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THE END TIMES

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The End Times – Volume III

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The cycle of history repeats itself,
much to the Dark Gods' merriment.
We approach the hour of the last
phoenix, when only Asuryan's fading
power can save us from thirsting Khaine.
The fate of the elves now relies upon
two realms: one doomed to perish in fire
and slaughter, and one that shall endure
whilst I have strength to defend it.
Mortals shall assume divine roles,
the heirs of Aenarion will fight the final
battle, and the accursed Widowmaker
shall be freed from its prison of stone.

These are the End Times.



Far beneath the Oak of Ages, Ariel awoke from troubled dreams. She was weary, too weary even to move from her bed of leaf and briar. The poison in her veins was killing her, she was sure of that, and nothing she had attempted had even slowed its progress.

Glowing spites, no larger than motes of dust, danced between the roots that formed the chamber's walls, their light flickering as they squabbled and fought. Little by little, Ariel's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and she at last saw the figure standing silently at the chamber's earthen edge.

'It has been a long time since you last entered my home,' said Ariel, her voice as dry and withered as her skin.

'A terrible storm is coming,' Lileath replied. She stepped forward, and the spitelings scattered before her. 'I wanted to see you before it breaks.'

'The Dark Gods?'

'Yes,' Lileath confirmed. 'In his ignorance, one of our own aids them.'

Ariel sighed. 'The cycle begins anew. Will you fight them?'

'I shall, as will others who remain. Already your children take up the roles of our departed kin.'

'For better or worse?'

'For better or worse,' Lileath agreed.

'I will not live to see it. My strength fades hourly.'

'I am sorry.'

Ariel scarcely heard those words. 'I remember when I was young, lost in the darkness with only Ereth Khial for company. Even in her kindlier days, the Pale Queen was a poor companion for a child, and she scared me as much as the gloom that surrounded us. Then came Asuryan – Talyn, Lord of Eagles upon his shoulder – and he brought forth fire to banish the darkness, and my fears.'

'You've never told me that tale.'

'My oldest memories are now all I have left to me,' said Ariel sadly. 'The rest have melted away like snow.' She paused, thoughtful. 'I know of little that could have weakened me so. Only...'

'Only a shard of true ice, formed in the darkness before Asuryan's light, buried so deep amongst the roots of this tree that no one will ever find it.'

Lileath had spoken matter-of-factly, and Ariel felt a fresh chill.

'Child, what have you done?'

'Only what I had to. You would never have agreed to what I must do next.'

'You have murdered me,' anger welled up in Ariel's heart, but she was too weary to act upon it. 'Do you love me so little?'

'I love you as I would a daughter, though you are my elder. Everything I do, I do for your children, to give them a chance of survival in the darkness that is coming.'

'I wish I could believe that.'

'Then believe this.' Dimly, Ariel felt warm hands clasp her own emaciated fingers. 'Whatever follows, I will fight alongside the mortals to the very end. This I promise.'

Ariel closed her eyes. She had no reply, for she could not find it in her heart to believe those words.

She slept for a time, though she did not intend to. When she at last opened her eyes, Lileath was gone, but so was the darkness. A small white flame flickered in a bowl a short distance away, its light warm and soothing. Ariel gazed into the fire for a time, drawing comfort from Lileath's gift.

Then, she heard the Oak of Ages' roots shift and crack. A voice echoed down from high above.

'Please, save our mother.'

Ariel heard footsteps on the rootborn stair, and realised that it was not over. Not yet. There was still a chance...

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

The world is ending. Morrslieb looms low in angry skies, and magic rises to greet it. Plague and madness are rife, and war marches on every land.

Champions are rising, if sometimes from the unlikeliest of quarters. In the Underworld, an ancient spirit stirs, stretching his will once more into the mortal realm. Once, he was the enemy of the living; now, he could play a vital role in their salvation. In the Empire, a herald rises, the forerunner, perhaps, of the return of a long-lost hero. In the mountains, drums proclaim that a bone-hewed prophecy at last edges to fulfilment, a warlord of yesteryear reborn a conqueror of today. Others will make their presence known before long: champions of light and dark, order and destruction, united against the all-consuming hunger of the Dark Gods – but it remains to be seen whether they will do so in time.

The bastions of the Old World already shudder, assailed by the servants of Chaos. Bretonnia, devastated by recent civil war, endures only under the leadership of the Green Knight, revealed to be none other than King Gilles of legend. Tilea, Estalia and the Border Princes are all but destroyed, overcome by the ratmen swarming up from the bowels of the world. Athel Loren is dying, ravaged by beastmen and poisoned by the same sickness that threatens to take the life of its divine queen.

In the north, the armies of Chaos march openly across Kislev, and hurl themselves at the Empire's defences. This is a plagued horde beyond counting, its like not seen since the Great War. Every artifice of Sigmar's heirs may not be enough to repel it. A great shining wall of faith and stone, raised by the wizard Balthasar Gelt, holds the horde in abeyance for the moment, but it cannot do so forever. Worse still, this is but the first and least of Archaon Everchosen's armies. The north shudders to the march of savages and traitors, their steel pledged to the Lord of the End Times. The men of the Empire cry out for aid and find none, the dwarfs have hidden themselves away beneath the mountains, Bretonnia is a corpse-choked wasteland and the elves have troubles of their own.

Ulthuan teeters on the brink of ruin. Daemons run rampant across its Ten Kingdoms, and the Phoenix King's absence is keenly felt. Caledor, mightiest and oldest of the elven realms, has withdrawn from the Phoenix Court. Its prince, Imrik, is deemed a traitor by his peers, but holds unswervingly to his course, though none yet know why.

Tyrion, heir of Aenarion, commands the realm's defences in the Phoenix King's absence, though he does so with a weary heart. His daughter, Aliathra, lies in the clutches of the undead, and his beloved, the Everqueen Alarielle, has departed Ulthuan on a mission of her own. Tyrion's mood has grown darker with each passing day, but all know that without Tyrion to lead its armies Ulthuan would fall.

Teclis, Tyrion's brother, keeps his own council. He alone claims to have seen the Phoenix King in recent months, and many in Ulthuan hold the mage to speak with their monarch's voice. Few in Ulthuan command the same trust as Teclis, yet he is seldom to be found as the war against the daemons rages on. Teclis has accepted a truth believed by few others. He knows doom is looming, and works to harness the world's magic so that mortals may have the strength to fight gods. In this, Teclis is guided by Lileath, goddess of prophecy, all the while unaware that his patron is playing for grander and more desperate stakes.

Far to the west, the Witch King sits upon his throne, seeking opportunity in blood and fire. Naggaroth is drowning in slaughter, but Malekith cares little as the dead clog the streets. The Witch King's mind, as ever, rests upon Ulthuan. He sees the fires of war ravaging his hated homeland, and wonders whether his own vengeance may yet be usurped. The Witch King can feel the rise of a new age upon the breeze, and wonders whether it is at last time to see the old hate consummated.

Yet Malekith's thoughts linger also on those who are at once his closest and least trustworthy vassals. Malus Darkblade has made no secret of his ambitions in recent months. Even as Naggaroth crumbles, the Tyrant of Hag Graef has taken care to advance his own position. Darkblade's star is rising, and Malekith knows that the dreadlord will not rest until the throne of Naggaroth is his. Darkblade is not the Witch King's only concern. More troubling to Malekith is the reticence of his mother, Morathi. Never before has the Hag Sorceress' tongue lain still when there is exhortation or castigation to be offered, and her silence is perhaps the most troubling sign in days suffused with portent.

In Athel Loren, they have at last uncovered the truth known to Teclis. Guided by Lileath's visions, prophetesses have seen that the Rhana Dandra, the end of all things, is come. Before the darkness passes, the elves will have to battle the Dark Brothers of Chaos as their own gods once did. Asuryan's host lost their battle, were cast down in failure to dwell amongst their children, and the asrai know that the elves must stand united if they are to fare better than those who gave them life. But ancient hatreds, mortal and divine, cast a long shadow. Even with Lileath's guidance, victory is all but impossible, and survival but a fleeting hope...



Ulthuan, gem of the Great Ocean! Forged from Draugnir's bones and set upon the mortal firmament by Asuryan's divine hand. But Asuryan did not reckon with the Dark Gods. Long had Slaanesh hungered for the souls of Isha's children, and, with silver tongue, he convinced his brothers to breach the mortal world. Weakened by Khaine's war, Asuryan's court could not stand; they were cast from their heavenly palaces, trapped in bodies of flesh, blood and flame. Thus did Khaine's anger first sour paradise; legend tells that it will do so once more before the Rhana Dandra dawns.

HEROES OF THE END TIMES

The history of the elves is a long and storied one, where truth and legend combine seamlessly. All too often, the deeds of mortals and gods alike echo forward through time, carrying the woe and strife of the past into a present already overburdened with both. The unfolding Rhana Dandra – the Last War Against Chaos – is as much a continuation of the war between the Chaos Gods and the Elven pantheon as it is a conflict of mortals. Ancient enmities will be consummated, and new ones forged before the final battle truly begins, and the destiny of the elves will be forever changed.

THE ASUR

- **Alarielle:** Everqueen of Ulthuan, mother to Aliathra, beloved of Tyrion.
- **Tyrion:** The Dragon of Cothique. Descended from Aenarion through the line of Morelion. Brother of Teclis, and consort to Alarielle.
- **Teclis:** High Loremaster of Saphery, descended from Aenarion through the line of Morelion. Brother of Tyrion, and favoured of Lileath.
- **Adranna:** Princess of Cothique. Sister of Dalroth and Dannor.
- **Aislinn:** Admiral of Lothern. Thought by many to be the Herald of Mathlann.
- **Aliathra:** The Everchild. Thought by most to be the daughter of Finubar and Alarielle. Tyrion is her true father.
- **Anaran & Anarelle:** Nephew and niece of Eltharion.
- **Caradryan:** Captain of the Phoenix Guard, chosen of Asuryan.
- **Dalroth:** Prince of Cothique in service to Tyrion. Brother of Dannor and Adranna.
- **Dannor:** Prince of Cothique in service to Tyrion. Brother of Dalroth and Adranna.
- **Eldyra:** Princess of Tiranoc, currently away from Ulthuan in search of the Everchild Aliathra.
- **Eltharion:** Warden of Tor Yvresse, currently away from Ulthuan in search of the Everchild Aliathra.
- **Finubar the Seafarer:** Eleventh Phoenix King of Ulthuan.
- **Imrik:** Crown Prince of Caledor.
- **Korhil:** Captain of the Phoenix King's white lion bodyguard.
- **Malhandir:** Tyrion's steed, noblest of horses.
- **Minaithnir:** Imrik's loyal dragon.
- **Riselle:** A Handmaiden of the Everqueen, Alarielle.
- **Ystranna of Avelorn:** High Handmaiden of the Everqueen.

THE DRUCHII

- **Malekith:** Witch King of Naggaroth. Son of Aenarion the Defender and the Hag Sorceress Morathi.
- **Morathi:** The Hag Sorceress of Ghrond. Second wife of Aenarion the Defender, and mother of Malekith.
- **Drane Brackblood:** Admiral of Corsairs, Mistress of the *Shadow Tide*.
- **Drusala:** Sorceress of Ghrond, close to Morathi.
- **Hellebron:** Crone Queen of Har Ganeth. Deathless rival of Morathi.
- **Kouran Darkhand:** Captain of the Black Guard of Naggarond.
- **Lokhir Fellheart:** Admiral of Corsairs, Master of the *Tower of Blessed Dread*.
- **Malus Darkblade:** Ruler of Hag Graef, possessed by the spirit of the daemon Tz'arkan.
- **Seraphon:** Malekith's steed, a black dragon of ancient times.
- **Shadowblade:** Master Assassin. In service to Hellebron.
- **Tullaris Dreadbringer:** Captain of Har Ganeth's executioners. Self-titled Prophet of Khaine.

THE ASRAI

- **Araloth:** Lord of Talsyn in Athel Loren. Beloved of Lileath.
- **Ariel:** Mage Queen of Athel Loren, Isha reborn.
- **Daith:** Blind smith of Athel Loren.
- **Durthu:** Eldest of Athel Loren's treeman ancients. He that bound together the fate of the elves and the Great Forest.
- **Kalara:** Priestess of Athel Loren, cursed for leading one of Orion's wild riders astray from his duties.
- **Naestra & Arahan:** Ariel's daughters.
- **Naieth:** Prophetess of Athel Loren.
- **Orion:** King of Athel Loren, Kurnous reborn.

BEINGS OF LEGEND

- **Aenarion the Defender:** First of the Phoenix Kings. Father of Malekith, and husband of Morathi. Perished during the creation of the Great Vortex.
- **Alith Anar:** Legendary Shadow King of Nagarythe.
- **Astarielle:** Everqueen of Ulthuan during the time of Aenarion the Defender. She who made the first bargain with the Great Forest later known as Athel Loren.
- **Caledor Dragontamer:** First Dragon Prince, creator of the Great Vortex.
- **Morelion:** Son of Aenarion and Astarielle, half-brother of Malekith.

THE ELVEN GODS

- **Asuryan:** The Creator. Lord of Heaven.
- **Khaine:** God of War and Strife. Manipulated into beginning the War of the Gods by Hekarti.
- **Lileath:** Goddess of the Moon, Dreams and Prophecy. Patron of Teclis and beloved of Araloth.
- **Atharti:** Goddess of Pleasure. Sister of Hekarti and her rival for Khaine's affections.
- **Hekarti:** Goddess of Sorcery.
- **Isha:** The Mother Goddess and wife of Kurnous. Has lived amongst mortals as the Mage Queen Ariel since the coming of Chaos.
- **Kurnous:** God of the Hunt. Husband of Isha. Has lived amongst mortals as Orion since the coming of Chaos.
- **Ladrielle:** Goddess of Mists and Wanderers. A guise taken by Lileath, Goddess of Prophecy. Known in Bretonnia as the Lady of the Lake.
- **Mathlann:** God of the Sea and the Storm. Sought refuge in the mortal world after the coming of Chaos.
- **Vaul:** The Smith God. During the War of the Gods, gave himself as slave to Khaine in exchange for Isha's freedom.





CHAPTER 1

The Widowmaker

Winter 2524 – Winter 2525

After long months of fighting, the high elves' battle against the daemons was nearly done.

The cost had been sobering. When the daemons spilled forth from the peaks of the Annulii Mountains, the princes of the realm had mustered their own armies in opposition, the proud colours of the Ten Kingdoms shining beneath the storm of magical fire. Every village, mansion and city had been defended with a stoic determination that would have shamed the armies of other lands. Alas, the daemons had been too many, and the winds of magic were at their backs, granting them strength enough to overcome even the hardiest of obstacles. Chrace had borne the brunt of the fighting. Lion March was an open grave, a field of unburied dead stretching as far as the eye could see; the mighty city of Tor Achare was a blasted ruin. The other realms were scarcely better off. The horror that had spilled from the Annulii highlands had ravaged countless cities, had left thousands of widows, orphans and grieving fathers searching for their loved ones in streets choked with dead. Only in desolate Nagarythe did life go on in a manner approaching normality, its defence marshalled by a reclusive figure seldom seen by outsiders. For the Aesanar, the shadow warriors, the daemons were but one more invader to be cast into the sea.

As the war raged, many heroes had forged legends worthy of song. Some were storied champions of old – Sea Lord Aislinn, Ystranna of Avelorn and Caradryan of the Flame to name but a few. Others arose through deeds of blood and fire, Prince Morvai of Tiranoc amongst them, but two of Ulthuan's greatest heroes were noticeably missing and their absence was a great burden on the elves' spirits. Where is Finubar Seafarer? many asked. Where is his queen? None knew the answers, or at least if any did they did not share them.

The Phoenix King and Everqueen had vanished from Ulthuan's shores in the hour of the daemons' onset, and some muttered darkly that their loss was in part the cause of these dire times. Bereft of Finubar and Alarielle's leadership, the Phoenix Court soon fell to disagreement, with Imrik of Caledor calling for the election of another to the highest throne. None doubted that Imrik wanted that honour for himself, but too many voices spoke in his support for the bid to be dismissed outright.

Salvation – or at least survival – was won once more by the hand of Prince Tyrion. Though his heart was weary with other burdens, Tyrion faced Imrik down and took command of Ulthuan's armies. Those who would have opposed him were quickly quieted when the entire host of Phoenix Guard – Asuryan's chosen warriors – offered their blades and their loyalty to the prince. Though a furious Imrik had split Caledor from the other kingdoms, Tyrion yet commanded the hosts of nine realms. Moreover, no small number of Caledorian princes had broken with their ruling prince, claiming their bonds of battle-earned brotherhood more important than ties to lord and land. Under Tyrion's leadership, and acting in near-unity for the first time in many seasons, the high elves at last began to know victory. Thus did the Wars of Reclamation begin.

Abandoning Caledor to its own defence, Tyrion swept north through Eataine, and the daemons scattered before his banner. The prince fought like one possessed, his appetite for war unflagging. He drove his host hard, marching them to the point where even the hardiest of elves felt fatigue creeping into their limbs. Each day brought a fresh battle against the daemonic horde, and Tyrion fought ever at the forefront, Sunfang flashing as it cleaved howling heads and hewed twisted limbs. As the Dragon of Cothique led his army north, sieges were broken and villages spared from the most dreadful of fates, yet it appeared to many that Tyrion took little pleasure in these victories. Some assumed he was wrathful that such a circumstance had befallen Ulthuan in the first place, others that battle's grasp upon his heart left little room for other emotions. Only Teclis knew the truth – that Tyrion feared for the fate of those he loved: the missing Everqueen, to whom he was consort, and their daughter, Aliathra. The latter was a secret Tyrion had long kept close, for all believed Aliathra to be Finubar's child, as perhaps she should have been. Aliathra languished in Mannfred von Carstein's cruel grasp, and Tyrion yearned to rescue her. Reluctantly swayed by Teclis' good counsel, the prince had remained in Ulthuan, despatching Eltharion the Grim in his stead. Though his body strove for his homeland, his mind dwelt ever on his daughter's fate.

As the elves struck further north, Tyrion became more reckless, tempting fates that would have been the doom of lesser warriors. At Port Elistor, he strove against the daemons from within the bounds of the swirling rift they poured from. Many Phoenix Guard perished that day, consumed by wild magic as they battled at their prince's side, but Tyrion emerged triumphant. At Cairn Avon, he outpaced his bodyguard and fought alone against a monstrous daemon with a profusion of mechanical limbs, dealing the beast a mortal blow but suffering a deep wound from the monster's massive iron claw in return. In that battle's wake, Teclis urged his brother to delay, to allow the healers to treat the corrupting poisons racing through his blood, but Tyrion would hear no words of caution. So it was that when the elven host fought to relieve the White Tower of Hoeth, Tyrion, his face gaunt and pale as snow, led the charge atop the noble Malhandir. Even in his wounded condition the prince could not be bested by the footsoldiers of the Chaos host, but before the gates of Hoeth he found his match.

The Siege of Hoeth was commanded by an old foe, the daemon N'kari. Herald of Dismay, Keeper of Secrets, Lord of a Thousand Songs, N'kari had plagued Ulthuan since its oldest days, and Tyrion almost since his birth. Now the monster turned from the splintered starwood gates to face his old foe. N'kari had supped deeply from Ulthuan's torment, and his vile form rippled with scarcely-contained power. Veins yet coursing with daemonic poison, Tyrion was no match for so mighty an enemy. He would have perished in the same claw-sweep that scattered the knights of Tor Andar, had Korhil Lionmane not sprung to knock the prince from his saddle, then stood firm between N'kari and his wounded prey. The Keeper of Secrets had laughed at Korhil, mocking his foolhardiness in facing a foe so far beyond his own meagre skill, but then the axe Chayal flashed to cleave one of the daemon's arms, and N'kari laughed no more. Still, it would have gone ill for Korhil at that moment had not a determined onslaught by the Phoenix Guard carried Teclis to his side, forcing N'kari to make an ignominious retreat into the hills.

With the Tower of Hoeth at last freed and Saphery fortified against fresh assault, Teclis delved into ancient lore from the time of Caledor Dragontamer, seeking a method by which the daemons could be truly repelled. In the meantime, forced to convalescence by his wounds, Tyrion attempted a reconciliation with sundered Caledor. However, Imrik refused to parley, and ordered all heralds turned back upon the realm's border. This refusal drove Tyrion into a rage so foul that for three days no one, not even Teclis, could speak with him. When at last Tyrion was sufficiently calm, he convened the other princes, and swore that Caledor would be banished from the Phoenix Court until its wayward prince begged his forgiveness on penitent knee.

Many were taken aback at Tyrion's vehemence, and more than half of the Caledorians who had fought at his side in defiance of Imrik now turned their armies homewards. This lesser betrayal spurred Tyrion to rage once more, but his wrath only fed his determination, and even appeared to speed his recovery. Many elves saw the light of war dancing upon Tyrion's brow, and opened themselves anew to his purpose. Thus, when the elves swept north again, they did so as a cleansing flame that scoured everything in its path.

After the daemons had been driven from Yvresse, rumours began to spread of veiled figures gathering around the waystones, of unlooked-for spears carried to battle in time of need. Dusk patrols ambushed by daemons amongst the fogs of Wailing Fen spoke of reinforcement by knightly hosts whose banners echoed ancient times, and who vanished with the sun's rising. In Athel Tamarha, Teclis witnessed such an intercession himself, as silent archers slipped through the trees to loose volley after volley against the daemons' flanks before dispersing like mist. No animated cadavers were these, he deemed, nor grave-spilled puppets, but warriors willingly risen upon tides of magic to defend their homelands.

By the time the Wars of Reclamation swept over Avelorn, Tyrion had recovered his health, though his mood was still black as night. In all the long months, there had been no sign of Finubar or Alarielle, nor had there been any word from Eltharion concerning Aliathra's fate. Sunfang was now not just Tyrion's sword, it was the executor of his wrath; the prince's anger, fears and frustrations flowed through every stroke of the blade. Daemons were slain in their thousands, dozens of armies cast back into the Realm of Chaos by courage and steel.



Yet still Tyrion was unsatisfied; the prince yearned for vengeance against N'kari. Moreover, Teclis had deemed that the Keeper of Secrets served as the daemons' anchor to the mortal world as he had once before. Were N'kari slain, the mage was certain he could weave a spell that would banish much of the daemon host. At Tyrion's command, knights of Ellyrion swept across Avelorn, seeking sign of the daemon's passage. At last, after many battles and much searching, word reached Tyrion that N'kari had seized the ancient Moonspire, and had transformed it into a palace of decadence in emulation of Slaanesh's blasphemous realm. Before the messenger had finished speaking, Tyrion had set his army marching into the gathering night.



Thus began the Battle of Moonspire, the greatest conflict of the Wars of Reclamation. Tens of thousands of daemons mustered beneath the ancient tower. They had been drawn hence not by loyalty, but the desire to share in N'kari's bounty. The Lord of Dismay had taken many slaves since his emergence into the mortal world, and their agonised terror was a heady brew to daemonkind. Such were the forces at his command, N'kari was sure of his victory. In his arrogance, he had forgotten that the Dark Gods he served were not the only ones in the firmament, nor the only ones yet with power. Moonspire was a temple of Lileath, Goddess of Dreams, and Teclis was her champion – one of three who walked the mortal world. The magic chained to its stones was therefore Teclis' to command, and as the high elf phalanxes shuddered beneath the first wave of daemons, he loosed it to his purpose.

At the mage's command, light spiralled about the tower and brilliant meteors streaked out of the blackened skies to plunge into the daemons' ranks. White fire blazed in each missile's wake, shrivelling unholy flesh but leaving that of the elves unharmed. As the daemons shrank back, the Phoenix Guard came forward. Tyrion rode at their head, Teclis at his side, and that day no force could contain them. Tyrion fought like a god of war, unflagging in his fury. The moonfire of Lileath burned upon Teclis' brow and blade, and no daemon dared approach him.

At the last, N'kari faced the twins. He was a mighty demigod of suffering and despair, but that night it availed him naught. As the daemon waded into the Phoenix Guard's ranks, Teclis sent the moonfire coursing across N'kari's body. Flesh blackening, the daemon bellowed and charged towards the mage, but Tyrion gave a battle cry of his own and touched his heels to Malhandir's flanks. Ducking low in the saddle, the prince passed beneath N'kari's mighty claws and Sunfang flashed out to open a deep wound in the daemon's belly. N'kari struck at Tyrion, but pain had slowed the daemon's reactions, and Malhandir carried the prince clear before the blow could land.

Then the halberds of the Phoenix Guard were pressing close about N'kari. Their strikes were but pinpricks against the daemon's hide, but the Flame of Asuryan drove him back. A dozen of the stalwart warriors crumpled beneath great scything claws. Then Teclis sent the moonfire forth once more, and N'kari staggered. Seeing his foe distracted, Tyrion came forward once again. Sunfang speared deep into N'kari's spine, and the daemon fell bellowing to its knees. Tyrion's blade flashed one more time and the daemon's head tumbled from its shoulders.

Tyrion had no time to rejoice in his victory, for the daemons had hated N'kari, and were undismayed by his fall. As the prince threw himself into the battle once more, Teclis pushed

towards the Moonspire. Surrounded by swordmasters, he fought his way through the horrors of the daemon-haunted tower, dragging N'kari's severed head to the altar at the summit. The elves fighting on the plain below looked up in astonishment as Teclis' voice echoed across the skies, the moon above glowing brighter with each syllable. The daemons, perhaps sensing their downfall was nigh, howled with one terrible voice as Teclis intoned the final word and slammed the base of his staff down onto the horned head.

The daemon's skull split asunder, and a deafening peal of thunder cracked the sky. There was a brilliant flash, and afterwards many claimed they saw the slender silhouette of Lileath looming over the battlefield. White fire pulsed out from the Moonspire, sweeping across the assembled hosts, and rippling out over the lands beyond. Where it passed, the daemons burst into ash, but the elves who strove with them felt nothing but the Moon Goddess' gentle caress and heard nothing but her soothing voice.

From the Moonspire's pinnacle, Teclis saw the fire sweep across the land. It would not stop, he knew, until it reached the shores of the ocean, and it would leave no daemon unharmed. They would return in time, but every moment was likely to be precious in the days ahead. The mage's fingers tightened around the Moon Staff of Lileath, now cold and inert. Already he could feel its life-giving magics ebbing away, could feel the pain it kept at bay creeping into his limbs. Wordlessly, Teclis fell backwards from the altar, and would have tumbled over the Moonspire's parapet had not two swordmasters reached for him at the last moment. The Moon Staff, now mere wood and baubles, fell from Teclis' grasp. This time, the swordmasters were not quick enough. The staff struck stone, shattering into three pieces. Looking down at the diminished fragments, Teclis judged the sacrifice a worthy one.

'Why am I here, Imrik?' Teclis asked, hoping that the other wouldn't note the pain in his voice. The Moon Staff of Lileath had been repaired by the finest artisans of Saphery, but its magic had fled. The old pain had returned in its place, and not even the most potent of potions could dim it entirely. The five hundred alabaster stairs down from Tor Caleda's royal chambers had been agony, but Teclis knew Imrik must have had a reason for requesting his presence. Even before the recent unpleasantness, the dragon prince had never been fond of Tyrion or Teclis.

'My apologies, loremaster,' Imrik replied, not sounding sorry in the least. 'I had not realised that you were so inconvenienced.' He gave a curt nod to the two dragon princes guarding the gate, and they stepped aside without a word.

Beyond, the dressed stone of Tor Caleda gave way to the cool gloom of a stalactite-crowded cavern. Imrik strode on through the dark, though Teclis fancied the prince's pace had slowed just a fraction.

'As to the reason for your presence, there is something I wanted you to see,' Imrik continued imperiously. 'I have been told that you alone may understand its significance.'

'And who told you this?' asked Teclis, staggering to keep pace.

'The greatest of my sires,' Imrik said softly, 'Caledor Dragontamer.'

He fell silent once again, inviting Teclis to gainsay him, to refute the impossible statement. Teclis said nothing. He too had spoken with the ancient mage in recent weeks, through the walls of the Great Vortex, but now was not the time to say so. Imrik was ruled by pride, and any challenge would likely go ill. Teclis was already risking enough by his presence in Caledor. Tyrion would not be pleased.

'I have dreamt much of late,' Imrik continued, his footfalls echoing through the darkness. 'I have dreamt of Ulthuan returned to what it used to be, of our star in ascendance once again, our dominance restored.' His voice grew distant and wistful. 'A month ago, Lileath came to me whilst I was sleeping. She acted as my forefather's herald, guiding me to the heart of the Great Vortex so that I could hear his wisdom. Can there be any truer sign of Caledor's return to greatness than a goddess acting in service to our greatest ancestor?'

Teclis said nothing. By his reckoning, Imrik's understanding of the relationship was precisely reversed, but again he held his tongue.

Fortunately, it seemed that the question had been rhetorical. 'My ancestor told me that a time of great change was upon us, where friendships and hatreds of old would no longer rule our destinies. He told me that if I wished for our people to survive, I must let go of the past, and embrace the future.'

'A steep price for a prince of Caledor,' Teclis said drily.

Imrik glared, but continued. 'The next day, a ship came out of the west, the sign of Lileath upon its sails, and the dragon of Caledor upon its prow. It had no crew save for a single Naggarothi, who even now languishes in my dungeons. In the hold... Well, see for yourself.'

Imrik led Teclis into a massive chamber. The mage made out the majestic forms of slumbering dragons, but his attention was swiftly drawn to the dragon eggs that stretched as far as his eyes could see.

'There are hundreds,' Imrik breathed. 'The plunder of countless generations returned unharmed.' Tearing his gaze from the eggs, Teclis looked up to see a single tear running down the prince's cheek. 'What does it mean?' Imrik demanded quietly.

'I think you already know the answer,' said Teclis. 'It is time for the Sundering to be undone. Our ancient war must at last be ended.'



As a weakened Tyrion battled N'kari beneath the Tower of Hoeth, Naggaroth faced enemies of its own. The ferocity of the Bloodied Horde had swept away much of the northern defences and brought the chill land's great cities under siege. Valkia, warlord of the Chaos host, had fallen when the Witch King had personally broken the assault upon glorious Naggarond. Yet Valkia's champions still fought on in Khorne's name, and there were yet rumours that the Gorequeen had somehow been preserved from Malekith's wrath, and even now readied another assault. Kouran Darkhand, Captain of the Black Guard, believed that Malekith would have ordered Valkia hunted down in other times, and had her remains strung from Naggarond's highest tower. However, though Kouran knew he would never admit as much, the Witch King's concerns appeared to lie more with survival than revenge.

Kouran had never seen Naggaroth invaded on such a glorious scale. For every army of northlanders crushed, another marched out of the glacier-ridden uplands, undismayed by their losses. Worse, the Witch King had been absent in the early stages of the invasion, and his lieutenants had defended his realm with their customary selfishness, concerning themselves only with protecting their own holdings. Thus had a vast tide of blood-drunk warriors reached as far south as Clar Karond and laid the city to waste. Malus Darkblade's army of Hag Graef could easily have turned the tide, had it marched to do so, but the bastard lord looked only towards his own interests.

Everywhere the tale was the same. Naggaroth's armies were scattered and overwhelmed by the foolish pride of their masters. Har Ganeth was all but gone, its gore-slicked stones contested day and night by warriors to whom blood was now the only prize. Hellebron had ranted and railed for aid at first. Then, when her missives fell on deaf ears, she had accepted the slaughter as a glorious gift from Khaine. By all accounts she now prowled the fallen stones of her temple city, slitting throats as murderously as any of her cat's paws. Ebnir Soulflayer, his rank imperilled out of failure to defend the watchtower of Volroth, had led an army into the glaciers, aiming to stem the tide of northlanders and so perhaps earn the Witch King's forgiveness. Soulflayer had died within hours, his loss of little account when set alongside the thousands of soldiers who had perished with him, warriors that were badly needed if Naggaroth were to survive.

There were exceptions, of course. Even amongst the dark elves, there were those who could see beyond their own petty interests to the good of the realm. When a score of chieftains from the Bloodied Horde had launched their longboats upon Karond Kar's chill isle, Lokhir Fellheart and Drane Brackblood had put aside their differences to bring the ramshackle flotilla to battle. Working together, they had wrought a far greater slaughter amongst the invaders than they would have done apart. However, yet again the northlanders' numbers proved too great, and for each gore-crusted prow sent plunging into the ocean's depths, two more slipped past the blockade to the slave-hold of Karond Kar. Even then, the city could have held firm, had not an earthquake shattered its outer walls. At first, this event had merely seemed to be another calamity in a time beset with them, until the catacombs beneath Karond Kar had split open and the ratmen had clawed their way into the light. Caught between blood-rage above and warpstone-fuelled sorcery below, the defenders were swiftly overrun. Before long, Brackblood and Fellheart's vessels of war were pressed to evacuating those they could. The slaves, who could be easily replaced, were left to die in their pens.

Three cities had fallen, and three yet stood. Now, as Naggarond found itself in an unexpected lull, Malekith rode north with a host of thousands. Morathi had sealed herself in Ghrond in the moment the Bloodied Horde had struck, refusing even to give warning to the other cities, and the Witch King would know why. Kouran, ever at his master's side, knew that this task was not without risk. If Morathi was a traitor – or even if she were not – there were countless painful ways by which she could make an intruder regret his insolence. Such was the reason this task had been given to Malus Darkblade first of all, and also the cause of the Tyrant of Hag Graef's sudden enthusiasm for battle elsewhere. Begging Malekith's indulgence, he had at last led his army south towards the ruins of Clar Karond, and made a great show of escorting the trail of broken refugees to the comparative safety of Hag Graef. Better to face a horde of blood-mad northlanders naked, and without even a sword in one's hand, than to court the Hag Sorceress' wrath. Despite his dislike of Darkblade, Kouran could not be certain he would have had the courage to do otherwise, if faced with similar orders. Of course, by offering shelter and salvation to the surviving warriors of Clar Karond, Darkblade had also improved his own position within the disintegrating realm, a detail that had not escaped Kouran's notice.

The ride north to Ghrond was a dangerous one, for the Naggarothi frontier still echoed to the sound of northlander drums. Fully a third of the army that had set out from Naggarond was lost in that outward journey, abandoned to the blizzard, or hacked down by fur-clad barbarians. Malekith kept his own counsel during the march, and even Kouran could not guess his mind. At times, the Witch King appeared to be deep in conversation, though his words were soft and addressed to no one in his escort. Kouran had seen such behaviour before, of course, and it troubled him not. The Captain of the Black Guard knew that more transpired than he had wit to recognise – he had never sought higher rank than that which he already occupied for this very reason – but he had faith that his master knew what he was about.

Only once did the Witch King even deign to enter battle himself, otherwise leaving the bloody business to his vassals. Some forty leagues short of Ghrond, the army crossed paths with a Chaos horde whose ranks teemed with blood-slicked warriors. This was not a mortal host, but one of daemons, drawn into the mortal world by the rising tides of magic and slaughter. A mighty tatter-winged bloodthirster led the horde and, as he drew near, the madness of battle swept over the dark elf ranks. The Naggarothi threw themselves forward without thought for their own safety. Shields and crossbows were cast aside as encumbrances, reaper crews abandoned their machines for the joy of blade upon flesh. Even Kouran, whose blood was seldom anything other than icy cold, found himself hacking with wild abandon. If no daemons were within weapon's reach, the dark elves turned upon one another with just as much ferocity. The entire army would have been lost but for Malekith, who alone seemed entirely unaffected by the bloodthirster's influence. Taking wing upon the dragon Seraphon, the Witch King closed with the colossal daemon, smote him with a thunderbolt, then buried his enchanted blade, Destroyer, to the hilt in the bloodthirster's left eye socket. With the daemon's death, a measure of discipline returned to the dark elf ranks. Though the battle raged long before its fires finally dimmed, from that point on its outcome was never in doubt. In the aftermath, many wondered how Malekith had kept his wits where no other had. Only Kouran recognised the truth: the Witch King's soul already overflowed with such hatred that it held room for no more.

At last, Malekith's army reached Ghrond, or rather the dense maze of black thorns that stood where the tower should have been. The twisted thicket stretched for leagues in every direction, clawing skywards to a point where it would have loomed over Naggarond. At first glance, the thorns appeared to be merely tangled growths spurred to incredible size by some sorcerous goad. However, as the army halted in the maze's shadow, they marked how the surface of the branches flowed like water, the fronds writhing when anyone drew near. Skeletons lay scattered amongst the morass, pulsing black roots entangled amongst their flesh-picked bones. It was little wonder that the invaders had given Ghrond a wide berth.

As Malekith approached, the wall of thorns parted to reveal one of Morathi's sorceresses, Drusala. Lithe and beautiful even by the unreal standards of Morathi's court, her hair was threaded with small black brambles that twitched and curled like a medusa's snakes. She addressed the Witch King with the full deference due, and explained that his arrival had been foreseen. The royal Morathi, Eternal Hekarti reborn, would grant her son an audience, but only he.

All there present were taken aback that the Hag Sorceress had proclaimed herself to be divine; all save Malekith, who had once let it be known that he was Khaine reborn in order to control the witch cults. He suspected a similar motive at play in his mother's sudden ascension. Sorceresses were ever apt to betrayal, and Morathi would be seeking whatever certainties she could. Kouran growled at the sorceress' demand. He knew firsthand how faithless Morathi could be – even now, the memories still haunted him. Yet Malekith waved his guardian to silence, and coldly accepted the invitation. Dismounting from Seraphon, the Witch King followed his mother's herald into the tangle of briars. With an ominous rustle, the wall wove tight behind him.

The audience chamber was glorious in its sumptuousness. Golden drapes hung from every wall, and basalt tiles, polished to a mirrored sheen, were barely visible beneath the wine-dark rugs. Marble statues, studies in flawless physique, lined the chamber. Morathi's gaze, as ever, lingered on her favourites as she entered the chamber. How many males would have sought her embrace, she wondered, had they realised this would be their fate? It mattered not. Like her, they would remain beautiful for eternity. They should be flattered by the gift, and honoured that she had thought them worthy of her charms.

Malekith had arrived some time ago, but the Hag Sorceress had been unable to resist the small victory of making him wait, though she had at least provided refreshment in the form of a captured Avelorn wine of rare vintage. She noted that he had not taken the seat he had been offered, but had instead claimed the bloodrock throne at the chamber's far end. Morathi crushed the spark of irritation. It was a petty act, one calculated to elicit a response she was determined not to give. The wine, she noted, was untouched. Malekith had such a suspicious mind, but she couldn't blame him. She gave a deep nod of greeting – never a bow, for that would have implied subservience – and crossed to greet her son.

'You have travelled far to speak with me, my child. Should I feel honoured, or afraid?'

'I have yet to believe that either of those words holds any meaning for you, mother,' said Malekith coldly. Morathi noted that he made no attempt to wield the majestic plural in private. 'Will you not be seated?' he went on.

So that she would be a supplicant before her own throne? Morathi thought not. 'I am quite content as I am,' she bit out. Here, in her stronghold, the sorceress was far from defenceless, but that did not mean she relished the prospect of testing her skill against that of her progeny. 'Why have you come?'

'You gave no warning of the northlander invasion, as was your duty,' Malekith intoned, savouring each syllable. 'Moreover, you have held back from Naggaroth's defence. I should be quite furious with you. Indeed, for a long time, I cherished no thought so well as your broken body beneath the lash.'

The Witch King rose from the throne and began to pace the room, pausing before each statue in turn to gaze into its eyes. Perhaps he recognised some of them, Morathi thought. Quite probably he did.

'Because of you, Naggaroth is all but fallen. Before the year is out, it will be but another ruin in a world already full of them. Yet I find that I feel no sadness for the loss.'

Despite herself, Morathi felt a sudden flush of anger. 'Pathetic! You disgrace your father's memory.'

'Not at all. Indeed, I intend to honour him as never before. Our folk had fallen into weakness and squalor.' He snorted. 'We had grown fat and lazy, a herd of dull-witted beasts no longer fit for the great destiny I shall provide.' Malekith turned to face his mother and spread his hands expansively. 'Now the herd has been thinned, the weak slaughtered by the northlanders' axes. I have you to thank for that, though I am sure you did not intend matters to unfold thus. Those who remain are warriors and survivors all. They will be my army, and Ulthuan's ruin, for they will survive only through seizing the land that is theirs by right. The throne of the Ten Kingdoms will at last be mine.'

'I have heard you say such things before,' Morathi sneered.

'Before, I did not have aid. The Phoenix King is already slain, betrayed by one of his closest advisors.' Malekith held up his gauntlets; the blood upon them had dried to a deep crimson. 'He died broken and screaming, his last dignity a memory before I choked the life from him.'

'The Five Gates will defeat you, as they have in the past.'

'They will not,' Malekith assured her, 'for I now hold the key to those fortresses, placed in my hand by one of their own. Besides, Ulthuan is as beset as we. While I do not doubt that our cousins will endure, they will not have the good sense to let the times purge their weaklings.'

'If victory is so assured, what do you wish of me?'

'You are my mother and, despite your myriad treacheries, you yet command my regard. Join your armies to mine, and the past will be forgotten. You shall be Ulthuan's queen once more – glorious, regal and beautiful as the night.'

Morathi sighed contemptuously. 'You still think like a mortal, when you should aspire to be a god.'

'You are many things, mother, but you are no goddess.'

'And who is to say that? The power of Hekarti pulses through my veins. As the magic rises, I can be anything I wish, and that is all that matters as the Rhana Dandra begins.'

'You're not the first to speak to me of the End Times, yet I remain somewhat unconvinced.'

'The mage, I suppose,' Morathi said, her contempt clear. 'Did you think I wouldn't hear him whispering to you during your journey? What lies did he tell you?'

'It hardly matters. He serves my goals, whether he realises it or not.'

'Of course,' Morathi mocked. 'You're not one to accept any wisdom other than your own. Look around you. The world cries out in torment, the skies bleed, the twin-tailed comet blazes through the skies, and you look for proof? The Dark Gods are rising, and they will swallow us all.'

'If what you say is proven true, then I shall fight them, as my father once did. I will not be denied my birthright.'

Morathi gave in to the shrill laughter building within her. 'You're a fool! These are the End Times. Only those who embrace their true

nature will survive. Yours is not that of a victor. Yours is to lose, and to blame others for the loss. Go back to Naggarond. Take what pleasures you may before the tides of Chaos close over your head. I will not waste my strength on foolishness.'

Malekith laughed in sudden and bitter mirth. 'And your nature is to languish in this ensorcelled tower, I suppose, a jilted princess pining for her love until darkness falls?'

'You understand nothing,' Morathi spat. How had he learned of that? The Witch King had been adrift in the Realm of Chaos at the time of her momentary weakness, and she'd taken care that no witnesses had lived to speak of it. 'He will be mine again. I have foreseen it.'

'How very convenient for you,' Malekith replied calmly. 'And might I ask what you foretell concerning my future?'

There was a long pause. Morathi knew she should remain silent, but she could not resist the opportunity to show her superiority. The only question was how truthful her words would be.

'If you go to Ulthuan, you will lose everything,' she proclaimed at last. 'Your realm will fall, your purpose will waver; everything that makes you who you are – everything that makes you my son – will crumble to naught. Even your name will no longer be your own. I would sooner see you dead.'

'Then it seems that this will be our last farewell, mother,' said Malekith scornfully. He was searching for some hint of a lie, Morathi knew, but he would find none. Just as he would not find any trace of her true reason for withholding warning.

Malekith turned to leave, but could not resist one more jibe. 'Out of fond regard, I grant you one last gift: your life. Your treason is not forgiven, but it will go unpunished. Sit in your tower and rot.'

Not all had expected Malekith to return from within the maze of thorns. None at all had expected that he would do so in good humour. Yet in both of these things the doubters were proven wrong, for the Witch King emerged into the chill air in jovial spirits. Nor did Malekith return alone. An hour later, as the Witch King's army was breaking camp, the wall of tangled thorns split wide to allow the exit of many thousands of Ghrond's garrison. The Sorceress Drusala led them, and explained that both she and those who followed her were a gift from Morathi, who realised that she had been neither so hospitable or faithful as she ought. Malekith listened to Drusala's pretty speech without a word. Then, with a curt nod, he ordered Kouran place the newcomers in the heart of the marching order. In another land, this might have been an honour, placing them so close to the Witch King as it did. In Naggaroth, it was merely an unspoken acknowledgement that Malekith put little trust in either Morathi's generosity or Drusala's loyalty; the warriors of Ghrond would march where he and Kouran could keep a close personal eye upon them.

A week later, Malekith gathered the surviving members of the Black Council to Naggarond. Of the original one hundred lords and ladies, only a score remained. Some had been dead for weeks, others had perished in their attempt to answer Malekith's call, and one had perished beneath an assassin's blade for refusing the summons. All who remained bore scars of recent battle, but none more so than Hellebron, whose long white hair was deeply matted with dried blood and shreds of viscera. Even Ezresor, the Witch King's spymaster, had been forced to test his blade in recent weeks, and he had discovered anew a taste for slaughter. Only the Hag Sorceress was missing, her place taken by Drusala, but none of the council were so foolish as to comment upon her absence during these portentous times.

When Malekith announced his intention to abandon Naggaroth in favour of one last strike against Ulthuan, reactions were mixed. Kouran, as ever, took note of those who displayed too little – or too much – enthusiasm for their monarch's decree. Malus Darkblade, in particular, made a poor show of concealing his distaste. The Tyrant of Hag Graef had fought his way to rulership of his city, and doubtless the thought of relinquishing his grip was bitter to him. The bastard lord raised his voice in assent nonetheless, careful not to give too open a sign of opposition. That would come later, in the shadows. Most of the council, however, were willingly swept up by Malekith's grand ambition, and Kouran knew why. It was not in the nature of the druchii to fight from behind walls of stone. They were predators, and the world was their prey. All had sensed Naggaroth was lost, or would at least be a battered shadow of its former glory for centuries to come. All would rather pass from the world attempting to seize a new and glorious land, than perish in the defence of a realm they merely tolerated.

Thus, in the same hour in which Teclis cast the daemons from Ulthuan, did the last great host of Naggaroth take ship east towards that fair isle, so many ships that their sails blackened the horizon. Behind them, Naggaroth burned, its cities set alight and its slaves put to the sword so that the northlanders would find not plunder and comfort amongst the empty remains, but fire and plague. Besides Morathi's remaining forces at Ghrond, it was only in Har Ganeth that any dark elves yet dwelt, fighting Hellebron's endless war against the Bloodied Horde.

Some aboard the black arks looked back at the ravaged coast with mixed emotion, but Malekith did not permit himself so much as a backward glance. Ulthuan was everything now; victory or death would find him there.

THE GARRISON OF EAGLE GATE

The garrison of Eagle Gate was replete with veterans from the recent war with the daemons. It had been a refuge during that conflict, a haven for legions whose own fortresses had been destroyed by the forces of Chaos. Few of the commanders knew one another well, so swiftly had war thrown them together.



PRINCE YVARN OF MELETAN

Yvarn had commanded the fortress of Eagle Gate for some five summers before Darkblade's assault. When the prince first took up command, many of his subordinates believed him to be unforged, lacking the necessary experience for so weighty a duty. Such opinions were not entirely unfounded. Yvarn was a distant cousin to the Phoenix King, and his family had much influence at court. However, what doubts there were quickly vanished during the Wars of Reclamation, when the host of the plaguelord Septimus Rot threatened to overwhelm Eagle Gate's defences. Yvarn's spear might have been but one of many to pierce the daemon's hide, but it was also the first to do so, for no other in the garrison could find the courage to stand in the creature's path.

SHRINASTOR, LOREMASTER OF HOETH

A curt and ill-tempered mage, Shrinastor was notable for making the rest of the garrison long for battle, if only it would cease his complaining. The loremaster served on Eagle Gate only from fear of dishonour, rather than out of a strong sense of duty. Like many of his kind, Shrinastor resented being drawn away from his studies in the White Tower, especially to perform such busywork as the endless patrols that were inevitably the garrison's lot. Yet however ill-liked Shrinastor might have been in times of peace, all appreciated his presence when the walls were under siege for, at such times, the loremaster loosed his pent-up frustrations in a myriad of flesh-flaying magics.





THE SILVERPELTS

When word had reached Eagle Gate that the daemons had set Chrace ablaze, Prince Yvarn offered the Silverpelts the opportunity to leave their posts and rally to their homeland's defence. The hunters scorned his offer, tersely explaining that their oaths to the Eagle Gate superseded even those to their homeland. Thereafter, they were a grim and taciturn group, who spent their days staring unblinking westward across the pass, and their nights clustered around campfires, singing songs of remembrance. As the haunting sound echoed through the courtyards of Eagle Gate, other members of the garrison felt a momentary glimmer of sympathy for those who would next face the Silverpelts' gleaming axes.

THE TALONS OF TOR CALEDA

At the time of the dark elf invasion, it was rare for warriors of Caledor to serve upon the gates, for Imrik had otherwise been true to his word that the Dragonrealm would stand alone. However, a few regiments chose to go against their prince's wishes, seeing loyalty to their comrades as more important than obedience to their prince. The Talons of Tor Caleda were made up of such forces, their defiance all the more paining to Imrik as their banner was first raised in the city from which the prince ruled.





THE ASHENCLOAKS

Though no shadow warriors were officially attached to Eagle Gate's garrison during Prince Yvarn's tenure, it was a rare day when ash-grey cloaks were not sighted amongst the rocks of the pass' northern shoulder. In the early days of his command, Prince Yvarn made several attempts to contact the aesanar nobles who commanded the Ashencloaks, but they always slipped away into the peaks without a word. Upon further investigation, Yvarn's scouts had uncovered a vast network of traps and snares hidden amongst the rocks, with scree slopes and clusters of boulders rigged to tumble into the pass below at the slightest disturbance.



THE EATAINE GUARD

Only one of the Eataine Guard's thirty legions was stationed at Eagle Gate, assigned as Prince Yvarn's bodyguard by royal decree. So battle-hardened were these warriors that it was often said – and not just by the Eataine Guard themselves – that the sum of their experience eclipsed that of the fortress' other defenders combined. Yet the Eataine Guard displayed none of the superiority that should have come with such an accolade. Instead, its warriors silently undertook the most thankless and dangerous of tasks, never once attempting to trade upon their reputation. Each time Eagle Gate came under assault, the Eataine Guard were the first upon the walls, spears gleaming in anticipation.

Prince Yvarn of Meletan
High Elf Prince

Prince Marendri
High Elf Prince

Prince Hodarn
High Elf Prince

Amarkan the Mask
High Elf Noble

Shrinastor
Loremaster of Hoeth

The Astromancers of Eritann
One conclave of Mages

The Silverpelts
One pride of White Lions

The Storm Guard
Four militia regiments of High Elf Spearmen

The Talons of Tor Caleda
Militia regiment of High Elf Archers, two legions of High Elf Spearmen

The Eataine Guard
One legion of High Elf Spearmen

The Ashencloaks
Three households of Shadow Warriors

The Sapphire Guard
Two legions of High Elf Spearmen

The Hostwardens
One legion of High Elf Spearmen

The Eyes of Morai-Heg
Three grand militia regiments of High Elf Archers

The Kraken Guild
Three crews of Lothern Sea Guard, each with two Eagle Claw Bolt Throwers

The Honoured Fang
Two claws of Dragon Princes

The Silverbound Host
One grand host of Tiranoc Chariots

The Eagles of Gibrae
An eyrie of Great Eagles

DARKBLADE'S HOST

Few dark elves had known success against the Great Gates of Ulthuan, but Malus Darkblade was determined to join their number. Certainly, he had the tools for the task at hand, for the remaining strength of Hag Graef and Clar Karond were his to command, to say nothing of Drusala's forces from Ghrond.



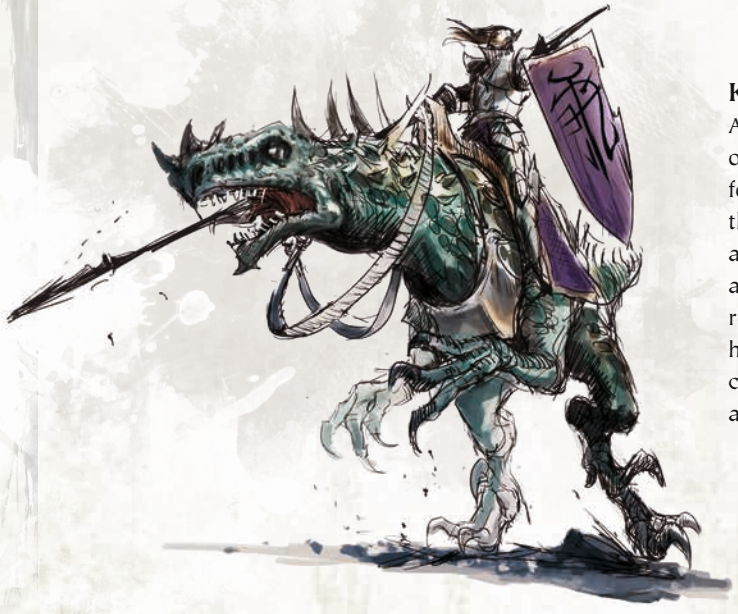
MALUS DARKBLADE

Ambition had carried Malus Darkblade far. Not so very long ago, he was an outcast; now he was one of Malekith's mightiest lords, and commander of the greatest Naggarothi army seen in centuries. Yet Darkblade's success had not been without price. His soul was bound to the daemon Tz'arkan. For the moment, the dark elf was the master, but the daemon would be satisfied with nothing less than freedom. Yet Darkblade was playing a game more dangerous even than this. He could smell change in the air, and believed that Malekith's resolve was weakening. Such times presented opportunity to one such as Malus Darkblade, who saw little reason why the Witch King's crown should not be his.

DRUSALA, HANDMAIDEN TO MORATHI

With Malekith's relationship with his mother at its lowest ebb in many years, most of Ghrond's warriors spoke and acted very carefully around the soldiery of other cities. Not so Drusala, who appeared blithely unconcerned by the ill favour in which her mistress was currently regarded, and passed from campfire to campfire with the sleekness and insouciance of a mountain panther. Drusala carried Hekarti's blessings wherever she went, and ever had some pendant or other small gift for nobles of rank. Most believed that she was trying to rebuild Morathi's battered reputation – they did not see the skeins of enchantment that were being woven tight around them.





KNIGHTS OF THE EBON CLAW

A warband with a long and notorious history, the Knights of the Ebon Claw swore allegiance to Malus Darkblade following the fall of Clar Karond. They shed no tears for their former home, decrying it as a refuge of weaklings and traitors, and pointed to its fall as proof of both accusations. They now rode in Darkblade's vanguard, little realising that this position had not been granted out of honour, but rather so that their new master could keep a close eye upon them. Darkblade was all too aware that an allegiance that shifted once could easily do so again.



KNIGHTS OF BURNING DARK

The Knights of Burning Dark were Malus Darkblade's household knights in name only. They did not serve him out of loyalty or tradition, but because his coin was good, and flowed generously. Few amongst them were of the noble birth normally associated with cold one knights. Most were veterans of running battles across Naggaroth and Ulthuan, whose heraldry and titles Darkblade purchased from families fallen on hard times, or those exterminated during his meteoric rise. Nevertheless, what the Knights of Burning Dark lacked in sophistication and breeding, they more than made up for in battle-skill – which is, of course, why Darkblade paid them so handsomely.



GRISELFANG AND SNARLCLAW

These colossal hydras gorged well on the northlanders of the bloodied horde, and it was Darkblade's hope that they would feast even more enthusiastically on Ulthuan's defenders. Nevertheless, Darkblade resented having paid full price for the creatures. He had purchased Griselfang and Snarlclaw a fortnight before the siege of Clar Karond. Prices dropped like severed heads once the city fell, as its beastmasters frantically sought safety in Hag Graef and Naggarond.

- ***Malus Darkblade, the Tyrant of Hag Graef***
- ***Tullaris Dreadbringer the Hand of Khaine***
- ***Drusala***
  Supreme Sorceress
- ***Karkhost the Butcher***
  Dark Elf Master
- ***Seetheran***
  Khainite Assassin
- ***Knights of Burning Dark***
  Four scalegeld of Cold One Knights, and one scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***Knights of the Ebon Claw***
  Five scalegeld of Cold One Knights
- ***Icewatch***
  Four legions of Dreadspears
- ***Bittergrasp Sentinels***
  Two legions of Darkshards
- ***Serpentsbloom***
  Three legions of Dreadspears
- ***Venomclaws***
  Four legions of Bleakswords
- ***The Seething Mist***
  Two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Ossian Guard***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Bloody Reavers***
  One crew of Black Ark Corsairs
- ***The Blades of Yorath***
  Two crews of Black Ark Corsairs
- ***The Menagerie of Raema***
  Six War Hydras, five Kharibdysses and three flocks of Harpies
- ***Griselfang and Snarlclaw***
  Two War Hydras
- ***The Lords of Oblivion***
  Four score Dragon riders of various allegiances

SLAUGHTER AT EAGLE GATE

The dark elf armada swept out of the west on the wings of a storm. Lokhir Fellheart's ships led the assault, striking at the fortified harbours of Tor Inra and Merokai on the Tiranoc coast. Ancient watchtowers toppled, blasted apart by sorcery or consumed by witchflame. Along the quaysides, proud dragonships blazed brightly then slid serenely beneath the waves.

Prince Morvai, only lately returned from the Battle of Moonspire, swiftly rallied his kingdom's armies and drove Fellheart's corsairs from the broken coastline. The prince paid a high price for his bravery. During the desperate fighting for Tor Inra, an assassin's blade set his veins afire with poison. For three days after, every healer in Tiranoc sought to cure the prince's ills, but to no avail. Thus did Morvai, son of Eldyr, pass into the shadow beyond, the royal line of High Tiranoc continued only by his sister Eldyra, who journeyed in distant lands. Despite Morvai's loss, the people of Tiranoc rejoiced, for they believed the dark elf raids defeated. Alas, Fellheart's strikes had only ever been intended as a distraction to draw Tiranoc's defenders southwards. Even as Morvai was laid to rest in his family's ancestral tomb, the true assault began on the border between Tiranoc and Nagarythe.

Drane Brackblood led this attack, her fleet sweeping away the Ulthuani patrols and closing upon the shoreline. As the ships advanced, a wave of white flame swept across the shoreline. A few captains, not knowing that Teclis had summoned the fire to purge daemons, believed it had been sent to destroy their vessels, and gave panicked orders for new headings. However, the flames dispersed scant miles from Ulthuan's shores, leaving the ships and their crews unharmed, save for the mocking derision the startled masters had to endure from their officers.

Soon after, Brackblood's fleet disgorged a great host along the Shadow March. The first vessel made landfall at dusk and, before midnight, the shoreline bristled with spears. Malus Darkblade had been given the 'honour' of leading the initial invasion. The Tyrant of Hag Graef had no illusions that Malekith hoped he would meet his end with an arrow in his belly, but he didn't care. Darkblade could sense opportunity, and his lips twisted in sly anticipation of the rewards that victory would bring. The daemon had been restless of late, the draughts he took to control it ever less effective. For now, Tz'arkan was silent, and Darkblade drove his warriors hard into the daemon-ravaged Tiranoc heartlands.

Already, black-fletched arrows arced out of the northern skies as the aesanar of Nagarythe reacted to the invasion. This too held scant concern for Darkblade, who sent dark riders into the rugged hills, but did little else to prevent the attacks. The shadow warriors' arrows were but pinpricks. Scores of his soldiers would perish, but he knew that many thousand times their number would survive. The combined armies of Hag Graef and Clar Karond, as well as Drusala's tithe from Ghrond, were at Darkblade's command. Speed mattered more than anything else, and he intended to be against the walls of Eagle Gate before the warriors of Tiranoc could bring them to battle. Darkblade did not know why Malekith had been insistent on the Eagle Gate over any other, but he was determined not to show weakness by failing in his assigned task.

Not all the shadow warriors harried Darkblade's advance along Hawkwing Pass; some had carried word into the mountains, and Prince Yvarn, commander of Eagle Gate, made his preparations for the assault. In times past, Yvarn would have liked nothing better than to watch the dark elves grind themselves to powder upon his walls, but such a stance was no longer possible. Though it was little understood beyond the mountains, the great gates of Ulthuan had suffered badly during the daemonic invasion, Eagle Gate worst of all. Towers had been shattered, the garrison diminished by fire and pestilence. Worse, a colossal plague daemon had thrown itself against the western defences, smashing a breach clear through six of the eight walls. The repairs were far from complete – the outer wall alone sported a line of broken rubble near a quarter-mile in length. The ramparts could be held, but only if the outermost breach were held also. Such an assignment was little short of a death sentence. Thus did Yvarn resolve to lead the defence of the breach alongside his personal guard, for he could not in good conscience order any other to do so.

The dark elves came at dawn. They made no attempt to initiate a traditional siege, for Darkblade had violently impressed the need for haste upon them. Instead, they drove hard for the breach in the outer wall. The knights of Hag Graef led the charge, urging their reptilian steeds through the defenders' hail of arrows and bolts. Hundreds perished before they reached the walls, but those who remained merely sneered at their comrades' weakness and spurred on. Darkblade rode within their ranks, far enough forward that all would know he had commanded the charge, but far enough back that whatever surprises the high elves had prepared would be spent on warriors other than himself. Behind came cloaked corsairs, the bleakswords and dreadspears of three cities, and the hydras of Clar Karond. It was a host of terrifying proportions, and almost every blade was carried against the breach where Prince Yvarn and his Eataine Guard waited in solemn silence.

Prince Yvarn looked out upon the oncoming host and saw only his doom. He looked to his left and right at the impossibly thin line of spears with which he had sworn to hold the breach, and knew at once that victory was beyond his grasp. Eagle Gate had endured against impossible odds in recent months, but Yvarn knew that the battered fortress could not hold unaided.

A clamour of shrill horns echoed across the mountainside. Yvarn jumped at the sound, a flush of shame following close behind. The soldiers trusted him, the prince thought, how could he lead them into inevitable defeat? He crushed the thought down, but it was insidious. If Eagle Gate was doomed, thought Yvarn, why die in its defence; why ask others to do so?

The ground was trembling now, shuddering beneath the cold ones' stride. *Withdraw!* screamed a small part of the prince's mind. *Save yourself; save your followers!*

Yvarn wavered, then gave in. Turning to face the phalanxes of the Eataine Guard, he placed a hand upon his sword-hilt and opened his mouth to speak. Yvarn's soldiers waited expectantly, but the order to retreat died on the prince's lips.

As Yvarn's hand had touched the metal, memories came flooding back. That sword had been borne into battle by fifty generations of his line, passed more often from corpse to living heir than from father to son, or mother to daughter. At that moment, a fire awoke within the prince, a flame that had somehow guttered to feebleness in recent days, but now burst forth into new and radiant glory. Yvarn stood a little straighter, a little taller, and all his doubts at last fell way. He saw the dark elf horde for what it was, an army of rogues and cut-throats, undisciplined and brittle. He would not shame his forefathers by retreating before such a foe.

'Ready arms!' Yvarn cried, his voice cold and clear. 'Today we fight for the Phoenix!'

The knights of Hag Graef struck the line of spears at full tilt, their lances easily punching through the ironwood shields to pierce flesh beyond. Cold ones snarled, before darting forward to lock their jaws around arms and throats. Blood pulsed bright in the wakening sun. Elves collapsed onto the rocks, their white robes stained red. Across the face of the breach, the phalanxes of the Eataine Guard shuddered as their front ranks were torn to ruin, but they held. Spears thrust forward to avenge fallen comrades, guided as much by wrathful instinct as the balance of hand and eye. Cold ones thrashed and died, bucking riders from their saddles and into the vengeful host.

Prince Yvarn, sword light in his hand, did his forebears proud that day, cutting down the warleader of the Ebon Claw, and toppling their standard. The prince scarcely felt the sword-blow that shattered his shield and tore a bloody gash across his chest. He heard the glories of Khaine in his ears, then realised it was no godly voice, but the keening of his soldiers, who pressed forward close behind him.

Suddenly, impossibly, the first wave of knights broke. No order was given, no horn-cry sounded the retreat – the survivors simply turned and fled from the line of phoenix-blazoned shields. Malus Darkblade railed at them as cowards, threatened the worst torments he could imagine, but still the knights flooded past. In the end, the Tyrant of Hag Graef fled with his vassals, seeing no future in fighting alone before the high elves. Prince Yvarn, bleeding but proud, ordered his soldiers to clear the breach and prepare for another assault.

Much blood would yet be shed on both sides, for the Battle for Eagle Gate was not done.



The next attack was not long in coming. The knights had barely fled out of longbow range when their own advancing forces prevented further retreat. Darkblade, furious almost beyond the ability to speak, battered them into a semblance of order. Ignoring the eagle claw bolts that lanced through the skies above, the Tyrant of Hag Graef sought out a dozen of the knights' champions, decapitated them, and flung the severed heads into the cheering ranks of bleakswords and corsairs. Few amongst the infantry had any great love for the preening cold one knights, and to see them humbled thus was a rare treat. Darkblade could feel Tz'arkan whispering through his mind as he took each head. The daemon was begging for release, promising to bring victory, but Darkblade, as ever, closed his mind to the pleas.

Order bloodily restored, Darkblade urged his forces forward again, but the moment had been lost. A decisive cavalry assault could have swept the defenders from the breach, but its failure ensured the dark elves would now have to follow a more traditional course. Already, Darkblade could see that the defenders had piled cold one corpses across the ground before the breach, a second wall of dead flesh scarcely within bowshot of the walls. That gruesome rampart made any further knightly charge inadvisable. The hour of the cavalry was done; it now fell to the infantry to carry the breach. Raising the Warpsword high, the Darkblade threw his forces forward once again.

This assault did not fall solely against the breach, for Darkblade had learnt his lesson. Instead, the dark elf line heaved forwards across the entire frontage of Eagle Gate. Black lightning vied with white fire as sorceresses duelled with mages, each seeking to bend the magic of the mountains to their cause. Reaper bolt throwers, their missiles heavily laden with dark enchantment, slammed into Eagle Gate, shattering cupolas and turrets. Corsairs lodged grappling lines on crenulations high above, hauled themselves up the polished stones, then fell screaming to their deaths as the defenders severed the ropes. Harpies swarmed across the ramparts. Hydras pressed the vast gate of silver and imbued starwood. Magical fire blazed from murder holes, and one by one the hydras perished, turning on their masters in their death throes. Shades sought the elusive aesanar amongst the pass' rocky slopes, and perished with black-fletched arrows lodged in throats and eyes. Darkblade was unworried. These were but feints, designed to keep fresh defenders from the breach. Hundreds of dark elves had died, but the dreadlord yet had thousands to unleash, and he flung them at Eagle Gate as a stoker shovels coal into a furnace.

Where the first assault had collapsed within minutes, the second raged deep into the night. So thick were the ranks of bleakswords and dreadspears that retreat was not an option – the warriors either fought to their last, or took a blade in the back as they scrabbled at their comrades' shields. For the dark elves, it was to be victory or death. They found plenty of the latter, but the former was denied them.

Prince Yvarn had led his soldiers down from the breach and arrayed a full battle line. Behind them, on the rubble and corpse-strewn slope, archers bearing the banners and colours of Caledor had appeared – loyalties to Eagle Gate had seemingly overridden the more distant quarrels of princes, at least for some – and their quicksilver volleys sent many a Naggarothi to Ereth Khial's embrace. Through it all, Yvarn and his Eataine Guard battled on, though their numbers dwindled. Perhaps half of the prince's soldiers had fallen, but the survivors fought without fear. With each white-garbed soldier that fell, the strange and beautiful war song of Khaine grew louder.

As dawn drew nigh, the second assault at last disintegrated. The dark elves about the walls fled down the pass, leaving their scorched and bloody dead piled thick upon the field. Darkblade, once again incandescent with disbelieving fury, set his lieutenants to countering the rout. The Tyrant of Hag Graef could scarcely believe that the breach's defenders had endured against some ten times their number. He could not allow them to resist any longer. Already the armies of Tiranoc and Ellyrion would be converging upon Eagle Gate. Darkblade needed the fortress taken before they arrived, or he would know only failure. Not for the first time, the dreadlord wondered if that had been Malekith's plan all along, but he crushed the thought.

The third assault began as the sun reached its zenith. Darkblade led this attack. This time, he advanced not in the anonymity of the middle ranks, but proudly, alongside the banner of Hag Graef. At Darkblade's back rode his foremost vassals, the Knights of Burning Dark; behind them came the soul-pledged warriors of his tower. The time for half-measures was past; only the most vicious and determined of his forces would serve now. As the Knights of Burning Dark began their charge, formations of corsairs once more swelled towards the main gateway, determined not to be outdone by their dry-foot allies.

Once again, the killing began long before the Naggarothi struck Yvarn's lines. Bowstrings sang, loosing arrows onto an approach already thickly carpeted with them. Fire was summoned by Caledorian mages and hurled from the walls, bringing fresh horror to the killing field below, but still the dark elves came on. The skies roiled above as Sapherian astromancers called forth arcane lighting, but Drusala's sorceresses had taken their foes' measure now. Jagged spears of light dispersed halfway between the clouds and the charging knights. With cackling

glee, the sorceresses reformed the stolen energies into billowing clouds of tentacle-laden darkness that swept across the walls and left only gleaming skeletons in their wake.

After what seemed an eternity to Darkblade, but entirely too short a span to Prince Yvarn, the Knights of Burning Dark reached the wall of corpses and the high elf phalanxes beyond. Some attackers were flung from their saddles as their steeds became entangled amongst the dead, but the instincts of Darkblade's loyal cold one, Spite, ran true, and the Tyrant of Hag Graef was delivered unharmed into the thick of the foe.

As far as Darkblade was concerned, the Knights of Burning Dark should have punched through Yvarn's line and into the fortress ward beyond. The defenders were weary from more than a day's ceaseless battle, and the attackers fresh of limb, their vigour purposefully preserved for such a moment as this. With Darkblade at the forefront, the line of flame-etched shields should have crumpled in moments, scattered by the Warpsword's blade. Yet, unbeknownst to the Tyrant of Hag Graef, reinforcements had at last begun to arrive at Eagle Gate. Dismounted knights of Ellyrion had joined the ramparts, adding their eagle-eyed bowfire to that of the defenders. A flight of phoenixes, the air blazing behind, now scattered the surviving harpies from amongst the fortress' uppermost towers. More importantly, three regiments of Chracian hunters, the lion rampant proud upon their banners, had joined the battle for the breach, and their axes gleamed as they hacked through darksteel plate and cold one scale.

For a third and final time, the dark elf assault stalled. Prince Yvarn saw the attackers waver, heard the sudden trumpets from the west and whispered a prayer of thanks to Asuryan. Eagle Gate had been saved.

Malus Darkblade's sword arced down through the helm of an Eataine spearman, splitting steel and skull with a single blow. The high elf collapsed, and Spite barged into the gap, his jaws closing around the head of a Chracian hunter.

Release me, **Tz'arkan whispered through Darkblade's mind.** ***I can bring you victory.***

Never! **Darkblade swore, but a part of him yearned to give in. How long had it been since last he had loosed the daemon? He couldn't recall – the crawling days and sleepless nights had merged as one, long ago.**

I could force you, **Tz'arkan hissed.** ***This pain, this suffering, the wild magic of the mountains; I have supped deeply of them, you can contain me no longer.***

If so, then why not take your freedom? **Darkblade demanded.**

I cannot fight both you and your enemies at the same time, **the daemon allowed.** ***But then,*** **it went on slyly,** ***I think you have something of a similar problem.***

At that moment, a chorus of horns sounded from the west, their notes silver and shining in the noonday sun. Tiranoc had come sooner than hoped, and he had failed. Darkblade cursed Fellheart for not keeping them at bay; Malekith for demanding so rushed an assault in the first place. Most of all, he cursed himself for having yielded to the Witch King's will, for not finding another path. There was but one course left.

Very well, **Malus snarled silently.** ***Come forth. We shall slay them all.***

Tz'arkan gave no reply, but Darkblade felt the daemon's spirit rise up to smother his own. Something was wrong, he realised as darkness flowed over his thoughts. Something was different. Then the pain began, and all Darkblade knew were his own screams.



At first, Darkblade's screams went unnoticed in the chorus of blood and steel. Hundreds fought and died beneath sword, lance and axe; few had eyes for aught save the desperate actions of the foe immediately before them. Then Darkblade's agonies shifted in pitch, growing shrill enough to unsettle the spirit. Every elf upon the breach fell silent as they felt otherworldly talons tearing at their souls. The Tyrant of Hag Graef fell from Spite's saddle, his skin flowing like water as he did so. Unbidden, a space cleared in that press of vying bodies, with warriors of both sides unconsciously retreating from the writhing dreadlord. For his part, the cold one – possessed perhaps of more good sense than the elves nearby – abandoned his master and vanished into the fray.

A moment later, there was a wet tearing sound. Darkblade's screaming slowly descended into a deep, snarling bellow as Tz'arkan reshaped the tyrant's body into a form he found more pleasing. Bones shifted and reformed, the sounds of cracking and splintering appalling to hear. Armour and torn cloth fell away as the bubbling mass of flesh doubled and redoubled in size. Horns sprouted from an elongated brow, and new limbs took shape. The Warpsword of Khaine, tiny for a moment in a monstrous grasp, flowed and reshaped into a weapon more fitting for its new master. As the elves nearby recoiled in sudden, instinctive terror, the daemon Tz'arkan gave a roar of triumph.

Tz'arkan's rampage was immediate and without discrimination. At one moment, the Warpsword flashed out to cleave a luckless member of the Eataine Guard, at another, the daemon's claws snipped and battered at the dark elves in his shadow. Such treachery was not intended, but driven by a sudden and overwhelming greed. Tz'arkan had intended to amuse himself by slaughtering Darkblade's foes, but the same wild magic that had enabled the daemon to suffocate the Tyrant's blighted spirits had also awoken a terrible hunger in his core. Surrounded by sweet, succulent elven souls, Tz'arkan lost all control, and each elf that fell at the daemon's hand strengthened him further. Tz'arkan felt the power swelling within with every death-scream, could feel the Realm of Chaos billowing and straining at reality. He resisted it at first, for he had no wish to share this bounty with his unholy siblings, but there was a desire there too, a need to let the rift burst open. For the moment, the daemon held firm against temptation, and breathed in the glorious terror that his emergence had provoked.

Prince Yvarn saw Tz'arkan's rampage and knew that the beast had to be slain. Spears were brought to bear, but they made little impact on the daemon's hide. The axes of the white lions had better luck, but no axeman who landed a blow survived to land a second strike. Steeling his courage, Yvarn flung himself at the daemon. His runesword, heirloom of fifty generations, glowed brighter than the sun as he struck at Tz'arkan again and again. Black ichor pulsed from the daemon's wounds, mingling with the blood of his victims, and Yvarn exulted in the knowledge that the beast could be slain. Then one massive claw closed around his blade, and another around his neck. The prince's choked screams were cut off as the claw crushed his throat. Without realising they did so, the Eataine Guard began to shuffle back towards the breach.

To the rear of the dark elf host, the newly arrived chariots of Tiranoc found the foe poorly arrayed to face them. The straining purebreds of Amarath and Elindon sped up the pass, their hooves thundering across the shaped stone of the roadway as they bore their masters into the battle. Harsh cries rang out across the dark elf host as the rearmost formations shifted to meet the new threat. However, the charioteers loosed their arrows as they advanced, each shot seeking a leader amongst the Naggarothi ranks. Panic spread as commanding voices fell silent, and the manoeuvres that might have saved the dark elves collapsed into disorder. Crossbows were raised and volleys loosed, but the fire was too hurried, and much too late. The chariots of Tiranoc were smashing through the packed ranks, the bones of fallen dark elves splintering beneath their silver-shod wheels.

From her vantage point upon a mountain-spur, Drusala saw the Tiranoc host veer away as a second, more determined dark elf line formed out of the rearguard's anarchy. The charge had been devastating, but the confines of the pass would work against the charioteers, if only her kinsmen could keep their order. Nevertheless, the sorceress was aware that the assault on Eagle Gate had all but fallen apart. Between the screeching phoenixes and the efforts of the mages, the corsairs had yet to gain a single foothold on the fortress walls, and whilst the daemon had driven the high elves back from their wall of corpses to the brink of the breach, it now seemed as if the beast was more interested in slaughtering the dark elves than capitalising on that gain. Drusala could see little hope of success for the dark elves. In theory, this resolution pleased her, for Morathi did not want to see Malekith meet with success on Ulthuan's shores, but she was ill-pleased that her life might be forfeit alongside the Witch King's ambition.

Then, a chorus of roars split the cold air, a sound as old as the mountains themselves. Cheering broke out along the ramparts of Eagle Gate, and the Naggarothi looked to the southern skies and saw only their doom.

Against all expectation, Caledor had come to the field, and the battle was as good as ended.

Marendri of Caledor was in the lock chamber of Eagle Gate when the roaring began. There were perhaps forty others with him – ten dragon princes and thirty Tiranoc archers – standing guard over the pulleys and counterweights that operated the gates and portcullises below.

'Do you hear them?' asked Illian, youngest of the Tiranoc elves. His face, like those of the others, was bright with joy. They were honoured that a warrior such as the dragon prince shared their vigil, awed by his reputation.

'I do,' Marendri confirmed. They were all young, he thought, eager, but unblooded. In that moment, he envied them, for his own innocence was all but fled.

'I told you that they'd come,' Illian exulted. 'I told you.'

'You did,' Marendri replied quietly, his eyes tracking around the room, planning the next few moments as precisely as circumstance would allow. The moment could be put off no longer. 'And I am sorry.'

'What...?' Illian's voice cut off as the point of Marendri's sword came clear of its scabbard and took the archer clean through the throat. All around the room, shouts of alarm mingled with screams as the other Caledorians followed Marendri's lead.

As the sound of running feet echoed down through the chamber outside, Marendri swept the last youth's sword aside and delivered as kind a deathblow as he could manage.

'Why?' the youth whispered with his final breath.

'Because I must,' said Marendri, suddenly weary. His knights had already sealed the chamber's heavy door, he noted with shame, buying time for what was to come. Releasing the lifeless body of his victim, he turned his attention to the forest of levers in front of him.

The dragons attacked without warning and without mercy. The host was vast, larger than any seen since the time of Aenarion, with hundreds of wings silhouetted against the skies. On the outer walls of Eagle Gate, cheering faded into screams as dragonfire swept the ramparts. The newcomers met little resistance at first. By the time any realised that there were black wings amongst the red and gold, that Caledor was a friend no more, it was much too late. Here and there, a commander ordered archers to direct their fire against the newcomers, yet it was the desperate strivings of the doomed. The dragon princes of Caledor were the finest warriors Ulthuan had to offer, the dragons themselves formidable beyond the reckoning of lesser creatures. They forged on through the sporadic bowfire, arrows scattering from armour and diamond-hard scale. Talons raked the towers and courtyards, snatching fleeing elves to their deaths.

The walls of keeps and towers were torn down, the merciless fire that left only ashes following close behind. Within Eagle Gate, the betrayal continued, as the Caledorians of the garrison turned on their fellows and cast open the gates. As one, the Naggarothi surged into the fortress' suddenly undefended centre, scarcely able to believe their fortune. Along the breach, the Eataine Guard perished, cut down from behind by a volley of dragonscale arrows. This particular betrayal did little to help the dark elves, however – Tz'arkan, well and truly lost to soul-lust, still wrought ruin amongst Darkblade's forces.

Far to the west, the commanders of the Tiranoc army saw the vast golden eagle fall from the fortress' spire, and knew that Eagle Gate had fallen, yet that was not the worst of it. It was unthinkable, but undeniable: Caledor had turned against the other kingdoms of Ulthuan.

Caledor fought for the Witch King.











If the fall of Eagle Gate marked disaster for the high elves, it was nothing less than a triumph for their dark cousins. Thousands had perished against the fortress walls, but the roster of the slain was a fraction of what it could have been.

In the hour of Caledor's betrayal, the elves of Tiranoc had fled back into their own ravaged lands. Chariots could never be a match for dragons, and the nobles of Tiranoc knew it. There was no pursuit. The dark elf formations were still in upheaval from the Tiranoc charge. As for the dragon riders of Caledor, they had no wish to wreak needless ruin upon their neighbours, despite their change of loyalties. Indeed, most could barely stomach fighting alongside the Naggarothi at all. Once the last defenders of Eagle Gate had streamed through the pass and into Ellyrion, the dragon princes guided their draconic steeds to the inaccessible shoulders of the mountains, halting only to help the few-score Caledorian defenders of the fortress to reach the comparative safety of the peaks.

The sorceress Drusala gave the dragons no heed. She had been as surprised as any at Caledor's arrival, but that was in the past, and the future beckoned. Moving like a ghost through the anarchy, Drusala drew near to the breach where Tz'arkan still raged. A cage of Ghrondian spears surrounded the daemon, but Tz'arkan had not yielded. Long had the creature sought freedom, and he had slain many in his quest to escape. Drusala was undaunted. The ring of spears parted at the sorceress' gesture, and she passed onto the blood-sodden and limb-strewn ground beyond. Behind her, the circle closed once again.

As the bloody evening passed into night, an uneasy peace fell upon Eagle Pass. The Caledorians remained in their roosts above, their unblinking gaze ever on the Naggarothi who laboured to secure Eagle Gate for their own. Hostilities between the unlikely allies were still a long way from impossible, and had thus far been kept in abeyance only by the fact that the Witch King himself had accompanied the Caledorian charge. Malekith had descended into the pass once the defences of Eagle Gate had crumbled, and announced his new alliance. The Witch King went on to warn that any attempt to harm a bearer of the World Dragon crest would be met with immediate execution. Thus was peace preserved through the threat of murder.

Imrik did not hear those words. Like his kin, he watched the scurrying of the dark elves from a lofty pinnacle, though in truth he saw little of the tableau before him. Imrik's thoughts wandered through dark places in that hour. He had not wanted to believe Teclis; would not have believed him had not Caledor Dragontamer echoed the loremaster's claims. The Crown Prince of Caledor was proud of what his warriors had achieved, but was revulsed by what they – what *he* – had done. The princes of Caledor might not have hated the Naggarothi so vengefully as the sons of Tiranoc and Nagarythe, but their loathing ran deep nonetheless. There was little consolation in the fact that the betrayal had been necessary; less in the possibility that it might well have been predestined from the moment of the world's creation. Imrik did not fancy a life lived out as a pawn of fate. Yet he did not wish for his people to perish in the Rhana Dandra, and Malekith was the key to victory. Caledor would fight; there was nothing new in that circumstance. There was honour in the cause – or so Imrik told himself – however it might seem to others.

At dawn the next day, Malus Darkblade rejoined the Naggarothi host. His return evinced no real comment, for there was much coming and going at that hour. Kouran had arrived from the west, bringing many thousands with him, and vanguard parties already issued into Ellyrion, preparing the way for the next onslaught. Moving quickly through the captured fortress, Darkblade reached the chambers where Malekith and his commanders now planned the second phase. Drusala was there, and Imrik too, though the latter was surrounded by a deep bodyguard of crimson knights and wore an expression of scarcely-veiled disgust.

In front of all, the Tyrant of Hag Graef abased himself before the Witch King and apologised for his absence during the night; an absence caused, or so he said, by relentless pursuit of the foe. Darkblade laid the banner of Eagle Gate at his master's feet, a token of fealty and corroboration both. None gainsaid Darkblade's claims, for none who had seen the dreadlord's transformation now lived – Drusala had seen to that. In any event, only a small number had seen Tz'arkan's emergence for what it was. For the moment, at least, Darkblade's secret was safe. Darkblade felt Malekith's gaze resting heavily upon him as he wove his dishonest tale, but his mask of arrogance never once slipped. Bad enough that Tz'arkan had gotten the better of him; worse by far that he was now indebted to another for caging the daemon and pressing the banner into his hands.

Towards the rear of the chamber, Drusala watched Darkblade's stilted grovelling with amusement. Indeed, she took such glee in his performance that the glamour the sorceress had worn like a cloak since leaving Ghrond almost slipped entirely before she recovered her composure. Imrik alone marked the slight shift in Drusala's features, and wondered what it boded. Malekith apparently saw nothing amiss, for he sonorously thanked Darkblade for his loyal service, and gave him command of one of the three armies that would depart on the morrow. Come next morning, the dark elves would be on the march once more.

Shadowblade clung to the underside of the windowsill, his deft fingertips easily finding purchase on the stones, despite the winds that howled across the tower's outer walls. A true assassin needed neither ropes nor spikes. The chamber within was empty save for Malekith and his two guests – one of whom had come to the tower as dusk fell. Shadowblade could see nothing, but his keen ears heard all.

'The more you speak,' Shadowblade heard the Witch King say, 'the more we are convinced that you have taken council with our mother, who imagines that she is Hekarti reborn.'

'And perhaps she is,' Teclis replied. 'Perhaps she always was. Is it so hard to believe? We know Isha and Kurnous dwell in Athel Loren.'

'You hold that our gods walk amongst us?'

'Not all of them, but enough. The cycle of history has a momentum that overwhelms even kings. Willingly or not, we will repeat that cycle in mimicry of those who came before. What is the Rhana Dandra, if not the echo of our gods' last battle?'

'I am Nethu,' the voice was Imrik's, and its whispered words spoke of a sudden truth. 'I have opened a door that should have remained closed.'

'Say rather that you have opened the path to the flame,' Teclis corrected. 'But yes, the comparison is otherwise apt. Nethu's actions, though a betrayal, prevented disaster – and so have yours.'

Malekith spoke next, his voice dangerous. 'It is your contention, then, that we are to play the role of Khaine?'

'No, your path is not Khaine's. You have worn his persona as a cloak only when it has suited you.'

'Then who?' the Witch King demanded. 'Who else is fit to bear the mantle of the Destroyer?'

'Khaine is not yet come. You know the stories – though he began the war of the gods, it was long before he showed his hand. At present he slumbers trifurcated, trapped in prisons of blood, soul and steel. Only when these three are one will he awaken. Your path lies elsewhere.'

At that moment, Shadowblade heard a screech high above as a harpy plunged out of the skies, claws outstretched. *Too much noise!* the assassin cursed silently, loosing his grip on the sill and sliding down the tower's stones. At the same time, a dagger flew from his hand and buried itself in the harpy's throat. Arresting his descent and ducking under the plunging corpse, Shadowblade hauled his way back up to the window, hoping that the sound had not alerted those within.

It seemed that it had not.

'Impossible!' Malekith's shout echoed clearly in the night sky.

'No, it is the truth,' Teclis' voice was still calm. 'That is why almost all succumbed to madness. It was the price of that betrayal.'

'Leave us, both of you!' Malekith snarled. 'Before we forget the services you have rendered, and let our black guard amuse themselves with your bones.'

There was the sound of retreating footsteps; it seemed that the meeting was over. Shadowblade released his grip on the sill and slid down the tower once more. The assassin cursed that he had not heard what had passed in the moment of the harpy's strike, but consoled himself that his mistress would be most interested in how Teclis had spoken of Khaine. Moments later, he ducked in through the window by which he had originally made his exit. The chamber had been empty before; it was not so now.

'I think it is time for your antics to come to an end,' Drusala whispered, her eyes gleaming violet in the dark. Shadowblade's hand flew to his belt. He already knew that even he wouldn't be fast enough.





News travels fast in Ulthuan, borne as it often is upon the shrill cries of eagles. Tyrion, his humour already taxed by recent woes, refused to believe the tales of Caledor's betrayal at first. Yet every messenger who brought news south carried the same tidings, that Eagle Gate had fallen to dragonfire more than to any blade. With each telling, Tyrion's mood grew ever bleaker, and at last he could contain his fury no longer. Stalking angrily from the Phoenix Court, he swept through the streets of Lothern until he reached the Phoenix King's tower, and ordered the door broken down. Korhil Lionmane, captain of Finubar's personal guard, argued respectfully at first, but quickly gave way when he had taken Tyrion's measure. Korhil too sought answers regarding Finubar's absence.

Thus it was that the ensorcelled door to Finubar's tower was at last opened; not by magic, nor by Sunfang's strike, but by the enchanted blade of Chayal, Korhil's double-headed axe. Driven by the captain's great strength, the steel repeatedly bit into the waning lock-magics and deep into the timbers. It took the better part of a day, and Korhil was weary by the end, but he would accept no aid. With every stroke, the captain had become more convinced that something ill waited for him inside, and that his labours were part penance for a failure he could not yet define.

And so it proved. With a crunch of splintering starwood, the doors crashed open on their hinges. Tyrion was through the gap in moments, Sunfang drawn to guard against dangers in the unexpected gloom. Though exhausted, Korhil ordered other members of his guard to hold the entrance, and followed the prince into the tower. Finubar was found easily enough, for the stench of death lay heavy in the dark. Tyrion discovered the Phoenix King in the upper chambers, before the scrying pool by which he had been said to stretch his thoughts across the globe. He would do so no more. Finubar had been dead for many months, although some trick of the tower's enchantments had preserved him in the moment of demise. The corpse was ragged, torn in unspeakable ways, its flesh bearing the most intimate of wounds, and the bloody gouges of hooked talons plain upon pale skin. Even through his own suffocating shame, Korhil was dimly aware that Tyrion's rage, moments before hot enough to melt ithilmar, had faded to the coldest of flames.

Finubar was sent to his final repose the next day, steered across the Sea of Dreams by Chracian guardsmen who had exchanged their white furs for black. Alas, the Phoenix Court knew there was time for but a fleeting period of remembrance. Soon thereafter, Tyrion was unanimously elected Regent of Ulthuan; if the realm survived another year, then he would walk through the flames to become that which he was in all but name: the twelfth Phoenix King of Ulthuan.

Tyrion's early days of rule were busy ones, shadowed by the perilous times and his dark mood. He ordered the remaining Caledorian princes at large imprisoned in Lothern, for fear of their treachery. He despatched armies to harry the dark elves rampaging through Ellyrion and Avelorn. Tyrion longed to face them in battle himself, as he had countless times before, but the Phoenix Court would not countenance their regent risking himself in battle so soon after they had lost a king. Such were the arguments that kept Finubar from Finuval Plain long ago. Tyrion chafed at the logic, but he could see the sense of it and acceded. Thus did Ystranna of Avelorn and Caradryan of the Flame lead the initial counter-attack in their regent's stead. Meanwhile, Tyrion learned of Ulthuan's defilement through every despatch and rumour, and soon came to resent every syllable uttered to him.

Most of all, Tyrion called for his brother, for he needed Teclis' counsel now more than ever. Yet Teclis was nowhere to be found, and each herald who returned in failure only served to deepen Tyrion's anger. Within a week of his ascension to the regency, Tyrion was utterly alone; his friends and family were beyond his reach, and those who served the prince feared his wrath more than they loved him. Only Korhil did not fear Tyrion, for he sensed that they shared the same burden. Alone of his guard, Korhil had not forsaken sable garb following Finubar's interment, but had dyed Charandis' pelt the colour of midnight to serve as a reminder of his failure. Korhil was canny enough to know that the Phoenix Court were wrong to keep Tyrion from the battle, for was he not their greatest hero? As the days and weeks passed, punctuated by reports of battles won and cities razed, Korhil urged the prince to forsake the Phoenix Court's wishes and ride north.



Tyrion would not do so; not until word came that the Witch King had forced passage through Eagle Gate and into the desolated Chrace that lay beyond. At that moment, Tyrion knew Malekith meant to assail the Blighted Isle, and thus seize Widowmaker from its resting place. Riding roughshod over the Phoenix Court's objections, Tyrion at last gathered an army of his own and took ship north across the Sea of Dreams. Though his inaction was finally at an end, he felt little satisfaction; even as he travelled to war, his mind yet lingered on the fate of his beloved Alarielle and their daughter, Aliathra.

'Come no closer!' Arahan's voice cut through the still air beneath the Oak of Ages' rotting branches. An arrow, already nocked, tracked the veiled newcomer as she advanced through the leaf mould.

'I mean no harm.' The intruder spoke softly. Her form was almost ghostly, fading and reforming like skeins of morning mist caught in a sudden breeze. Her face was all but hidden by a veil that crossed close beneath jet-black eyes; her hair by a thin shawl that was the colour of smoke. The little of her face that was visible above the veil was elfin in aspect, and her body was slender beneath a gossamer dress.

'They all say that,' Naestra retorted, stepping around the base of the oak, her own bow levelled.

'They all lie,' put in Arahan. She could no longer recall how long she and her sister had stood guard over the majestic tree. She knew only that her mother, known to some as Ariel – and to others as Isha – slumbered inside whilst the Everqueen tended to her wounds.

'I come in friendship,' the figure insisted, but nonetheless ceased her approach. 'Do you know me?'

'You are the Lady of the Silverspire,' Naestra replied.

'You are Ladrielle,' echoed Arahan.

'You brought this sickness upon her.'

'It is your fault that the oak dies.'

Ladrielle ghosted forward, seemingly oblivious to the arrows trained upon her. 'Are you so sure of that? I see new shoots upon the bough.'

Arahan's eye flicked to the nearest branch. Sure enough, there were suddenly bright green leaves amongst the black.

With a rumble, the ground near Arahan's feet sank away, revealing a stairway of roots that led beneath the oak. Sudden light blazed from the below, so brilliant that it forced both sisters to shield their eyes.

The Lady of the Silverspire laughed in sudden joy. The dress that had been grey was now the colour of the midnight sky; the shawl slipped from her shoulders and the veil fell away. Arahan saw that there were brilliant stars in the goddess' alabaster hair and a crescent moon shining upon her brow. Arahan had seen that face long ago; she had been fashioned from the light of those stars, just as Naestra had been formed from the darkness that hung between them.

'Lileath...' she breathed, earning a querulous look from her sister.

The goddess laughed again. 'I forget that you have never seen beneath the veil, that Lileath and Ladrielle are one.' She smiled. 'This is a time of rebirth. Enjoy it, for the darkness presses close behind. I can guarantee nothing of the days to come.'

The light slowly ebbed away. A figure emerged from within the hollow, and began to ascend the gnarled stair. She moved haltingly at first, but grew in confidence with every step. By the time she had reached the top of the stair, the light had faded entirely, revealing a slender elf-woman clad in the greens of a long-awaited spring.

'Tell me,' Lileath instructed, 'whom do you see?'

'I see the Everqueen,' said Naestra, her disappointment plain.

'I see our mother,' said Arahan, who had looked more carefully.

Lileath shook her head. 'She is both, and she is neither...'

'But I am whole for the first time in thousands of years,' interrupted Alarielle sharply. She opened her hand, and a ruby's fragments fell to the ground. 'The essence of the shieldstone has been freed, reunited with my blood, and with Ariel's divine spirit. I have been restored by one for whom twin names and duplicity are but a matter of course.' Her voice, bitter before, grew hard. 'We must summon the council. There is much work ahead of us. The last war of the gods is upon us.'

Tyrion said little as the high elf fleet sped across the Sea of Dreams. Korhil, ever at the regent's side through choice and duty, was certain he understood the burdens that weighed Tyrion down. Yet even he was at a loss to explain why the prince spent long hours in the *Sword of Khaine's* highest watchtower, staring unflinchingly eastward.

In truth, there was little else for Tyrion to do. The army he had brought from Lothern was the finest that could be raised, its ranks thick with those who had fought with him since the start of the daemon invasion. They knew their duty, and needed no reassurance. Likewise, the fleet itself was steered by the capable hands of Sea Lord Aislinn, Ulthuan's foremost admiral. Aislinn was known by some as the Herald of Mathlann, the God of Sea and Storm. Korhil had always assumed the title was given out of poetic respect, but in that voyage he learned better. Heavy black clouds and seething water ringed the ships as they made passage across the Sea of Dreams, but wherever their alabaster prows voyaged, the skies were clear and the waters calm. Moreover, whenever Korhil looked out to sea, he swore he caught sight of dark, scaled shapes moving through the storm-tossed waters around them.

Throughout the voyage, slim, single-hulled cutters brought word of events to the north. Malekith had indeed crossed the mountains. Princess Ystranna had passed through the wreckage of Phoenix Gate in pursuit, and brought Malekith to battle in the Chracian forests. Unfortunately, her forces had been badly overmatched, and forced to resort to hit and run battles beneath the boughs. Malekith commanded the greater part of the Naggarothi armies, but not all; Malus Darkblade had remained south of the mountains in Ellyrion. By chance or design – and Korhil was certain it was the latter – any attempt at pursuit of Malekith would first have to sweep Darkblade's host aside.

Thus when Tyrion's fleet made landfall at Elrost Bay, they found the seawalls held against them by a black-bannered host. Viewing the defences from the *Sword of Khaine's* foredeck, Korhil was gloom-struck. This was now a race, with the Widowmaker as the prize for victory. The coastal fortifications appeared slimly manned, but they were still formidable enough to force a delay of several days.

Korhil argued that the fleet should continue further to the east, to instead make landfall on the shores of Avelorn, but Tyrion would hear nothing of it. Ordering the captain to silence, Tyrion sent his army ashore. He had not even delayed long enough to allow Aislinn's vessels to bombard the sea walls. Already, the high elves were dying as the reaper batteries took their toll, and Korhil knew the tally would only grow worse once they reached crossbow-range. The captain did not doubt that Tyrion's army could take the walls – he feared only for the steep cost victory would elicit. Korhil made to speak again, but fell silent when Aislinn threw his head back and sang a single beautiful note. Korhil stared at the admiral, uncertain of what to think, then noticed that the waters of the shoreline were heaving.

One by one, enormous shapes hauled themselves onto the shores, seawater streaming from their leviathan flanks. The merwyrms had followed the fleet for days, drawn to Aislinn by some ancient instinct, and now they rose to do his bidding. At once, the dark elves recognised the monsters as the greater threat, and shifted their fire against the scaled behemoths. It did little good. Bolts ricocheted from wyrm-scale as the beasts passed through the ranks assembling on the shores and threw themselves against the sea walls beyond. As Korhil disembarked to join the assault, he saw a merwyrm, crossbow bolts buzzing about its head like flies, shoulder aside a section of rampart and scoop up a half-dozen dark elves into its maw. When Tyrion left the *Sword of Khaine's* foredeck, Aislinn gave a curt nod, then made preparations to bring the fleet out to sea once more. Though he had pledged many phalanxes of his sea guard to the regent's host, the admiral's home lay upon the waves, not on dry land.

What had threatened to be a long and costly battle was over faster than Korhil could have believed. Many of the Naggarothi, their lines and morale broken beyond recovery, fled as the high elves clambered up the steep slopes to the walls beyond. A few dark elves fought defiantly on, holding out along sections of the sea wall not yet breached by the merwyrm onslaught. Those sections had to be cleared with fire and steel, and their stones were soon slick with blood. By the time the last stretch of wall had fallen, hundreds of captives had been seized. However, Tyrion was not minded to take prisoners, and so ordered them thrown from the ramparts. Those who perished on the rocks below were the fortunate ones; those who survived the fall lived only long enough to see the hungry merwyrms bear down upon them. As Tyrion's host marched inland, the coastal air resounded to agonised screaming, and to the sharp crack of breaking bones.

Beyond the walls of Elrost Bay, the scattered scrub of the coast gave way to Ellyrion's sweeping plains. Smoke curled lazily on the horizon to mark the dark elves' passage, each hazy column the funeral pyre of a town or village caught in their path. With every league that fell away beneath the high elves' marching feet, their mood grew steadily grimmer. It was one thing to hear of invasion, and quite another to see the smoke-blackened ruins, or to know the thick stench of charred flesh in one's nostrils. Tor Emyrath was the worst by far. Ellyrion's second city had once been the jewel of the plains; now it was a stinking and fly-bothered

refuge where the dead lay wherever the fires had overtaken them. Many of the knights in Tyrion's host hailed from Ellyrion, and they begged permission to bury the dead. The regent refused, wary of any delay, and urged his army on past the charnel-city. From that hour, the sons of Ellyrion gripped their spears a little tighter than they had before, and whispered prayers of vengeance to Drakira and to Khaine.

The host encountered the first Naggarothi foraging parties a handful of leagues northeast of Tor Emyrath. Most were hopelessly lost, waylaid by the magic of Ellyrion's plains. All perished, for Tyrion at last loosed his Ellyrian knights to a long-sought slaughter. Much to Korhil's disapproval, Tyrion often rode with the reavers, slaking Sunfang to its hilt with dark elf blood. Following each victory, severed Naggarothi heads were set upon spears to serve as warning that Ellyrion was defenceless no longer. Korhil disapproved of this barbaric gesture, but said nothing. He had not been left untouched by the army's grim mood, and could not be sure he would behave differently once he set foot in Chrace's ravaged provinces. Nevertheless, the captain kept his eyes ever to the horizon. He knew that forage parties could only mean that Darkblade's army was near. Korhil feared that a trap had been laid, and that the recklessness of Ellyrion's knights would drag the entire host into its jaws.

As dusk fell on the day of Twilight's Tide, the twin moons already visible in the ruddy skies, Tyrion's host crossed the low rise of the Pyradon Hills and down into the sunbeaten expanse of Reaver's Mark. There, Korhil's instincts proved correct. A trap had indeed been laid, only they were not its target. There, amongst the rocky outcrops spewn forth by ancient volcanoes, another high elf host battled for survival against a dark elf army many times its size. Gleaming islands of white and silver shone against a sea of black banners and scaled cloaks, the air shimmering about them as desperate mages wove enchantments of protection. Caledorian dragon riders duelled with phoenix knights in the skies above, the air around them roiling with gouts of flame. In the centre of the plains, rising high above the carnage, the Banner of Asuryan fluttered in the wind. Beneath it, striving alongside the wounded form of a frostheart phoenix, fought Caradryan of the Flame, Captain of the Phoenix Guard.

Korhil could not image how so experienced a warrior as Caradryan had come to be so surrounded, for there was little cover along Reaver's Mark, and certainly not enough to conceal a Naggarothi host so many thousands in size. Yet surrounded Caradryan was, and without aid both he and his army would be lost. This truth was clearly not lost on Tyrion, for Korhil saw the regent mutter something under his breath, then rise up high in Malhandir's saddle. Sunfang swept up to the heavens, the fires along its length visible even against the angry blaze of the setting sun. The host fell silent for a second, anticipating some inspiring speech or rousing battlecry. But then Sunfang flashed down, and Malhandir was a blur of blue and gold upon the hillside. A heartbeat later, the knights of the host were thundering in Tyrion's wake, their voices alive with cries of vengeance. The Battle of Reaver's Mark had begun.



TYRION'S HOST

The warriors of Ulthuan needed little urging to join Tyrion's northern campaign. Some came out of duty to the prince whom they had always held to be their rightful king. Others marched out of a desire for vengeance. All trusted Tyrion to bring them victory.



TYRION, DEFENDER OF ULTHUAN

Tyrion was now the regent of Ulthuan, and the responsibility weighed heavily upon him. He felt no fear for the battle ahead, only anger at what had been done to his homeland. If Malus Darkblade's army were twice the size, still Tyrion would charge into its very heart, seeking retribution for Ulthuan's losses.

KORHIL, CAPTAIN OF THE LION GUARD

Korhil arrived at Reaver's Mark still consumed with guilt over Finubar's death. With no Phoenix King to protect any longer, the Captain of the Lion Guard was committed to giving his all in Tyrion's defence. In Korhil's eyes, the regent was now the only person who stood a chance of holding Ulthuan together, and he was determined not to fail Tyrion as he had Finubar. At the same time, Tyrion had recognised Korhil's loyalty. He had given the captain authority far beyond that normally granted to the commander of the Phoenix King's bodyguard, putting him on equal terms with any of Ulthuan's generals.





THE KNIGHTS OF TOR EMYRATH

Almost all of the Ellyrian reavers and silver helms at Reaver's Mark were kin to those elves slain at Tor Emyrath. These knights were so consumed by the need for vengeance that they would gladly have followed Tyrion to the other end of the world. The ribbons on their lances each represented close kin slaughtered in the sack of Tor Emyrath, and their weapons were blessed by a Chosen of Kurnous. With the Hunter God's blessing thus upon them, and Tyrion at their side, the Knights of Tor Emyrath were beyond fear.



THE SPEARS OF DABBARLOC

Although Aislinn did not himself accompany Tyrion's army, he assigned six vessels' worth of Lothern sea guard to the campaign. Almost all came from the battalions of the Spears of Dabbarloc, who had honed their skills on four different continents. The Spears of Dabbarloc took their name from one of Mathlann's many children – in this case, the fronded king said to dwell in the waters of the Inner Sea. According to legend, Dabbarloc enfolded his foes in a clammy embrace before consuming them. The sea guard who bore his name fought in a similar fashion, surrounding the enemy before overwhelming them.



THE SONS OF KALAGAN

In the legends of Lothern, Kalagan was a mighty dragon with wings of water, who prowled the starlit seas in search of shipwrecked sailors. Kalagan had a mighty appetite, but sometimes spared the worthy and guided them to land. The Sons of Kalagan sought to emulate the dragon's deeds, roaming the battlefield in search of those in need of their aid. Many a high elf had been saved from a grisly death by the Sons' skycutters scattering the foe before whisking their wounded ally to safety.



ACHAREA'S BLESSED

Chracian legend tells of a priestess who dwells within the deepest woods, and meets only with those warriors who show faultless valour. For many Chracians, this presents an irresistible challenge, and many fine soldiers perish in the leafy dark, hoping to catch a glimpse of Acharea. Nevertheless, there are many who have the wit and strength to encounter Acharea and survive. Even though each experience is wildly different, all who feel her touch return home with their senses and skills sharpened. The brotherhood of warriors who fought at Tyrion's side were formed from souls such as these, each eager to test the gifts of Acharea on the battlefield.

- ***Tyrion, Defender of Ulthuan***
- ***Korhil, Captain of the Lion Guard***
- ***Caradryan, Captain of the Phoenix Guard***
- ***Televor, Marshal of the Western Seas***
  Lothern Sea Helm
- ***Hoeth's Honoured Chosen***
  One Conclave of Mages
- ***The Riders of Tor Emyrath***
  Three sworn-hosts of Ellyrian Reavers
- ***The Palatines of Tor Emyrath***
  Two sworn-hosts of Silver Helms
- ***The Brothers of the Plains***
  One sworn-host of Ellyrian Reavers
- ***The Spears of Dabbarloc***
  Six crews of Lothern Sea Guard, each with two Eagle Claw Bolt Throwers
- ***The Sons of Kalagan***
  Three flights of Lothern Skycutters
- ***Acharea's Blessed***
  One pride of White Lions
- ***The Fangs of Chrace***
  One legion of High Elf Spearmen
- ***Flameblades***
  Two legions of High Elf Spearmen
- ***The Eagles of Telomor***
  One legion of High Elf Spearmen
- ***The Hand of Asuryan***
  One blessed host of Phoenix Guard
- ***The Starsworn***
  One militia regiment of High Elf Archers
- ***The Puremane Company***
  Three prides of White Lions
- ***Heralds of the Fire Eternal***
  Three Flamespyre Phoenixes

DARKBLADE'S HOST

Though a shadow of its earlier glory, the host of Malus Darkblade was still an enemy to be respected. It had cut a swathe of ruin across Ulthuan, and still had blades aplenty to indulge its master's cruel will. Every Ulthuani army which had yet stood in its path had been flayed bloody. It remained to be seen how Tyrion would fare.



TULLARIS DREADBRINGER

The rightly-feared Tullaris Dreadbringer did not come to Reaver's Mark at the direction of his mistress Hellebron. Indeed, the Crone Queen had forbidden her subjects – all save her spy, Shadowblade – from involving themselves in a distant war when there was slaughter to be had amongst Ghrond's ruins. Few disobeyed Hellebron's word, but Dreadbringer was driven by a greater power even than she – Khaine's voice whispered through his dreams, and the executioner could have no more denied the Destroyer's urging than he could have climbed to the moon. As battle was joined at Reaver's Mark, Tullaris Dreadbringer felt a strange anticipation, as of a destiny at last to be fulfilled. He could not have guessed the form that consummation would take.

THE BLOOD COVEN

Long ago, three sorceresses fled Morathi's employ. They sought refuge with her arch-rival Hellebron, offering up the Hag Sorceress' greatest secrets in exchange for protection. Though the Crone Queen was tempted by the chance of a petty victory over Morathi, she did not easily trust traitors, and returned them to her mistress. Enraged, the Hag Sorceress gouged Khaine's runes of domination into the rebellious sorceresses' pale flesh, guaranteeing their loyalty with a god's bloody shackles. Those wounds have never healed. The sorceresses' limbs were always slicked with their own blood, and the trio stood as an abject lesson to those who would betray the mistress of Ghrond.





THE KNIVES OF KHAINE

Morathi had spent much coin and plunder wooing whole clans of shades over to her cause in recent months. The Knives of Khaine were not the largest group to fall prey to her honeyed promises, but they could easily be counted amongst the most vicious. Much of the slaughter wrought at Tor Emyrath had been the Knives' doing, and there was not one amongst them who fought at Reaver's Mark without an expanse of flayed Ulthuani skin carefully concealed amongst their possessions for later sale to a discerning patron. Even in a time of so much death, the unmarred skin of a high elf could fetch a steep price, and the Knives of Khaine were determined to reap a profit.



THE ICEBLADES

The warriors known as the Iceblades were fanatically loyal to Morathi – but then, they had no choice. Each was a handsome noble, seduced from his proper loyalties by Morathi's handmaidens and lured away to Ghrond. Once within the Tower of Prophecy, the lies of luxury and bliss fell away, replaced by a reality in which icy poisons stripped away the mind, leaving the victim little more than a puppet longing for instruction. Only Morathi and her most favoured handmaidens knew the words that compelled the Iceblades, for they jealously protected the thrill of such total control.

THE OSSIAN GUARD

The executioners of the Ossian Guard revered Tullaris Dreadbringer as a prophet of Khaine – so much so, in fact, that they were prepared to risk Hellebron's wrath by following him to Ulthuan. Where most executioners sought to kill swiftly and cleanly, the Ossian Guard struck only to cripple and maim, in order that there would be sufficient prisoners at the battle's end to make a worthy sacrifice to Khaine. These rituals were grand affairs, necessitating the slaughter of hundreds. If the foe could not provide the proper amount of fodder, the Ossian Guard thought nothing of seizing the dark elves' own wounded, and 'volunteering' them to serve in the enemy's stead.





THE VOICELESS ONES

Ghrond's upper chambers are purported to contain luxuries fit to drive mortals mad, and only a select few are permitted into these rooms. Fewer still leave again, and those seldom make their egress. Such was the case of the Voiceless Ones – the sentinels who stood watch over the upper chambers. Their silence had been guaranteed by the removal of their tongues, but their fate was far kinder than those who guarded the Hag Sorceress' private quarters; they were gelded and blinded also, and could fight only by sound and touch.

- ***Malus Darkblade, the Tyrant of Hag Graef***
- ***Tullaris Dreadbringer, the Hand of Khaine***
- ***Drusala***
  Supreme Sorceress
- ***Seetheran***
  Khainite Assassin
- ***The Blood Coven***
  Four Sorceresses
- ***Knights of Burning Dark***
  Two scalegelds of Cold One Knights, and one scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***Knights of the Ebon Claw***
  One scalegeld of Cold One Knights
- ***Icewatch***
  Three legions of Dreadspears
- ***The Voiceless Ones***
  Two legions of Dreadspears
- ***The Iceblades***
  Two legions of Bleakswords
- ***Bittergrasp Sentinels***
  Two legions of Darkshards
- ***Venomclaws***
  Two legions of Bleakswords
- ***The Ossian Guard***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Blades of Yorath***
  One crew of Black Ark Corsairs
- ***Selekan Guard***
  Three legions of Dreadspears, two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Skullbearers***
  Two legions of Bleakswords, two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Menagerie of Raema***
  Four War Hydras, three Kharibdysses and one flock of Harpies
- ***Knives of Khaine***
  One tribe of Shades

THE BATTLE OF REAVER'S MARK

Tyrion's charge was driven by instinct, not strategy, but in the initial moments of the battle it mattered little. First to feel its fury was a band of Ghrondian dreadspears. They were some way distant from the heart of the fighting, acting as bodyguard to one of Drusala's handmaidens as she called forth dark fire. Too late, the dark elves turned to face the new threat, and the long spears of Ellyrion came stabbing down through hauberk and chain. The sorceress began a charm that would spirit her to safety, vile words breathed from lips more beautiful than mortal dreams, yet Sunfang took the witch's head before the spell was complete, and Malhandir's hooves trampled her body into the burnished grass.

The warriors of Ghrond scattered like chaff before the scythe, and the knights of Ellyrion swept on. There were empty saddles now amongst the charge, the horses eager as any to claim recompense for the slain. The wind gusted beneath the setting sun, howling over feathered helms so that the knights' battle-cries sounded more like the dirges of the dead than the blood-promises of the living.

Tyrion led the charge home against a second regiment, this one bearing the hydra of Clar Karond upon its banner. These Naggarothi had time to brace their shields, but to no avail. Tyrion was retribution made flesh, and he cut deep into the dark elf ranks, the sheer momentum of his impact flinging foes aside. Not all the knights who followed were so fortunate. Many were thrown from their saddles as the wall of shields buckled, but did not break. Others were dragged to the ground where wicked dirks and stamping feet ended their part in the glory of Tyrion's charge. However, the Naggarothi fared worse; the second regiment broke much as the first, and the reaver knights laughed with joy as they rode their foes to ruin.

As the darkness grew deeper, Caradryan fought in silence as he always did, the only sounds to accompany his blows were the harsh scrape of metal upon metal and the screams of those he slew. Around him were gathered a great company of Phoenix Guard, all as stoic as he. Yet if Caradryan had no concerns for his own warriors, he feared greatly for the rest of his army. He could see Chracian spears being blasted to ash, or hacked down by corsairs' steel. He had witnessed a phalanx of Sapherian soldiery overrun by Naggarothi knights bearing the banner of Malus Darkblade. Had Ashtari been unwounded, Caradryan would have ridden to their aid, but the phoenix was sorely hurt and could not fly. Shackled by his steed's injuries, unable even to offer words of command due to his sacred vow of silence, Caradryan fought on, awaiting the aid that he knew would come. Today was not his day to die.

Further to the south, amongst a stand of sun-bleached trees, the spears of the Fangs of Chrace vied with the glaives of the executioners known as the Ossian Guard. The white-clad soldiers fought with all the fury of their kingdom's lions, striking with shield and haft as often as spear-tip. By contrast, the executioners strove with careful precision. Each blood-slicked blade was held at guard for long seconds at a time, striking only at the most propitious moment to shiver a shield or lop a head from its shoulders. The front three ranks of the Chracian regiment were already a tangle of mutilated corpses, and still the skull-helmed Naggarothi carved their way deeper.

Tullaris Dreadbringer fought at the executioners' head, the voice of Khaine urging him on to every fresh blow. His draich was ever in motion, whirling and spinning from one perfect strike to the next. A spray of blood greeted each blow, the razor-sharp blade slicing effortlessly through ithilmar scales and steel helms. A Chracian captain, his cry of challenge as wild as the wind, descended upon Dreadbringer, ancestral axe already sweeping down. The dark elf appeared not to notice his attacker, for his glaive still blurred amongst the phalanx's spearmen. Only when the blow was a hand-breadth above his head did Dreadbringer at last move. The glaive spiralled outward and upwards without slowing, splitting the haft of the descending axe and the Chracian captain's skull in the same motion. Dreadbringer gave a serpentine smile as the newly-slain corpse hit the ground. The Lord of Murder was feasting well.

With Tyrion now in the thick of battle, it fell to Korhil and the other captains to bring the remainder of the newly arrived host into the fight. They came at a run, determined that their headstrong regent would not fight alone. The Phoenix Guard and white lions formed the centre of the line, a complement of Aislinn's veteran sea guard the left, and good Lothern spears the right. They could be counted amongst Ulthuan's finest soldiers, and Korhil noted with approval that the hasty advance did nothing to disorder his line. Yet the captain could tell that something was wrong. The dark elf commander had made no attempt to reorder his force to assail the thousands pressed hard upon his flank. Korhil's every instinct screamed that something was amiss, though he could not divine what that might be.

As midnight approached, Drusala was sitting on the highest of the volcanic spurs, troubling herself little with the battle's bloody business. She had followed this part of the dark elf host not out of need, but out of a desire to keep a careful eye on

Malus Darkblade, whose fate she now held between her slender fingers. She had heard, rather than seen, the crash of knights somewhere to the southwest, but had paid it little heed. In the sorceress' mind, such charges soon spent their vigour, and seldom won battles. Had she seen Tyrion at the head of the host, Drusala might have felt differently, but she had not, and thus focussed her attention on the advancing infantry. The magic of the Ellyrion plains was older than words could describe. Earlier, as Caradryan's army had approached, she had gathered up that maze of invisible pathways as a weaver spools thread, then cast it wide once more, scattering Caradryan's host also. Now Drusala again clawed her fingers deep into the hidden ways, and pulled Korhil's advance apart.

For Korhil there was no nausea as the world shifted beneath his feet, no sense that anything was other than it should have been. One moment, he had been at the head of the advance, Chayal ready in his hands; the next, a bellowing hydra was before him, its teeth hungry for his flesh. A lesser warrior would have perished there and then, but not Korhil, slayer of Charandis. His axe flashed to sever one of the hydra's heads, the sharp tang of its blood thick upon the air as the blow fell. Other heads hissed in pained outrage and darted towards the captain, but again Korhil was too fast. Dropping low, he slid under the beast's colossal bulk, slicing Chayal's blade deep into its belly as he did so.

Bellowing in agony, the hydra reared up, and Korhil rolled clear. Again the serpentine heads came forward, but now the captain was not alone. More white lions pressed forward, but they were sorely diminished – no more than a few score out of the hundreds who had followed him. For the first time, Korhil noted he was far from where he had thought himself. At last, he knew how Caradryan had become surrounded, but the knowledge would do him little good.

All across Reaver's Mark, the tale was the same. Korhil's line, so ordered and disciplined, had been scattered to the four winds as the pathways of Ellyrion had shifted beneath their feet. High elves who had thought the enemy to their front now found themselves assailed on all sides. Quickly realising their peril, the sentinels of the spear-phalanxes ordered their soldiers into defensive rings. Shields were braced in the soil, and weapons levelled for the inevitable onslaught. None performed this manoeuvre more quickly than the Lothern sea guard, and they were soon loosing arrows into the dark elf ranks.

Discipline had rescued the high elves from disaster, but the battle's outcome was still in doubt, for the regiments of Ulthuan could no longer act in one another's defence. Only Tyrion's knights, thus far beyond Drusala's malign intent, rode free upon the field.



From the battle's heart, Malus Darkblade saw Tyrion and the knights of Ellyrion tear apart another of his warbands, and bit back a curse. He had hoped to eliminate Caradryan's pathetic force with minimal loss, but such was clearly not to be his lot. Yet he knew Tyrion of old, and knew also that the prince's head was a prize beyond value, one that his Warpsword – restored to its normal size with Tz'arkan's re-caging – would claim. Whatever enchantment Drusala had placed upon him had not only driven Tz'arkan back into the shadowed reaches of his soul, but had also shackled the daemon's full power to his will. He could feel Tz'arkan's might bubbling through his veins, and knew that not even Tyrion could stand before such power. With a cry, the Tyrant of Hag Graef urged Spite towards his new prey, little realising that another had set his sights on the high elf commander's head. To the north, Tullaris Dreadbringer, most feared of Har Ganeth's executioners, had tired of wasting his blade upon the Chracian phalanx. The voice of Khaine stirred within Dreadbringer's mind as his eyes fell upon Tyrion, and he knew at once where his fate lay.

Korhil's white lions clustered tight in the shadow of the hydra's corpse. Crossbow bolts whined all about them, but most spent their force upon the monster's flesh or the thick fur of the white lions' pelts. Steel flashed as heavy axes bit through the scaled cloaks of corsairs or smote skull-blazoned shields to splinters, but Korhil knew his position would soon be overwhelmed – the Naggarothi were too many, and his own warriors too few. In the middle distance, he could see the banner of Asuryan fluttering bright against the dark sky. Coming to a decision, the captain of the white lions hacked down the corsair to his front. Calling for his soldiers to follow, Korhil pushed forward into the gap, each blow bringing him closer to the shining banner of the Creator.

Tyrion's knights were tiring. Just as Drusala had foreseen, fervour was proving to be their ruin. As weary reavers turned their steeds for the safety of a high elf line that no longer existed, Darkblade's knights and Dreadbringer's executioners closed about the sons of Ellyrion like the jaws of the World Dragon. Lances pierced bellies, lodging deep in the spines beyond. Draichs hacked through horseflesh, then struck again to slay those cast from the saddles of the dying steeds. The stench of blood, terror and voided dung smothered all, but still the survivors fought on. Tyrion strove with them, each strike of his blade splitting an executioner's helm, or sending a cold one knight sprawling into the trampled grasses. Yet in the din of battle, the regent did not know that he was stalked by more dangerous foes.

Malhandir recognised the danger of Darkblade's approach before Tyrion did, and the noble steed turned about so that his master could face his foe. Thus was Sunfang raised quickly to deflect Malus Darkblade's first blow, the Warpsword of Khaine's steel scraping along Tyrion's blade with a piercing screech. Consumed by a wild frenzy, Darkblade struck again and again. Each blow was parried, though Tyrion was driven down in the saddle with every strike. Darkblade's daemon-infused might was formidable, and it took every ounce of the regent's strength to cheat the Warpsword's steel. Spite lunged and snapped at Malhandir, but the elf-steed was too swift, and darted clear of the cold one's teeth.

Again the Warpsword hacked down, but this time Tyrion made no move to block. Instead, he urged Malhandir to one side, and the strike hissed a hair's breadth to his right. Off-balance, Darkblade fell forward in his saddle. Sunfang lunged forward, but the Tyrant of Hag Graef was too fast. Darkblade leaned far back in his saddle, and the blow meant to take him in the throat instead sliced a long scar across his left cheek. Snarling, Darkblade instinctively clapped a hand to the wound. That momentary distraction was all Tyrion needed. At his word, Malhandir sprang forward and Sunfang lanced true for Darkblade's heart.

It was at that moment that the tip of Tullaris Dreadbringer's draich punched through Tyrion's armour and deep into his back. No ordinary blade could have dealt that blow, could have pierced the Dragon Armour of Aenarion, but Dreadbringer's draich was steeped in wicked enchantments of murder, and would suffer no bar in its search for blood. Shouting his sudden pain, the regent slumped low in the saddle.

Drusala heard Tyrion's cry and saw him upon the field for the first time. Anger and panic fought for dominance of her actions. This was not what she had intended. The sorceress had recaged Tz'arkan in the hope that Darkblade might prove a useful weapon against Malekith; the prospect of Tyrion's death displeased her greatly. She had grown complacent, and now the regent would pay the price. As Darkblade and Tullaris bore down on their prey, Drusala's mind appraised and discarded every possible intervention. She could not act directly against Tyrion's attackers, for that would surely bring only a traitor's death. There was only one thing she could do, and it was not without risk. Gritting her teeth, Drusala reached deep into the swirling winds of magic and began to chant.

Far to the east of Ulthuan's shores, in a land known to men as Sylvania, a dark and blasphemous ritual was reaching its apex. The servants of Nagash, the Great Necromancer of Nehekhara, had laboured long with the goal of returning their master to the living world. Much blood had been spilled in their cause but, as was ever the case, the most significant had been saved for last. As power swirled and gathered, Arkhan the Black opened the veins of his final sacrifice and added her essence to his vile works. Many had perished in the attempt to save her, but to no avail. Thus passed Aliathra, Everchild of Ulthuan.

Aliathra's death did not go unmarked, for her soul lingered awhile in the winds of magic before Nagash's hunger consumed it. In Athel Loren, Alarielle fell silent as she addressed the council of lords and ladies, her heart suddenly overflowing with grief. In Ulthuan, Tyrion marked his daughter's passing even as Dreadbringer's draich came down to take his head. If he felt sorrow, it was for the most fleeting of moments, for something long caged in the deepest part of his being tore free at that instant. Determination, blacker and hungrier than Tyrion had ever known, swept through his soul, dousing the pain of his wound and the weariness of his limbs. With an animal growl, he leaned clear of Dreadbringer's intended deathblow and bore the executioner to the ground. Sunfang punched through armour, flesh and spine. The dark elf's blood was black under the night sky, and it pulsed up over Tyrion's hands as he tore the blade free.

Tullaris Dreadbringer was dying. He knew this, and cared not. Khaine's voice was louder than ever. What had once been a whisper was now a strong and sonorous tone. Dreadbringer knew that only his mortal shell would die, that the better part of him would go on to fight wars more terrible than any he had yet seen.

There was a flicker of blue and gold on the edge of Dreadbringer's failing sight, and he knew that Tyrion was there, as Khaine had said he would be. The dark elf knew there was but a brief moment of opportunity, and marshalled his last strength to take it.

'Finish me,' Dreadbringer breathed. 'Set me free. Set yourself free.'

Tyrion spat his denial, but spoke no word. Dreadbringer had to imagine the expression on the other's face, for he could now no longer see. Khaine spoke again to Tullaris, giving him the words he needed.

'You are weak, and you revel in your weakness. That is what killed your daugh...'

Dreadbringer did not feel the blow that slew him. Instead, he experienced a rush of euphoria as his soul left its mortal prison. At last, he knew the truth that Khaine had tried to share with him all these years, and it was glorious.

Darkblade did not mourn Dreadbringer's passing, he cared only that Tyrion was distracted. Tyrion's back was still turned, his blade lodged in Dreadbringer's head, and Darkblade knew better than to waste the opportunity. With a cry of triumph, the dreadlord raised the Warpsword high, its killing edge aimed to slice apart Tyrion's skull – but a heartbeat before the blow fell, a familiar agony rippled through his body as Drusala's charm took effect. The Warpsword fell from Darkblade's hands as he tried to resist the daemon's influence, but Tz'arkan would be caged no more. He rose through the dreadlord's mind like bile rising through the gullet – thick, choking and bitter. With a last mournful snarl, the flame of Darkblade's soul gasped, guttered and then went out, smothered forever. Spite collapsed sideways under the sudden weight as his master's body blossomed once more into Tz'arkan's horrific form.

From her vantage point atop the rocks, Drusala saw the daemon burst forth and swore in an ancient tongue. She had intended to halt the transformation partway, leaving Darkblade a twisted and vulnerable pile of flesh, but Tz'arkan had been too strong. With the door opened a chink, the daemon had forced it the rest of the way. Drusala felt no concern for Tyrion, though, as he turned to face the daemon. Rage lay mantled upon his shoulders, its power heady even from that distance. More than ever, Drusala knew her choices of late had been the correct ones.

Tz'arkan tore himself free of Darkblade's ruined flesh, crushing the last vestige of the tyrant's mind. His howls of delight drowned Spite's agonised roars as the cold one was crushed beneath daemonic hooves. The foolish sorceress had set him free once more! Better yet, Drusala had presented him an elven princeling to feed upon, and thereafter two armies to devour. Then Tz'arkan's gaze rested



upon Tyrion once again, and he too saw the shadow that had so piqued Drusala. Shrieking a challenge to conceal his sudden fear, the daemon bore down on Tyrion.

The regent would not prove easy prey. With Dreadbringer's blood dripping from his gauntlets he spurred Malhandir into the daemon's charge, ducking under the sweeping claws. Sunfang shone in Tyrion's hands as he called upon its ancient power, and suddenly its blade was blazing bright against the darkness. Tz'arkan's flesh caught light at once, the fires racing across waxy skin. The daemon screamed as he staggered back, giving voice to a noise so shrill that elves nearby collapsed to the ground, clutching at their ears. Tyrion alone seemed unaffected by the sound, and drove the daemon back with a flurry of strikes that left vile ichor pulsing from a dozen wounds. Scant months before, a creature such as this had nearly been the prince's ruin, but all who could see the battle knew instinctively that Tyrion was a foe beyond Tz'arkan's measure. Elves, both high and dark, scattered from the combatants' path. Some did so too slowly – these Tz'arkan seized and flung into Tyrion's path, but Malhandir deftly avoided each flailing body and carried his master onward. Tyrion held two swords now, having gathered up the Warpsword of Khaine from where it had fallen, and the cursed blade shone darkly alongside Sunfang's righteous fire.

Finally, Tz'arkan could retreat no more, for at his back stood Caradryan's Phoenix Guard. Their halberds did not waver, but goaded the daemon back onto his pursuer. With a desperate cry, Tz'arkan lowered his head and charged at Tyrion, hoping to overwhelm the regent with his brutish onslaught. Tyrion did not react until the daemon was upon him. Then, with a mighty shout, he thrust both swords forward. Tz'arkan gave one final, terrible scream as the blades sank deep into his monstrous chest, his death as much at his own hand as at his foe's. Tyrion urged Malhandir away as the daemon's corpse slipped past him to crash on the ground.

As if to mark the daemon's fall, the ground trembled and the skies shook. To the southeast, clouds blazed with violet flame. Though none there yet knew it, Nagash's rebirth was complete, and his first act had been to strip the death magic from the heart of the Great Vortex. Reaver's Mark fell silent, as all present stood in awe of the skyward auguries. Then the fires pulsed one last time, and a graveborn chill hung heavy in the air. All across Reaver's Mark, the dead began to rise.

It was not just that battle's slain that lurched to their feet, but the fallen of millennia past. Most were elves, killed in the long wars of a divided people, but there were mannish dead amongst the grave-spoil, and greenskins too. Only Tz'arkan did not rise, for only mortal flesh heard the call. Instinct made the living cower away from that grave-spilled horde, though at first the dead made no move to attack. Then the sorceresses amongst the dark elf army saw opportunity, and willed the cadavers to carry their rusted arms against the embattled high elves. Sapherian mages responded immediately, and sought to banish the unholy horde, but spells that had served for untold centuries flickered and died. Death lay heavy on the land, and high elves who had thus far fought without fear now wavered as old friends rose to claw at their flesh.



Caradryan's halberd shone as it split the sightless corpse apart. Vorallan had been one of his finest guards until a corsair's blade had taken out his throat earlier that night, but he would mourn the twin sadnesses of death and defilement later. For now, survival came first.

The captain felt skeletal fingers clutching at his greaves and stamped down hard, the cracking sound that followed bringing a smile to his lips. It did not remain there long. Asuryan had foretold this day long ago, and the thought of the darker times to come filled Caradryan with despair.

A short way ahead, Caradryan saw Tyrion scatter a pair of worm-eaten corpses, Sunfang's blade slicing through the rusting plate of their armour with ease. The regent rose high in Malhandir's stirrups and lifted the Warpsword of Khaine aloft, a dark halo of flame blazing about his brow. Then, in thunderous tones, the regent spoke the words that had haunted Caradryan's dreams for as long as he could remember.

'Dead of Ulthuan!' shouted Tyrion. 'I bear the Warpsword of Khaine, he who is the Destroyer, the Murderer of Nations; he who made corpses of you all.'

At the regent's words, the undead hordes ceased their striving. The rows of silent corpses froze in place and did not move, no matter how the Naggarothi sorceresses shrieked at them.

'I speak for the Destroyer,' Tyrion continued, his voice echoing like thunder across the plains. 'I bear his blade. You owe him fealty by right of conquest; your allegiance is mine to command. Khaine's enemies are mine, and my enemies are yours. Slay them all.'

With a piercing crack, the Warpsword shattered to ash. Tyrion sank back into Malhandir's saddle, and his halo turned the colour of fresh-spilt blood. But the regent's words, and whatever magic lay behind them, had found their mark. As one, the dead of aeons past turned their backs on the high elves and marched against the Naggarothi.

As the killing began, Caradryan gave silent prayer to Asuryan. The captain did not know what impulse had driven Tyrion to do what he did, nor what sudden magic had driven his deeds. Asuryan had shown Caradryan only consequence, not cause, but that was enough to provoke fear of what would soon come, as inevitably as night followed day. For now, however, there was the battle, and a victory near at hand. Caradryan would weep for tomorrow, but only once the killing was done.

Even then, with Darkblade slain and the ranks of the undead loosed against them, the Naggarothi fought on. The hatred of aeons smothered their fears, and malice drove them. The dead lacked the skill and vigour they had once known in life. They held their weapons slack-handedly, and when they fell they did not rise to fight again. Too often, the dead simply trudged on into the teeth of the Naggarothi blades, making no effort to defend themselves. Jagged blades tore through pallid flesh and scattered worm-eaten bones, each victory marked by a snarl of triumph from the dark elf who struck the blow. Thousands of the grave-born collapsed and did not rise again, but tens of thousands more remained, and they began to overcome their foes through relentless weight of numbers. Here and there, a dark elf fell to a rusted blade. Most were pulled from their feet and trampled bloody by the remorseless horde, or dragged down beneath the tide of unliving, and smothered by clammy flesh.

The high elves came close behind the dead, all thoughts of discipline thrown to the winds as Khaine's influence fell upon them. Knights of Ellyrion, spearmen of Lothern and Chrace, archers from distant Saphery – all surged forward with blades drawn. Tyrion rode at their head, the crimson halo wild about his brow. Sunfang gleamed in his right hand, and the Warpsword of Khaine was hungry in his left. It was not desire for victory that drove the high elves, nor vengeance for their fallen countrymen, but a primal craving to wreak slaughter. In the days that followed, some would recall with shame the bloodlust that overtook them that night, but most remembered only a blood-red haze and a joy beyond describing. Korhil was swept up in the madness as much as any, his axe rising and falling in wild frenzy until his lion pelt was soaked through with Naggarothi blood and his hands could grip the weapon no more. Only the Phoenix Guard remained untouched by the madness, for Khaine had no purchase on those whose souls were given to Asuryan.

At last, the Naggarothi broke. It happened slowly at first, with individual warriors throwing down their weapons and seeking the illusion of safety wherever they could. Then, like a crumbling shoreline lashed by a furious tide, the dark elves shattered and fled away into the night. Thus was the beginning of a long and bloody pursuit, with the high elves running wild across the plains, and the dead shambling and twitching in their wake. Caradryan watched them go. The dark elves had been defeated, but the captain of the Phoenix Guard knew that there had been no victors that night.

From her hiding place amongst the trees, Drusala watched as the blood-mad high elves tore the Naggarothi host to ruin. She shivered, not with cold or fear, but anticipation. For the first time in many a century, she felt excitement bubbling through her veins. Features shimmering as her glamour of disguise shifted into a new likeness, the sorceress stepped out from the trees and joined the pursuit.







As dawn broke on Twilight's Ebb, it found Tyrion's army encamped on the edge of Reaver's Mark. The regent had wanted to press on through the mountains, to close the gap between his forces and those of the Witch King, but his commanders had argued that the army be allowed to rest. Even Caradryan, mute as ever, had managed to convey his disapproval with a careful shake of the head. Now, as healers passed between the hastily erected tents, and the unwounded took refuge in sleep, Tyrion lurked alone in his own pavilion, brooding in the darkness.

Few knew what to make of the previous night's battle, of the dead rising to fight in Tyrion's cause. Had the Warpsword of Khaine given him that power, or was it some hitherto unrealised gift of his blood? No one knew the answer. At least the dead had been returned to their proper place. Those cadavers who had not been cast down during the final stages of the battle had collapsed as dawn's rays swept across Reaver's Mark, banished at Tyrion's command. Scouts reported that the unliving roamed unrestrained elsewhere, but those who had fought at the high elves' side had been restored to rest.

Korhil, who along with Caradryan had chosen to keep watch in the grey and murky morn, remarked his surprise at how readily the asur had fought alongside the dead. Caradryan, as was his way, said nothing, but Korhil thought he glimpsed fleeting concern in the other's face. Reason told Korhil that what Tyrion had done was an affront to proper tradition; moreover, it was a sin against Asuryan's natural order. However, his instincts told a different story, assured him that it had been necessary, even desirable. The captain didn't know which half of his nature to trust, so he spent the hours almost as silent as Caradryan, troubled by the strange excitement that danced within his soul.



In the early hours, swift skycutters came from the north, carrying word that Malekith's army too had ceased its march for the present. Ystranna had brought the Witch King to battle once again, this time reinforced by a vast host of warriors from Nagarythe who had ridden out of the west. That battle too had seen the dead arise, but there they had attacked both sides. With his battle lines disrupted by the rising dead, Malekith had been forced to withdraw to the slopes of the mountains once more.

As noon approached through grey and rain-swept skies, the sorceress known as Drusala made her way through the encampment. She met no challenge, for her glamour ensured that she appeared to be an archer in service to the sisters of Avelorn. That Drusala neither carried a bow, nor had laid hands upon one in centuries, did not matter, for she did not intend to tarry long. Like Korhil, she felt excitement upon the breeze, but unlike the captain she knew it of old, and was pleased to taste of it. Drusala passed from tent to tent, drinking in the heady vigour, feeling it build the anticipation she had felt since the end of the battle. At last, the sorceress reached her destination, marked as much by the lion guards upon its perimeter as the billowing sea dragon banner that flew at its centre. Whispering an enchantment to shield her from the guards' eyes, Drusala twitched aside the canvas flap and passed inside.

It was dark inside the tent, far darker than it should have been. It was as if the occupant's mood hung heavy on the air, smothering any source of light or joy. Drusala smiled as her eyes searched the gloom. She remembered that feeling well.

There was a whisper of movement, and the sorceress felt a hand tight across her mouth and a blade against her throat.

'You are not what you pretend to be.' Tyrion's voice was low and dangerous. 'Reveal yourself, or lose your head.' He shifted his fingers to allow a reply.

'You're not going to kill me,' Drusala whispered icily.

'Am I not?'

The blade pressed closer and Drusala felt a rivulet of blood trickle down her neck, but she'd played such games before.

'No,' she hissed. 'Else you'd have done it already. Do as you wish. I shan't stop you. But there are truths only I can share.'

The blade came away. Fingers dug into Drusala's shoulder as the regent span her around.

Despite the darkness, the sorceress could now see Tyrion clearly. There was a hardness to his expression that had not been there when they had last met, but it only served to make him look more like his ancestor. And like one other, too.

'As for revealing myself, you already know who I am,' she breathed. 'You recognised me at once, did you not?'

Drusala's lips twitched into a thin smile. Her glamour split apart like the petals of a flower and fled into the darkness. Tyrion's grim expression did not so much as flicker. Was he remembering that kiss atop the blood-slicked altar? Or was he about to call for his guards? The thrill of danger was almost as intoxicating as his presence.

'Morathi,' Tyrion whispered coldly, and took a step forward.

Tyrion did not emerge from his tent until the afternoon sun was low in the sky. The rain had at last ceased, but it was obvious to all that its departure had done little to ease his mood. Nor did he appear obviously cheered by the presence of the dark-haired handmaiden who hung upon his every word and gesture. Korhil, quickly summoned to the regent's presence, did not recognise his attendant, who respectfully introduced herself as Riselle. Then again, the host was vast, and Korhil dared not let his eyes linger long. He knew Tyrion to be the Everqueen's consort, but impropriety lay heavy on every word and gesture that passed between the prince and his newest aide.

To Korhil's surprise, Tyrion did not order the army to the march, but demanded of its attendant mages that Teclis be found and summoned to his presence. This order surprised many, for there was an anger in the regent's voice that none had ever heard levelled against his sibling. The mages hurried to obey nonetheless, sending elemental messengers far and wide across the winds of magic.

At dusk that day, a steed of billowing shadow rode from the north, Teclis upon its back. Korhil greeted the loremaster and guided him to the ruined circle of Haladra, some distance to the encampment's east. As they travelled, Korhil spoke of Reaver's Mark, and its aftermath, though he was surprised how little interest Teclis showed. What should have surprised the captain – but somehow did not – was that no matter how he tried, he could not broach the subject of Riselle, nor recall her face.

Teclis was weary by the time he and Korhil reached the weathered stones of Haladra, the Forest of Ethermark looming against the eastern sky. Forsaken Haladra matched his mood, as doubtless it matched his brother's. The outer ring of alabaster statues was almost weathered away, with only Khaine somehow standing tall in defiance of the elements. Half of the inner circle were gone or toppled as well, and those that still stood were wreathed in vines. Only masked Asuryan, standing proud in the centre of the circle, was unmarred. Tyrion stood in the Creator's shadow, two swords sheathed upon his belt, Riselle all but draped across one arm.

Korhil did not know why Tyrion had chosen Haladra for the meeting, and nor did he know the significance of the sad smile that flickered across Teclis' face. He was there out of duty to his regent, and could not have anticipated how events would unfold. As Teclis approached, Tyrion pulled clear of Riselle and gave curt greeting to his brother. For a time, the twins circled one another, as if both knew what was to come, yet neither wished to be the one to broach the topic. For a moment, Korhil had an image of Asuryan watching over Haladra, his scales of judgement shifting as each twin mirrored the other's steps. Then Tyrion, able to contain himself no longer, began to speak.

The regent spoke angrily, his finger stabbing to emphasise each point. He accused Teclis of treachery, of consorting with Malekith to bring about Finubar's death, and of aiding the Witch King in his war. Despite Tyrion's wrath, his tone was pleading, and begged Teclis to explain his actions. Korhil understood how the prince was torn, for the horror of Tyrion's accusations gnawed at his own gut. However, when Teclis finally spoke, he did so only to confirm the truth of his brother's words.

In that moment, Korhil's certainty reeled as the full horror of Teclis' treachery struck him. The captain was dimly aware that Riselle was watching with rapt attention, drinking in each word as if it were fine wine. He saw Tyrion's gauntlet come about to deal Teclis a backhanded blow across the face. The mage, never his brother's physical equal, was knocked from his feet, blood trickling from his mouth.

Teclis hauled himself up onto one knee, using his staff to bear as much of his weight as he dared. His mouth was in agony; it was like hot needles were stabbing into his jaw. He had wondered several times if he should have refused the summons, but knew in his heart that he owed his brother this moment, if nothing more.

'And Aliathra, brother?' Tyrion ripped Sunfang from its sheath, and placed its point against Teclis' throat. 'Was her death a part of your treachery? If it weren't for your counsel, she might yet be alive!'

Teclis spat a gobbet of blood onto the vine-trailed flagstones, feeling anew the pain of his broken teeth. Even now, weakened, the mage knew he could muster a dozen spells that would reverse their positions, and even slay his brother outright. He had seen through Morathi's disguise from the first, and knew that her silent abjurations could easily be brushed aside. Nevertheless, Teclis knew he could not bring himself to harm his twin, even at the cost of his own life.

'I am sorry,' he said quietly. 'It was necessary.'

Teclis' whispered charm went unnoticed beneath his brother's animalistic cry of rage. Tyrion snatched his sword back and raised it high, but Teclis' shadow-steed was already in motion. Moving between the heartbeats, the beast galloped past the twins. As Sunfang's blade swept down, Teclis grasped for the silver bridle, and was drawn away into the gathering dusk as his brother raged impotently in the ruins behind him.

High above the ruins of Haladra, in the wooded hills of Ethermark, Araloth of Athel Loren watched Teclis' retreat from amongst the trees. Every word uttered there had reached his ears, as they had those of his two companions.

'Why did you not let me intercede?' Araloth asked. 'You brought me here from Sylvania, prevented me from saving the Everchild, and told me that I would be needed to halt a greater evil on Ulthuan. Surely this was the time to act.'

Lileath shook her head, the stars in her hair gleaming in the dusk. 'Do you know which side you should have aided, my love? The mage labours alongside the greatest enemy of his people, but the prince falls under the shadow of his blood. Do you know which deserves your help?'

'No,' Araloth allowed. 'But you do.'

'Of course. I know altogether too much of what is to come. I lived it once before.'

'Then why won't you tell me?'

'The time is not yet right. It breaks my heart to keep this from you, but you cannot imagine what is at stake. Soon, I will tell all, but for now you must trust me. Our path lies elsewhere, for the present.'

Their companion stirred. 'Then let us be to it,' she snapped. 'I tire of waiting.'

Araloth shot a reproving look at the red-haired elf who had dared speak thus to a goddess. He scarcely knew Kalara, and it would have been easy to assume her sharp tongue was born of arrogance, but Araloth had caught glimpses beneath her haughty facade, and deemed rather that it sprang from some terrible loss.

'Be not so swift to wish these minutes away,' said Lileath, sadly. 'Time has never been more precious, to any of us.'



Tyrion railed at the dusk sky for some time after his brother's escape, but eventually he and his companions left. As Malhandir's hooves faded away in the distance, three figures moved down from the trees above.

At their head was Araloth, Lord of Talsyn. His senses were alert even though he knew his hawk, Skaryn – circling high above – would warn him of enemies long before he saw them for himself. Lileath strode behind him, her midnight dress flowing in the evening air like oil upon water. Last came Kalara, once a priestess of Isha, now an archer in Araloth's host. The rest of the army was still concealed deep within the Forest of Ethermark, one of the few emergence points in Ulthuan for the globe-spanning network of the worldroots. Araloth's warriors would trail Tyrion's host as it headed north at Lileath's request, whilst the goddess and her two companions walked a different path.

As the travellers approached the outer ring of Haladra, Lileath took the lead. Drifting effortlessly through the tangle of vines and brambles, she lingered a moment before a toppled statue that had once been raised in her honour, then continued on until she stood before the graven likeness of Asuryan. Lileath neither moved nor spoke for some time thereafter, lost in silent prayer. Kalara, whose patience had rested on a knife edge since they had arrived in Ulthuan, accused the goddess of wasting time, but Lileath was unperturbed. She explained that she would need Asuryan's assistance in what came next, and that the Creator was too weak to hear or aid anything but the most heartfelt of pleas. At that, Kalara fell silent, and took a seat on a hunk of rubble that had once been Morai-Heg.

Araloth, who had heard Lileath speak of the gods taking mortal form, asked if Asuryan was amongst them. Lileath considered for a time, then explained that Asuryan had once taken a mortal form, but had been unmade by treachery. Now he was neither mortal, nor strictly divine, though he would surely help them if he could. Then she turned once more to the statue, and continued her unspoken entreaty. With a flutter of wings, Skaryn descended from the darkening skies and took his accustomed perch on Araloth's shoulder.

Dusk fell away into night, and the leering moon rose high in the sky. Still Lileath stood silently before the statue whilst Araloth and Kalara waited as patiently as they could. Twice, Araloth thought he heard something prowling beyond the outer circle, and twice he went searching for it with spear at the ready. On both occasions, he found nothing. He expected to meet with Kalara's mockery each time he returned to the inner circle, but the glade-mistress offered no such words. Not for the first time, Araloth saw a sadness in Kalara's posture, and wondered why Lileath had insisted on her presence.

At last, as midnight crawled past, Lileath ceased her vigil. With one last bow to the masked statue, she stepped away. As she did so, brilliant fire blazed into life across the statue's brow and spilled forth down its outstretched arms. At once, the cold and dark of the night was banished, and in the light of the fire, Araloth saw the broken statues made whole once again. He saw wise Hoeth, his face no longer split and cracked, vain Atharti, restored to beauty once more, and glowering Eldrazor, a wicked blade grasped in each hand. He saw Isha and Kurnous, joined in embrace whilst Khaine looked on in jealousy.

Only as the fires splashed like rain onto the flagstones in front of Asuryan did Araloth realise that the statues had vanished, replaced by ghostly figures, echoes of Asuryan's divine court – the legends of the elven gods brought to life. As the flames leapt higher, Araloth saw Hekarti whisper to Khaine, who drew a great black sword and turned upon Kurnous. For a time, Khaine fought Kurnous with Isha as the prize, the gods' movements slow and exaggerated, like actors playing roles. Kurnous fell wounded, his echo bursting into fire as the sword pierced his breast. Khaine reached out to claim Isha, but she threw herself into her lover's flames rather than be taken. Both Hekarti and Atharti moved to comfort the Destroyer, but fell to each other's jealous blows.

Of all the gods and goddesses, only Lileath – and her other persona, Ladrielle – were not present amongst the echoes. The real Lileath stood in the centre of the growing pool of flame, though she did not burn. As Atharti fell dead at her sister's hand, Lileath beckoned to Araloth and Kalara to join her within the flames.

As Araloth moved towards the flames, the image of Asuryan, unmoving to that point, stirred to life. All around him, the other gods – or at least those that had not yet been slain by their fellows – suddenly looked up in horror at the skies. The fires were fading now, all save the ring around Lileath, and darkness was drawing in once again. The echoes of the other gods raised their arms as if to ward off some dolorous blow, and Asuryan looked directly down at Araloth. Slowly, haltingly, the Creator raised his hands and removed his mask. Beneath, Araloth saw that Asuryan's face was identical to his.

REMEMBER THIS.

The words, spoken deeper than thunder, echoed across Haladra. One by one, the gods burst into ash, until only Lileath remained. A shadow passed over the ruins, and Araloth saw that he stood in a ring of broken statues, as he had before.

Darkness descended. The statues were cold and lifeless. But for the ring of fire around Lileath, Araloth might have believed it all the result of his own weariness. Then he looked across at Kalara. Her face was pinched and tight, her cheeks wet with tears.

'What did you see?' he asked.

'I saw something from my past,' Kalara said at last, a catch in her voice 'A running stag and an archer...' Her tone turned hollow 'I saw a reminder that the gods can be cruel.'

Araloth waited, but Kalara had no more to say.

'I saw the gods at war with one another,' Araloth said, 'and then with something else...' He shook his head, trying to make sense of what he had seen beneath Asuryan's mask. 'I don't know what I saw.'

'You saw a window on what was,' Lileath told him, 'a reminder of why you are here.' The goddess gestured to the fires flickering around her. 'This is a doorway to what might be, and it will soon close.' She reached out her hands towards Araloth and Kalara. 'Come, we must leave.'

Araloth looked again at Kalara, who nodded. Together, they walked into the flames, and found themselves in a world unlike any they had seen before.



When Araloth and Kalara followed Lileath through the portal of fire, they emerged upon a rocky isthmus in the Dreaming Wood, known to most as the Realm of Chaos. Far beneath them, half-hidden by yellowish miasma, the branches of a foetid forest swayed restlessly.

Lileath told the elves of the goddess Shallya; of how she was held captive in the heart of Nurgle's manse. Shallya had to be rescued, said Lileath, for she was as vital to the humans' survival as Isha was to that of the elves. So dire were the times that Ulthuan's fate mattered little if plague consumed the rest of the world. The rescue had to be now, or not at all. Nurgle bargained with his brother gods at the Court of Covenant, and could return to his manse at any time. Moreover, it might take Shallya many months to return to her full majesty, and time was already short.

Though Lileath could not aid Araloth and Kalara directly – for she could not risk her own capture – she lent them as much of her strength as she could, allowing the pair to survive uncorrupted in a land where corruption was the only constant. Before she departed, the goddess promised that the portal would remain open, there on the Bridge of Fools, for their return. Then Lileath faded, and the elves were alone.

Thus did Araloth and Kalara begin their descent into the jungle. Few others could have negotiated its perils as easily as they, but the elves were of Athel Loren, and Nurgle's garden was a forest of sorts, however vile. Thorned vines tore at their limbs, and creepers tugged at their feet. Brightly coloured flowers spat steaming liquid, and fungi burst into showers of greenish spores. Trails of maggots writhed across the sodden ground, and swarms of daemonic flies wended between the trees. Exposed roots crunched under their feet, the brittle skin bursting to release a cloying mucus that ate away at the soles of their boots. What streams there were oozed rather than flowed, their viscous waters thick with the stench of liquefying flesh.

At times, Araloth and Kalara heard the bleat of a horn or a clamour of bells, and hid themselves amongst the fronds as a hunting party of daemons ambled deeper into the jungle. At others, the elves were saved only by Skaryn, Araloth's keen-eyed hawk, whose shrill voice drove them to concealment moments before discovery. Yet not all such foes could be avoided. Sometimes the daemons were too close, or the undergrowth too dangerous to enter, and on those occasions the elves had to trust to their blades for survival.

On one such occasion, Araloth stooped beneath the eaves of a maggot-ridden tree, only to find himself sinking into a noisome quagmire. As the Lord of Talsyn struggled against the muck's embrace, Kalara held their shambling hunters at bay, but the battle was only ended when the tree itself joined the battle, lurching forward on fibrous roots to snatch the daemons into its many jagged maws. It would have dearly loved to claim the elves too, no doubt, but Lileath's blessing kept it at bay. When Kalara at last hauled Araloth free, the Lord of Talsyn found his skin crawling with segmented, bone-white leeches that only Skaryn's talons could bloodily dislodge.

For time out of mind, Araloth and Kalara wandered through the festering jungle. There was neither sun nor moon to chart the passage of days, and no stars by which to navigate. There was only the swirling ochre sky, the rich stench of decay, and the echo of laughter upon the breeze. The elves knew they were lost, and had never once caught sight of Nurgle's manse. Araloth prayed repeatedly to Lileath for guidance, but the Goddess of the Moon remained silent.

After what seemed an eternity of wandering, Araloth and Kalara at last found the help they needed. It came not from their goddess, but from a scholar they encountered amongst a clearing of dead trees. No daemon was he, but a mortal man who hacked and spluttered as he wended on his way. He held a quill in one hand and an open book in the other. Upon his back, he bore many a tome, each one brimming with lore concerning the godly realms, and on his belt hung a sword of dwarf-forged steel, whose runes blazed and sparked in the unholy light of the clearing. The scholar's eyes were red-rimmed and bleeding, and his skin marred by blisters and lesions, yet still he smiled and joked to himself.

The scholar was wary at first, doubtless thinking the elves a danger, but the lure of learning their story proved too much, and he soon offered to help them along their way. Like them, the scholar had been trapped in the Realm of Chaos for what felt like an eternity, but it seemed that the gods wished him to make record of the place, for he could find his way where the elves could not. The scholar was a hindrance as much as he was an aid, for he insisted on stopping to catalogue everything he saw. Yet without him, the elves would have made no progress at all, so they tolerated his eccentricities as best they could, and used their blades to protect him when they were needed.

Some time thereafter, the three travellers came upon a twisted outcrop of strange crystal. It spiralled through the jungle's trees, at times bursting from the ground, at others arcing through the sky. This was part of Tzeentch's domain, the scholar said, a crystal labyrinth full of damned souls. As the scholar's quill scratched across a fresh page, Araloth spied a mortal face trapped in the crystal, its expression shifting and changing as it flitted from facet to facet.

A little after, the elf could hear the prisoner's voice upon the breeze. The captive explained that he was a sorcerer who had crafted a magical stone that let him transcend the barriers between the mortal and immortal realms. Alas, the sorcerer had become trapped on his journey, and now begged the elves to free him from his prison, offering his service in exchange. Araloth was ill-inclined to accept, for he sensed duplicity, but nonetheless asked the scholar if a rescue was possible. It could be done, the scholar asserted, and he showed them how to craft a rope of fondest memory that, when anchored outside the labyrinth, could guide them from its depths. So did Araloth and the scholar enter the crystal labyrinth. Kalara served as their anchor beyond its bounds, Skaryn perched upon her shoulder. The glade-mistress' hands were locked tight about a rope crafted from their shared memories of Lileath, recollections that even Tzeentch could not warp.

Madness assailed Araloth at every step. The crystals showed him glimpses of pasts that never were, and of futures that could not be, so the Lord of Talsyn clamped his eyes shut and allowed the scholar to lead him onward through the crystal corridors. Threats and promises echoed through Araloth's mind, but he clung tighter to the memory of Lileath, and the voices slowly dimmed. After what seemed like an age, Araloth and the scholar came upon the sorcerer, who was trapped, pinned in place by the taloned grasp of his own future-reflection. The daemonic image roared as Araloth approached, but the elf opened his eyes at last, and smote the creature with his spear, smashing it into thousands of glittering fragments.

Even on the outside of the labyrinth, Kalara could hear the whispers that so assailed Araloth, but she paid them no heed. The duty Lileath had lain upon the glade-mistress was deeper than even Araloth knew, and she was determined to see it fulfilled. Thus did she cling tightly to the rope of memories until her companions and the sorcerer re-emerged from the labyrinth's depths.

Soon the party was underway once more. No one spoke. Araloth and Kalara were still weary from their trek through the maze, whilst the scholar strove to make note of the labyrinth's wonders before the elusive memories departed forever. For his part, the sorcerer was a churlish and distant fellow. He had been little pleased to discover the elves' destination, but he nonetheless agreed to keep his word.

After many hours' travel, the company entered a glade where the trees writhed and thrashed, and the ground was a thick carpet of vicious, biting insects. In the glade's very centre, a knight was spreadeagled and shackled to the ground by rusted chains. He was a giant of a man, whose armour gleamed like silver despite the cloying murk of the jungle floor. Yet for all his strength, the knight could not break free; he tugged and tore at the chains as the insects flowed over him, but the metal held fast.

At Araloth's command, the sorcerer sent fire billowing across the glade, leaving the knight untouched but clearing a scorched path along which Araloth and Kalara could approach. Working together, the elves broke the shackles, and the knight at last stood free. Though his speech was strange, the knight's gratitude was plain. He soon pledged his aid, explaining that the Chaos Gods were his sworn foe, and that he would gladly do aught to thwart them.

With the knight's blade joined to their cause, the company progressed swiftly through the jungle. No longer did they need to stray from the scholar's paths to avoid daemons, for those they encountered were soon overcome by the sorcerer's fire and the knight's righteous steel. Kalara rejoiced in the ease of their passage, but the knight spoke words



of caution. Nurgle's attention must be far afield indeed, he said, for were the Plaguefather's rotten gaze upon them, then doom would surely follow. Araloth was discomfited by the knight's words, for he knew it was likely the abundance of plague in the mortal world that now drew Nurgle's eye. Thus did the Lord of Talsyn bid his companions to quicken their pace. The scholar disagreed, warning that haste was as much their enemy as the daemons of the realm, but Araloth insisted, and so the party pressed on.

As the company passed swiftly beneath a vast and desiccated tree in what the scholar identified as the Garden of Blight, they did not mark a heavy shadow in the uppermost boughs. Only a shower of rotting leaves and plump larval casings betrayed the movement above, and by then it was too late. A daemon landed heavily on the knight's back, bearing him into the mud, its touch leaving sticky black trails across his silver armour. The knight bucked his shoulders in an attempt to dislodge the beast, but the daemon clung on, its tentacles swaying happily at its unwilling playmate's efforts.

Araloth and Kalara struck as one, spear and sword gouging sticky wounds in the beast's flanks. With a disconsolate yelp, it released its grip on the knight and tumbled to the floor, its eyes twitching between the elves' levelled weapons. The sorcerer laughed, the scholar reached into his pocket for a new quill, and the knight, more wounded in pride than body, rounded on his attacker, his sword coming down to take the beast's chinless head. The creature appeared so forlorn and betrayed, though, that Araloth checked the knight's blow with his own spear, and ordered the other to stay his hand. The knight bridled at the elf's temerity, and cursed him for a fool, but the moment of execution had passed. The beast sprang upright and, clearly unwilling to press its luck any further, lumbered off into the undergrowth.

In the wake of the beast's attack, Araloth consented to a more cautious pace, and the knight was careful to examine overhanging branches before passing beneath their seeping grasp. Many times, Araloth felt eyes peering at him through the undergrowth, but whenever he tried to spy the source, the watcher vanished in a rustle of leaves. Though there were no more attacks from the trees, there were other perils aplenty. As the party crossed the abyssal sump, the ground gave way, and only the sorcerer's spell of levitation kept them from drowning in a pool of bubbling pus. A short distance after that, the swamps became so treacherous that even the scholar could not find the way, and only by seeing through Skaryn's eyes could Araloth divine a safe path through the burbling morass. Then, in the heart of that swamp, the great rotten-timbered walls of Nurgle's manse loomed large. The company had reached their destination.

Araloth felt no sense of triumph, for droning daemons flocked thick about the manse's bounds; to approach unseen was impossible. The sorcerer counselled that the attempt be abandoned, that the group should retreat to the Bridge of Fools and make their escape to the mortal world. Kalara refused at once, for she was determined to see the quest through. The scholar consulted his notes, and determined that the room they sought could be reached by a side door, if only the daemons were distracted. At this, the knight drew his sword, and bade his companions farewell. He had, he said, made something of a name for himself since his arrival in the benighted realm. He would serve as the distraction his companions needed by bringing the daemons to battle, and he would do so alone.

Without another word, the knight set out for the manse, moving stealthily at first lest he draw the daemons to his companions. When at last he was clear, the knight gave challenge at the top of his lungs, decrying the Plaguefather as a grasping miser whose obsession with cleanliness was the stuff of legend. The daemons responded immediately, plunging into the swamp to confront the mortal who had dared defame their master. As Araloth watched, the knight swept out his hand, and blue fire exploded amongst the advancing daemons. Then he yelled his challenge once again and ran to meet his foes.

Determined not to waste their comrade's sacrifice, Araloth's company followed the scholar between the rungs of the crumbling iron fence around the manse's gardens, and thence through the servants' door. The scholar led them deftly through a series of mildewed and ramshackle corridors. Few daemons moved to bar their path, for most had been drawn to the clamour of battle outside, and the party evaded those that remained by cleaving to the shadows.

Before long, they had come to a weed-strewn and stone-flagged room, in the centre of which sat an ancient cauldron wherein some vile liquid bubbled. In one corner, a suspended cage span slowly from a root-encrusted hoop let into the sagging ceiling. In aspect, this prison was like unto a songbird's cage, though one large enough to hold a dozen men. It was also set high off the floor, and only with the sorcerer's magic to raise them could Araloth and Kalara reach its shackled door.

As the sorcerer and the scholar watched from below, Araloth clung to the cage's bars and picked the lock with his spear, but when the door sprang open, his heart fell. The cage did not contain the goddess Shallya, as Lileath had told him, but a canker-ridden and suppurating daemon, distinguishable from those he had encountered elsewhere in the Realm of Chaos only by the tarnished silver bracelet clasped about its right wrist. In that moment, even Araloth's

bold heart knew doubt. Had Lileath deceived him, or had she herself been deceived? At his side Kalara shed a single tear, for she knew that the hour she had both dreaded and longed for had at last come. Speaking in a whisper, she asked Araloth to remove the daemon's bracelet.

Uncomprehending, Araloth unclasped the trinket as instructed, taking great care not to let his skin come into contact with the creature's sore-laden hide. No sooner was the band removed than the daemon glowed with white light. The glow faded as quickly as it had come, and the daemon was gone, replaced by the slender, unblemished form of Shallya. Released from bondage, the goddess looked one last time around the room, gave a gracious smile and vanished in a flash of light. Thus was Shallya freed and the quest fulfilled.

Araloth turned to leave, but Kalara did not turn with him. It was her destiny to take Shallya's place, she told Araloth sadly. Nurgle would not lightly bear the loss of his chief taster, and would surely rouse every daemon at his command to see her returned to the cage. Only if Kalara assumed Shallya's role, became the poxfulcrum in her stead, did the others have any hope of escape. Thus had Lileath foretold, and thus would Kalara at last atone for a long-ago transgression against the gods.

Before Araloth could argue, Kalara plucked the enchanted bracelet from his hand and clasped it shut around her own wrist. At once, her skin began to discolour, boils and lesions bursting from her pale flesh. Kalara backed away from her companions, stumbling as her bones bowed and cracked under the weight of her suddenly bloated flesh. Her hair and raiment rotted away, her nails blackened and twisted. With her last croaking breath, the glade-mistress bade the others go, even as she collapsed amidst the squalor of the cage. His heart heavy, Araloth allowed the sorcerer to lower him back to the floor. She who was now the poxfulcrum watched him go without recognition.

Araloth and his companions left the manse like ghosts, careful not to draw the attention of its guardians. As the company made their escape, Araloth beheld the broken body of his comrade, the knight, set upon a jagged spear. Araloth could see that the man still lived, and would have fought to rescue him had the scholar not held him back, insisting the elf stay true to his mission. The daemons could not kill the knight, the scholar said; he was beyond their power, and would take his own revenge in due course – such was the way of things in the Realm of Chaos.

Araloth's return to the Bridge of Fools was far easier than his departure. The burgeoning jungle was almost deserted, and Araloth wondered again what that portended for the mortal realm. At last, they reached the bridge, and found Lileath's portal of light still open. The mortal world was in reach.

Alas, the sorcerer had cared nothing for the elf's quest; he had hoped only that it would offer him the opportunity to return to the mortal realm. Now that the path was open before him, he gleefully summoned fire to repay the indignities of servitude. Flames coursed from the sorcerer's fingers and slammed into Araloth, knocking him over the isthmus' edge. The elf's straining fingers found a desperate handhold, but already he could feel the rock crumbling beneath him. Skaryn, seeing his master's plight, swooped down to take the sorcerer's eyes, but the traitor called forth a pillar of flame and swatted the hawk from the skies. Araloth looked to the scholar for aid, but the other simply opened a fresh page in his journal and began to write. With a thin smile, the sorcerer marshalled the magics for a final spell.

It was then that help arrived from a most unexpected quarter. The beast of Nurgle Araloth had spared had not forgotten him. Like all its kind, the creature existed only to be friendly, and languished forever in disappointment. The beast had followed Araloth at a distance, not out of gratitude, but because he was the first being to show it anything other than hatred in some considerable time; Araloth, or so the beast reckoned, was his friend. Now the beast saw someone attempting to hurt his friend, and bounded forward to issue suitable punishment. The sorcerer never saw his doom approach, though he perhaps felt the beast's heavy breathing upon his neck in the moment before it swallowed him whole.

Araloth, understandably wary at the source of his sudden reprieve, hauled himself back onto the Bridge of Fools. The beast, delighted that its friend wanted to play, bounded toward him. The creature nearly knocked Araloth back over the ledge in its enthusiasm, and its long, drooling tongue was feverish in its affection. This time, the scholar did act. Picking up a skull that lay by his feet, he twitched it twice before the beast's eyes, then hurled it away down the slope. The beast hesitated for a moment, doubtless wary of some trick, then thundered happily off after the prize.

Reclaiming Skaryn's battered body from the ground, Araloth asked the scholar if he wished to return to the mortal world, but was politely refused. There was still so much to see, the other replied, and without another word, he followed in the beast's wake, singing merrily. With a last look around, and a whispered farewell to Kalara, Araloth stepped back through the portal and returned to the mortal world, and the war that awaited him.

Malekith was displeased, and Kouran Darkhand knew it. Indeed, all within the Naggarothi host knew it, for the disembowelled remains of several dreadlords had been prominently displayed precisely to make his temperament known. The flush of success that had been born from Eagle Gate's collapse had vanished like a flame doused in seawater, and the host's advance had slowed almost to a crawl.

Ystranna of Avelorn, foremost of the Everqueen's handmaidens, had already striven against Malekith's army during its assault on Phoenix Gate. Quickly realising she could not hold the mountains, she had withdrawn her armies to the woodlands of the mountain slopes. From there, her sisters had harried the dark elves from beneath the cover of the ravaged tree line, daring them to give pursuit into the lion-haunted tangle. At first, many Naggarothi regiments had taken the bait, but none had returned; the woods were riddled with secret paths and hidden fortresses, and alive with axes and spears. The daemons might have reduced Chrace to a dead land, but its folk defended it as keenly as they ever had.

Malekith had finally endeavoured to crush Ystranna's resistance on Twilight's Tide. Thousands of shades flooded into the Whiteweald, wicked blades gleaming. Dragons had swooped low over the canopies, loosing their fires until acres of the Whiteweald were ash, but the only corpses found amongst the desolation were those of dark elves. And still the arrows came from deeper in the forest, joined now by volleys from the western approach as Nagarythe's shadow warriors entered the battle.

Strangely, that reinforcement had almost been the high elves' undoing. Increased numbers had fed a legendary arrogance, and the warriors lurking in the Whiteweald had come singing to the fight. Such was the unexpectedness of the assault, that it almost achieved its goals. Naggarothi regiments, arrayed to defend against a potential attack from the west, suddenly found themselves beset on two sides. For a few perilous minutes, the dark elf host had teetered on the brink of a humiliating collapse, but then Malekith had joined the battle. Wheeling Seraphon low beneath dark skies, the Witch King had twisted the magic of the Whiteweald to his service, and tore a deep fissure in the ancient bedrock. Harnessing the raw power that gushed free from the roots of the mountains, Malekith called down freezing mists and meteors of magical flame. The trees of Whiteweald, though dead for many months, twitched to hungry life at his command, their branches and roots tearing at the archers concealed within their midst.

The Battle of Whiteweald should have ended in disaster for the high elves, for no mage amongst their ranks could have hoped to match the Witch King spell for spell. However, as the dread moon loomed low over the spell-wracked mountainside, the dead arose. The unliving were mindless, and tore at both sides with equal vigour. Beset by a third enemy, the dark elf counter-attack was hopelessly disrupted, and the charge that should have swept the high elves from the mountainside came to a halt against a wall of clammy and unfeeling flesh. Malekith could perhaps have imposed his will upon the risen dead, but he dared not split his attention and risk losing control over the magical fulcrum he had recently awakened.

As events transpired, it mattered little. Forced to battle both the dark elves and the dead, Ystranna's army had at last retreated from the field. The vengeful elves of Nagarythe had pressed the matter some hours longer, but even they had retreated before dawn's rays had touched the mountainside. With his immediate foes vanquished, Malekith used the fissure's power to return the dead to rest. But as he did so, the Witch King felt another mind touch his own, and knew that his time was running short.

The next morning, survivors from Malus Darkblade's slaughtered army brought word of a new enemy approaching from the south. They spoke anxiously of a host almost as large as the one Malekith commanded – a host marching under the banner of Prince Tyrion.

Kouran knew that the proper tactic at that point would have been to press on towards the Blighted Isle, leaving behind a blockade force to keep Ystranna at bay. He even suggested such a course to his master, but the Witch King would hear nothing of it. Malekith claimed that he would not risk leaving an enemy alive at his back, but Kouran suspected his monarch's monstrous pride had more to do with the decision. Every scout's report suggested that Ystranna's host was less than a fifth the size of the Naggarothi army, and the Witch King could not bear to be sent scurrying away by so meagre a foe. Kouran, however, was able to press his master in a way that no other would dare, and at last convinced Malekith to swallow his pride.

That night, Kouran journeyed to the Caledorian encampment. Ever since Eagle Gate, the dragon princes had been careful to maintain some distance from the Naggarothi host. The necessity Prince Imrik had seen in the alliance was far from universal, even amongst his own knights, and there was yet hate enough between the two elven races to drown a continent in blood at slightest provocation. The dragon host that fought alongside the dark elves did so purely out of love for their prince. That burden had weighed heavily on Imrik in the weeks since Eagle Gate, and he was both fiercely proud and inexpressibly sad at the role Caledor had come to play.

As ever, Imrik had kept Kouran waiting far longer than was polite – a less than subtle reminder of the vast gulf he saw in their respective status. It also gave the dragon prince a grim sense of amusement to see that the captain of the black guard had marched out with an escort of no less than five hundred spears. Allies or not, no druchii felt safe in the company of Caledor, and rightly so.

Malekith's orders were couched in respectful terms, but were unmistakeably commands nonetheless. The Caledorians were to press the attack against Ystranna's forces, and those of her Nagarythe allies, whilst the rest of the Witch King's host pressed north. Imrik was silent. The prince had thus far been able to avoid wetting his own steel. He had clung to the idea that if he did not spill blood, then some honour yet remained. The prince suspected that no few of his knights had similarly avoided murdering their ancestral allies, leaving the killing to Naggarothi all too eager to oblige. The dragons – including Imrik's own loyal Minaithnir – had shown no such restraint, and Imrik could not help but wonder if their reading of the situation was deeper than his own. Better to imagine that, perhaps, than to dwell overmuch on how easily the dragons had turned on their former friends. If the Caledorians fought alone, they would no longer have the luxuries of restraint or mercy – or of honour.

From Kouran's mocking expression, Imrik deemed that the other knew the reason for his reticence. The prince's hand tightened on his sword; but for the sudden arrival of a bloodied and bruised Teclis, he would have cut Kouran down, whatever the consequence. As it was, Teclis' tidings denied Imrik even the small joy of stilling Kouran's sneer. The mage told how Tyrion had fallen under Morathi's spell, and how a dark power was now mantled upon his shoulders. As Teclis had foreseen, the Curse of Aenarion had at last claimed his brother – the Defender of Ulthuan was becoming Khaine reborn. Tyrion had to be prevented from taking the Widowmaker, and if that meant that the godly weapon instead fell into Malekith's hands, then so be it.

Thus did Caledor become the shield for Malekith's final march north. As the dark elves pressed on towards the northern shores, hundreds of dragon princes stormed into the Whiteweald, and there prosecuted the bitterest battle to wrack Ulthuan for many long centuries. The Caledorians fought with the grimness of warriors driven by necessity, for Imrik had at last spoken of the stakes that drove him. All mercy and restraint had fallen from his princes, and they drove back Ystranna's forces in silence – even the wounded and dying uttered no sound. The hit and run tactics that had worked so well against the Naggarothi soon proved ineffectual against Imrik's forces, for he had fought many battles in defence of Chrace, and knew what to expect from his foe. The secret fortresses were razed by dragonfire, and Caledorian spearmen marched along the hidden paths, cutting off Ystranna's warriors as they sought to retreat.

At the very moment Malekith set foot on the Blighted Isle, Imrik faced Ystranna amidst the ruins of her army. The handmaiden knew she was overmatched, but still she held her ground, bowstring a blur as Minaithnir bore down. Two arrows pierced Imrik's armour, but those wounds grieved the prince less than his own blow, which drove the Starlance through Ystranna's heart. The handmaiden's death marked the end of the Chracian resistance.

As darkness fell, Imrik toiled alone to build her funeral pyre – one that would burn for many days. The prince angrily refused all other aid. As the dancing flames consumed Ystranna's body, Imrik whispered a prayer to Asuryan, for he knew that a worse slaughter was yet to come.



GUARDS OF THE CURSED SHRINE

When it became clear that the dark elves once again intended to lay claim to the Blighted Isle, many legions marched north to deny them. Yet there were other defenders too – warriors who had held the sacred site for generations, and had sworn to do so again.



ANARAN AND ANARELLE

In the battle for the Shrine of Khaine, command of the high elves fell to Anaran and Anarelle, the children of Eltharion's younger brother, Argalen. They alone knew of Eltharion's death in a distant land, for his spirit had appeared to them several nights past, and bestowed upon them not only the duty of protecting Yvresse in his absence, but also the gifts of their ancestry. Now Anaran wielded the Fangsword, and Anarelle bore the Talisman of Hoeth. These were heavy burdens, but the twins were determined to do honour by their uncle's memory.



ALITH ANAR, THE SHADOW KING

Alith Anar had watched the events of recent months with mounting unease. Time and again, he had seen the feud between his people and the hated dark elves play out, but he sensed that there was something different this time. Nevertheless, he brought many of his aesanar to the Blighted Isle and prepared for war. That Malekith sought to claim the Widowmaker was obvious; that the Witch King should be denied his prize was equally so. Alith Anar had no desire to lead the battle to come, but he would fight, and perhaps – at last – slay his hated nemesis.

REVENANTS OF KHAINE

The Revenants of Khaine were formed to prevent the dark elves seizing the Blighted Isle. When word spread that Malekith was marching north to claim the Shrine of Khaine, the revenants came from every corner of the island to stand against him. Though they acknowledged no lesser authority than the Phoenix King, they were prepared to fight to the last – no matter how dark the day.





THE SILVERIN GUARD

The Silverin Guard were more usually tasked with defending the Watchstone of Tor Yvresse – a waystone of fabulous power. However, such were the dangers posed by Malekith's northward march, that the council of Yvresse agreed unanimously that five battalions of spears and two of longbows be sent north immediately to reinforce the Blighted Isle's defences. Each Silverin Guard wore a suit of armour fashioned in the time of Yvresse's founding. Daemons roamed freely across the hills in those days, and the first Silverin Guards wore armour enchanted against their claws. The magics contained within the steel scales had since faded to almost nothing, but a spark still remained – enough, perhaps, to avert a grim fate.



THE SKYHAWKS

The Skyhawks were mistwalkers of Yvresse, tied by tradition to the heirs of Argalen, son of Moranion. When Anaran and Anarelle resolved to defend the Blighted Isle, the Skyhawks were battling creatures of the Annulii on the border between Yvresse and Eataine. Abandoning the fight to the Eataine militias, the Skyhawks had marched northwards at incredible speed, reaching the Blighted Isle some hours before Malekith's vanguard. Though weary from their journey, the Skyhawks stood ready to fight beside Argalen's heirs – to the death, if necessary.



THE KNIGHTS OF TOR GAVAL

Princes of Yvresse dislike fighting from the skies, for their homeland is swathed in a mist that makes flying a very dangerous proposition indeed. However, there were always those to flout convention – the Knights of Tor Gaval were one such group, and had trained their entire lives to fight atop winged steeds amongst Yvresse's thick mists. Some rode griffons, others eagles – a few had even purchased skycutters from the navy of Lothern. Thanks to the challenges of training in their murky homeland, the Knights of Tor Gaval were rightly said to be amongst the most talented of wingmen in all Ulthuan.

Anaran, Protector of Tor Yvresse
High Elf Prince

Anarelle, Warden of Tor Yvresse
Mage

Alith Anar, the Shadow King

Essendrion
Archmage

Revenants of Khaine
One legion of High Elf Spearmen

The Skyhawks
Three Mistwalker companies (High Elf Archers)

The Silverin Guard
Five legions of High Elf Spearmen, and two regiments of High Elf Archers

The Sentinels of Seagrave
Three legions of High Elf Spearmen

Wardens of Northwatch
Two crews of Lothern Sea Guard, each with two Eagle Claw Bolt Throwers

The Knights of Tor Gaval
Five High Elf Princes on Griffons, three Sea Helms on Lothern Skycutters and two High Elf Nobles on Great Eagles

The Skylords of Avelorn
Three High Elf Princes on Griffons

The Tidestorm
Two flights of Lothern Skycutters

The Wraithband
One household of Shadow Warriors

The Desolate
Two households of Shadow Warriors

The Sword of Aenarion
One legion of High Elf Spearmen

The Eyes of Isha
One regiment of Sisters of Avelorn

The Seldi Trueflights
One militia regiment of High Elf Archers

The Knights of Athel Tamarha
Three sworn-hosts of Silver Helms

THE HOST OF NAGGAROND

Malekith had never been one to keep his enemies close. Enemies were to be slain, or despatched to certain doom. Thus the army that came to the Blighted Isle was composed entirely of warriors the Witch King could trust – or at least those whom he knew to fear betrayal's consequences more than they coveted its rewards.

MALEKITH

The Witch King was in triumphal mood as he arrived at the Blighted Isle, seeing centuries of defeats at last swept away by meaningful victory. The alliance with Caledor, unforeseen as it was, had at last given Malekith the advantage he needed, and he believed that the Widowmaker would make him almost unstoppable. Nevertheless, Malekith still had doubts. Though he would not admit to it, the Witch King was concerned that Teclis had deceived him – that he was somehow being led into a trap. It mattered not. Malekith could not turn back now, for he no longer had Naggaroth to retreat to. The Battle of the Blighted Isle would end in victory, or it would end in death!





KOURAN DARKHAND

Alone amongst the Naggarothi host, Kouran recognised his master's doubts, but they did not trouble him. As far as Kouran was concerned, Malekith was soon to fulfil his destiny – when that happened, those who had served him loyally would be rewarded. Kouran's desires were simple. Decades ago, he was used and discarded by Morathi, and he yearned to avenge his abandonment. Kouran did not doubt that if Malekith achieved his long-sought victory, he would be allowed to drag Morathi from her tower in chains. Thus would the duplicitous sorceress at last pay for her betrayals beneath Kouran's iron-shod boot.

THE SOULSKULLS

Few regiments from Naggarond survived long enough to forge a legend for themselves. This was not through a lack of skill or valour, but because someone always had to be held accountable for Malekith's defeat. All too often, legions were broken up after a campaign, their warriors scattered across other formations – or led to the slaughter – and their colours cast into fire. The Soulskulls, however, had thus far managed to evade Malekith's wrath. This achievement was simply attained. If the angry eye of the Witch King fell upon the Soulskulls, then the commander of that time was dragged before Malekith by his junior officers, and accepted the totality of the blame. Such a confession was invariably the death of the commander, but the regiment endured to fight once again. Despite this, there was never any shortage of dreadlords wishing to take command of the Soulskulls, as many nobles saw only the prospect for wealth and glory, never the risk of ignominious death.





THE LORDS OF OBLIVION

The dragon riders who fought for Malekith at the Blighted Isle were not Caledorian, but rather high ranking officers of the Black Guard who were granted their steeds as rewards for loyalty. These reavers hunted as a dark-winged pack, overwhelming their enemies one foe at a time – a methodology which invariably meant that every Lord of Oblivion had at least a partial claim on every kill. This, in turn, led to bloody rivalries in the battle's wake, as each dragon rider sought to claim for himself the rewards in reality earned by all.



THE BLACK GUARD

Not since Finuval Plain had so many Black Guard been gathered on a single battlefield. Never before had the whole of the merciless host fought at Malekith's side, for previously a good portion of their strength remained behind to safeguard Naggarond. However, with Naggarond fallen, and blood-drunk northlanders revelling in its streets, there was no longer anything there to protect. Careful of potential betrayal from the Ghrondian soldiery, Malekith had positioned several legions of Black Guard between Morathi's warriors and the remainder of his army. If treachery occured, the Black Guard could be relied upon to see that it came to naught.

- ***Malekith, the Witch King***
- ***Kouran Darkhand, Captain of the Black Guard***
- ***Stromark***
  Khainite Assassin
- ***Bannoth Chillgrasp***
  Khainite Assassin
- ***Klorvach Shiverspine***
  Black Ark Fleetmaster
- ***Knights of the Gouged Heart***
  Three scalegelds of Cold One Knights, and one scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***The Lords of Oblivion***
  Two-score Dragon riders
- ***The Ghostskulls***
  Two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Ironskulls***
  Two legions of Bleakswords, one legion of Dreadspears
- ***The Stoneskulls***
  Two legions of Darkshards, one legion of Dreadspears
- ***The Soulskulls***
  Two legions of Darkshards, one of Bleakswords and three of Dreadspears
- ***The Black Guard***
  Six towers of Black Guard
- ***The Doomdraichs***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Silent Sisters***
  One cult of Witch Elves
- ***The Mantled Dark***
  Three vanguards of Dark Riders
- ***The Brinemurder Steel***
  Two crews of Black Ark Corsairs
- ***Klorvach's Talons***
  One crew of Black Ark Corsairs
- ***Khaine's Gaze***
  Six batteries of Reaper Bolt Throwers
- ***The Shrine of Red Ruin***
  One Bloodwrack Shrine

BATTLE OF THE BLIGHTED ISLE

No site in Ulthuan bore deeper scars than the Blighted Isle. It was a place of legend, of the darkest rumour and the most glorious of deeds. It was there that the Shrine of Khaine had been raised in the time before Chaos, and there that the most terrible of battles had been fought. Bones lay strewn across the desolate hillsides and plains. They lay so thick that neither rock nor soil could be seen beneath, and in places trees seemed to sprout directly from the bonespoil. These bones were the remains of warriors who had battled in Malekith's name, or that of the Phoenix Throne. Some had lain there for centuries, others for but a matter of weeks, for the battle of the Blighted Isle never truly ceased.

Here alone, of all the world, the dead had not risen. Khaine's eye lay heavy upon these shores, and he guarded jealously those fallen in the eternal battle for his temple. Yet the Blighted Isle was not without dangers to Malekith's host. The Revenants of Khaine, bitter warriors of Nagarythe who had long ago given themselves to the Destroyer, had held the island against the dark elves for generations, and would do so now, if they could. They did not fight alone. As the course of Malekith's northward journey had become clear, swift ships from Cothique had borne other high elves north to join the battle. Now, much of Yvresse's army stood ready in a double line upon the hillside, their banners limp in the thin mists.

In the centre of the slope stood the soldiery of Tor Yvresse, their spear-tips and arrowheads agleam in the wan light. Few wished to face down the Witch King's host without the leadership of their lord Eltharion, but he was now but dust upon the breeze. Command fell to Anaran and Anarelle, the children of Eltharion's younger brother, Argalen. They alone knew of Eltharion's death in a distant land, for his spirit had appeared to them, and laid upon them the gifts of their ancestry and the burden of protecting Yvresse. Now Anaran bore the Fangsword, miraculously restored, and Anarelle the Talisman of Hoeth.

The eastern flank of the Yvressi line was held by the mistwalkers, and the griffon knights of Tor Gaval. The great beasts shifted restlessly as the dark elf host arrayed for war far below, eager to be loosed to the hunt, but their elven masters knew the folly of striking too soon, and urged the griffons to stillness.

In the west, the grim warriors of Nagarythe sharpened their blades anew. Some set their keen eyes upon the assembling dark elves, looking for sundered kin who could at last be redeemed in death; others recited the names of the shamed Nagarythe houses, in whose name each arrow would today be loosed. The sibilant whispers sounded like the phrases of sorcery in that murky air, and perhaps they were magic of a kind, for none save the elves of Nagarythe knew the true power of their rituals. Only where a tall, grey-cloaked figure walked did the voices fall silent in reverence. He gave no orders – nor indeed did he speak any words – but where he passed, the thickening of resolve was palpable in the air.

Behind the assembled lines, the Shrine of Khaine loomed out of the mists. This was no mortal structure, but one laid down by the Destroyer himself. It changed form with the war god's capricious mood, at times appearing as a cyclopean ziggurat; at others, a caldera of boiling blood or a shadow-haunted ruin. The only constants were the altar and the Widowmaker that lay upon it. On that day, the Shrine of Khaine was a hill of skulls, set within a broad, bone-strewn plain. Some of the skulls were carved from the black bedrock of the isle, others were the remnants of ancient warriors. Brooding monoliths jutted into the skies, their flanks crackling with dark lightning. Though there were no walls to defend, nor ramparts to man, this was where the Revenants of Khaine would make their stand.

Haste had characterised every battle in this campaign, and the assault on the Shrine of Khaine was no different. Malekith's forces were ordered into battle line with a speed born out of necessity. The dark elf rearguard had already reported bloody skirmishes with Tyrion's scouts, and Malekith knew that the defenders of the shrine would have to be swiftly overwhelmed. Kouran was disappointed that Tyrion had not veered off to seek revenge on Imrik, but knew it would make little difference. Regardless of what tales Teclis had spun for the Witch King, Kouran knew his master would crush the upstart prince. The honour of first blood, however, was Kouran's, and Kouran's alone, for the Black Guard had been chosen to lead the attack.

At the Witch King's gesture, the banners of Naggarond went forward. Kouran's boots splashed through the shallow stream at the base of the hill, and moments later, the first spells and counterspells crackled between the opposing lines as mages vied with sorceresses. So too did the first arrows begin to fall amongst the dark elf ranks. The dead and wounded collapsed with neither scream nor sigh, for the Black Guard did not feel pain – leastways, not whilst their grim captain marched at their head. An arrow from the second volley struck Kouran high in the shoulder. The captain did not even stagger, but snapped the shaft and tossed it contemptuously onto the ground.

There was a rumble of thunder overhead, and a flare of lightning. A thin rain began to hiss from the sky, its droplets the colour of spilt blood as

they ran down plate and helm. Kouran was dimly aware of clamouring horns as the dreadspears and bleakswords of Naggarond followed in the Black Guard's wake. Without thinking, the captain quickened his pace – no lowly city-scut would reach the battle before him.

Scores of shadow warriors had advanced through the rocky outcrops to the west, and their arrows cut across the Black Guard's ranks. The dark elves crumpled by the dozen, their blood mingling with the red rain. Kouran made a gesture, and two dozen shadows, scarcely visible until that moment, split off from the Black Guard and leapt towards the rocks. The next volley hissed out towards the running assassins, who skipped between the hail of arrows without missing a step on the rain-slicked rocks. Only one of the shadows fell, and the rest were in amongst the leading high elves before a second volley could be loosed.

The skirmish that followed was as murderous as it was brief. Blades flashed as they slit throats or opened veins in sprays of blood. Daggers parried swords, and were rammed hilt-deep through scale-armoured chests, and then the assassins sprang lightly away again, weaving a dance of death through the sodden rocks.

It was a fight the shadow warriors could not win, yet they refused to abandon their position. Instead, they flung themselves forwards with swords and knives. It was a bold attempt, but doomed. Only when the grey-cloaked figure descended into the outcrops, his runesword gleaming with blue fire, did the tide turn, for what he surrendered to the assassins in speed, he more than compensated for in skill. As Kouran watched, the newcomer seized a leaping Naggarothi by the throat, and dashed his brains out on a rock. As he did so, the hood fell back to reveal a circlet of silver and a glittering black gem set upon his brow. It was a face from ancient days, but Kouran had no time to dwell upon its seeming impossibility, for the Black Guard had reached the enemy's line, and his halberd had blood-work to do.

The Black Guard struck the Yvressi line in its very centre, halberds crashing down and coming away bloody. Kouran's blade arced beneath a shield to sever a spearman's leg at the knee, then jerked viciously up to cleave his rank-mate's head. Another spearman lunged forward, thinking he'd seen a gap in the captain's guard, but Kouran simply reversed his halberd's swing and drove the butt of its staff between the attacker's cheek-guards. The high elf's scream died with a crunch of shattering bone, and Kouran sprang forward over the corpse and into the phalanx's heart.

So tightly packed were the spearmen that those to either side could not turn to assail the captain, but nor could Kouran swing his own weapon. He cared not. He had survived the gutter-fights of Naggarond, and the selection rituals of the Black Guard – he saw only joy in this battle. Another spearman came forward, but Kouran knocked his weapon aside with one plate-gloved fist, then pulled his attacker in close with the other. Before the high elf could pull free, Kouran seized his head in both hands and slammed it down onto his spiked knee. Blood sprayed and Kouran tossed the limp body aside, pouncing for the next foe in line.

At last, the soldiers of the Black Guard uttered a sound – not a scream of pain, nor a cry of fear, but a sonorous battle-cry shouted as one from a thousand voices. It rumbled up the hillside, setting hearts a-tremor. Even Prince Anaran, standing tall in the centre of Tor Yvresse's Silverin Guard, felt his courage waver, but the weight of the Fangsword reminded him of his duty, and so he stood his ground.



Such was not the case everywhere. The press of bodies around Kouran slackened as the high elves broke, the survivors scrambling uphill towards the hawk-banner of Tor Yvresse. The captain of the Black Guard snorted in contempt, then retrieved his halberd from amongst the dead. Warriors of Naggarond were flooding past the Black Guard now, their eagerness for battle fuelled by the sight of spilled blood. Kouran spared a second disdainful thought for his kinsmen, who had broken rank in their haste to close with the foe. Let them fight like wild dogs, he thought. The Black Guard had higher standards by far.

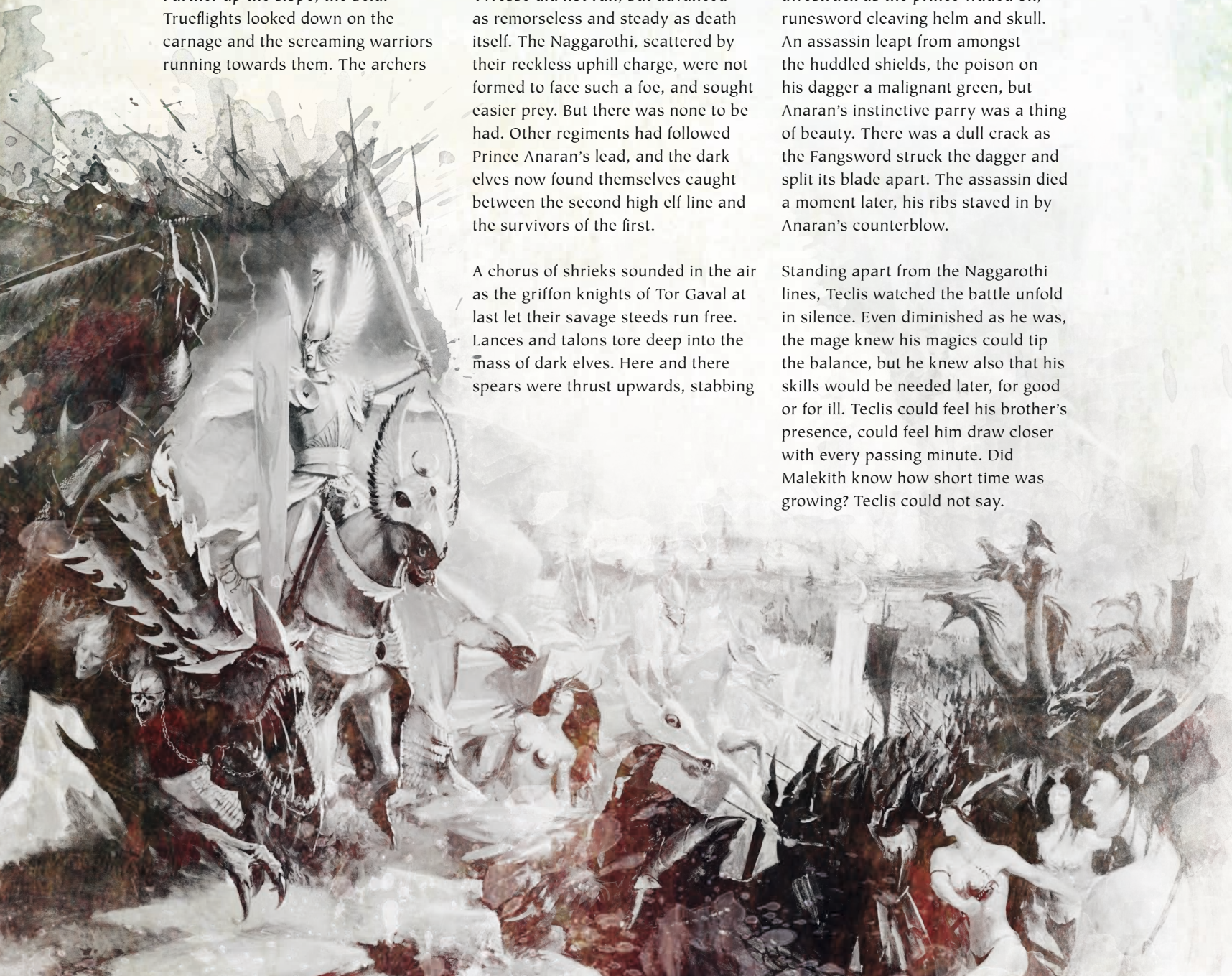
Further up the slope, the Seldi Trueflights looked down on the carnage and the screaming warriors running towards them. The archers had seen the Black Guard prevail in the face of seemingly impossible odds. As the wind whipped the blood-red rain about them, the Trueflights lost their nerve. They turned and ran as the first bleakswords reached them, but too late. Wicked blades speared forward into backs turned in flight. The lucky ones died at once, their spines severed or hearts pierced. Most fell wounded, their bones trampled bloody by the victorious dark elves.

Anaran saw the Trueflights shatter. He beheld only too clearly the hole that was opening in his lines, and led the Silverin Guard down to turn to the tide. The spearmen of Tor Yvresse did not run, but advanced as remorseless and steady as death itself. The Naggarothi, scattered by their reckless uphill charge, were not formed to face such a foe, and sought easier prey. But there was none to be had. Other regiments had followed Prince Anaran's lead, and the dark elves now found themselves caught between the second high elf line and the survivors of the first.

A chorus of shrieks sounded in the air as the griffon knights of Tor Gaval at last let their savage steeds run free. Lances and talons tore deep into the mass of dark elves. Here and there spears were thrust upwards, stabbing at the skyborne attackers. The griffons wheeled effortlessly away, or else closed their beaks around the spearhafts, hauling the wielders skyward before casting them back to the ground far below. The dark elves banded into brittle shieldwalls ripe for shattering. Anaran was only too happy to oblige them, and he lead the Silverin Guard unflinchingly onto the largest of these desperate bands.

The young prince made his name that day, and proved himself a worthy inheritor of the Fangsword with every spray of blood that arced from its tip. Soldiers who had fought at Anaran's side for near a decade watched awestruck as the prince waded on, runesword cleaving helm and skull. An assassin leapt from amongst the huddled shields, the poison on his dagger a malignant green, but Anaran's instinctive parry was a thing of beauty. There was a dull crack as the Fangsword struck the dagger and split its blade apart. The assassin died a moment later, his ribs staved in by Anaran's counterblow.

Standing apart from the Naggarothi lines, Teclis watched the battle unfold in silence. Even diminished as he was, the mage knew his magics could tip the balance, but he knew also that his skills would be needed later, for good or for ill. Teclis could feel his brother's presence, could feel him draw closer with every passing minute. Did Malekith know how short time was growing? Teclis could not say.



Higher on the hillside, Anarelle wielded the magics of the Blighted Isle with a skill that belied her inexperience. White fire burst from her fingers, snatching dark elves to ash. A band of bleakswords, made savage by desperation, bore down upon Anarelle's position, but she did not falter. Voices whispered to her from within the Talisman of Hoeth as the spirits of the previous bearers showed her which spells to call upon. Uttering the words she had been given, Anarelle slammed her hands together and the ground before her broke apart, spitting forth shards of stone that shredded the oncoming dark elves and blasted them away down the slopes.

From the base of the hill, Malekith saw the first wave of his attack stall, and loosed his second. Horns sounded, and more Naggarothi surged forward. Hundreds of darkshards marched in this second attack, the regiments operating in pairs. As one advanced, the other laid down withering fire, driving the mistwalkers and shadow warriors back into the cover of the rocks.

The griffon knights, tempted by this more dangerous prey, swooped low to drive the darkshards back, serrated bolts streaming in the air about them. A dozen griffons plunged to the battle-wracked ground. One skidded to a blood-slicked halt a few paces before Kouran, but the beast had been sorely wounded by crossbow fire, and its reactions were dulled. The captain severed the creature's head with a single mighty blow, then heaved its battered rider for his warriors to despatch. Still the knights of Tor Gaval swept down, and the leading lines of darkshards scattered before them. Alas for the sons of Tor Gaval, Malekith had foreseen their coming. As repeater crossbows slipped from dying hands and clattered on the rocks, voices as ancient as the mountains rent the air as a dozen black dragons swept skywards, Seraphon at their head.

The knights of Tor Gaval split and dove apart as Malekith's counter-charge struck home, but there was no escape. Draconic throats belched dark fog as the griffons dove past, and many a noble of Yvresse met his death amongst those choking vapours. Still the knights of Tor Gaval wheeled about to face this new foe. There were two or three griffons to every dragon at Malekith's command, and the steeds of Yvresse were swifter and more lithe by far. Steeling themselves once more, the knights of Tor Gaval swore the hated foe would be driven back that day.

As the knights closed once again, Malekith's sorceresses ceased their assault upon the slopes, and shifted their attention to the skies. Vile syllables sliced through the air, bending the errant magic of the Blighted Isle to the dark elves' bidding. The magic writhed, glimmering darkly as it formed shadowy thorns about the griffons' wings. The sorceresses wrenched their shadowy weave as fisher-folk grasp at their nets, and the griffons lurched groundwards, bloody plumage floating lazily through the air as they strove to break free. Seraphon roared in triumph, and the dragons descended upon their foe.

Anarelle felt the magic of the isle shift, but knew not what it meant until the voices of the talisman told her how to weave a counterspell. Focusing on one of the sorceresses far below, Anarelle breathed the words she had been given. She could feel her incantation slicing through the weave of magic, and the dark elf's rising panic as the control of the spell slipped away. As Anarelle finished her incantation, she saw the thorn-weave tear free of the sorceress' hands and turn upon its creator. A terrible scream echoed across the hill as the thorns constricted about the sorceress and tore her to bloody scraps. Bereft of a lynchpin, the thorn-weave unravelled. Despite herself, Anarelle felt a brief spark of spiteful satisfaction.

In the skies, the knights of Tor Gaval felt the net about them slacken, and urged their griffons to freedom before the dragons struck. Not all were swift enough, and those suffocated amongst the choking vapours or were torn apart by fang and claw. Yet enough tore free – though at a great cost in blood and ravaged flesh – and surged into the fight once more. Even with their numbers thinned, the knights of Tor Gaval could perhaps have claimed mastery of the skies, were it not for Malekith's presence.

The Witch King was in no mood to be held at bay, and fought with a recklessness that he had not displayed in centuries. Malekith gave no thought to his own defence, relying on his enchanted armour to keep him from harm. In his right hand he bore the Destroyer, and it clove griffon-hide and ithilmar scale with equal ease. His left wielded the winds of magic as a weapon, each gesture setting dark fire blazing amongst griffon plumage, or wracking his foes' bodies with ancient curses. None could stand before the Witch King that day, and Malekith revelled in his dominance.

Far below, Anarelle felt the air shudder with the Witch King's sorceries, and demanded that the voices within the talisman tell her how to counter them. The spirits of the dead were reluctant at first, deeming the Witch King a foe far beyond Anarelle's ability, but the handmaiden refused their counsel. The attention of the defenders' archmages was elsewhere, and no other could thwart the Witch King in time. Relenting, the voices seeded the proper knowledge in Anarelle's mind, the ancient words arranging themselves in her memory even as she spoke them aloud. A moment later, Malekith's furious shout echoed across the hillside as his sorceries dissipated upon the winds. Turning his attention from the knights of Tor Gaval, the Witch King goaded Seraphon in search of the upstart who had dared foil him, his seething rage clear to behold.

The battle on the hillside was no longer a matter of lines and tactics, but a bloodbath. Regiments from both sides had been cut off during the fighting, and battled on until their strength failed or their nerve broke. Assassins and shadow warriors benefitted from the tumult, for their skills were better suited to the swirling confusion, and many a warrior who thought himself safe ended his days to an unforeseen dagger or keen-aimed arrow.

Only around Kouran of Naggarond and Anaran of Yvresse did any semblance of order exist, and it was inevitable that these two would meet. At last, the Black Guard battled an enemy worthy of their steel, for the Silverin Guard had been formed from those veterans whom Eltharion had led to the walls of Naggarond itself. These Yvressi did not shrink from Malekith's chosen warriors as their countrymen did, but came forward with spears levelled. When the spear-staves broke, they fought with short knives, or with fists and stones, for they met the hatred of the Black Guard with their own soulful loathing. For their part, the Black Guard fought on as remorselessly as they had before – to do else would be to admit fear or respect for their foes, and Malekith's elite knew little of either. The deep war-cry of the Black Guard melded with the sharper shouts of Anaran's spearmen, and the dead fell thicker still amidst the old bones of the hillside.

Anaran was weary, but he fought on without wavering. He had lost count of how many Naggarothi had fallen to his sword, or how many of his own warriors had perished in the striving. There was only the battle itself, a victory to be won no matter the cost. The prince thought nothing when a new opponent loomed out of the carnage before him. The dark elf wore no helm, and the scars of decades lay heavy upon his face. Anaran did not know he now faced Kouran Darkhand, and would not have flinched if he had. The Fangsword was alive in his hand, untiring and thirsty, and the prince stepped forward once more with a cry of challenge.

For generations, Kouran had taken pride in the fact he had retreated before no foe, living or dead, but now the ferocity of Anaran's onset forced him to take a step back. Ducking low under the prince's wild swing, Kouran swung his halberd out at ankle-height, making Anaran leap back. Two Silverin Guards moved to confront Kouran in their prince's place, but Kouran's blade disembowelled them both in one ferocious swing, spilling their bloody guts onto the rain-slicked ground. Anaran came forward again, the Fangsword wild, and again – unthinkably – Kouran was forced to take a backwards step, this time with blood streaming from a fresh wound scored across his brow.

With a growl, the captain of the Black Guard brought his halberd down in an overhead swing, and sparks flew as Anaran blocked the blow, his left leg braced. But this, Kouran had anticipated. Before the clamour of the blade-strike had fully sounded, Kouran brought a heavy boot down on Anaran's outstretched knee. There was a sickening crunch as the leg bent fully back, and Anaran collapsed with a gut-wrenching scream of pain that served only to raise a smile on Kouran's ravaged face. Seeing the prince's danger, a pair of Silverin Guards seized Anaran by the shoulder and made to haul him to safety, but they were too late. Kouran's halberd came down one last time, and Anaran's screams were stilled as the blade split his skull.

Kouran became aware that the press of bodies around him had slackened. He now stood alone in a ring of levelled Yvressi spears. The only Black Guard he could see lay dead amongst the bones.

Turning, Kouran saw that there were no spears to his back, but rather the faceless helms and levelled bows of shadow warriors. At their forefront was the tall, grey-cloaked figure he had spied earlier amongst the rocks. His hood was back; this close, Kouran could not help but recognise him – or at least the warrior he pretended to be.

'Hnh,' Kouran snorted. Slowly, deliberately, he spat on Anaran's corpse. 'Tell me, are you truly the Shadow King? Or just another aesanar pretender, keeping his legend alive?'

'What say we find out together?' the grey figure replied levelly, and stepped into the circle of spears.

Kouran's only response was a viper-quick slash of his halberd. The blow should have taken the cloaked figure's sword-wrist, but the other was too fast, and span clear in the moment that the strike should have landed. Kouran lashed out three times more in quick succession, each strike a flawless evolution of the last. None connected.

A fifth blow was struck, and met with no more success than those that preceded it. This time the cloaked figure was not content merely to evade, and stepped inside the halberd's arc. Agony exploded through Kouran's chest as the runesword ripped upward through his ribcage.

Kouran collapsed to his knees as his opponent twisted his sword free. The captain did not know the halberd had fallen from his numbed hands, did not feel the blood gushing from his ravaged chest. But he did hear his opponent's parting words.

'The pit awaits you,' said Alith Anar. 'I'll send your master there soon enough.'

Anarelle felt her twin's death as Seraphon loomed through the driving rain. The sudden grief scattered her thoughts at the very time she needed the fullest concentration. Every spell of protection she attempted slipped away at the last moment, and the insistent warnings from within the talisman served only to panic her further. As the black dragon's shadow closed over her, Anarelle didn't even have a chance to scream before Seraphon's talons ripped her apart and scattered the torn remains upon the hillside.

Teclis saw Anarelle's death, though it moved him not. So many deaths were now laid at his feet that he could no longer bring himself to mourn individuals. The fight had well and truly turned in the dark elves' favour, as the mage had always known it would. Knots of warriors from Yvresse and Nagarythe yet fought upon the hillside, but it would only be a matter of time before they were overwhelmed. Only the Revenants of Khaine, the sworn defenders of the war god's shrine, now stood between Malekith and his prize. They too would be swept aside, Teclis was sure, but would it be done soon enough? Only time would tell. Calling a shadow steed to his side, Teclis drew his cloak tight, and rode down into the dying embers of the battle – but as he did so, he heard silver horns blowing to the south, and knew that time had run out.



Malekith heard the horns as Seraphon flew once more towards the knights of Tor Gaval. From his vantage point in the skies, the Witch King could see what Teclis could – the banners of Lothern and Chrace stood proud upon the southern hills. He noted too the Dragon of Cothique's golden armour amongst the distant host, and in that moment was seized by sudden urgency. All other thoughts driven from his mind, the Witch King drove Seraphon hard for the hill's summit, and the prize he sought. He would not wait for his forces to drive the Revenants of Khaine from the shrine.

From deep within the rocky slopes of the western hillside, Alith Anar saw Seraphon's shadow pass directly overhead. Resolving to seize the opportunity that Drakira, Goddess of Vengeance, had placed before him, the Shadow King nocked an arrow. The Moonbow flared white as Alith Anar loosed his shot, the missile flying true towards the spread-winged shape silhouetted against the clouds. The Shadow King saw Seraphon plunge from the skies, and a moment later felt the ground shudder as the dragon slammed into the bone-covered hillside. Calling for the nearest shadow warriors to follow him, Alith Anar sprang away up the slope. He knew Malekith would not be slain so easily.

The phoenix Ashtari shifted restlessly on the ground as Caradryan looked upon the battlefield before him. The lower slopes of the Shrine of Khaine were swarming with dark figures, tiny as beetles at that distance. A handful of white banners still flew on the hillcrest, but they were badly outnumbered by the black.

'We're too late,' Korhil said. His words were spoken factually, rather than with an air of defeat, but he earned a scowl from the handmaiden known to him as Riselle. She rode on Malhandir's back behind Tyrion, as she had each day since Reaver's Mark, but now slid to the ground in a flurry of armoured skirts.

'We cannot be,' Riselle replied icily. 'We must not be.'

At that moment, she bore little resemblance to the submissive – almost servile – creature that Caradryan had observed before. She stood taller, straighter, and her gaze was unflinching.

'Does Ulthuan know valour only in victory?' she continued, her tone harsh.

Caradryan saw Korhil stiffen at the insult, but Tyrion shifted in his saddle before anything more could be said.

'What would you have us do?' the prince asked.

Riselle turned and took Tyrion's gauntleted hand in hers. 'Malhandir can carry you to the shrine in moments. It does not take an army to raise a sword, just a strong arm and a ready will. It is time to claim your destiny, my beloved.'

Korhil shook his head uneasily. Caradryan could tell the other too sensed something odd in the handmaiden's words, though the feeling always passed like a waking dream.

'Go,' Korhil told Tyrion. 'We will follow.'

The regent nodded once, and then Malhandir was a blur upon the hillside.

Caradryan urged Ashtari into the air, leaving Korhil in command of the host. His phoenix was not so swift as Malhandir, but he was swift enough. Caradryan's moment of destiny was drawing near, and he went forth to meet it.

Morathi remained behind as Tyrion's host flooded into the battle below. No one questioned her, but then she had spent no little effort on enchantments to ensure that she seldom lingered long in any one mind. Only Tyrion had been exempted from her spells, and the Hag Sorceress doubted she could have commanded him even if she'd tried – he was too like his forefather.

As the last of the banners vanished down the slope, Morathi cast her voice upon the winds of magic. Choking down exhilarated laughter, she uttered a single perfect word, whose syllables swirled far across the battlefield to reach the ears of her followers marching amongst Malekith's ranks. Though the Witch King knew it not, fully a third of his army marched not at his command, but his mother's. These now cast aside their pretended allegiance and turned upon their fellows.

Some of these betrayers were warriors of Ghrond, those who had accompanied 'Drusala' from the Tower of Prophecy, but not all. Morathi had known her son's suspicions would fall heaviest upon those who bore her colours, and had cast her net wide. As the shape of the future had slowly revealed itself, the Hag Sorceress had spread her influence throughout all of Naggaroth. The loyalty of Malekith's troops had been bought with gold, or favours such as only she could provide. Where these had failed, enchantment had served. Ghrond's luxuries had been sampled widely across Naggarond, and many had been snared by a sip of perfect wine, or the gentle touch of a close companion. Poisons could be used to do far more than simply kill their victim. Even Morathi did not know how many fought for her cause in the manner of puppets dancing on strings, their true selves screaming helplessly behind dulled senses. Caught between the traitors in its own ranks and Korhil's vengeful assault, the Naggarothi host shuddered and began to break apart.

As the killing began afresh, Malekith's journey to the summit continued. He had heard his mother's voice upon the air, though he did not waste time in wondering what it meant. Claiming the Widowmaker was all. Alith Anar's arrow had torn the membrane of Seraphon's left wing, and the impact with the hillside had wrought greater harms. Jagged bones protruded through the dragon's blood-slicked scales, but still she clung to life.

As Seraphon clambered from the ragged furrow made by her impact, the Revenants of Khaine launched their attack. Spears lunged for the raw red wounds in an otherwise unbreachable hide, then fell masterless to the ground as Malekith's dark fire blasted the wielders to ash. Arrows hummed down from the shrine's dais, but Seraphon swept her good wing about as a shield, and the shots scattered away. More spearmen closed, their vengeful cries roiling across the hilltop. Seraphon lurched forward, and her attackers screamed as their bodies were crushed against the skull-strewn ground. Malekith stretched out his hand, and the archers upon the shrine top fell dead, their bodies shredded to wet rags.

As Malekith strove with the Revenants of Khaine, five others approached the summit. Teclis' shadow steed flew across the hillside like a ghost, unnoticed by those warriors who still fought there. Further down the slope, Alith Anar darted amongst the rocks. His course was a winding one, for vengeance was a demanding mistress. Many a fleeing high elf survived that day only because the Shadow King's blade claimed their pursuers' lives, though few knew their salvation's cause. Tyrion outpaced them both, though he saw them not. Elves of both sides parted before him, for even the bleakest-hearted of them beheld the shadow of death upon him, and knew better than to challenge it. Some distance behind Tyrion, Ashtari's mighty wings beat the air, carrying Caradryan to his regent's side.

Yet it was the fifth pursuer who would reach the shrine first. He approached from the east, skirting around the monoliths that crowned the hill. All but a few of the defenders had been drawn into the doomed battle against Malekith, and those that remained were easily evaded or silenced with a swift knife-blow. In truth, Shadowblade did not know why he was at the Shrine of Khaine, nor how he had spent the past weeks – not until he had felt a voice whisper in his mind moments before. He shucked off the heavy garb of a Black Guardsman, which he had worn as a disguise, and followed Malekith's trail uphill, driven on by a pressure he could neither fight nor name. Tucking the dagger back into his belt, Shadowblade sought a handhold on the nearest monolith and began to climb.

Meanwhile, Malekith's battle with the Revenants of Khaine was drawing to a close. The high elves had refused to flee, but pressed the attack even knowing they were doomed. Now their blood pooled amidst the bones, or trickled from between Seraphon's monstrous teeth. Only their leader, Caradon, remained. He stood alone and unafraid before the Witch King, spat one last useless curse, and then fell headless as Malekith's blade swept out. Sneering, the Witch King ordered Seraphon on to the altar.

Shadowblade leapt from the monolith as the dragon passed below him. The dagger was in his hand once more, and his cloak rippled and snapped as the wind gusted around him. Blood-red rain lashed at the assassin's eyes, but he did not blink. Shadowblade knew he would have but one chance. The Witch King's armour had few weak points, but the assassin had studied them all long ago.

Though his blood still seethed with the battle's fury, Malekith was not one to be taken ill-prepared. He heard the rush of the assassin's descent and, at the last moment, turned in his saddle. Had Shadowblade been at the peak

of his powers, he might have been able to correct his strike. As it was, the voice in his mind slowed him, and a blade intended to split the Witch King's vertebrae instead shattered the bones of his left shoulder.

The Witch King cried aloud and lashed out with instinctive fury. Strands of dark magic reached out for Shadowblade as he fought for footing upon Seraphon's back. The vaporous tendrils wound about the assassin's limbs, and hurled him away. Shadowblade twisted through the air, landing with a crunch amongst the sodden bones, then staggered back as Malekith struck him with a bolt of darkness. The assassin was slammed back against a monolith, his head cracking hard against the black stone.

In that moment, the enchantment that had controlled Shadowblade's actions these past weeks splintered. He had come to Ulthuan as a spy for his mistress Hellebron, but Morathi had ensnared him at Eagle Gate, then twisted him to serve her cause. Not that it would do any good to tell Malekith that – not now. Shadowblade knew at once that the Witch King would kill him anyway and, with the element of surprise lost and his dagger still lodged in Malekith's shoulder, the assassin knew that escape was his only chance.

As Malekith readied the spell that would smear his assailant across the hilltop, the crunch of hooves upon bone announced Tyrion's arrival at the corpse-draped shrine. Malekith was distracted for a moment, but a moment was all Shadowblade needed. Darting quickly around the monolith's flank, he vanished into the rocks beyond, shards of black stone stinging at his flesh as the doombolt meant for him shattered the monolith instead. The assassin did not look back. He had much to tell Hellebron.

Whilst Shadowblade fled, Malekith and Tyrion faced one another before the altar. They exchanged no words, neither threat nor challenge, for each knew that this would be a battle to the death.

Tyrion struck first. Malhandir leapt forward and Sunfang was alive in Tyrion's hand, hacking at Seraphon's neck. The dragon reared back, but injury had taken its toll. Sunfang's tip etched a glowing line across the scaled throat, and black blood gushed forth. The dragon reared up, her good wing coming around to buffet Tyrion from Malhandir's back, but the regent's steed darted aside, and a blow meant to crush the pair succeeded only in striking Tyrion's helm from his head.

As Malhandir skittered to regain his footing, Seraphon darted low, moving as she had been trained in order to present Tyrion as an easy target for Malekith's sword. The Destroyer hacked down, but Sunfang parried the blow, then flickered out in a riposte that tore through the Witch King's breastplate. Blood gushed free from amongst shattered ribs as Seraphon bore her master away from the danger. Malekith knew he could not match the Dragon of Cothique blade for blade. The regent was somehow faster than when last they had fought. Worse, the Witch King could feel the poison of Shadowblade's dagger burning through his blood, and the pain of the shattered shoulder slowed his movements. Yet if Malekith could not defeat Tyrion as a warrior, he still had sorcery at his command.



As Seraphon's head darted forward again, the Witch King levelled the Destroyer's point at Tyrion, but this time made no attempt to strike. Instead, dark fire rippled along the blade and burst forth to consume the regent. Again, Tyrion was too fast to be claimed by such a ploy. Even as Malhandir bore Tyrion away around the altar, the prince levelled Sunfang's blade in opposition and called upon its own fires. Brilliant flame clashed with inky darkness atop the Widowmaker's resting place, the air writhing and the rain hissing as the two heirs of Aenarion fought for dominance. For a glorious moment, it seemed that Sunfang would win the duel, but its brilliance had never been wrought for such work. The golden fires faded as quickly as they had come, and the darkness swept over Tyrion.

Brave Malhandir screamed in pain as the fires engulfed him. Tyrion fared better, for the dragon armour of Aenarion protected him, all save for his head, which had been exposed by the helmet's loss. The regent's hair caught fire, his skin bubbling and cracking as the flames wrapped about him, but Tyrion did not yield. With no thought for what should have been a crippling pain, he urged his steed on through the firestorm, his blade coming about. With a last effort, Malhandir vaulted the altar, and Sunfang's killing edge swept Malekith from his saddle.



Malhandir collapsed, his hide steaming, but Tyrion strode on, the blackened flesh of his face crackling as he did so. Seraphon raised a claw to strike at Tyrion, but the dragon's strength and blood were all but spent, and she crumpled into an unmoving heap before the blow could fall.

Malekith was on his feet, his left arm lifeless and drenched in his own blood. Sunfang's blow had split open the Witch King's armour at the belly, and charred flesh that had not seen the sun's light in millennia now gushed tainted blood over the dark metal. Malekith, slowed by his injuries, could offer only the most token of parries to Sunfang's next blow, and the Destroyer shattered into fragments. Again, the Witch King strove to summon the dark fire, but the pain of his wounds buzzed angrily in his mind, stilling his tongue.

Tyrion swung at Malekith's neck. The Witch King fell to his knees as his thick gorget buckled under the blow, then slammed back against the altar as Tyrion's foot struck his jaw. Tyrion looked once at the blood pooling around Malekith's twitching form, and reached for the Widowmaker. Khaine's cursed blade had appeared differently to all who had sought to claim it. When Malekith had beheld Widowmaker long years ago, it had been a sceptre of rule, but for Tyrion, it appeared as Sunfang's twin, and it fitted his grasp just as well. Such was the first sight to greet Teclis' eyes when his shadow-steed brought him to the shrine a moment later.

'Brother, don't do this!' Teclis shouted through the rain.

Tyrion gave no sign of heeding the words. He closed his fingers around the Widowmaker's grips, and swept the sword up.

At once, the shadows about Teclis seemed to lengthen, and the rain grew colder. Thunder cracked against the turbulent sky, and dark laughter billowed in its wake. The ground shook, the skulls chattered and gibbered in sudden mirth, and then fell eerily silent. The shadow-steed vanished, its magics undone by the Widowmaker's presence, and Teclis felt the winds of magic grow thin about him.

'I should be surprised to find you here,' the regent said at last, turning to face his brother, 'but little you do surprises me any longer.' His blackened lips cracked into a cruel smile as he prodded Malekith's body with his toe. 'Yet I find that I am pleased to see you. This... thing... is not yet slain, and I would like one witness to my triumph, even if it is a treacherous one.'

'You cannot kill him,' Teclis said urgently. 'If you do, our people are doomed.'

'Our people will never falter whilst I am alive to lead them,' Tyrion laughed. 'Or at least, to lead those who prove worthy. The coming war will winnow out all others.'

'Listen to yourself. These are not your words. This is our curse! This is the madness of Khaine!' Even as he spoke, Teclis knew his words would find no purchase on his brother's heart, just as Caledor Dragontamer's warning had failed to sway Aenarion so long ago. Something older and darker lurked there now, but he only needed a moment or two more...

'There is no madness. The Dark Gods are rising – I see that now. Our folk are too soft to fight them as we are, but I will forge them into something better, something stronger.'

'And who has told you that, Morathi?' Teclis demanded, his throat raw with emotion. 'She's using you.'

'Is she now?' Tyrion asked amenably, but then his tone grew far darker. 'Then how very different in your dealings you are.' He raised the Widowmaker high. 'It matters not. Today our ancient enemy dies, and a new sun rises.'

The Widowmaker swept down...

Teclis' spell, prepared whilst his brother had spoken, lashed out across the shrine. Tyrion bellowed angrily as bands of light fastened themselves around his limbs, binding them tight and preventing the blow from falling. Teclis' shadow steed was already moving, and the mage was on his knees at Malekith's side a moment later. The Witch King lived, though barely, and Teclis knew he would not endure long.

There was a hollow *crack* as Tyrion's bonds shattered in a blaze of light. Teclis hastily gathered the magics for a second spell of binding, but the Widowmaker glowed a dull red, and hungrily drank in the power swirling about the hilltop. Desperate, Teclis wove strands of light magic into a shimmering shield, but Tyrion's gauntleted fist passed effortlessly through to knock the mage sprawling.

Alith Anar watched all this unfold from the eastern rocks. He could not hear the words that were spoken, nor did he understand what had passed between Tyrion and Teclis to bring them into conflict. But he did see the crumpled body of his ancient foe, near motionless at the altar's base. Moving slowly closer, the Shadow King set another arrow to the Moonbow. Whatever else occurred that day, Malekith would perish.

As Ashtari circled down towards the shrine, Caradryan took in the scene below. He had witnessed it a thousand times in his dreams, and yet had somehow always hoped that this day would not come to pass.

This was the truth Asuryan had shown him those long years ago; Ulthuan's greatest heroes fighting over the fate of its greatest enemy, and it was Caradryan's fate to tip the balance, one way or another.

Not for the first time in recent days, Caradryan suppressed the urge to fight his destiny. He would trust to Asuryan, as he had these long years, even at the cost of his own life. As Ashtari swooped low over the Altar of Khaine, Caradryan sprang from his saddle, landing cat-like between Tyrion and Malekith, his halberd gripped before him.

The regent laughed without mirth. 'I am in no need of your aid, captain, though you might restrain my errant brother for me, if you wish to serve.'

Caradryan held his position, and he saw Tyrion's eyes shift in sudden realisation.

'Are all about me traitors now?!' the regent demanded. 'Stand aside!'

Caradryan shook his head slowly. Then, with an effort, he uttered the first words to pass his lips in decades. 'No.'

Tyrion laughed bitterly at Caradryan's refusal. He half-turned away, then span back, the Widowmaker hissing out to take the captain's head. At that same moment, Alith Anar loosed his arrow, the shaft speeding true for Malekith's heart.

By rights, Caradryan should have died in that hour, for thus Asuryan had foretold long ago. However, Asuryan was the Creator, not a sower of fate. That was Lileath's domain, and destiny was hers to influence – hers, and those who were her mortal heralds. Lileath had granted Teclis much of his power, and had forged the Shadow King's bow. In a strange way, the two were kin, and the mage sensed the arrow had been loosed almost before it left the string. Teclis bent his will upon the speeding arrow, altering its course by the tiniest fraction. Such was the distance between Alith Anar and his prey, that even this was enough, and the shot intended for Malekith struck Tyrion's breastplate above his heart. The dragon armour held, as it had many times before. Nevertheless, the force of the impact flung Tyrion from the shrine, to tumble away down the bone-screed hillside, and the Widowmaker's blow went wide.

Caradryan did not move for a long moment, so certain had he been of his death. Others were not so paralysed. The Shadow King, disbelieving that his shot had landed so far astray, drew his sword and charged towards the shrine, determined to complete with steel what his bow had failed to do. Teclis too was in motion. The Widowmaker had gone with Tyrion, and with its dampening presence removed the mage could feel the winds of magic blowing anew across the shrine. Kneeling once more at Malekith's side, Teclis called upon Lileath a second time.

White light washed over the Shrine of Khaine, flowing over the ancient stones in a gentle caress. When it faded, Malhandir and Alith Anar were the only living things upon the hilltop. Teclis, Malekith, Caradryan – even Seraphon and Ashtari – all were gone. But to where, the Shadow King could not guess.







The battle did not rage long after Teclis' escape. Assailed from without and within, Malekith's host shuddered. Banners fell as their bearers fled, or were destroyed to prevent their capture by the foe. Only the survivors of the Black Guard kept their order. Silent once more, they marched across the battlefield, Kouran's lifeless body borne at the heart of their grim formation.

Even though Malekith's army had fled, the fighting continued. The elves of Tyrion's host had no reason to make distinction between Morathi's pawns and the other Naggarothi, and fell upon them just as readily. For minutes that felt like hours, white heraldry and black vied upon the hillside, and the blood flowed as freely as before. Korhil could not have stopped that slaughter, for he was as caught up in it as the rest, and Tyrion yet lay wounded and unconscious amongst the upper slopes of the hillside.

At first, Morathi had watched the renewed battle with amusement. The Hag Sorceress had always found singular joy in blood spilt on so broad a scale, and at her whim. Yet as time wore on, the lustre faded from the scene. She had sensed Teclis' magics upon the hilltop, and worried at Tyrion's continued absence. At last, she forsook her shelter amongst a strand of dead trees and strode down into the battle. She came not in her guise as Riselle, handmaiden of Avelorn, nor even as Drusala the sorceress, but uncloaked and wearing no face save her own.

Elves of both kinds shrank away as Morathi advanced, for her majesty blazed like a dark sun upon the bone-strewn hillside. Shadows lashed and flickered in her wake, and a halo of violet fire danced about her brow. In that moment, Morathi was as beautiful and terrible as death, and her will could not be denied. Battle cries fell silent on numb lips, and weapons fell slackly to their wielders' sides. The Hag Sorceress had prepared long for this moment, had woven her enchantments through Tyrion's forces as surely as she had her own, yet even she was surprised at how easily those about her succumbed. There was something else at work on the hillside, she realised, and it had lent her its power.

Korhil had been in the thick of battle when Morathi revealed herself, and he too was snared by her will. In his case, at least, the Hag Sorceress' domination was not total. The captain was aware enough to recognise the animal hunger that rose in him as she passed. It was no carnal desire, nor did it answer to any other name he knew. Even if Korhil had been able to bring himself to speak of the feeling, he could not have described it. There was need, but freedom also, as if he had lived all his life in a cage, and now the door had been thrown open. Part of the captain wanted to grasp the axe Chayal from where it had fallen, to strike down she who ranked amongst Ulthuan's foremost enemies, but the greater part knew only gratitude for his newfound freedom. When Morathi crooked a single perfect finger in Korhil's direction, he followed without hesitation.

They found Tyrion on the hillside a short time after. The regent was unconscious, driven into darkness by his wounds. Even in oblivion, the prince's grip was tight about the Widowmaker, and he would not be separated from it. Her composure cracking for the first time that day, Morathi ordered him borne from the hillside. Thus was Tyrion carried from the field by honour guards of both Ulthuan and Naggaroth. Korhil led others higher up the slope, but discovered no trace of those who had laid the prince low. Malhandir was found upon the summit. The steed was near to death, and the captain of the white lions saw to it that the horse was treated with no less honour than his master.

Morathi tended Tyrion long into the night. By the light of bloodtallow candles, she called upon half-forgotten spells of renewal. When these achieved nothing, she drew upon darker sorceries, entwining her life-force with Tyrion's in order to spread the burden of his wounds. Those who passed the regent's tent saw shadows flickering against the canvas, heard the Hag Sorceress' shrieks as her skin blistered and charred in sympathy. Yet no one dared intrude, so no one witnessed the regent's ravaged form softening and healing, nor Morathi sloughing off her own calloused flesh like a snake shedding its scales.

The next morning, Morathi awoke from exhausted slumber to find Tyrion gone. This itself did not greatly concern her. However, she suddenly realised that her beguiling enchantment of the previous day had all but flickered and died, its magics expended in the effort to restore Tyrion's health. For a moment, Morathi feared that she had overreached, and thus thwarted her own schemes, but then she heard Tyrion's strident tones outside the tent and knew that all would be well.

From the Shrine of Khaine, Alith Anar was once more witness to the impossible. The plain below was thick with asur and druchii, but their blades were not at one anothers' throats. Instead, all paid rapt attention to the golden-armoured figure before them. The Shadow King could even see some of his shadow warriors – elves of Nagarythe pledged never to rest until their ancestral honour was restored – standing in the crowd.

Had the Shadow King not seen it for himself, he would not have believed it. The wind had snatched most of Tyrion's words away, but Alith Anar had heard enough to worry him. The regent had spoken of how the mortal and immortal worlds were the elves' to rule. The Shadow King did not know Tyrion well, but had many

times observed his deeds and thought him a worthy soul. Now the regent sounded more like Malekith, and Alith Anar found himself wondering if it would have been better if Tyrion had perished on the hillside.

The Shadow King saw Tyrion fall silent as a slender figure approached. Alith Anar recognised Morathi at once, and his mood grew grimmer. He would have buried an arrow in her skull at that moment, had he thought it would make a difference. However, the jet-black stone upon his brow no longer throbbed in opposition to the previous eve's enchantment. Whatever madness had befallen his countrymen, the Shadow King knew it was no longer under Morathi's control – if, indeed, it ever had been.

The wind dropped, and Tyrion's words suddenly carried clearly. *'I bear Aenarion's armour. I carry his sword. His blood runs through my veins. You owe me your allegiance!'* The response from the gathered elves was immediate, and deafening in its fervour. Alith Anar felt an old and terrible magic claw at his soul, and knew at once it would claim him if he stayed. Turning, the Shadow King slipped away into the rocks, trying to ignore the worry gnawing at his heart.

Shadowblade was already sailing away from the Blighted Isle. The high elf crew of the vessel had chosen death over cooperation, but the ship was small enough that the assassin could command it alone. As the wind whipped through the mainsail, Shadowblade considered his next move. He knew Lokhir Fellheart's fleet lay to the west, and suspected that the admiral would grant him passage back to embattled Har Ganeth. Though Shadowblade longed for revenge against Morathi, duty to his mistress came first. Hellebron would want to know of her rival's scheming, of that the master assassin was quite certain. And who else would she choose as her weapon, save for her most trusted pupil?

Far away, Alarielle urged the Council of Athel Loren to make ready for war. Her own grief – not only for Aliathra, but Tyrion also – was hidden beneath a regal mask. The lords and ladies had been ill-inclined to trust her at first, despite the gossamer cloak of Ariel's magic that lay upon her shoulders. Yet both Naestra and Arahan had vouched for Alarielle. Furthermore, Orion had embraced her as his queen, and so those who yet harboured doubts kept them carefully concealed. Nevertheless, few amongst the council had any love for Ulthuan, and saw little reason to shed their blood in its salvation. Then Alarielle shared with them the same vision of the future that Lileath had granted her beneath the Oak of Ages' boughs, and all objections ceased.

In Chrace, Imrik's vigil was ending as the ashes of Ystranna's pyre at last burnt themselves out. When the prince opened his eyes, it seemed to him that the trees of the glade had drawn closer, as if also in mourning for the handmaiden. Then he saw the leaf-cloaked figures amidst the boughs, and reached for his sword. The wood elves levelled their bows in reply, but Araloth, returned from the Dreaming Wood as midnight had faded, ordered his kin to lower their weapons, and implored Imrik to stay his hand. He explained that they too had wished to bear witness to Ystranna's pyre, for she had fought in Athel Loren's defence long ago.

Moreover, Araloth told, Imrik and the wood elves shared common cause – the cause of Lileath. When Imrik stiffly insisted that he served Caledor Dragontamer's will, not that of the goddess, Araloth simply smiled, and said that Malekith and Teclis had great need of them both, far to the south – or so Lileath had said.

Imrik did not respond at first, reflecting on where his choices had led him. The prince did not disbelieve the wood elf, though he was not sure why. Rather, his distrust sprang from the invocation of Teclis' name, for he was increasingly of the opinion that the mage knew far more than he had shared. Imrik consented at last, however, and agreed to mobilise the army of Caledor once more. He had given his word to both Teclis and Malekith, and he would not break it now. As Imrik left the glade to muster his forces, Araloth bade his spellsingers begin to rouse the worldroots. Their destination was too far afield for even the swiftest of dragons to reach in time...



The sea surrounding the Shrine of Asuryan was thick with warships, the Dragon of Lothern blazoned upon every sail. Their crews pounded the ancient walls with every spell and siege engine at their command. Teclis knew these were Aislinn's vessels, the finest ships in Ulthuan.

Even deep within the shrine, Teclis heard a series of sharp cracks as the next bombardment slammed home. From the middle distance, a deep rumble told him that another section of the shrine's outer walls had collapsed into the sea. A moment later, the hurried tread of armoured boots on stone also told him that the Phoenix Guard were mustering to block the breach. Aislinn would have merwyrms and sea guard on the rocky coastline by now, Teclis was sure. An assault was inevitable.

A chorus of screeches split the air, and Teclis craned his neck to see a flock of phoenixes wing their way across the water. Flames billowed in their wake and washed over a dragonship, the timbers and sails catching light almost immediately. The fires spread hungrily, outstripping the crew's ability to quench them. Archers on neighbouring vessels loosed their volleys skyward, but the swirling phoenixes broke apart, reformed and dove against the next vessel in line. The Shrine of Asuryan was not entirely defenceless.

Teclis winced as the whine and crack of another volley struck the walls. How quickly the madness had overtaken Ulthuan. Now salvation rested in the isle's foremost betrayer and greatest enemy – if he lived that long. Tearing his attention from the encircling ships, Teclis looked back along the raised roadway in the direction of Malekith and Caradryan.

In the days since the Blighted Isle, Teclis had endeavoured to cure Malekith's ills, but Shadowblade's poison and the magic of Sunfang were a potent combination. The wounds had not closed, and the bones refused to set. Blood still oozed from the rents in the Armour of Midnight, but Malekith refused to die. He had also refused almost all aid. Since leaving the Shrine of Lileath, he had taken every step alone, although Caradryan had ever been but a pace behind him. Now he set an uneven pace across the raised roadway to the inner sanctum, each awkward pace leaving a smear of blood across the polished stones.

'Well, this is glorious,' Malekith declared in a pained yet sardonic tone. The roadway shuddered, and he reached out to steady himself.

'It is insanity,' Teclis countered, surprised even now by the other's capacity for spite, even in the face of his own death. Caradryan said nothing, though the worry on his face was plain enough.

A steel-tipped bolt the width of a tree trunk struck the outer battlements, punching through the stone to tear bloodily through the Phoenix Guard mustered behind. As Teclis watched, the first grapnels appeared upon the broken stone.

'Come,' he said. 'We have no time to waste.'

Progress along the roadway was painfully slow, and every step was punctuated by the strike of an artillery bolt upon the walls, or the bellow of distant merwyrm. By the time Teclis and his companions had reached the roadway's far end, the clamour of steel upon steel had joined the cacophony as Phoenix Guard vied with Aislinn's marines for control of the ramparts. The attackers were too many, Teclis knew. It was inevitable that the shrine would fall.

'Your plan seems to be failing, mage,' Malekith mocked as they passed through the great gates and into the inner sanctum. Two-score Phoenix Guard marched past them and back through the closing gates.

'I had planned to bring you here at once,' Teclis corrected, reliving the bitterness of that particular failure. 'But you would not be swayed, were determined to follow your pride. Who knows how many have died needlessly because of that hubris?' He took a deep breath. Rising to the Witch King's malice would do no good. 'Now we shall both have to hope you are strong enough, despite your injuries. My brother has become Khaine, or something very like him. You know the legends. Only Asuryan can defeat Khaine – Asuryan, or his chosen vessel.'

'The flame rejected us once,' Malekith said. 'Why should it not do so again?'

'There was no rejection. You simply weren't strong enough. Asuryan always intended for you to succeed your father. Think on it. Why do you suppose every Phoenix King was shielded by mages in their passage through the fire. Even then, they all passed into madness of one kind or another. It wasn't just Aethis and Morvael – even those my people revere were consumed by the power or the guilt of a stolen throne.'

'And what proof have you of this?' Malekith demanded.

Teclis could not blame the other for disbelieving. It had taken him many months to come to terms with it himself.

'Finubar told me,' he said. 'Why do you suppose he hardly fought you at the end? He, at least, was good-hearted, but the guilt ate away at him. That is why he so rarely led his people to war. He knew he was but the continuance of a subverted tradition. He was glad to die.'

Without warning, a new sound joined the battle outside: the deep, primal roar of dragonkind. Teclis gave a small smile; a little welcome news did much to leaven the dire times. 'Imrik has come,' he said quietly. 'You owe him much, though I doubt you will ever accept that.'

'Even now, when you know I have no other choice; still you attempt to manipulate me.' It seemed that Malekith had heard neither the dragons' roar, nor Teclis' words. The Witch King's voice was angry,



but Teclis deemed it to be the anger of one slowly embracing an unwelcome truth, rather than one resisting a lie.

At last they came to the Chamber of Fire. At Caradryan's nod, the chamber's guards stepped aside and opened the heavy brass-bound doors. They, like the rest of the Phoenix Guard within the shrine, seemed to think nothing odd of the Witch King's presence.

On the other side of the doors, a broad marble stair led upwards. At its pinnacle, beneath a pyramidal roof shaped long ago from a single colossal diamond, the sacred fire blazed and flickered. Once, Teclis knew, the flames had burned so bright that they touched the diamond ceiling. Now they were scarcely the height of an elf.

'Why do you think that Imrik fights for you?' Teclis asked as the doors slammed closed behind them. 'Why do you think that the Phoenix Guard have allowed you within these walls? Why was Caradryan ready to die for you?' Teclis asked. 'Imrik has learned the truth of things, and the Phoenix Guard have always known it.'

'Then why do so many of them march under Tyrion's banner?' Malekith demanded.

'They have fallen under Khaine's sway, like so many others. They knew that if they followed Tyrion, they would join his madness. But they knew also that it was their fate, and so went anyway.'

'A pathetic excuse.'

'No, it is an honourable sacrifice,' Teclis rejoined. 'To pledge yourself to the Phoenix Guard is to be haunted, every day, with the knowledge of how you will fail, no matter how flawless your service.' Teclis closed his eyes briefly. 'It is not a path I could have chosen. I need hope, and the Phoenix Guard know only certainty.'

'Weakness,' Malekith mocked, but the sound quickly degenerated into a terrible, wracking cough. Bloody spittle oozed out through his helm's mouthpiece to drip to the floor. The Witch King stumbled, and would have fallen had Caradryan not moved to support him.

Malekith pulled free of Caradryan. He took three staggering steps towards the flame, then stopped. 'If we pass into the fire,' he said without turning, 'our every striving has been a lie.' His voice seemed almost wistful.

Teclis waited for a moment before speaking, then chose his words carefully. 'Does that cause you to regret your deeds?' he asked.

'No,' said Malekith softly, but then his voice grew harder. 'No. We would do it all again. *I* would do it all again.'

'Then nothing about you was ever a lie,' said Teclis, 'and by your words you prove yourself no better than those who stole the throne.' He sighed. 'But you are Asuryan's choice nonetheless. All that is left of our Creator waits for you in the fire. If you can withstand the pain, there is perhaps a chance for us all.'

'And if I cannot?' Malekith asked.

'Then the last spark of Asuryan will fade, and those of our people who survive Tyrion's madness will be consumed by the Dark Gods.'

Malekith did not reply, but took the final few steps into the sacred flame. At one moment, he was a black shadow against a brilliant light. At the next, there was just the flame.

Then the screaming began.





CHAPTER 2

Khaine Reborn

Winter 2525 – Winter 2526

Months passed, and the war for Ulthuan grew ever more bitter.

Few knew what had transpired at the Shrine of Asuryan. They knew only that the temple – indeed, the entire island – had split asunder and slipped into the Sea of Dreams. Even Sea Lord Aislinn, whose ships had bombarded the shrine up until the very last moment, was sure only that the dragons of Caledor had abruptly ceased their attack. A thick mist had descended as the island had begun to shatter, and even the most keen-eyed lookouts in Aislinn's fleet could not tell if the dragons had spirited any of the besieged away. This angered Aislinn greatly, not least because hundreds of his finest soldiers had been trapped in the shrine as it slipped beneath the waves.

For a time, the war was sporadic. Tyrion, still gravely wounded, convalesced in Cothique. The prince's supporters prosecuted the conflict on his behalf, but found Imrik ever a thorn in their sides, for the Caledorian prince campaigned with such flair that even those who hated him for his betrayal found themselves in awe. Yet Imrik took care that his forces never strayed into Nagarythe. Thus far, the aesanar had been quiescent, and Imrik had no wish to provoke the Shadow King into choosing a side.

In the weeks after the Battle of the Blighted Isle, Imrik not only defended his homeland, but also managed to conquer the neighbouring realms of Tiranoc and Eataine. This act provoked Aislinn's rage to full flood for, when Lothern fell, so did any means of uniting his fleet. From that point on, near half of the admiral's vessels were trapped in the Sea of Dreams, and the remainder on the Great Ocean. With Lothern in their grasp, the Naggarothi sea lords were not so constrained. Lokhir Fellheart and Drane Brackblood at last had the opportunity to avenge centuries of humiliation. Thus were some of the most vicious battles of those weeks fought not on land, but upon the high seas. Each tide spilled a bounty of mangled and blade-ravaged corpses upon the shores; splintered driftwood choked every inlet and estuary along Ulthuan's southern shores.

The war ground on and Imrik's forces pushed north through Eataine, into Yvresse and Saphery. Yvresse was swiftly abandoned by both sides. The magical mists had ever been the haunt of daemons and, as the elves strove with one another for control of the realm, the scions of the Dark Gods preyed equally upon Imrik's and Tyrion's forces. Both sides forsook any attempt to claim Yvresse and left the realm's populace to fend for themselves as best they could.

By contrast, Saphery fell soon enough, its magery overwhelmed by dragonfire. However, the Tower of Hoeth remained untouched. The loremasters decided neutrality was the only proper course, and Imrik honoured their choice. Though their ears were abuzz with threats and pleas from both sides, the loremasters ordered the great gates of the tower sealed shut, and prayed for guidance. They were not the only elves to do so. As the war spread into Cothique, the majority of Ulthuan's princes, looking for sense and finding none, determined to defend their own holdings, and joined with neither side.

All this changed when a rejuvenated Tyrion at last joined the war. Riding from the north, he bore the title of regent no longer, but comported himself as the Phoenix King. A few objected, stating that the prince had not passed through the Flames of Asuryan, but most of the doubters disappeared or suffered an uncharacteristic change of opinion, and those that remained fell into line.

In mere weeks, Tyrion undid the work of months. At the battle of Tor Yvresse, he sent Imrik reeling from the field. The dragon prince's holdings in Cothique fell days later, and soon Tyrion was marching on Saphery. It was there, on the shores of Lake Calliana, that the self-proclaimed Phoenix King and the Crown Prince of Caledor at last came to blows. Imrik's Star Lance struck first, its enchanted point piercing armour that had never before been breached. Yet Tyrion did not seem to notice his wound. His return blow shattered Imrik's shield and swept him unconscious from the saddle. Imrik would have died there, skewered on the Widowmaker like a boar on a spit, had three of his household knights not come to his aid. Imrik would live to fight again, but his three saviours would not. They, and the dragons that bore them, fell that day, hacked apart by the union of Ulthuan's greatest swordsman and its most terrible weapon.

With Imrik's defeat, the outcome of the war seemed certain. It wasn't simply that Tyrion was a mighty warrior – though this he undoubtedly was – it was that wherever he rode, a battle-madness fell upon the elves who fought at his side. Worse, Morathi rode alongside her lover, a sly smile on her face and sorcery at her fingertips. She made no play of subservience now, but comported herself as Tyrion's equal – if not yet his queen. Their union was total, their accord almost perfect. Only once did they argue, when the army marched into Yvresse. There, Morathi shattered a dozen waystones, and used the souls within to strike bargains with the daemons of the mists. On discovering this, Tyrion flew into a rage and slaughtered the daemons. When the Hag Sorceress shrieked her objection, Tyrion struck her to the ground, leaning close and whispering as he clamped gauntleted fingers about her throat. None heard what he said, but Morathi never again sought to bargain with daemons.

After Imrik's defeat, inexplicably, Tyrion ceased his assault. Claiming that there was no longer an enemy worthy of his attention, he returned

to Cothique, leaving his armies to forge on. Most were mystified at this behaviour, but a few wondered whether the wound Imrik had dealt was deeper than previously thought.

Whatever the cause of Tyrion's withdrawal, the prince increasingly passed his hours in private with Morathi, or his closest courtiers. Common rumour spoke to all manner of wildness committed there, of dark revelries, and of prisoners hunted for sport. Prince Dalloran of Cothique objected when one such hunt took place across his ancestral lands. The prince vanished soon after, though his daughter was soon after seen in Morathi's growing entourage of handmaidens, and his two sons were given high rank in Tyrion's court.

Korhil was witness to much of what occurred, for he had fought at Tyrion's side in all the battles since the Blighted Isle, and the unease that had haunted him since Finubar's disappearance blossomed. The prince that Korhil now served was not the one he remembered of old, yet the Captain of the white lions could do little to change matters, and duty bound him tight. Only when Korhil was distant from Tyrion and Morathi were his thoughts uncluttered, and he strove to convince himself that his memories were but vivid nightmares. At last, Korhil sought reason to escape from his prince's presence, and volunteered to lead the campaign to retake Lothern if only because it would take him from the shadows of Tyrion's court. Thus did he come to the bloody fields of Eataine, where Lokhir Fellheart commanded Malekith's forces, and Chayal could find honourable work.

Korhil proved his worth a dozen times over in the long weeks of that campaign. He strove as both warlord and warrior, ever in the forefront of battle. Hundreds of the foe died in skirmishes to command the low hills of Eataine, thousands in the battles for its windswept plains.

Under Korhil's leadership, Fellheart's corsairs and their Caledorian allies were driven almost to the walls of Lothern itself. Scarcely a day passed without the clamour of steel upon steel echoing through the valleys, or the horn-calls of Caledor clashing with the war songs of Yvresse and Saphery. Smoke from funeral pyres and sacked mansions drifted upon the breeze. Ancient dragons, their scaled hides bristling with arrow shafts, lay dead upon the hillsides, for no fire could touch their corpses.

The last great battle of that campaign was fought against the walls of Lothern itself. All knew that victory there would not only allow the reunification of Aislinn's fleet, it would also leave Caledor open to assault. Yet even this could not lure Tyrion down from the north, and so the task fell to Korhil. Thus did he attack the walls even as Sea Lord Aislinn's ships struck the harbour. Yet as the arrows whined and spells crackled beneath a red sky, Korhil saw that the defenders of Lothern did not just wear the colours of Imrik's Caledorians or Malekith's dark elves. All of Ulthuan's provinces save Nagarythe were represented on the walls, with the greens of Avelorn standing proud alongside the red of Eataine and the blues of Yvresse and Saphery. There were even members of the white lions – the Phoenix King's own guard – marshalling to defend a city they should have been fighting to liberate.

Korhil's first reaction was one of outrage. How could so many more of his kinsfolk have joined Caledor in treachery? But still a doubt lingered in his mind, one borne from his experiences at Tyrion's side. There was no time to dwell on such matters, for at that moment a new warrior entered the battle.

Malekith came like a thunderbolt from the bloody sky, fire blazing in his wake. Seraphon, healed of her wounds, bore him into battle. The sword Asuryath, forged from the shards of the Destroyer and kindled with the fire of the creator, shone in his hand, and the dragon knights of Caledor came behind. Even from a distance, Korhil could see that the Witch King was somehow different, cloaked in a power more wholesome than was his bitter custom. Certainly, his arrival granted fresh heart to the elves within Lothern. Trumpets sounded, and a great cry went up from within the city. The gates slammed open, and the defenders sallied in Malekith's wake. They came in a great host, the warriors of two long-estranged nations fighting under the phoenix banner. Such a sight had not been seen for centuries, for millennia. Perhaps when Aenarion had ridden out against the daemons there had been a host such as this, but never in all the years since.

There was a thunder of wings as the dragons dived to the attack, and many of Korhil's soldiers fled in terror. Others cast down their weapons and fell to their knees, overcome by Malekith's glory and by the light of Asuryan that danced upon his brow. Though it would take many bloody hours for its fate to fully unfold, Korhil's army was undone from that moment, and the slaughter that followed was one-sided. By the time Korhil ordered the retreat, more than half of his warriors had been slain, or had surrendered awestruck.

Aislinn had marked his allies' predicament, had broken off his own attack as Korhil's army had descended into rout. Thus, whilst many of the admiral's ships vied with vessels of the corsair fleets, others were waiting along the inner shore to evacuate Korhil's fleeing troops. Malekith made no attempt to pursue, but with a shouted command and a sweep of his sword halted his own forces some way beyond the range of the dragon ships' bolt throwers. As the last survivors clambered onto the decks, Aislinn's aeromancers summoned winds to carry the ships seaward. Korhil's gaze rested upon the shore

until it faded from his sight, and he glimpsed Imrik and Teclis amongst the victorious host. But this was not what troubled Korhil most. The last thing he saw was Malekith walking amongst the surrendered.

Several days later, Aislinn set the survivors ashore at the Sapherian port of Islina, then turned southward once more to continue his private battle with the corsair fleet. As the defeated army licked its wounds, Korhil sent swift messengers northwards to Cothique, bearing tidings that treachery ran deeper than previously suspected. For the longest time, there was no response, and Korhil wondered if some peril had waylaid his heralds.

Then, at last, Korhil received fresh orders. He was instructed to bring whatever forces he could to Tyrion's side, not to support another invasion of Eataine – as he had anticipated – but to march on Avelorn. Korhil's heart turned to ice at his orders, and he finally realised a truth that had gnawed at him for long weeks. The captain did not want to return, did not want to lose himself again in the madness of Tyrion's court, duty or no. At last he came to see what so many others had since the Battle of the Blighted Isle: Tyrion was Ulthuan's saviour no more, but something far darker. Yet Korhil could not bring himself to side with Malekith, as others had. The Witch King was Ulthuan's oldest foe, and the thought of serving such a creature was yet abhorrent, even if Malekith seemingly had Asuryan's blessing.

If Korhil hated the message, he at least found a kindred spirit in the messenger. The order was borne by Adranna, daughter of the vanished Prince Dalloran. She too had drowned in the madness of Tyrion's court, but with every step southward had come increasingly to her senses. By the time Adranna reached Korhil, she had remembered everything and, on some impulse, told the captain her tale.

Adranna's brothers had taken their father to Tyrion in chains, and received rank and titles upon his execution. When she protested, she had been given to Morathi as a plaything. The Hag Sorceress had delighted in remoulding the princess' mind in a manner entirely out of keeping with her noble rank, but Adranna's true self had bubbled to the surface. Sensing Korhil's reluctance, Adranna begged him to return, to break Morathi's hold over Tyrion. Adranna promised that she had prepared magics that could shield them both from the madness of the court – Morathi's power was spread thin, and Adranna sought to exploit a chink in the sorceress' enchantments. Shamed by the princess' determination, Korhil agreed.

Back in Lothern, Malekith's arrival had not proven quite so serendipitous for Tyrion's enemies as Korhil had believed. The new Phoenix King had emerged from the ruin of the Shrine of Asuryan with his health restored and power redoubled, but his character had been little altered by his experiences, and his reputation amongst the Asur not at all.

To ease the transition, Teclis wove a glamour around Malekith. His thought was to alter the other's appearance so it might better reflect the shining heroes the elves had come to accept as their rulers, rather than the glowering, flame-scarred figure that this Phoenix King so obviously was. Thus prepared, Malekith was initially welcomed into Lothern with, if not enthusiasm, then at least with wary acceptance. In this, the support of both Teclis and Imrik was invaluable, for they had earned the trust of many over the years.

Teclis, in particular, was careful to weave tales of how Asuryan and Khaine were two sides of the same coin; he spoke of legends concerning an earlier age of the world, in which Asuryan had been the blackest god in the pantheon and Khaine the only shield against his madness. These tales, which Teclis claimed were recorded in secret tomes at the Tower of Hoeth, were all lies. Nevertheless, many of the elves present in Lothern had suffered greatly from Tyrion's madness, and leapt at even the barest excuse to believe that Malekith's presence amongst them was part of something grander than desperation. Thus did Tyrion help to ease Malekith onto his new throne more than any, though the transition was imperfect.

Malekith had spent the preceding weeks regrouping his dark elves: gathering the survivors of the northern armies, and reinforcing their numbers with warriors from the black arks who had not yet been blooded by the war for Ulthuan. Most of these he had ordered to Caledor and Tiranoc. However, many thousands now followed him to Lothern, and many high elves looked upon their arrival as an invasion.

Even Asuryan's blessing was insufficient to overcome millennia of hatred and terror. It didn't help that the sinking of the Shrine of Asuryan was all too easily interpreted as a deliberate act brought about by some trick on Malekith's part. The presence of dark elves – the survivors of the Phoenix King's northern campaign, and all he had been able to gather in the weeks since – did little to reassure the high elves that the tale Teclis told was not a jest of the darkest and most distasteful kind.

Malekith helped none of this by proving vexed and short-tempered. He had long been used to his Naggarothi court, where a veiled threat or naked violence had been sufficient to cow any opposition. Ulthuan was greatly different, with each noble believing his or her opinion sufficiently important to require unwanted intrusions on their king's time. Malekith's patience – never his most plentiful resource – was sorely tried, and those tests were often failed. Only Teclis' calm – but increasingly







strained – manner kept the peace in those times, for he was the only one to whom Malekith would listen, albeit without acknowledging such.

However, even Teclis began to despair for the future. Malekith had been too long a tyrant – and Ulthuan too long without one – for there to be much hope that the two could work together. Yet Lileath had told Teclis that the bond could be formed, and so the loremaster was determined to make it work if he could.

Nevertheless, after a week in Lothern, Malekith had alienated a great many of those he had come to as an ally. Some of the lords and princes who had joined Imrik in the face of Tyrion's aggression now abandoned the alliance, and a great many more were tempted to do so. Even though the dark elves were encamped several leagues from Lothern, skirmishes between the two allied forces somehow managed to escalate. With every drop of blood split, the rift between Malekith and those he sought to rule grew wider.

Matters came to a head a month after Malekith's arrival in Lothern, when the outpost of Allardin was sacked by corsairs from Drane Brackblood's black ark, the *Shadow Tide*. Brackblood pleaded ignorance of the matter, and had proven her loyalty many times, but neither factor prevented Malekith from ordering not only her execution, but also that of three whole tiers of the *Shadow Tide*'s officers, in addition to those who had led the assault on Allardin. Malekith had hoped that this action would undo the damage caused by Allardin's fate, but the opposite quickly proved true. Ulthuani princes who would have readily killed Brackblood themselves a month earlier seized upon Malekith's harsh actions as proof of his unfitness.

The first assassination attempt followed shortly after, when Prince Torhaeron gathered those of Finubar's white lion guard still in Lothern, and seized the Sapphire Palace where Malekith held court. It was a doomed attempt; Caradryan was now the Captain of the Phoenix King's bodyguard, and Malekith was never attended by less than two hundred soldiers chosen from both the Phoenix and Black Guards. Torhaeron died in the attempt, hacked down by Caradryan, and few of the conspirators escaped the Sapphire Palace. But the damage was done.

Malekith, now incandescent with rage, set loose his own spies and assassins throughout Eataine, ordering that every family member and acquaintance of the conspirators be brought to Lothern, where punishment would be enacted. If the new Phoenix King was prepared to seek the death of his truest admiral, he was more than ready to drown the straits of Lothern in high elf blood.

This, at last, drove Imrik to challenge Malekith's authority. Harsh words were exchanged before Malekith's throne; harsh words that nearly turned to blows. Ultimately, it was Imrik who backed down, stalking from the chamber with a face black as thunder, Malekith's threats hard upon his heels.

That these threats were never realised was once again due entirely to Teclis' carefully-chosen words. This time, however, the mage did not attempt to placate Malekith, but forcefully reminded the Phoenix King how much he owed to Imrik, and to others. Perhaps realising that he could not afford to lose both Teclis and Imrik, Malekith at last backed down, and rescinded his orders regarding the conspirators' families. This enforced moderation came too late for Admiral Brackblood, whose headless body had been fed to hydras several days earlier. However, Imrik – and many of his fellow princes – were sufficiently mollified by Malekith's gesture that a tenuous accord once more settled over Lothern, and the business of Tyrion's war could at last continue.

Elsewhere, Korhil and Adranna came at last to Duskwide, on the edge of Avelorn. It was a realm much changed from how either remembered it. The ancient trees had grown twisted, and the roads that led to the kingdom's heart had all but vanished beneath wild undergrowth. Tyrion and Morathi were there already, escorted by a host of Cothiqui spears many times the strength of Korhil's force.

Shielded by Adranna's enchantments, Korhil saw Tyrion with unclouded eyes for the first time. The prince, and the warriors who accompanied him, were leaner and hungrier somehow, and the pupils of their eyes glinted red. Alarmed, Korhil sought his own reflection in Chayal's blade, and saw a face paler and sharper than the one to which he was accustomed.

To Korhil's surprise, Tyrion seemed not to notice his captain's unease. Moreover, he offered neither censure nor complaint for the disastrous battle at Lothern, and refused to discuss the implications of Malekith's return. Tyrion's words were only of Alarielle, whom he deemed to have returned to Avelorn's depths, and with whom he sought reunion. Korhil was deeply uneasy. He sensed the unwholesome excitement that edged the prince's words, and wondered why so many spears were required for so happy a task. He wondered also why Morathi was not furious at Tyrion's obvious desire, but the Hag Sorceress instead wore only her customarily thin smile.

That eve, Tyrion hosted a great fire-lit banquet in Duskwide's largest mansion. Korhil thought the display entirely too lavish for Ulthuan's dire times, and marked how fearfully the mansion's prince acquiesced to Tyrion's demands. But the captain said nothing, for what could he say? He watched as Adranna made play of being the cruel and lascivious creature Morathi had sought to make her, and noted too that her brothers – Dalroth and Dannor – were ever in attendance upon Tyrion, offering jests a shade too cruel for decency.

The next morning, the army – for army it was, despite Tyrion's claims – struck out into Avelorn, its course set for Withelan, where Alarielle had made her court. For days, they travelled in the dark beneath the eaves. It did not feel like the Avelorn that Korhil remembered. Rather, it reminded him of the distant forests of Athel Loren, where once he had walked at Finubar's request. Korhil saw no living soul, but moon-cast shadows moved with a life of their own, and he ever felt wary eyes upon him. It seemed the captain was not alone in his suspicions. Several times, Tyrion halted the march, calling out into the shadows for the presumed watchers to show themselves. But no response ever came.

Finally, Tyrion's host reached Withelan. Here, at least, the forest was brightly lit, the silken tents of the Everqueen's court all but shining in the glow of lanterns and sparks of caged magic. Alarielle waited in the very centre of the glade, her own light brighter than anything else in that place, but she did not wait alone.

Alarielle's guard, the sisterhood of Avelorn, stood arrayed across the glade, their bows ready in their hands. But there were other elves there also, archers clad in vibrant greens, and antler-crowned hunters sat astride sleek stags. Their leader, Araloth of Talsyn, stood at the Alarielle's side. The towering figure of the forest god Orion stood a pace behind her, spear braced upon the ground. His form shook with barely contained wrath, and the hounds at his heels growled as Tyrion spurred Malhandir towards Alarielle. Through it all, Morathi's smile did not waver.



'I have come to claim you, my queen, as is my right and destiny.'

To Korhil's mind, Tyrion sought to brook no argument, but the prince's words clearly found no purchase.

'The Tyrion I knew would not ask this of me, much less demand it as his right,' Alarielle said coldly. 'Once, I would have given myself to you out of love, but I will not be claimed as a trophy.'

'I am the Phoenix King,' Tyrion snapped. 'Would you deny me? Would you deny your people?'

For the first time, Alarielle's expression softened into sadness. 'Your soul has hollowed, and Khaine has poured himself into the void. You are not worthy of the throne, or of me. I am sorry.'

'Ulthuan is at war!' the prince shouted, the fingers of his outstretched hand closing into a fist. 'The Witch King corrupts our people; unity is our only hope. You will be my queen!'

Tyrion spurred forward. There was a ripple of sound as the maiden guard set arrows to their bows. Orion growled, but his wrath subsided as Alarielle raised a slender hand. The gesture was not for his benefit alone.

As Korhil watched, the Everqueen's radiance grew brighter. Darting roots burst from the soil, wending around Tyrion and Malhandir, holding them fast. With a snarl, the prince moved to draw Widowmaker, but could not free his sword arm.

It was not only Tyrion. Korhil felt flailing roots burst from the sod to entangle his limbs, heard the commotion as other elves suffered the same fate. In an eyeblink, every member of Tyrion's host was held fast.

'Here, in Avelorn, you shall take only what I allow,' Alarielle said, her steely voice cutting effortlessly across the din.

It was then that Morathi at last spoke, her voice like oil spilling across water.

'Is that so?' the Hag Sorceress asked, and she began to laugh.

THE EVERQUEEN'S GUARD

After millennia of unease, the elves of Avelorn and Athel Loren had been united once more. As was fitting for a race so often torn between extremes, it was love and hate that made the reunification possible; love of Alarielle, and hate for the darkness descending upon Ulthuan.



ORION, KING IN THE WOODS

For the first time in many winters, Orion had not surrendered to the pyre, for with Ariel's passing, he knew he would not have returned with the spring. The part of him that was Kurnous was glad, for he could not bear to live on now that his beloved Isha was gone from the world, all save the echo that sheltered within Alarielle. The part of Orion that was mortal was sorrowful, for he knew that when he passed, the wood elves would be forever changed. Yet both aspects, ancient god and elven prince, were united in resolve. Thus did Orion come to Withelan without fear, and his courage gave heart to all who fought at his side.



THE SPEARS OF ORION

The Spears of Orion were one of the largest of the many hunter kindreds that owed personal allegiance to the King in the Woods. For thousands of years, they had been the vanguard of his Wild Hunt, and each winter the last line of defence for the Oak of Ages. Some were youngsters of a mere nine decades, whilst others had served their king since the time of Coeddil's betrayal, or even remembered the bitter winter that saw Orion's first manifestation. All were sworn to fight and die at his side, fearing neither blade nor sorcery whilst their king had need of them.

LORD DAITH OF TORGOVANN

When Alarielle declared her return to Ulthuan, none were so determined to accompany her as the master smith, Daith. Many thought his choice exceedingly odd, for Daith had long been blind and crippled. However a few – notably Araloth of Talsyn – had seen the smith fight before, and recognised that Daith's impediments were as nothing to the spirit that drove him. Daith's last act before journeying forth was to open wide the doors to his hidden vault, placing at last the full glory of his work in the hands of his fellow elves. Thus did many of elves who marched with Alarielle wield weapons whose like had never before been seen.





THE TALSYN HAWKS

From the very first, Araloth, Lord of Talsyn, threw his wholehearted support behind Alarielle's ascension as queen of Athel Loren. This declaration of allegiance not only secured the aid of one of the wood elves' greatest heroes – indeed, he who had been Ariel's champion – but also ensured that Talsyn's mighty kindreds would march at her side. Foremost of these were the Talsyn Hawks, a combined host of riders, archers and spears whose blades had reaped a much-rivalled tally of beastmen. Unlike others in the Everqueen's host, they did not shrink from the prospect of battle with other elves, for their faith in Alarielle was as total as their lord's.



DURTHU'S WARGROVE

It had been a long time since the treemen of Athel Loren had come to Ulthuan, longer still since they had fought in its defence. They did not come now out of loyalty to the Everqueen, as did the wood elves, but because Durthu ordered that it should be so. Ever since Alarielle's touch had driven away his madness, the eldest of ancients had begun to glimpse fragments of the future – he could see the irreparable damage that the minions of Chaos were wreaking on the Weave. Thus did he awaken those gnarled titans who had fought at his side in ages past – Lorrenoc, Sidhendri, Talbornan and Givrioth – to serve as his lieutenants in an army of spirits greater than any seen for long centuries.



THE DAUGHTERS OF WINTER

Maidens of the Thorn are held in a mix of fear and contempt by other wood elves, for their motives and deeds have always been shrouded in mystery. When the mavens of the sisterhoods appeared without warning to pledge allegiance to Alarielle, it therefore strengthened the Everqueen's position even whilst raising doubts in many minds.

- ***Alarielle, Avatar of Isha***
- ***Orion, the King in the Woods***
- ***Araloth, Lord of Talsyn***
- ***Naieth the Prophetess***
  Spellweaver
- ***Lord Daith of Torgovann***
  Glade Lord
- ***Durthu, Eldest of Ancients***
- ***The Daughters of Winter***
  One coven of Sisters of the Thorn
- ***The Talsyn Hawks***
  Three kinbands of Glade Riders, five kinbands of Glade Guard and two kinbands of Eternal Guard
- ***Durthu's Wargrove***
  Four Treeman Ancients, six Treemen, six withermarches of Tree Kin, and twelve briarbands of Dryads
- ***The Spears of Orion***
  One grand hunt of Wild Riders of Kurnous, three kinbands of Glade Riders
- ***The Skymark Windriders***
  Two kinbands of Glade Riders
- ***Brackenost***
  One kinband of Glade Riders
- ***Lord Daith's Guard***
  One kinband of Eternal Guard
- ***Sentinels of Withelan***
  Three regiments of Sisters of Avelorn
- ***The Oakenhearts***
  Three legions of High Elf Spearmen and three milita regiments of High Elf Archers
- ***The Unseen***
  One kinband of Waywatchers
- ***The Radiant Guard***
  One sworn-host of Silver Helms
- ***The Vigil***
  Three kinbands of Wildwood Rangers

THE HOST OF KHAINE

Tyrion, and all who fought at his side, had now fallen into darkness. Khaine's influence lay heavily upon them all, the Widowmaker fuelling their decadence and hubris just as it had for Aenarion long ago. If there was any longer any goodness in Tyrion's soul, it was buried deep by the time he came to Withelan.

TYRION

By now, many had marked that a change had come over Tyrion, a darkness deeper than any he had struggled with before. There were many high elves who welcomed this change, believing that ruthlessness was the coin by which they would purchase victory. More by far were swamped by the growing shadow of Khaine that surrounded the prince, not realising that their own characters were starting to shift in the Widowmaker's presence.





PRINCE DALROTH

Of all the nobles of Cothique, few were drowning in Khaine's shadow so completely as Prince Dalroth. At his brother's urging, Dalroth had turned on his own kin – betraying them to Tyrion and Morathi in exchange for favour – but he had committed darker deeds also. Dalroth had given himself to Khaine more utterly than any knew. Many of Dalroth's servants had met their end in his half-remembered, half-instinctive observances to the Destroyer, and the prince already dreamt of the blood-soaked offerings he would make once the battle was done.

ADRANNA

Eldest child of Prince Dalloran, Adranna was the only one of three siblings not lost to Khaine – although not for any lack of trying on the part of her duplicitous brothers. Alone of her family, Adranna could see the unfolding fates. Whilst she did not want to fight on Tyrion and Morathi's behalf, Adranna knew that her only chance of survival – as well as that of her ally and confidant Korhil – lay in seeming a loyal and dedicated follower of the ersatz Phoenix King. Adranna would regretfully spill blood if called upon to do so, but her reluctance would surely be of no comfort to the kin of those she killed.





DRAKIRA'S CLAWS

Vengeance is a belief that all dark elves hold dear, and Drakira – a goddess worshipped by all who seek recompense – is therefore called upon by Naggarothi of all ranks. The Ghrondian dreadspears known as Drakira's Claws considered themselves to be the mortal vessels by which the goddess of forsaken promises saw her will done on the mortal world. In Tyrion, they had found a patron who had many causes to seek vengeance: his throne was in doubt, his brother, his friends – even his lover had betrayed him. Even without the growing Shadow of Khaine magnifying their battle lust, Drakira's Claws had reason enough to fight.



THE KNIGHTS OF TOR ALIN

Few were the Cothiqui regiments that had not trained beneath Tyrion, but the Knights of Tor Alin had ties closer than most. Tyrion's family had owned land in and around Tor Alin for generations, and it was in the ranks of the city's silver helms that the young prince honed many of his skills. Indeed, without the exploits of Tyrion, the traditions of the Knights of Tor Alin would have come to an end during a battle with Drane Brackblood's corsairs. Though many years had since flowed by, the ties between Tyrion and the Knights of Tor Alin had only gotten stronger. Those few in their ranks that had not battled at the prince's side had at least been trained by him, and there was not one amongst them who would not follow his orders without question.



THE CROWS OF KHAINE

As the shadows around Tyrion thickened further, so too did the numbers of harpies in Ulthuan increase. They were drawn to the slaughter like flies to dung, their cruel voices splitting the skies from the sight of blasted Anlec in the north to as far south as the border of Eataine and Yvresse. Even in those lands thus far untouched by Malekith's war, watches had been stiffened to prevent flocks of harpies stealing away children or the infirm. The Crows of Khaine, however, did not settle for such simple feasts, and followed Tyrion's host in the hopes of more succulent prey.

- ***Tyrion, Avatar of Khaine***
- ***Morathi, the Hag Sorceress***
- ***Korhil, Captain of the Lion Guard***
- ***Prince Geron***
  High Elf Prince
- ***Prince Dalroth***
  High Elf Prince
- ***Prince Dannor***
  High Elf Prince
- ***Adranna***
  Sorceress
- ***Drakira's Claws***
  Three legions of Dreadspears
- ***The Knights of Tor Alin***
  Four sworn-hosts of Silver Helms
- ***Knights of Burning Dark***
  One scalegeld of Cold One Knights, and one scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***The Puremane Company***
  Two prides of White Lions
- ***The Menagerie of Raema***
  Three War Hydras, two Kharibdysses
- ***The Shrieking Death***
  One troupe of Sisters of Slaughter
- ***Mathlann's Chosen***
  Two legions of High Elf Spearmen, two militia regiments of High Elf Archers
- ***Tor Acoth Waveriders***
  One flight of Lothern Skycutters
- ***Selekan Guard***
  Three legions of Dreadspears, two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Skullbearers***
  Two legions of Bleakswords, two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Voiceless Ones***
  One legion of Dreadspears
- ***The Crows of Khaine***
  One flock of Harpies

THE BATTLE OF WITHELAN

Though it was a secret known to few living, Ariel, Queen of Athel Loren, had once studied the darkest of magics. Her tutor had been none other than Morathi, who parted with the knowledge in order that her life be spared. But the Hag Sorceress had ever been cunning; through her lessons, she planted a secret seed in Ariel's heart. This corruption led the Queen of Loren into madness. That insanity eventually passed, but Ariel was never truly cured. The seed of darkness had remained part of the Mage Queen in all the seasons that had followed, slumbering, waiting for Morathi's call. Though Ariel herself was dead, a part of her lived on in Alarielle, and a part of the dark seed had transferred also. Now, as Morathi's laughter cut across the clearing, the husk of magic cracked open and vile shoots burrowed deep into the Everqueen's soul.

Araloth knew none of this. He heard only Alarielle's piercing scream and saw her collapse. The Lord of Talsyn was moving to the queen's side even before she fell, even before the root-snares that bound Tyrion's host withered and died. As Araloth crouched at the Everqueen's side, the first cries of treachery flew forth, the first arrows hard on their heels. The Lord of Talsyn marked the oily black fluid seeping from Alarielle's mouth and eyes, but then a bellow of triumph and a shattering of wood told him that Tyrion was free. Rising, Araloth turned to face the prince.

Despite the events unfolding around him, Tyrion seemed almost calm. He guided Malhandir towards Araloth, and commanded the Lord of Talsyn to stand aside. As reply, Araloth raised his spear. He harboured no illusions as to his ability to defeat Tyrion, but he stood unflinching as death came to claim him.

'Stand aside, mongrel! Alarielle is mine.'

Tyrion's voice was low and sibilant, more that of a serpent than a prince, thought Araloth.

'She belongs to all of us, and to none of us,' he replied. 'And we've already seen too well the limits of your regard.'

'Very well,' spat Tyrion, and he thrust the Widowmaker down.

Tyrion was fast – faster even than Araloth had guessed. Even though he had expected the blow, the Lord of Talsyn knew he could neither parry nor evade. As the gleaming point of the Widowmaker lanced true to his heart, time seemed to slow, but his limbs felt like lead.

There was a blur of motion to Araloth's right, and a metallic ringing sound. Tyrion's thrust went wide as the Spear of Kurnous struck the Widowmaker's blade. A moment later, there was a thunder of hooves, and Tyrion was borne away as Orion's wild guard struck home.

Orion himself did not join the pursuit at once, but knelt awhile at Alarielle's side, his thoughts unreadable to Araloth. The king brushed his fingers along her cheek, then almost absent-mindedly raised a hand to catch his returning spear.

'See to the queen's safety,' Orion commanded Araloth, his voice a deep and vibrant rumble. Rising to his feet, the king raised the great Horn of the Wild Hunt to his lips, and the treetops shook to its fury.



Orion's horn echoed through the glade, and others rose to join it. The bold notes danced upon the air, awakening such ferocity that even the coldly-reserved sisters of the maiden guard felt their blood come afire. As one, the Everqueen's warriors surged forward with spear and sword. Arrows were nocked and loosed on the run, whistling through the air as harbingers of the melee to come. Only Araloth, and a small band of Eternal Guard, fought the horn's cry. Their duty was to bring Alarielle to the ruins at the army's rear, where Naieth the prophetess guided the actions of its spellshapers.

The Battle of Withelan was not the grandest of its time, but it was amongst the most savagely fought. Khaine's shadow fell heavier on Tyrion each day, and it lent strength and fury to the prince's followers as surely as it did to him. Yet those asrai who had come to Avelorn had pledged their lives to the Everqueen, and spent their blood gladly in her defence. More determined were the sisterhoods of maiden guard, who had held the Everqueen a living goddess long before their distant kin had declared it so. These veterans of the war with the daemons now readily turned their lessons – and their blades – upon traitor kin with little remorse. Many of the elder sisters had long thought that the Curse of Aenarion made Tyrion an ill mate for their queen, and saw that day all the proof they could have wished for.

In the centre of the glade, Tyrion fought like a caged beast. He was surrounded on all sides by the wild adepts of Kurnous, but their spears could find no weakness in his armour, save the rent torn by Imrik's lance, and the prince was careful to keep that spot well-guarded. Blood sprayed forth as Widowmaker struck again and again. Through it all, Tyrion

raged and cursed, determined to reach Alarielle. Wild riders fell dead and dying all around the prince, but not one amongst their number sought to flee.

In the wild riders' wake came other horsemasters, warriors of Skymark and Witherhold whose arrows flew truer at full gallop than others' did at rest. Behind them came the spears of the eternal guard, and the great axes of rangers, the wielders' brooding countenances a grim contrast to the leaping wardancers who swiftly overtook them. On the fringes of the glade, shapes flitted through the trees as lithe dryads sought unwary enemies to set their claws upon. Further back, vaster shadows loomed, the ground shaking as Durthu led a band of treemen against Tyrion's northern flank.

Seeing their lord embattled, knights of Ghrond and of Cothique spurred forward, but their charge broke apart as Orion led more wild riders into the fray. The King in the Woods crashed into the thick ranks of cold one knights, uncaring of the claws and lance-tips that raked his flesh. The Spear of Kurnous swept out, disembowelling three plate-armoured knights and striking another from his saddle. For a moment, the dark elf mewled upon the ground, for his legs had broken with the force of his fall. Then Orion's hoof came down, the knight's ribs splintered, and the cries ceased. On Orion pressed through the battle, his every step bringing him closer to the one who had laid low his queen. Yet just as Tyrion was penned in by his foes, so too was the King in the Woods. No great distance lay between the two, but they might as well have been on opposite shores of the Great Ocean.

This was no longer a battle of archery, but of blade. The initial volleys had taken a heavy toll of Tyrion's host, but now shields locked together, and the arrows of Avelorn and Athel Loren wasted their force on timber and steel. Korhil commanded the southern flank, his soldiers the Chracian veterans of his failed campaign. Adranna fought at his side, her enchantments flickering between light and darkness as she balanced the tutelage of decades with the sinister arts Morathi had instilled within her. Further north, Dalroth and Dannor goaded the warriors of Ghrond and Cothique into the slaughter. Where Korhil strove to retain his battered honour, the brothers knew no such restraint. Seeking to outdo one another's cruelties, they threw their warriors into the fray as flour to be ground in the mill, heedless of the lives lost to their recklessness. As the bodies of their subjects piled upon the field before them, Prince Geron, one of their father's most trusted advisors, twice tried to temper the brothers' folly. On the second attempt, Dalroth slit open the old soldier's throat before throwing his body into a kharibdyss' maw.

The clearing shook as the two hosts clashed in earnest, the wild battle cries of the wood elves a harsh counterpoint to the mellifluous war songs of the high elves. Only the Ghrondian warriors fought in silence, as was their wont. It hardly mattered, for their mistress was raucous enough for many times their number.





Morathi's laughter was a gusting wind that carried to every corner of Avelorn, and to many lands beyond. This confrontation had not been borne of her manipulations, but the Hag Sorceress was determined to drain every sweet drop from the chalice presented to her. She had not forgotten her humiliation when Ghrond had fallen to the wood elves long ago, and if Ariel were at last beyond her reach, then the Hag Sorceress sought to take vengeance upon her inheritors. The winds of magic, so thick and honeyed as they blew through Avelorn, bent easily to Morathi's will, rippling and billowing as she greedily delved. The laughter now took the form of beautiful words, rising and falling in pitch as the gathered magic pulsed. As Morathi's incantation reached its pitch, there was a sudden, ear-splitting crack.

Korhil felt the air go still and lifeless, saw the cloud of roiling black mist sweep forth from the Hag Sorceress' hands. Elves and dryads scattered from its path. Segmented tentacles, fat and pink, whipped out from the vapour, leaving livid green welts wherever they struck. The captain saw a wood elf warband break apart as the cloud bore down upon them, the warriors casting aside their spears as they dove clear. Not all of them made it to safety. A few, too slow by far, vanished as the cloud rolled over them. Others screamed in panic as tentacles lashed around their limbs, dragging them steadily backwards into the seeping darkness. Korhil saw one elf dragged into the cloud as she tried to aid her comrade, and another pulled free as a well-aimed arrow severed the tentacle around his waist. Green blood spurted from the wound and there was a shrill wail from somewhere in the darkness, but still the cloud moved on, leaving a trail of withered grass and an army of clean-picked skeletons in its wake.

Araloth reached Naieth's side as the army's mystics sought to unmake Morathi's conjuration. Already the black cloud was drawing nigh on the ring of Torgovann spears and Avelorn bows that sheltered Naieth's band, and there was no time left for subtle measures. It seemed to Araloth that the forest wailed as Naieth wrought her counterspell. All around him, leaves that had remained green since the beginning of time wilted and fell lifeless to the ground. Trees that had endured the passage of centuries aged to dust as spellweavers drew magic from their roots to contain the swirling cloud. With a thin hiss, the vortex of darkness dispersed like smoke on the breeze, and a cheer went up from the wood elf ranks. Three of the spellweavers collapsed, rotted from the inside by the magics they had unmade, and Naieth fell heavily forward onto her staff, her faithful owl fluttering concernedly about her head.

As Araloth carefully laid Alarielle upon the ground, Naieth summoned other mages to her side. The prophetess' nose wrinkled in distaste, but she assured Araloth that the harm could be unmade, given time. Alas, it seemed that time was the one thing the wood elves could not afford. Even as Naieth set about crafting a blessing to drive out Morathi's poison, a great whooping shout broke out beyond the Torgovann lines.

Fresh enemies had come, laughing and dancing as they tore through the lines of spears. They wore no armour, these newcomers, just golden masks in the likenesses of daemons. They fought with incredible grace, each move flowing flawlessly into another, their chain-link whips lashing out to slit throats and veins. Leaving Alarielle to Naieth's care, Araloth ordered his own warband down into the fight. Yet, even as the Lord of Talsyn ran, the centre of the spearwall disintegrated, and the way to the Everqueen opened. With a fresh chorus of triumph, the attackers charged into the gap, and Araloth knew he would not reach it in time. But there was one who could.

Stepping across the corpses with a surety that belied his blindness, white-haired Daith, Lord of Torgovann shouted a challenge to the Naggarothi lash-maidens. His lungs burning with exertion, Araloth heard the leading gladiatrix make some mocking comment, then saw her fall dead upon the ground, head struck clean off by a single faultless blow. Araloth had not even seen Daith's blade move. The other masked attackers threw themselves forward before their leader's head struck the ground. They came together, whips whirling, seeking to overwhelm the aged elf through numbers as much as skill. They need not have made the effort.

As Araloth's thudding feet ate up the ground between him and the Torgovanni lines, he realised that even if he reached Daith's venerable age, he would never be able to fight as the blind lord did. Where the masked Naggarothi were wild and theatrical in their attacks, Daith was measured and efficient, his sword never moving a hair's breadth further than it needed to. A flick of his wrist, and the broad tip of Daith's blade struck a barbed whip aside; with another, an attacker's throat was opened to the bone. Daith's movements were works of art, so delicate yet unyielding that they made all others appear clumsy by comparison. The gap in the line was fifteen shields wide, and the attackers a swarm of lashes and shields, but Daith held them.

At last Araloth's warband reached the gap. Daith tilted his head to stare sightlessly at Araloth, then twisted his lips into a smile. Levelled spears drove the last of the masked women away, but not before one last act of spite. One of the masked elves, who had been feigning death at Daith's feet, rose up and slammed a dagger hilt-deep into his chest. With a cry that mingled grief and anger, Araloth thrust his spear forward to slay the assailant. Suddenly disheartened, the foe fled. Abandoning his weapon, Araloth caught Daith as he fell.

'This is not the first time I have fought this battle,' Daith breathed, as Araloth lowered him to the ground, 'but it will be the last.'

Araloth's brow furrowed. 'I don't understand.'

'Do not mourn. By standing between Khaine and Isha, you have freed me. This time there will be no labour before the forge to buy her release.' Daith's voice grew stronger, more determined, and he seized Araloth's arm. 'He must not take her again!'

'He won't,' Araloth assured the dying lord firmly, not knowing what else to say.

Daith seemed not to hear him. 'Vaul, they called me then,' he whispered, 'before the Dark Gods cast us from the heavens.'

Araloth's eyes widened in surprise. Daith must have seen his expression, for he gave a weak laugh.

'Lileath has placed you outside the web of fate, yet you remain innocent of the cycle you have avoided.' He smiled. 'She was always the favourite of my nieces, but watch her closely. Whatever she has told you of her plans, they will go much deeper.'

'I will,' Araloth promised, though his mind was still racing with the implications of what had been said. It mattered little, for Daith, Lord of Torgovann, was dead, and heard nothing.



A cry from behind Araloth told him that the dark elves had regathered their courage. Gently setting Daith's body on the ground, the Lord of Talsyn took up his spear once more and returned to the fight.

Further to the north, the battle was turning in the Everqueen's favour as the warriors of Ghrond scattered before the treemen. Cothiqui phalanxes, more disciplined than their dark cousins, held their ground, but to little avail. The treemen's assault was as slow and inevitable as a root breaking through rock. Spears shattered on thick bark, and bones broke as gnarled feet stamped down. Elves screamed in sudden fear as vines hoisted their struggling bodies high, then hurled them back down onto their fellows.

Seeing the danger of the treemen, Dalroth ordered Ghrond's war beasts sent against them. Whips cracked sharply in the cold air as the monsters of Naggaroth were goaded into the treemen's path. Massive kharibdysses, as ungainly on land as they were ugly, slithered forth, their maws snapping hungrily. Hydras came in their wake, their belched flames taking swift root in the forest spirits' flesh.

Many treemen perished, consumed by fire or felled by dark sorceries, each levying a great toll upon the foe before he died, but Durthu was unstoppable. No fire could find purchase on his hide, and neither claw nor fang could pierce it. His runesword shone in a silver arc, and the foul blood of kharibdysses was blue upon the grass. A hydra bellowed and pounced at Durthu, but the sword flashed to sever two of its heads, and a third pulped under the impact of a mighty fist.

In the centre of the glade, Tyrion at last fought his way free of the wild riders. The prince now looked more daemon than elf, for his armour was slick with blood, and his face a sharp-visaged rictus of abandon. Kicking

the last of the Sons of Kurnous from the Widowmaker's blade, the prince spurred Malhandir on through the chill air, shouting at the knights about Orion to make way.

The King in the Woods fought atop a mound of bloodied dead no less grim than that which Tyrion had left behind. Elves of both Naggaroth and Ulthuan had perished beneath the spear of Kurnous, the most brutal of Hag Graef's knights and the flower of Cothique's houses slain as thoughtlessly as any other quarry. Orion bled from a dozen small wounds, and two savage rents besides, but his strength was undimmed. One wolfhound crouched at its master's feet, its fur matted by its own blood and that of the knight whose throat it had torn out. The other lay unmoving, having taken a lance thrust meant for Orion's heart.

Those wood elves who looked upon Orion's striving that day marked a determination they had not before observed, not in all the many rebirths their king had known. None knew the cause – none save Alarielle, and she was sworn not to speak of it. When the ring of knights about Orion parted at Tyrion's command, the King in the Woods did not falter, but threw himself readily against the prince with a wild cry.

Seldom since before the days of Aenarion had such a battle been seen. Blow and counterblow rang out as the Sword of Khaine clashed with the Spear of Kurnous, each sound an echo of a long-ago battle in the heavens. Then, as now, Kurnous fought Khaine with Isha as the prize. Then, as now, it would be a battle beyond mortals. Tyrion's knights, not daring to intervene in their lord's battle, turned their blades outward, fending off the wood elves who came howling to their king's aid. Soon a ring of blood and corpses bounded the godly contest, but neither eternal guard nor wardancer pierced the circle.

Orion could feel his strength fading. The Widowmaker had pierced the king's flesh in many places, and the fires he had denied for long months were now sparked to fresh fury by the blade's kiss. As the Spear of Kurnous shattered beneath the Widowmaker's strike, Orion rose up and seized Tyrion by the throat with one hand, the other coming about to slam against the prince's armoured ribs. The golden armour of Aenarion buckled beneath the impact, and two of Tyrion's ribs snapped. A third gave way as Orion hammered at his foe again, this second blow at last forcing a cry of pain from the prince's lips.



Widowmaker came about in a wild blow, guided more by instinct than design. Orion ducked low, but one of his horns fractured under the impact. With a mighty bellow, the King in the Woods butted Tyrion full in the face, and half dragged the prince from his saddle. As he did so, Orion gathered up a fragment of his spear's shattered tip. As Tyrion struggled in his grasp, Orion drove the sliver of metal through the rent Imrik had opened in Tyrion's armour, and snapped off the point in the prince's flesh.

That act took the last of Orion's strength. He staggered back, skin glowing from the fires burning beneath. Ignoring the blood seeping from his own wounds, Tyrion hauled himself high into Malhandir's saddle once more. He spurred forward and brought the Widowmaker down one final time. With one last cry, Orion, King in the Woods, fell dead. Moments later, he was ash. The cycle had ended once again, the hunter slain at the Destroyer's hand. All that now remained was for the Mother to be claimed.

Orion's final shout did not go unmarked. In the moment of its sounding, Alarielle's eyes shot open, the Everqueen roused as much by that cry as by Naieth's attempts to revive her. Gripped by sudden purpose, Alarielle rose to her feet only to see Tyrion marshalling his surviving knights. Alarielle had not blindly chosen Withelan as the site of confrontation. Though Morathi's gambit had nearly undone her, the Everqueen had known the Hag Sorceress would have some poisonous scheme at hand, and had trusted in her own followers. The price had been high, but there were no easy triumphs to be had any longer – just victory at any price, or defeat.

The ruins of Withelan were not elven. They had been raised in antiquity by a being of terrible power who sought to bend the magic of Avelorn – stronger at Withelan than any other place save the Gaean Vale – to his own will. The monuments had fallen, as all works one day must, but the reservoir of power remained. Morathi could not wield it, for it was the magic of light and life, but it was the Everqueen's to command, and now she called it forth.

The ground rumbled as a spiral stair burst from the ground beneath Alarielle's feet, raising her almost to the leafy canopy above. As she rose, the Everqueen marked the look of consternation and surprise on Morathi's face as she tried and failed to wrest control of the unleashed magics. Alarielle felt only disdain. Like so many before her, the Hag Sorceress had not thought Alarielle a worthy foe, had seen only a matron whose role was to nurture and protect. It was an attitude Alarielle had faced for as long as she could remember.

As the spiral stair shuddered into stillness, Alarielle took in the battlefield. She could see the burnt ground where Orion had perished, the mound of corpses where Daith had striven, the banners of three great elven nations as they strove to decide

her fate. But most of all, Alarielle saw Tyrion at the head of his knights, their blades and lances carving ruin amongst those who dared to bar their path.

ENOUGH!

Alarielle was not aware she had spoken, but her shouted word echoed across the glade. Magic flowed out of the ground and up the spiral stairs at her call. It pulsed across the battlefield; horses and cold ones reared up as it reached them, casting knights from their saddles. As the riders tried to regain their feet, Alarielle's spell took hold. The knights felt their limbs grow heavy and agony rip through their minds. They called up to the Everqueen, arms lifted imploringly at she who now commanded their fate. But Alarielle knew no mercy that day.

The knights' skin thickened and cracked as the magic raced across it; armour and cloth fell away, scattering to dust. Their legs became roots, and dug deep into the thick soil; their arms, raised in supplication, split apart into swift-growing branches, and leaves of brilliant green burst forth from gnarled skin. In moments, only Tyrion remained, protected as he was by the Widowmaker. Of his knights, the only sign they had ever existed were enchanted heirlooms entangled in branches, and patterns in the bark that might once have been faces wracked with pain.

The greater part of Tyrion's army would have perished that day, had it not been for Morathi – though she doubtless acted to save herself more than any other. While the bow wave of magic flowed across the battlefield, the Hag Sorceress called upon magics of her own. As the transformation took hold amongst the front ranks of Tyrion's phalanxes, the Hag Sorceress let cry a forbidden word. There was no laughter in her voice now, just a tone of desperation.





A wave of black magic rose at Morathi's call, drawn not from the bedrock of Avelorn, but from the tainted souls of those who followed Tyrion. It clashed with Alarielle's spell mere feet away from the Hag Sorceress, and the air shone a dozen colours where the two tides met. For a moment, there was a terrible wailing noise which echoed across the clearing, the crux point of the sorceries rippling like flame as they clashed. Then, with a deafening report, both spells imploded, the backwash striking Morathi from Sulephet's back and sending Alarielle sprawling from her summit.

Morathi toppled back into the thick grass of the clearing, blood streaming from her eyes and ears, her black soul afire with pain. Handmaidens clustered around their mistress and bore her away from the glade. Adranna was amongst them and, had she the opportunity, would have driven a dagger into the Hag Sorceress' heart. However, the princess judged there were too many loyal handmaidens in attendance to guarantee success. Sacrificing a life to rid the world of Morathi was one thing; to do so needlessly was something else entirely.

On the other side of the glade, a great cry of sorrow went up as the Everqueen fell, but one amongst the host chose action over dismay. Ignoring the spears that pricked at his thick flesh, mighty Durthu broke into a run. Then, demonstrating a grace few knew he possessed, the treeman leapt towards the spiral stair. As Durthu's gnarled fingers sought purchase on the ancient stones, he let fall his sword and snatched Alarielle from the air. The clearing shuddered as the treeman let go his grasp on the spiral stair and crashed to the ground below, a dazed Everqueen in his grasp.

As Durthu gently set Alarielle down, Tyrion spurred forward from the twisted grove that had once been his

knights, Widowmaker flashing. The sword smouldered as it speared into Durthu's hide, the thick black smoke of its passing rising from the wound. It burned Durthu as the long ago dwarfish fires had once burnt him, but the treeman uttered no sound of pain. Instead, he wrapped the fingers of his free hand around the exposed length of blade and dragged the godly steel from his flesh. For a heartbeat, the treeman and the prince stood locked in a strange tableau, neither willing to relinquish their grasp, Durthu silent, Tyrion raging. Then the treeman's lips cracked into a snarl, and he suddenly wrenched the blade free. Tyrion, still unwilling to surrender his weapon, was yanked from his saddle and whirled in a half-circle about Durthu's head. With one last mighty heave, Durthu hurled the prince – Widowmaker and all – back over the remaining Cothiqui phalanxes and deep into the forest behind.

As the crash of branches accompanying Tyrion's departure sounded across the glade, Malhandir whinnied loud, and galloped off in search of his master. Even as the steed's hooves thundered away, Durthu creaked to one knee, smoke gouting from his wound. Alarielle, on her feet once more, ran to the treeman's side and laid her hands upon his rough skin, white light flaring about her fingers as she sought to stem the damage.

The elves of Tyrion's host did not yet know that their prince still lived. They saw only their sorceress fallen, their knights slaughtered and their prince humbled. Battle-lust faded from hearts and eyes, and urgent horns began to sound the retreat. Dalroth and Dannor were amongst the first to turn tail, for the princes had learnt much of ruthlessness under Tyrion's tutelage, but little of bravery. Korhil was the last of Tyrion's commanders to leave, ushering his soldiers before him. As he slipped away into the forest, the captain realised that he had experienced his second defeat in as many battles. To Korhil's mild surprise, he discovered that he wasn't at all sorry for the loss.

As matters transpired, Malhandir found Tyrion nearly a league into Withelan's deepwoods, and at first the prince was determined to renew the battle. However, he marked the colours of Cothique and Ghrond streaming past him, and the dark cortege that bore Morathi from the field, and knew that he would find only defeat in Avelorn that day. Bitterly, the prince hauled himself into Malhandir's saddle to join the retreat.

Tyrion had been dealt a sore blow, and had the elves of the Everqueen's host made any attempt at pursuit it would have been far worse. What little harrying there was of the retreating army was left to the dryads, who chased their fleeing foes to the very borders of Avelorn. As it was, the elves of Athel Loren and of Avelorn were weary with battle, and had their own dead to attend to. Orion's ashes were gathered into a silver urn, and the slain carried upon litters fashioned from shields and spears. Daith's body was accompanied by an honour guard of some five hundred elves. Though few amongst the host knew the secret that Araloth had been made privy to, all knew the smith from his deeds and reputation. As dusk fell, Alarielle awoke the worldroots, and the sombre procession returned to Athel Loren.

The only true victors of the Battle of Withelan were the trees forged from the flesh of Tyrion's warriors. Reborn into a more serene and contemplative form, their roots would feast well upon the corpse-mulch of their former allies, their foliage growing ever more luxurious as the season deepened.

Teclis stepped carefully across the alabaster sands. The moon was low in the sky, its light reflected by the gentle waves of the Inner Sea.

The Everqueen stood silhouetted against the shoreline, her silken robes billowing in the breeze. She was alone, after a fashion. The maiden guard had sensed their mistress' need for solitude, and withdrawn to a respectful distance. However, Teclis knew that at least a dozen hidden arrows were trained on his heart. The Sisters of Avelorn took their duties seriously.

Alarielle turned at Teclis' approach. The mage bowed deeply, but abandoned the formality at her gesture.

'There is no need for such protocol between us,' Alarielle said softly. 'We are family, you and I – or as near as makes no difference.'

'My brother was here,' said Teclis. It was not a question. He already knew the answer.

'Is that all you have to say?' asked the Everqueen. 'You were always cold, but I never before realised that reserve extended even to your own brother. Do you shed no tears for what he has become?'

'I might ask the same of you. Your spirit is bound to Tyrion's even more tightly than mine.'

Alarielle waited a moment before replying. 'He has fallen so far. I would never have believed it, had I not seen with my own eyes.'

'The Curse of Aenarion has stirred in his blood, and Khaine now rules his heart. He is not responsible for what he has become.'

'Is there no hope for him?' There was no plea in Alarielle's voice, Teclis noted, just a weary resignation.

'None this side of death,' Teclis replied, his eyes fixed on the gentle swell of the waves. 'We must look to others for our salvation.'

'Malekith,' Alarielle breathed. 'Would that I had not lived to see these times.'





The Battle of Withelan marked a turning point in the war. When the wood elves returned home to Athel Loren, they bore a burden of honoured dead and shared the truths they had seen first-hand. Before the flames of Daith's pyre had fully died, another council was convened. This time, the result was unanimous – the full might of Athel Loren would at last be roused.

On Ulthuan, Alarielle sent her maiden guard far and wide across the Ten Kingdoms, carrying word of Tyrion's madness to every prince and lord who had not yet chosen a side. The Everqueen herself journeyed through the worldroots to Lothern. There, she marched in full ceremonial procession up the promenade to the Sapphire Palace, and pledged her allegiance to Malekith. Araloth, who had accompanied Alarielle on her journey – and had received no few suspicious looks from the elves of Lothern – now took sour satisfaction in the horror that the Everqueen's announcement provoked. Imrik's face, in particular, was a mask of stone. Even the Lord of Talsyn was taken aback by Alarielle's next declaration: as was tradition, the Everqueen would wed with the new Phoenix King, just as soon as the war was concluded.

Few noted the subtleties of Alarielle's proclamation. By tradition, she should have wed Malekith soon after his ascension, not at the conclusion of a war that could yet rage for many months. Alarielle had offered Malekith legitimacy in exchange for his promise to end Tyrion's threat, but that was not all. As queen now of both Ulthuan and Athel Loren, her promise of marriage bound the wood elves anew to their splintered race. For the first time in millennia, the thrones of the elves would be one.

Malekith, of course, saw the full implications of Alarielle's words, but judged that the arrangement won him much for little cost. Teclis too marked the game Alarielle played, and recognised the strategy as one Lileath had first proposed to him many months previously. Yet neither the Phoenix King nor the loremaster knew the full truth of Alarielle's mind, for neither were present in Alarielle's chambers that eve, when the grief that the Everqueen had held back for so long burst forth in a flood of tears.

Later that night, Malekith took counsel with his dreadlords and princes. None of the elves were allowed into the chamber armed, for there were enmities running back generations in that chamber, and none could afford for the tenuous alliance to be sliced apart by a blade drawn in anger. The Phoenix King found it somewhat amusing that so many of the Naggarothi nobles had accepted their new situation so swiftly – far more swiftly, in fact, than their Ulthuani counterparts. The dark elves saw in Malekith's ascension the proof that the dark elves had at last conquered Ulthuan, and hungered for the slaughter and plunder to be had in the lands under Tyrion's sway.

The next morning, an army marched forth from Lothern, marshalled under the banners of Naggaroth, Ulthuan and Athel Loren. Malekith and Alarielle rode at its head, a king of brooding darkness counterbalanced by a queen of radiant light.

Far to the north, in the Cothiqui city of Tor Alin, Tyrion's mood was growing steadily darker. His spirit was burdened by the humiliation at Withelan, his flesh in agony from Orion's last blow. Neither surgeon nor mage had been able to remove the shard from Orion's spear, and it sent pain lancing through Tyrion's flesh with every breath. Furthermore, the prince's manner was strangely purposeless following the Everqueen's escape. Morathi, fearing that her grip upon Tyrion's heart was failing, sought to provide what comforts and assurances she could.

Morathi paid no heed to Korhil as she slipped past him and into Tyrion's chambers. To her mind, the white lion was a loyal but dull brute, wholly lacking in wit.

Though the setting sun blazed down upon the lowlands of Cothique, Tyrion stood in shadow, his brooding form silhouetted against the delicate stained glass of an arched window depicting Aenarion's final battle.

How like his forefather the prince – no, the king – had become, Morathi mused. The thought, as ever, provoked a smile far softer than the one that normally graced her thin lips. She moved lightly to Tyrion's side, the soles of her naked feet soundless on the marble tiles.

'You're thinking of her again, aren't you?' the sorceress asked, running her fingers across Tyrion's cheek.

'I must have legitimacy,' said Tyrion, 'and with the Flame of Asuryan lost, only marriage to the Everqueen can provide it.'

That was not the whole of the tale, Morathi deemed. However much Tyrion might protest otherwise, the bloodless daughter of Avelorn still commanded a portion of his heart. Or was that jealousy speaking, she wondered? Either way, the sorceress knew that outright opposition would gain her nothing.

'Then you shall have her,' breathed Morathi, leaning close. 'Let Alarielle be your wife in the sunlit days of rule. I will be yours in the darkness, as I was before, in another life.'

In the distance, the sun began to sink below the horizon, its light the colour of spilt blood as it streamed into the chamber.

'In any case,' Morathi whispered, 'the Everqueen need live only until she provides you with an heir.'

The words exchanged between Tyrion and Morathi went not so unobserved as they supposed. Korhil, sheltered by Adranna's enchantments, heard much of what passed between the prince and the sorceress. When Korhil overheard Morathi speak of murdering the Everqueen, he knew that he had to take action – but what could he do? Though Adranna had extended her protection to many of Korhil's most trusted soldiers, their numbers were nowhere near enough to attempt an armed revolt – the thought of which was, in any case, still abhorrent to the noble captain.

Korhil believed that Tyrion's mind was not his own, and wished to free the prince from whatever baleful influence lay upon him. On the nature of Tyrion's malaise, Korhil and Adranna disagreed: he held Morathi responsible, where the princess claimed that it was the Widowmaker itself that corrupted him.

Three nights after Korhil had first heard Morathi propose the Everqueen's murder, the captain returned home to find the mansion where he and Adranna dwelt shrouded in darkness. Fearing the worst, Korhil strode through the halls with Chayal in his hands. Of Adranna, there was no sign. Korhil feared that Dalroth and Dannor – who had never approved of the captain's closeness to their sister – had at last acted upon their resentments. Such a thing would have been impossible in the Ulthuan of recent memory, but in these uncertain times he could not be sure.

At last, Korhil discovered Adranna slumped seemingly lifeless upon a bed, a hooded and masked figure looming over her. Chayal flashed out, but the assailant was far swifter. Rigid fingers jabbed at Korhil's torso, and the captain's axe fell from numbed hands. As Korhil fought to regain control of his paralysed body, the hooded figure leaned over his prone form and proceeded to tempt the captain to treason.

A week later, Korhil left Tor Alin before dawn's first rays. With him went a few score white lion veterans, enough to protect against dangers on the increasingly wild roads, but few enough not to arouse comment.

Korhil could still scarcely believe the act he had undertaken, far less that he had done so at Shadowblade's instigation. Even at the time of the bargain's striking – full in the knowledge it would have cost his death – he had been ready to refuse the opportunity, but Adranna had convinced him otherwise. Now Korhil travelled northward, the Widowmaker concealed beneath his cloak, their path wending ever towards the shore, and a rendezvous with Hellebron, high priestess of Khaine.

Stealing the Widowmaker had been easy enough – disturbingly so. When it was not at Tyrion's side, the sword rested in a vault, watched over by white lions. It had taken several days for Korhil to rotate the guard so that it contained only those loyal to him. At every moment, the captain had been sure that his subterfuge would be discovered, but it never was. Tyrion still trusted him completely, it seemed, just as Morathi deemed him too stupid to be of any threat.

Korhil's chosen guards had remained behind, selflessly sacrificing their lives to maintain the illusion of the Widowmaker's presence. Even with this precaution, the captain didn't doubt that the sword's absence would quickly be discovered, and his party travelled as swiftly as they could manage, each hurried step bringing them closer to their destination.

Korhil scarcely believed that Hellebron would keep the bargain Shadowblade had made, that she would unmake the Widowmaker. His hopes – desperate as they were – lay in Tyrion returning to his proper senses when parted from the sword. There was risk, of course, in handing such a weapon over to Hellebron, but Korhil did not believe that the crone could wreak greater harm with it than Tyrion already had.

For himself, Korhil had no such hopes. He knew that Hellebron would kill him as soon as she deemed his usefulness to be over. Thus had he sent Adranna south on the fastest eagle in Cothique, both to place her out of Tyrion's vengeful reach, and to bring word to Malekith. If nothing else, Korhil knew his deeds would prove a useful distraction for Tyrion's enemies, and he had realised at last that Malekith was by far the lesser of two evils. As they travelled, Korhil had come to believe that the Widowmaker was responsible for their ills as much as Morathi, for he could hear it whispering his mind, goading him to slaughter. Even though he was sheltered by Adranna's enchantments, the voice rang loud in Korhil's skull, and every step was marked by a struggle of wills. Too many times had Korhil almost succumbed to the Widowmaker's promises, and he prayed for the strength to resist it a while longer.

The marshes of Cothique were alive long before the storm-lashed coastline came into sight. Fleeing citizens warned of Naggarothi running wild, slaughtering all they found. Korhil, his limbs weary from travel, once again questioned the wisdom of his course, but realised it was much too late for doubts. By the time the captain glimpsed the first banners of Har Ganeth amongst the sparse trees, he was once again resigned. Alas, at that moment, there was a thudding of hooves in the soft ground behind, and raven-cloaked outriders galloped through the thin sea-born mists. As Korhil urged his company to greater speed, one of the riders sounded a shrill horn. Moments later, other unseen horns sang out in response, their notes cutting through the chill air like the baying of hounds.

Tyrion's forces had found them.

AN ALLIANCE OF ENEMIES

The fates of the elves had become muddied indeed. Scant weeks ago, it would have been unthinkable for Korhil to accept Hellebron's aid. Now, the captain of the Phoenix King's guard had no hope other than an alliance with the high priestess of Khaine.



HELLEBRON, THE CRONE QUEEN OF HAR GANETH

Some months previously, Hellebron had been content with her lot; Naggaroth may have lain in ruins, but she had gladly battled the Bloodied Horde with every fibre of her being. Each day had been an orgy of slaughter, and Hellebron had revelled in it, careless of the deaths amongst her own followers. However, she eventually resolved to leave the ruins of Har Ganeth to the northlanders and take ship to Ulthuan. By claiming the Widowmaker, Hellebron hoped to not only foil Morathi's plans and increase her own influence, but also to lure Tyrion to her side.

SHADOWBLADE

In truth, Shadowblade cared little about the Widowmaker's fate, and nothing at all about Korhil's survival. He was focused on two things alone: pleasing his mistress, and gaining a measure of revenge over Morathi for his recent enslavement. That said, the coming battle would at last allow the master assassin to apply his skills against suitable foes. For too long, Shadowblade had been a spy rather than an assassin, and his blades thirsted for blood. They would find plenty of it in the marshes of Cothique.





KORHIL, CAPTAIN OF THE LION GUARD

Korhil had become curiously liberated by his recent betrayal. For too long, he had suppressed his conscience out of duty to Tyrion, and feared every path that beckoned. Now, he was like an arrow springing from a Chracian longbow. Whether the coming battle was won or lost, Korhil knew that it would define his legacy, and he rushed to greet it. The troubled moods of recent months no longer lay heavy on the captain's brow. His doubts had cleared, and his destiny lay plain on the road ahead, but what that destiny was remained to be seen.

THE SISTERS OF SINGING DOOM

There are many blasphemous songs that exult Khaine's glories. The Sisters of Singing Doom knew them all, and came into battle shrieking those syllables in voices sharp and wicked as knives. Many of their chants had such power that they could paralyse the unworthy, or else cause blood to flow from eye-sockets and ears. Even those who survive did not endure unmarked, and were fated to suffer dreams of blood and death every night until, in madness, they took their own lives. Of course, such temporary survivors were rare, for the Sisters of Singing Doom seldom left their victims alive long enough to suffer dreams of any kind.





THE BLOODCLEAVE

There were many cabals of executioners in Hellebron's host, but none so feared as the Bloodcleave. Even in Har Ganeth, where transgressions against the law were always punished with a ruthless fanaticism, the leaders of the Bloodcleave stood out as zealots, for they would often execute not only the lawbreaker, but also any members of his or her family that lay within three generations. Indeed, many accredited Hellebron's refusal to dissolve the Bloodcleave with a fear of causing them offence. The truth of the matter, however, was that Hellebron gloried in their zeal, for it rid her of many opponents she would otherwise have had to eliminate herself.



THE PUREMANE COMPANY

Hand-picked by Korhil to aid in his treachery, these white lion guards had resisted the influence of Tyrion and Morathi just as their captain had. They did not doubt the reason for their fortitude, ascribing it to the traits of stubbornness and honour that have ever been cornerstones of the Chracian warrior's code. Even so, by the time Korhil marched north from Tor Alin, his companions' resistance was due more to Adranna sheltering their souls from the growing shadow than any innate strength of character. Each of the Puremane Company understood the enormity of the task before them and was prepared to die in its prosecution. Like Korhil, they held themselves partially responsible for what had come to pass, and sought absolution in unmaking Tyrion's madness.

- ***Hellebron, the Crone Queen of Har Ganeth***
- ***Korhil, Captain of the Lion Guard***
- ***Shadowblade***
- ***The Sisters of Singing Doom***
  One cult of Witch Elves
- ***The Bloodmaidens***
  One cult of Witch Elves
- ***The Hookclaws***
  One cult of Witch Elves
- ***The Daggers of Darkness***
  One cult of Witch Elves
- ***The Bloodcleave***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Severed Ones***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Shatterskulls***
  One cabal of Executioners
- ***The Hellebronai***
  Two legions of Dreadspears
- ***The Oathblooded***
  One legion of Dreadspears, one legion of Bleakswords and one legion of Darkshards
- ***The Puremane Company***
  One pride of White Lions
- ***The Shrine of Slaughter***
  One Cauldron of Blood
- ***The Shrine of Righteous Murder***
  One Cauldron of Blood
- ***The Shrine of Red Repentance***
  One Bloodwrack Shrine
- ***Warlocks of Bitter Night***
  One coven of Doomfire Warlocks
- ***Warlocks of Endless Dark***
  One coven of Doomfire Warlocks
- ***Khaine's Daughters***
  One flock of Harpies

MORATHI'S HUNTERS

There was no greater proof of Ulthuan's slide into madness than the fact that Morathi – acclaimed by many as the first true dark elf – was now not only Tyrion's consort, but also a warleader in her own right. Blood was washing the old certainties away.



PRINCE DANNOR

Few Ulthuani fell under the influence of Tyrion and Morathi so swiftly as Prince Dannor. The youngest and most wayward of three siblings, he stood to inherit little from his father's estate. Thus did Dannor plot to improve his fortunes, bringing about his father's execution and his sister's disgrace. Only Dalroth – Dannor's elder brother – was spared. At the time of the betrayal, even Dannor balked at betraying all of his kin, and convinced himself that Dalroth's removal was unnecessary. However, greed is a powerful motivator. By the time his allies located Korhil, Dannor was scheming to remove even Dalroth from his path.

MORATHI, THE HAG SORCERESS

Morathi came to battle with fury tempered by relief. Korhil's deception had been swiftly discovered, and his accomplices slaughtered, but the captain had left no clue to his destination. Tyrion, deeming that Korhil would make for the forests of Avelorn, led pursuit westward. Morathi, far more steeped in deception than he, followed her instincts north. As escort, the Hag Sorceress brought Prince Dannor and his household guard. All had whiled away enough hours in the company of Morathi's handmaidens for her to be quite confident of their loyalty, even with Tyrion so far afield.





KERRINATH OF SAPHERY

The path of the loremaster has always been one fraught with temptation. Elves are compulsive by nature, obsessive in pursuing their chosen course – even if it leads them into danger. So had it ever been for Kerrinath, who many times met with censure from his fellow loremasters for delving into long-forbidden arts. With Morathi's arrival in Ulthuan, not only did Kerrinath have a patron who was content for him to explore sorcery, he also had a tutor – not that Morathi had any intention of sharing more than a fraction of her knowledge, of course.

THE BLADES OF HOETH

Though they were outwardly loyal to Kerrinath, many of this swordmaster bodyguard were uneasy with the path their master had chosen. Most had fought alongside the loremaster long enough to know his interests too often slipped into the realm of the unhealthy. Nevertheless, duty is duty, and the Blades of Hoeth were sworn to Kerrinath's side. If they abandoned the errant loremaster now, or so the swordmasters reasoned, no other would be able to guide him back into the light. Such would likely be a difficult journey, so completely had Morathi ensnared Kerrinath, but hope's cages are no less binding than those forged by despair.





THE RAVENSPEARS

Nowhere had Morathi's influence spread so deeply as amongst the dark riders of the northern wastes. The Ravenspears were one of five patrol-hosts meant to be standing sentry north of the Naggarothi watchtowers, there to seek out incipient danger and carry word south to Naggarond. However, when Morathi foresaw the Bloodied Horde's invasion, she suborned the Ravenspears to join her own garrison at Ghrond, thus denying Malekith of warning even as she strengthened her own position. Now the Ravenspears served Morathi, as so many did, out of equal parts fear and ensorcelled love. So profound was the spell that most did not even recall the lives they led before the Hag Sorceress' gaze fell upon them.



THE EVERAST SENTINELS

The Everast Sentinels were Prince Dannor's household guard. In the preceding decades, their record was an honourable and storied one, replete with tales of valiant battle against Naggarothi corsairs and the beasts of the Annulii. Such days were naught but a memory, so cruel had the Everast Sentinels become, but those who stand tallest often have furthest to fall. Like many Cothiqui regiments during the End Times, the Everast Sentinels eschewed the traditional sea blues of their kingdom in favour of the deeper shades sported by Lothern and Sapherian regiments. This change was wrought in imitation of Tyrion, who, even though his family hailed from Cothique, always bore Lothern colours, out of respect to Finubar the Seafarer.

- ***Morathi, the Hag Sorceress***
- ***Prince Dannor***
  High Elf Prince
- ***Kerrinath of Saphery***
  Loremaster of Hoeth
- ***The Blood Coven***
  Three Sorceresses
- ***The Blades of Hoeth***
  One honour guard of Swordmasters
- ***The Ravenspears***
  Three vanguards of Dark Riders
- ***The Everast Sentinels***
  Four legions of High Elf Spearmen, one legion of High Elf Archers
- ***Selekan Guard***
  Two legions of Dreadspears, two legions of Darkshards
- ***The Skullbearers***
  Two legions of Bleakswords, two legions of Darkshards
- ***Voiceless Ones***
  One legion of Dreadspears
- ***Knights of Burning Dark***
  One scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***Harbingers of the Scoured Abyss***
  One scalegeld of Cold One Chariots
- ***The Knights of Tor Alin***
  Two sworn-hosts of Silver Helms
- ***The Shrine of Red Ruin***
  One Bloodwrack Shrine
- ***The Scions of Underworld Sky***
  One tribe of Shades
- ***The Nightbrothers***
  One tribe of Shades

THE TRAITOR'S DUE

As the dark riders thundered down the slope, Korhil knew that he would never reach the dubious safety of Hellebron's forces in time. A short way to the north, the overgrown and tumbled stones of Analdar's Shrine lay in a sunken hollow. It was a poor enough place to make a stand, but it was the only one in reach. The white lions had covered perhaps half the distance to Analdar's Shrine when the dark riders caught them amongst a strand of half-sunken trees. Realising that he had no choice but to fight, Korhil ordered his company to a halt, and had them counter the charge with one of their own.

A handful of white lions fell as the spears thrust home. However, the boggy ground had robbed much of the charge's impetus, and most of the dark elves' strikes wasted themselves on thick lion pelts or the armour beneath. In return, the axes of Chrace hacked deep through horseflesh and bone. Crippled horses screamed their last and slid to a bloody halt in the murk as the axes bit, and those riders who survived their steeds' demise were soon cut in twain by a white lion's second swing.

Still the dark elves came, a flood of dark cloaks and wicked spears to sweep Korhil's company away. Chayal hacked down again and again, each sweep of its silvered blade spraying blood into the marshes, but Korhil knew well enough the fight was going against him. Worse, the dark elves did not need to slay the white lions in order to claim victory, only delay them long enough for the hastening reinforcements to reach their side. The voice of the Widowmaker rose in strength to match Korhil's fears, begging for release, and the captain found his hand practically upon the weapon's hilt before he snatched it hurriedly away. Live or die, he would do so on his own terms, not as a slave to Khaine.

As another wave of spears crashed home against the beleaguered white lions, a shadow slipped from the treetops above. Shadowblade had trailed Korhil's march all through Cothique, though he doubted any had marked his presence. The assassin could have taken the Widowmaker at any time, had Hellebron not been clear in her command that he was not to touch the blade. Though Shadowblade was not permitted to bring the sword to his mistress himself, the assassin was determined that Korhil should survive to do so.

Shadowblade landed light-footedly on the haunches of a charging horse, his forearms closing fast about the rider's skull before the other had marked his presence. A heartbeat later, the assassin wrenched his victim's head a quarter-circle to the left. There was a sharp crack, and the dark elf slid out of his saddle to splash in the mire. The corpse tangled in the legs of the next horse along, and that outrider too went down in a tumble of screams and flailing limbs. Shadowblade was already moving, leaping for the galloping steed to his front. Steel glinted as shuriken flew from the assassin's hands, slicing deep into the flanks of two more steeds. The horses reared high in pain, and two dark elves were flung backwards into their own ranks, trampled bloody before they had time to utter a sound. Shadowblade's daggers were in his hands as he landed, the steel flashing as he slit another rider's throat and heaved him into a bank of reeds.

Some of the dark riders had realised the danger now. Crossbow bolts spat in Shadowblade's direction but the shots went wide. Not so the assassin's return strikes, and two more dark riders toppled from their saddles, as Shadowblade leapt into the branches above. Swinging to a new perch, he readied another pair of shuriken and looked for his next target.

Korhil sensed, rather than saw, the dark riders collapse into disorder. The charging spears, so tightly ordered to that point, broke apart, the horses scattering as they tried to escape the death that was loose within their ranks. Mud sucking at his heels, the captain ordered his white lions to break off and make for the shrine. A few dark riders spurred after them, but more shuriken came from above, and the pursuit fell into chaos.

From his perch amongst the boughs, Shadowblade could see much that was yet hidden to Korhil. All across the low hills, warbands of dark riders flocked like carrion birds drawn to a feast. To the south, beyond the bend of the Eselli River, he could see banners of Cothique and Ghrond as they advanced through the thin drizzle so common in Cothique. Morathi rode amongst the host, her sorceries no doubt hastening their steps. But to the north, just behind the hollow that concealed Analdar's Shrine, the assassin saw a grander sight by far. An army of livid reds and crimsons advanced along that smooth slope, the jagged silhouette of Hellebron's cauldron-shrine rising high above even the tallest banners. The assassin could see that Korhil's company had at last reached the shrine, and permitted himself a smile. His duty was done, for the present. Now was the time for revenge.

At first, the battle was a sporadic affair. Both Morathi's and Hellebron's forces had been arrayed for march, and much time was lost as regiments shook themselves into fighting formations in the cloying marshland. The first clashes were between the roaming dark riders of Morathi's host and the tattooed shades whose loyalty Hellebron had purchased long ago. Crossbow bolts whined about the stones of the shrine as the two skirmish lines duelled, for the ground was too treacherous there for even

elven horsemen to risk a headlong charge. Korhil's company made no attempt to join the battle, but took shelter amongst the crooked stones as the corpses splashed into the mud.

When the armies clashed, they did so determined to settle old scores. Ghrond and Har Ganeth had been rivals just as long as had their mistresses, and their warriors needed no encouragement to kill. Even the Cothiqui fought with desperate fervour, for they were yet deep within the Shadow of Khaine even though Tyrion himself was far afield. None of the sea elves fought so determinedly as Prince Dannor. Morathi, wanting to make sure of his loyalty, had lavished seductive attention upon him during the march, all the while stoking his disgust at how his sister had sought comfort in a low-born Chracian. Whilst most of Morathi's host fought for her, and for Tyrion, Dannor came to claim Korhil's head. Thus did the largest phalanx in Morathi's host march not against Hellebron's army, but directly down upon the shrine where the white lions waited.

The two hosts were well-matched. Morathi's force was the larger of the two. Dannor had roused every militia band he could on their northward march, and the arrows of keen-eyed Cothiqui archers fell like rain amongst the warriors of Har Ganeth. Another foe would perhaps have broken and fled beneath that deluge of death, but Hellebron's forces were the survivors of the battle with the Bloodied Horde in Naggaroth. The males were Khaine's chosen executioners, or warlocks seeking sanctuary from thirsting Slaanesh; the females were witch elves, handmaidens of slaughter. They could feel their god's presence, and took the boiling in their veins as proof that the Crone Queen led them to war in Khaine's name. Only the shades fought without Khaine's blessing, but as the vile liquid in Hellebron's cauldron began to bubble and spit, they forgot their fears as surely as any.

The witch elves came shrieking to the fight, heedless of the mud sucking at their heels, and careless of the arrows and bolts that fell amongst their ranks. Blood burst livid red against pale skin as the shots slammed home, but Khaine's handmaidens felt neither pain nor fear. The injured staggered on until they were trampled by the unwounded that came behind. The dead fell where they lay, wild grins frozen on their faces as the mud closed over them. By contrast, the executioners advanced at steady pace, every rank marching in unison, every blade held ready in anticipation of the slaughter to come. Seldom did an arrow draw blood amongst these ranks, for most shattered against skull-helms and chainmail skirts.

The witch elves struck Prince Dannor's phalanx like a wind of blades. The Cothiqui warriors fought with spears braced and shields locked, but the handmaidens of Khaine crashed into the line with no thought for the danger. Spears thrust forward, impaling pale flesh, but still the witch elves came on, the wounded hauling their skewered bodies down the spears until their strength failed. Most of these perished before they had taken another step, but as they collapsed the dead weight dragged the spears down into the marsh. Before fresh weapons could be brought forward, the next rank of witch elves surged through the gap, blades flashing and eyes gleaming.

Prince Dannor held to his purpose as the phalanx collapsed. Through threats and sheer stubbornness he rescued a few score spears from the unfolding rout, and sent them wading through the thick reeds to the overgrown shrine. As the Cothiqui militia reached the summit, Korhil ordered his company against them, and high elf fought high elf amongst the reeds. There, on the edge of the stone pit where offerings had once been made to Drakira, Goddess of Vengeance, Chayal clashed with the longsword of Prince Dannor.



As the thin rain grew more forceful, Morathi swept matted hair from her eyes. She saw that the Cothiqui phalanx was torn apart from within, but merely snorted with derision. Such cat's paws were easily replaced, and she yet had a battlefield's worth of soldiery to do her bidding. Even as she watched, black-lacquered chariots sped across the firm ground on the battlefield's eastern flank and crashed into a mass of howling witch elves. Some of the Har Ganethi darted aside, but many more were mangled beneath steel wheels, or else were torn to scraps by snarling cold ones that feasted upon their uncovered flesh.

Further to the east, far from the blood-spattered reeds of Analdar's Shrine, skull-helmed executioners hacked their way through a regiment of Ghrondian spears, only to find their path blocked by tall-helmed swordmasters. Kerrinath of Saphery was one the few loremasters who had been lured to Morathi's cause. Now he led his bodyguard into the fray, recently-learnt sorceries crackling from his fingertips to cook his enemies within their armour.

The Har Ganethi were pressed close on all fronts, penned in by the superior numbers, but they cared not. To their mind, more foes meant more blood to be shed in their god's name. Only in the centre of the field, where the thin waters of the Eseli trickled through a field of stones, did Hellebron's forces advance, for it was here that the Crone Queen fought.



Ghrondian warriors, desperate to please their mistress, swept over the cauldron-shrine as it rumbled through the mud, the spirit of Khaine that drove it refusing to be impeded by the filth of Cothique. All who laid hand upon the cauldron-shrine's jagged form perished, hacked bloodily apart by Hellebron or her attendants. None slew more than the Crone Queen that day. Blood spattered across her skin; it mingled with the rain and ran in rivers down the steps of her shrine to pool in the corpse-strewn mire. Through it all, Hellebron was haunted by memories not her own, of another battle for Khaine's favour that had ended long ago. The recollections vanished into mist as the Crone Queen grasped for them, leaving only the sound of Morathi's mocking laughter behind. That frustration drove Hellebron into ever greater bloodlust, and it seemed to those present that a crimson halo rested upon her brow. With each blow she struck, the more fiercely the cauldron bubbled, and the louder the witch elves yowled.

Morathi paid Hellebron no heed, for to do so would have been to let the Crone Queen believe she was worthy of attention. Instead, she lavished her sorceries upon the warlocks who rode upon the battle's flanks and sent crackling bolts of darkness against the dark riders and Ghrondian darkshards. Splinters of obsidian magic gathered between the Hag Sorceress' outstretched hands, then swept out at her command, each cluster hissing through the rain like a swarm of malevolent insects. Most of the warlocks perished before they realised their danger, the flesh picked clean from their bones. Morathi shrieked in mirth at the sight. What had begun as a desperate chase had now become yet another opportunity to humiliate Hellebron, and the Hag Sorceress was determined to enjoy it.

Then Shadowblade struck.

Morathi saw the glimmer of movement a heartbeat too late. Shadowblade's feet slammed into the sorceress' chest, knocking her from Sulephet's back to splash into the sodden mud. Before Morathi could muster even the smallest cantrip, the assassin's knees were on her shoulders, and his fingers clamped across her mouth.

'You chained my mind, and shame rots me from within,' the assassin hissed. 'I bring recompense.'

Morathi saw the sheen of a dagger, and felt a burning pain high upon her cheek.

'Less beautiful now,' Shadowblade murmured. 'One scar for each dawn a slave. Expect another soon.'

Despite herself, Morathi flinched. Then the weight upon her shoulders vanished, and Shadowblade with it.

With a scream of rage, the sorceress sent dark fire coursing after the assassin, turning the air about her to steam, but Shadowblade was long gone.

As concerned handmaidens clustered near, Morathi slicked the marsh's filth from her limbs, then raised a hand to her injured face. The cut was shallow, and scarcely an inch long, but her fingers burnt where they touched the wound. She knew at once there had been poison on the blade, and that it would leave her skin forever marred.

With an animal shriek that had nothing to do with the pain from the wound, Morathi loosed her fires once again, this time against the handmaidens whose incompetence had permitted such indignity.

As the screams faded and the handmaidens' ashes scattered on the breeze, Morathi clambered onto Sulephet's back, her limbs trembling with humiliation and rage.

All at once, the enjoyment Morathi had taken in the battle drained away, leaving only sour dregs. As she cast her eyes over the clashing lines, she no longer cared if Hellebron thought her weak – she just wanted to shame the Crone Queen as she herself had been shamed. The skies darkened, and the Hag Sorceress revelled in the heightened power she had known these last months. Livid violet lightning arced from the clouds to smite the cauldron of blood which Hellebron rode, melting its frame to twisted slag. The statue of Khaine shattered with a colossal boom, the shockwave casting elves from their feet for hundreds of yards around.

Of those who had fought upon the cauldron, only Hellebron was thrown clear into the churned marsh. She barely felt the impact of the statue's explosion, or the gobbets of molten brass that scalded her skin, for her mind was numbed at the cauldron's loss. The vessel which had restored her youth for thousands of years was gone. There were others she could yet make use of, but that one had been the finest of its kind – moreover, it had been hers! The rage that swiftly followed drove Hellebron to her feet, and into the heart of Kerinath's swordmasters. The skills that had enabled the high elves to prevail against the executioners quickly proved insufficient against the slighted Crone Queen. Scattering dismembered swordmasters before her, Hellebron seized the loremaster and tore out his throat with her teeth.

Yet no matter how frenzied Hellebron had become, the battle was at last slipping away from her. With the cauldron gone, Khaine's blessings fell away from the elves of Har Ganeth, and the fury faded from their eyes. Little by little, Morathi's superior numbers began to tell. The banners of Har Ganeth fell, and did not rise.

All of this went unnoticed by Korhil, who yet strove with Dannor amongst the shrine's vine-tangled stones. Both prince and captain each bled from a dozen wounds, but the white lion had the better of his opponent, and Dannor knew it. That the prince still lived was testament less to his own skill, and more to the sibilant voice that echoed through Korhil's head, distracting him with its urges to draw the Widowmaker.

At last, Korhil's guard slipped, and Dannor spied his opening. With a cry of triumph, the prince thrust forward, little realising that he had fallen into Korhil's trap. Chayal came around as the captain twisted aside, cleaving three of Dannor's fingers where they gripped his sword's hilt. The prince screamed and fell sideways, grasping at the wound with his good hand. Then Chayal flashed out once more. Dannor's sobs ended as his head was struck clean from his shoulders, and his twitching body toppled into the offering pit.

Korhil had won his private battle and avenged no few insults levelled at Adranna during the exchange, but as he looked out across the battlefield, he knew only the bitter taste of failure. The army of Har Ganeth was in full flight, Hellebron being all but dragged from the field by a captain of executioners who would surely know reward or death before dusk fell. As for Korhil's company, all were dead, though they had given good account of themselves before they had fallen.

A winged shadow fell over Korhil, and the captain felt weariness overtake him. Chayal slipped from Korhil's grime-flecked hands, and he knew his battle was ended.

'Little lion,' mocked Morathi as Sulephet landed gracefully in front of Korhil. 'It seems I underestimated you, but now your pride are all slain, and your prowling has at last come to an end.'

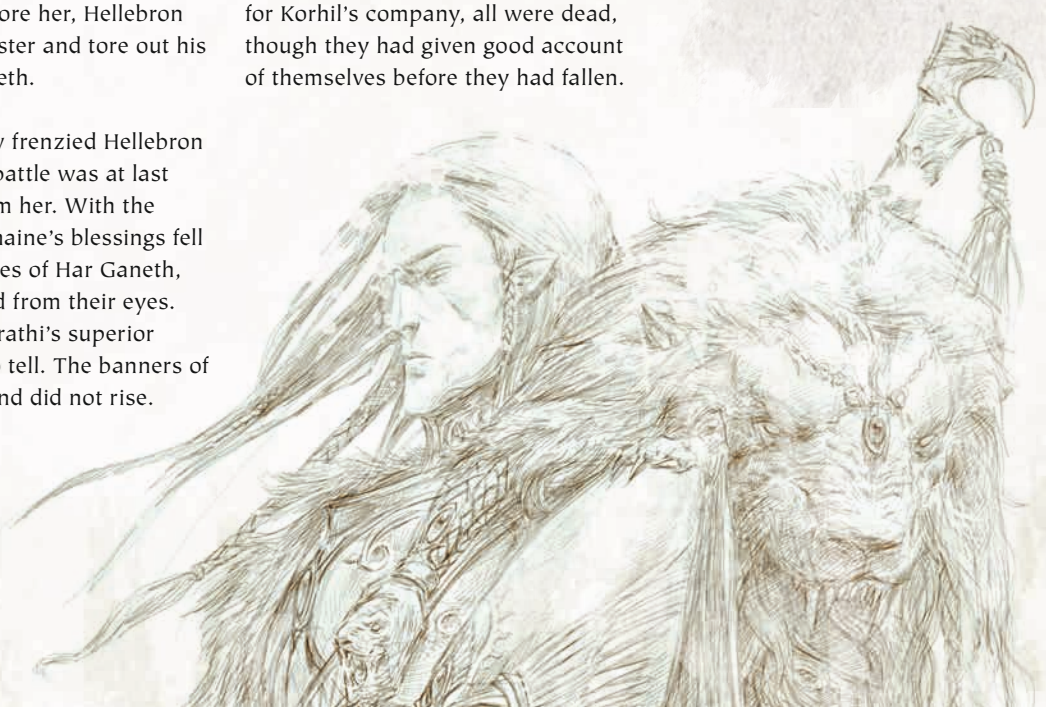
Korhil scarcely heard the sorceress speak. The Widowmaker's voice had grown louder with Dannor's death, drowning out all other sounds.

Kill her!* it demanded. *Kill her, and seek your queen upon the field below. She waits for you amongst the slain.

With an effort, Korhil reached beneath his cloak to where the Widowmaker's sword belt was concealed. The captain heard the voice's approving hiss turn to one of anger as his hand brushed past the hilt and instead unclasped the belt.

'You win,' said Korhil defiantly, throwing the Widowmaker, scabbard and all, onto the bloodied stones before him. 'Kill me, and let me be done with all this.'

'Oh I will,' Morathi promised, as Sulephet shifted restless beneath her. 'But not yet.'









Though Korhil had failed to put the Widowmaker beyond Tyrion's use, his actions had not entirely been in vain. Adranna had arrived in Lothern before the Widowmaker had even been stolen, and Malekith saw the opportunity that Korhil had inadvertently placed before him.

As Tyrion scattered his forces north and east in search of Korhil, the Phoenix King's armies were also on the march. They travelled not over land, nor on the Sea of Dreams, where Aislinn's ships still prowled. Instead this fresh campaign was launched from within the worldroots. Freed from logistical constraints, Malekith's armies streamed through eastern Eataine and into Saphery, reclaiming territory lost earlier in the year.

Moving so many armies – and so quickly – through the worldroots placed a great strain on Alarielle. Neither Araloth, nor any other in Malekith's council could match the Everqueen's mastery of the ancient pathways, and so the burden fell upon her, and her alone. Often, Alarielle laboured long into the night guiding some new host into position, and every morning her face was drawn and weary. Yet none ever heard her speak a word of complaint or despair.

Swift as it was, the campaign to retake Saphery was easily as bloody as any yet fought. Tyrion had not been entirely blind to the danger growing in the south, and had sent his most loyal lieutenants to guard against it. These princes proclaimed themselves the aestyrion – the Sons of Tyrion – and fought with fanatical fury to deny Malekith's advance.

Nowhere was this more evident than during the siege of Tesselia. There, one of the aestyrion – a cruel-minded lordling named Killin, who had descended into madness almost as swiftly as Tyrion himself – ordered his mages to drown the city in wild magic in the moment that Malekith's troops flooded into the ruined streets. Even as Killin fell, his body pierced by a score of arrows, a swirling rift exploded into life at Tesselia's heart. The rift's fury claimed every soldier and stone within the city before its appetite was sated, but the magic that had birthed it never truly faded. Tesselia, once the jewel of Saphery, was gone forever. In its place was left a barren landscape where the voices of the damned howled through the ice-cold winds.

Killin was the worst of the aestyrion, but those who remained were as cruel as any dark elf who had ever lived. As Malekith's armies swept on, the aestyrion ordered the citizenry of Saphery to take up arms in Tyrion's cause. Most of those who acceded did so only to save their families. They perished by the thousand, driven forth in the vanguard to waste the enemy's arrows and weary the invaders' arms whilst the aestyrion kept their elites in reserve. That this cruelty failed to change the course of even a single battle only added to the tragedy.

Not all of Saphery's citizens complied with the aestyrion's demands. Most of these dissenters were rounded up and slaughtered, or else used to bait ambushes for Malekith's forces. Those armies led by the Phoenix King's dreadlords simply ignored such provocation and held true to their orders, for what did they care if one group of Ulthuani slaughtered another? The same could not be said of Imrik's dragon knights, whose recklessness cost them dear even as they sought to rescue the captives. However, this cruelty was ultimately self-destructive to Tyrion's cause. When Malekith arrived at the Tower of Hoeth to demand the loremasters' allegiance, he found the gates open and its swordmasters arrayed in his honour. Finreir had forsaken neutrality in the face of such barbarism.

All this Tyrion learned on his return to Tor Alin, though in his arrogance he did not act at once. Morathi had

returned more than a week earlier. She had placed the Widowmaker once more in its vault, this time taking care to ensure that its guardians were bound by enchantments that would cease their hearts in the event of treachery. As for Korhil, he languished behind the thick door of a dungeon. The captain had journeyed the many leagues from Analdar's Shrine on the end of a chain trailed from a Naggarothi chariot. Scarcely an inch of his skin was unmarred by blood or bruise, and the flesh hung loose from his bones in too many places, but he had not cried out, instead retreating into bitter and brooding silence.

Morathi did not need to ask the cause of Tyrion's delay, for the western horizon glowed an angry orange. Avelorn was afire, its ancient woodlands collapsing into lifeless ash. Such was the price the Avelorni had paid for Tyrion's humiliation at Withelan. Scarcely half the soldiers who had ridden with Tyrion returned to Tor Alin, but the prince's victory was as obvious as it was glorious. Hundreds of Avelorni prisoners trailed in his army's wake, bound in long lines by barbed chains.

Tyrion flew into a rage at the reminder of Korhil's betrayal. The sorceress, who was well used to such mercurial displays, soothed her lover's wrath, then made a gift of the heavy key to Korhil's cell. As the moon rose over Tor Alin, Tyrion made his way into the bowels of the mansion and passed into the makeshift dungeon. In the hours that followed, Korhil's silence was at last broken beneath the bludgeons of Tyrion's gauntlets. Save Morathi, none who dwelt in Tor Alin slept well that night, so terrible were the screams.

The next morning, the princes of Tyrion's armies were summoned before the gates of Tor Alin, where a new shrine to Khaine had been raised using stone taken from the temple of Asuryan that had once dominated the city's heart. There, they witnessed as the prince beheaded the Avelorni prisoners one by one with the reclaimed Widowmaker. The display of butchery lasted the better part of the day, but Tyrion did not tire – rather, he grew more frenetic with each body that collapsed lifeless to the gore-drenched stones.

As each head fell, Morathi seized it by a handful of its blood-soaked hair and hurled it into the baying crowd. The sorceress thrilled to see how readily the once-staid princes of Ulthuan fought amongst themselves for these foul tokens of favour, and she saw more than one dagger flash as one prince slew another to claim the prize as his own. After many thousands of years, Morathi at last felt as if she had come home.



As the last Avelorni prisoner was brought forth, Korhil was dragged to the shrine's summit by a pair of Morathi's handmaidens. He could not have made the journey himself. Tyrion's wrath of the previous eve had left the captain's legs a mess of mangled bone; his eyes empty and ragged holes. Korhil's body might have been broken, but his resolve was undimmed. Even as he was led to his death, he called out to Tyrion, begging the prince to see what he had become before others suffered. Tyrion struck Korhil to silence with a gauntleted fist, and ordered him dragged to the centre of the shrine.

Yet the final stroke that would take Korhil's life was not to be Tyrion's. Instead, this cruel honour was granted to Prince Dalroth, in recompense for his brother's death and what was seen as his sister's corruption. Of all the blows struck that day, this was the only one not struck with the Widowmaker. Instead, it was Korhil's own axe Chayal that was to serve as the executioner.

'Hold!' Morathi's voice cut effortlessly through the raucous tumult of the crowd.

Dalroth paused in mid strike, and he glanced at Tyrion for approval. Morathi saw the prince nod – as she knew he would – and Chayal's blade was set aside. Pausing only to give a slight bow to her lover, Morathi walked across the stones, revelling in the warmth of the spilt blood as it oozed between her toes.

'This is your end, little lion,' Morathi purred softly, crouching at Korhil's side, 'but it does not have to be so. Pledge to serve me as loyally as you once served Tyrion, and I will not only see you spared, I will raise you up higher than you have ever been.'

'My death means nothing,' Korhil whispered, his bitter defiance sweet in Morathi's ears. 'I was a fool, and I pay a fool's price. Others will break your enchantment.'

'Really?' Morathi mocked. She ran one perfect fingernail around the crusted wound of Korhil's left eye socket. The other flinched in pain, and the sorceress laughed as she licked the dried blood from her finger.

'Stubborn to the last,' she said, 'but know this: the enchantment is not mine. Tyrion is not under my spell; I am under his, and our glorious rule shall last an eternity. Think on that as the axe falls.'

Turning her back on Korhil, Morathi rose to face Dalroth. 'That is a beautiful weapon, but perhaps a little unwieldy,' she told him. 'No one would think ill of you if it took more than one stroke to finish the job.'

Dalroth's thin features twisted into a wolfish grin, and he raised Chayal high once again...

Adranna's enchantments had bound her closer to Korhil than the other had known. Thus, when Chayal at last ended the captain's life, the princess soon after brought word of it to Malekith's council. Adranna's grief was twofold. Korhil's death laid heavy upon the princess, even though she knew that she could have done little to prevent it. Worse was the knowledge that if Korhil was taken, then so was the Widowmaker.

Malekith felt no sympathy for Adranna's personal loss. He was grudgingly impressed that Korhil had possessed the temerity to challenge Tyrion, but this slight respect was instantly undermined by the Phoenix King's disdain for the captain's failure. None of this, however, prevented Malekith from realising the full implication of events: with his blade returned, Tyrion was whole once more. Thus were the Phoenix King's armies marching hard for the border between Saphery and Cothique, even before the first survivors brought word of the razing of Avelorn.

Weeks of bitter fighting followed. The mountain passes between glittering Saphery and mournful Cothique were in no place as wide as those watched over by the great western gates, but there were myriad lesser paths all the same. Battles erupted on the shoulders of the Annulii, never fought between more than a few hundred elves, sometimes contested by less than a dozen. The peaks shook with the fury of spell and counterspell, and scouts darted between the rocks, ears seldom hearing the bowshots that claimed their lives. Often, the sounds of battle roused the beasts of the upper slopes: manticores, chimerae and other warped creatures that came roaring from their lairs. Little by little, the passes were choked with the dead, the high mountain streams dammed by bodies.

Malekith's shieldwalls held for as long as they were able, but in such tight confines the fury of Tyrion's followers could not be withstood. Even the dragons of Caledor could not tip the balance. Morathi's handmaidens used magic to bind the denizens of the slopes to their will, and the dragon princes and phoenix knights were torn from the skies by great flocks of the Annulii's savage denizens bent to a single purpose. To give them their due, the Caledorians were determined to continue the battle against this army of monsters, even despite their horrific losses. However, Malekith forcefully ordered the dragon princes to withdraw and instructed for the passes to be abandoned. The princes of Caledor were the brightest of all the gems in Malekith's crown, and he did not wish to see their light extinguished for little gain.

Malekith was still far from loved by those of Ulthuan's populace who had fallen under his rule. Indeed, many princes whispered of his overthrow, unable to countenance the Witch King of Naggaroth lingering upon the Phoenix Throne. None of this was as secret from Malekith as the conspirators would have wished, for his spies were everywhere. Teclis' calm counsel saved many a prince from the consequences of his own rash words, but not all. Malekith had been too long a tyrant to let such intrigue pass unmarked. However, demonstrating a wholly alien restraint, the Phoenix King did not order his enemies executed. Instead, he elevated them to the highest of military ranks, and sent them to take command of the front lines. Malekith trusted to Tyrion's forces to slay his enemies, and the Phoenix King was seldom disappointed.

If Ulthuan's princes remained far from sanguine about accepting Malekith as their king, few could honestly doubt the determination with which he fought for his new land. As Tyrion's forces pushed into Saphery, Malekith fought tirelessly with fire and with sword. At Tyrasel, Malekith stood alone against many times his number, holding back a baying horde of blood-mad Cothiqui whilst his army withdrew. At Tor Amin, he led the dragon princes of Caledor in the charge that tore Morathi's army of monsters to talon-raked scraps, even as it bore down upon Caradryan's hopelessly outnumbered band of Phoenix Guard.

Upon each bloody field, Malekith gave challenge to Tyrion, demanded that the Dragon of Cothique face him in single combat. Not once did the Phoenix King's taunts draw Tyrion forth. The prince was no more eager to confront Malekith than Khaine had once been to confront Asuryan. Besides, Tyrion had no need to defeat the Phoenix King directly – not whilst his armies were sweeping aside all before them, as they continued to do.

The elves under Tyrion's sway were immune to all but the blackest terror, and fought with the strength of the possessed. With each battle Tyrion won, the Shadow of Khaine grew stronger, and many lords and princes who had thus far remained neutral now fell under his sway. Warriors from Chrace and far off Tiranoc could now be sighted in the prince's ranks, as could corsairs from the fleet once commanded by Drane Brackblood. It seemed that two unbloodied warriors came forth for each of the Khaine-struck elves felled in battle. Thus did even the grandest victory for Malekith's forces end in retreat, with the phalanxes of Lothern and Caledor seldom given time enough even to honour their dead before marching hurriedly southwards once again.

The last battle upon the Finuval plains was fought amidst the ruins of Tor Ellian, a city crushed to rubble in one of Malekith's long-ago campaigns and now all but reclaimed by the forest of Finuval's Edge. There, under Prince Dalroth, the aestyrion crushed the Phoenix King's left flank, and would have ridden the greater part of Malekith's army to ruin, had not the wood elves arrived from Athel Loren at that very moment. Emerging from

the depths of the worldroots, the asrai caught Dalroth's phalanxes in their undefended rear, and thus won victory from what would otherwise have been a crushing defeat.

Thousands of wood elves and forest spirits perished at Tor Ellian, but their sacrifice rescued tens of thousands of Malekith's followers. Adranna was amongst those who owed the folk of Athel Loren her life, for she had been taken captive whilst attempting to slay her corrupted brother. Naestra and Arahan, the daughters of Ariel, had led the charge to free the princess, and Dalroth himself had been carried from the field, his shoulder pierced by one of Arahan's arrows. In the aftermath, the wood elf host marched with Malekith's army, sworn never to abandon the Everqueen's side until the war was ended, one way or the other. Alas, the victory at Tor Ellian was but the prologue to a long and weary retreat. Yet still Malekith fought on, with Alarielle ever at his left hand and Imrik at his right.

With his campaign in jeopardy, Malekith sent Teclis across the Ten Kingdoms, carrying a message that commanded all princes to prove, in battle, their loyalty to the Phoenix Throne. This garnered some success, although those princes who brought their blades to Malekith's side did so chiefly because of the messenger's persuasive tongue. Yet still there were those who refused allegiance to either Malekith or Tyrion. Some did so out of fear, others out of pride. However, there were those who judged neither side worthy of victory, such was the ruin they had wrought.



'You are not welcome here.'

The voice was soft, but cold as ice, and spoken so close that Teclis could feel the other's breath upon the back of his neck. With an effort, the mage kept his composure and turned. How the challenger had come so close without betraying his presence, Teclis couldn't fathom.

'The Shadow King lives up to his reputation,' said Teclis.

For a long moment, the bitter wind whistling through the confines of the pass was the only sound. To the east lay the charred forests of Chrace; to the west, the bleak and mist-laden expanse of Nagarythe began.

'I know why you have come,' Alith Anar said at last, 'and the answer is no.'

'Even when the fate of Ulthuan hangs in the balance?'

The Shadow King laughed bitterly. 'Let me show you something.'

Without another word, he strode the last dozen paces to the pass' end. Frowning, Teclis followed, bracing his staff against the uneven ground.

'Nagarythe was ever the least populous of the Ten Kingdoms,' said Alith Anar. 'Now look at it.'

The Shadow King swept his hand across the valley below, and the mist parted. To Teclis' surprise, it was thick with campfires and tents. They stretched as far as the eye could see, nestling in old ruins and tangled gorse.

'I had no idea.'

'Nagarythe now offers the only refuge in all Ulthuan,' said Alith Anar. 'Neither your master...'

'He's not my master.'

Alith Anar ignored the interruption. '...nor your brother dare challenge me. Thus has the bitter king of Nagarythe become the last hope of thousands.' He laughed without humour. 'What strength remains in this land is pledged to their fate, not Malekith's.'

Suddenly the air was full of crows, their thunderous wing beats echoing through the pass. When they dispersed, Teclis was alone.



Even as his armies fell back, the Phoenix King displayed an arrogance as monstrous as any who had claimed the throne before him, and was determined to crush Tyrion's armies and slay the prince in battle. However, Teclis argued that such a course was doomed to failure. The Dragon of Cothique's armies would continue to grow whilst Malekith's shrank. Even if victory could somehow be claimed, Teclis insisted, it would take many years before Ulthuan was truly whole again. Even then, he continued, Tyrion was not the true threat, just as Khaine was never the true threat in the wars of the gods. The Dark Gods were rising once again, fed by the slaughter in Ulthuan and elsewhere. The elves would yet have to stand against their threat, and victory over Tyrion was pointless if it left Malekith's own forces so crippled that they could not defeat the minions of the Chaos Gods. The only hope, Teclis insisted, was to marshal a power that even Tyrion could not defeat – they would have to travel to the Isle of the Dead, shatter the Great Vortex and make its magic their own.

The Phoenix King was furious. He recalled well his own long-ago effort to unmake the enchantments of Caledor Dragontamer, an attempt that had shattered Ulthuan. Malekith had waited too long and sacrificed too much to claim the throne of Ulthuan – he would not risk his kingdom on the counsel of despair when spears might yet win victory.

Teclis was surprised at the vehemence of Malekith's response. Until that moment, he had not truly believed that the Witch King of old would forgo the opportunity for greater power, no matter the risk – and there was certainly great power to be had. Just as Nagash had striven to become a conduit for death magic, Teclis' proposal presented Malekith with the opportunity to bind one of the eight winds to himself, and thus become nothing less than a god in mortal form.

Privately, Teclis lamented that it was a poor time for Malekith to at last be contented with his lot. However, when he spoke again, it was to assure the Phoenix King that Nagash's theft of death magic had weakened the Great Vortex sufficiently that the other winds could be claimed without risk. Nevertheless, the same caution that had ever prevented Malekith from achieving his ends slammed down like an iron grate, and he refused to speak any longer on the matter.

Teclis saw his careful plans unravelling, but was unsure how to retrieve the situation. He knew that Lileath could have reasoned with the Phoenix King – the words of a goddess were ever more convincing that those of a mortal. Alas, it had been many weeks since Lileath had been seen on Ulthuan, and she had paid no heed to Teclis' increasingly urgent prayers. More than ever, Teclis missed his brother's counsel.

With no other choices remaining, Teclis spoke of his plan to Alarielle and Imrik. The Everqueen was no fonder of the idea than her betrothed. She feared not just for the consequences to Ulthuan, but also those inflicted upon the wider weave of the world. It was not without good cause, she reminded Teclis, that Caledor Dragontamer had first fashioned the Great Vortex. Surely, if what Teclis was proposing was possible, Caledor would have done it thousands of years ago? Unexpectedly, Imrik spoke in Teclis' support. Caledor Dragontamer had suggested the same plan to him some months earlier and, as ever, the word of his ancestor was unassailable to the dragon prince. Eventually, Alarielle agreed to speak with Malekith. She did not know that neither Teclis nor Caledor had conceived the unbinding of the Great Vortex themselves; they had been given the idea by Lileath. Had she known this, the spark of Ariel that was fading in her soul would have spoken in warning.

An ocean away to the east, Lileath walked through the faded glory of Castle Drakenhof, ancestral seat of the von Carsteins. The goddess' divine form was invisible to the thralls who roamed the gloomy corridors, and her voice was like the lingering memory of a dream. There, she often conversed with Princess Eldyra of Tiranoc, sole survivor of Eltharion's attempt to rescue the Everchild, who had been captured at the whim of Mannfred von Carstein. Eldyra and her jailors believed that Mannfred had afflicted her with his blood's curse; her spirit was cold as ice, shadowy creatures lurked ever on the edge of her vision and the voices of the dead haunted her like waking dreams.

At first, Lileath masqueraded as one of Drakenhof's thralls, offering kindness in that most unkind of places. Only when she had earned a measure of Eldyra's confidence, did the goddess speak of what had truly transpired. The same ritual by which Nagash had wrested death magic from the Great Vortex had also destroyed Ereth Khial, the elven goddess of the dead, and in the aftermath her divine remnants had been bound to Eldyra's mortal form. Now, just as Tyrion had become an avatar of Khaine, Eldyra was slowly inheriting the Pale Queen's mantle. The voices Eldyra heard were those of lately-slain elves who had escaped Slaanesh's maw, and the shadowy creatures were the rephallim that had guided them to her.

This was a truth that no elf could have borne well, for Ereth Khial was a goddess reviled by all. Eldyra went mad for a time. When her jailors heard her cursing at empty air, and saw her thick black tears of rage, they wondered what value their master placed in such a creature. In truth, Mannfred had been guided by his instincts, and was ignorant of his prize's value. Had he been present, the vampire would have broken Eldyra and made her power his own, but Mannfred was far afield, labouring under Nagash's will.

At last Eldyra's madness gave way to a cool, clear determination. Accepting Lileath's offer of tutelage, she learned how to bind and draw power from her attendant spirits. At first, the idea revolted the princess, for the act of leeching magic from the spirits doomed them to oblivion. But Eldyra was changing, as the other avatars were changing, and Lileath's tales of the Rhana Dandra only hastened that transformation. As Eldyra's spirit grew ever colder, she became ever more callous – a being of survival, of necessity. As with Ereth Khial before her, Eldyra grew blind to the loves, sorrows and desires of her attendant dead, and readily quenched their existence to empower her own. There was never a dearth of spirits, for the war on Ulthuan caused Slaanesh's table to overflow. Though the rephallim brought but a fraction of the slain to Eldyra's presence, these still accounted many hundreds with each passing day. Thus did a new Queen of the Dead arise in Castle Drakenhof. She shattered the walls and enchantments that had held her mortal self prisoner, and journeyed into the mountains. Lileath went with her, little by little explaining the task she would need to perform.

On Ulthuan, the Phoenix King's army had reached the Tower of Hoeth, only to face another danger. Gradually, elves deserted Malekith's ranks and escaped north to join with Tyrion, often leaving the bloody corpses of betrayed comrades in their wake. At first, most were Naggarothi, and the Phoenix King deemed them to be knaves who found the Dragon of Cothique's temperament more to their liking than Malekith's own. But, as time went on, high elves and wood elves too began to abandon the Phoenix King's ranks. Some were the conspirators who had planned for Malekith's eventual death, but not all.

Marendri, a prince of northern Caledor, loyal to Malekith from the very first, was one of these. One moonless night, the dragon prince slit the throats of his three brothers, and hacked his way through the sentry line. Marendri would have escaped to join Tyrion, had one of his siblings not dealt him a crippling blow before succumbing. Slowed by his injuries, Marendri was cornered by Imrik, who was appalled at the wild-eyed savage his comrade had become. The knight was red-eyed and sharp-featured, his words a jumble of vicious curses and snarls. It was more mercy than justice that guided Imrik's sword that night.

When Imrik spoke of what he had witnessed, all were forced to concede that the Shadow of Khaine had grown so thick that it fell upon their ranks as well as Tyrion's. When Alarielle spoke in support of unbinding the Great Vortex, Malekith finally agreed. Teclis said nothing. The loremaster's enchantments had made it possible for the Shadow of Khaine to overtake his allies. He had no regrets at his

deception, for Lileath had told him the unbinding was necessary, but he wondered how much more tarnished his soul could become before he was just as bad as Tyrion or Malekith.

Thus was the Tower of Hoeth, which many had hoped would be their refuge whilst a counter-attack was prepared, quickly abandoned. Many of the loremasters joined the Phoenix King's westward march, but Finreir refused to leave the tower, even though he knew that Tyrion would surely overrun the ancient stones. Swift Lothern skycutters flew ahead, ranging over land and sea as they sought Lokhir Fellheart's fleet. There were no forests on the Isle of the Dead to allow journey through the worldroots, and ships would be needed to carry the Phoenix King's army across the waves. However, as the shore grew closer and Tyrion's army drew nearer, no word came from Fellheart. Aislinn was not the cause, for the skycutters had reported that his fleet lay moored around the Gaean Vale. Behind Malekith's host, violet fire blazed upon the hilltops and angry voices echoed upon the winds.

Recognising that time was moving against them, Alarielle took command of a skycutter and set out across the Sea of Dreams. She went not to the west, as had those in search of Fellheart's fleet, but north. The Everqueen told no one where she was bound, and Malekith was gravely vexed by her departure.

There were bloody clashes now between Malekith's rearguard and Tyrion's vanguard, but still Fellheart did not come. As Malekith's forces neared the coast, Imrik and Araloth led the hosts of Caledor east to slow the prince's advance. Thousands perished in desperate battle amongst the thin grasslands of the Sapherian shores. Outnumbered and in danger of being overwhelmed, Imrik fell back towards the shore and called for reinforcements. Malekith sent Caradryan with a great many of his Black and Phoenix Guard, but still Fellheart's fleet did not appear. Finally Imrik could fall back no further, and Malekith resigned himself to a battle upon the shore.

At last sails were seen upon the western horizon. Many of the host cheered until they realised that the canvas was not the black of Fellheart's fleet, but the white and blue of Aislinn's. Cheers turned to cries of despair as the elves of Malekith's army saw that they were caught between two foes. Then came a single skycutter ahead of the fleet, Alarielle upon its prow. Beside her stood Aislinn, erect and proper as ever, but his face haunted by sorrow. The Everqueen had found the admiral amongst the ashes of Avelorn and he, at last having realised the mistake of his allegiance amongst the charred and ravaged dead, had begged forgiveness. Aislinn stiffly offered his fleet in the Phoenix King's service, and a desperate evacuation began.

Even then, Malekith's host endured only through bravery and sacrifice. Tyrion's vanguard, seeing the ships draw near, came across the dunes in their thousands. They did not bother to form anything recognisable as a line of battle, but came howling and screaming across the dunes; chariots, spearmen and knights whose weapons were wild in their hands. Sceolan of Athel Loren met them with an ordered shieldwall. It buckled but did not break. A second charge crashed home, a Tiranoc spear taking Sceolan's one good eye, another piercing his heart a second later. The wood elves wavered as their lord fell, but warriors of Naggarond and Lothern pressed forward to thicken the line, and the shieldwall stood firm to meet a third assault.

The shallows of the shore were seething as thousands of elves waded through the breakers to the tall-hulled ships beyond. Anything too heavy to carry was abandoned, and much more besides. Treemen waded into the deeper waters, their roots burrowing into the sea bed and their mighty arms flexing as they hoisted elves aboard. An hour passed, then two, then four. Some of Aislinn's ships, their keels low in the water and their decks crammed, struck out westward. Still the Khaine-lost elves spilled across the dunes. At last, as the first banners of Tyrion's phalanxes appeared against the eastern skies, the dragons of Caledor set their fires loose along the shoreline, scattering the blood-mad hordes and buying time for the last of the shieldwall to clamber aboard. Malekith was the last to leave, and before Seraphon's wings bore him westward, the Phoenix thought he caught a glimpse of Tyrion amongst the advancing spears.

As dusk fell, Aislinn's ships sped westward, their decks full of sodden and exhausted elves. The black shapes of Fellheart's fleet at last appeared upon the southern horizon. The *Tower of Blessed Dread* loomed large at the flotilla's heart. Its colours no longer proclaimed loyalty to Malekith, but to Tyrion. One more mystery had been solved, though its resolution was little to the liking of any in Aislinn's fleet. Fellheart's vessels would have wrought great slaughter on Aislinn's overloaded ships had they chosen to chase, but their admiral had other orders and the sleek vessels continued eastward, to the Sapherian shores Malekith had so lately abandoned. The next morning, the Lothern fleet continued on through heavy seas. Dawn was fully in the sky before any realised that Aislinn had taken a skycutter and departed eastwards in the night.

So it was that when Fellheart's ships headed westward once more, their decks straining beneath the weight of Tyrion's host, Aislinn's skycutter came alongside the *Tower of Blessed Dread*, and the admiral allowed himself to be brought before Tyrion.

Morathi watched as thin-faced corsairs dragged Aislinn across the foredeck and threw him before Tyrion. At the prince's side, Fellheart simmered with impatience, the tentacles of his mask twitching.

'You are a traitor, Aislinn,' Tyrion growled, placing the Widowmaker's point against Aislinn's chest. 'Why would you come back? To beg?'

'I did not come here to beg. I came here to die,' Aislinn spat. 'Hatred blinded me to what you had become, and I will make atonement. Mathlann looks after his own.'

Morathi could hear the threat in the admiral's voice, but could not place its danger. Aislinn was a pirate, nothing more. What threat could he be?

'By tide and tempest I curse you and your kind,' Aislinn shouted suddenly, his lips hooking into a sharp smile. 'May the deeps take you all.'

Those last words, so simply said, rang out across the seas, as did Aislinn's laughter.

Tyrion scowled and thrust the Widowmaker forward. The Sea Lord went silent as the blade pierced his heart, but Morathi knew it was already too late.

As the Herald of Mathlann's blood spilt across the deck, the once-calm skies grew dark and angry, the canvas of the sails whipping and snapping as a gale sprang up.

Lightning cracked across the skies. One of the *Tower of Blessed Dread's* sails was struck. It burst into flames, the fires spreading hungrily across rigging and spar. As Morathi groped for a counterspell that would unmake Aislinn's enchantment, she saw that a dozen ships were also ablaze.

A colossal wave, taller than the *Tower's* highest topmast, reared up and slammed down on the black ark's deck. Morathi's counterspell collapsed mid-syllable as the breath was smashed from her body. Struck from her feet, she felt the cold of the seawater around her, and the howling of the storm above filled her ears.

Then everything went black.



THE PHOENIX KING'S ALLIANCE

Without the wood elves' aid, Malekith's campaign would have ended many weeks earlier, and his debt grew deeper at the Isle of the Dead. So many elves had become Khaine-lost or slain in battle that there were, by that time, more asrai in the Phoenix King's army than elves of any other one race.

MALEKITH, THE PHOENIX KING



Many times over the millennia, Malekith had dreamed of what it would be like to return to Ulthuan in glory, to seize the Phoenix Throne and repay centuries of indignity. None of his imaginings ever came close to the reality at hand, for not once did the son of Aenarion consider that he would one day be the salvation of the hated high elves. Though it was fading fast, the power of Asuryan still blazed upon Malekith's brow, granting him the Creator's gifts of fire and fortune. The former Witch King did not know if this would be enough to bring about Tyrion's defeat, but would fight all the same: the tale of Malekith's life was scattered with failures, and he would not easily countenance another.



IMRIK OF CALEDOR

Imrik's road to the Isle of the Dead had been a long and difficult one, but he had kept to the faith. Though originally he fought at Malekith's side only because Caledor Dragontamer spoke of its necessity, Imrik had begun to glimpse chinks of nobility shining through the Phoenix King's cruel and calloused soul. These, combined with Tyrion's descent into the grimmest of madness, had quashed whatever doubts Imrik entertained. He had come to believe that the dawn of a new age was upon the elves, and was certain that they would fare better under Malekith's rule than Tyrion's.

THE DRAGONSPINE PRINCES

Recognising the brutality of the battle to come, Imrik had assembled the cream of Caledor's knights into a single, terrifying host. Most of the Dragonspine Princes rode into battle upon armoured steeds, but a few fought from the windswept skies, directing their draconic companions to wherever dragonfire would have the greatest effect. For the Caledorians, this battle was no mere clash of steel. In their minds, the outcome would determine, once and for all, whether Imrik was correct to side with Malekith at the war's outset.





THE SISTERHOOD OF AVELORN

The Everqueen's personal guard had suffered greatly in recent months, worn away by conflict with daemons and with Tyrion's Khaine-lost elves. Nevertheless, these trials had served only to strengthen the survivors' resolve, and every handmaiden and sister who fought upon the Isle of the Dead did so without fear. The sisterhood's ranks were leavened with wood elves of Talsyn, hand-picked by Naestra and Arahan to ensure the Everqueen's safety. The resulting host was more united of purpose than any other on the Isle of the Dead. Whatever differences there might be between these asur and asrai, they faded in comparison to the love they shared for Isha's avatar.



THE SHADOWFIRE GUARD

The white lion guard no longer had the responsibility of defending the Phoenix King. Instead, that duty fell upon the Shadowfire Guard, an amalgam of Malekith's Black Guard and the Phoenix Guard of Asuryan. No other formation upon the Isle of the Dead so completely reflected the spirit of the Phoenix King: darkness leavened by Asuryan's fire, ruthlessness balanced by nobility of spirit. Though their ranks were not intermingled, the two factions of elven guard fought side-by-side, the once-bitter enemies united in Malekith's service. It mattered little that the Black Guard fought out of promise of plunder, whilst the Phoenix Guard were bound to fulfil their own destiny. All that mattered was that their halberds were sharp and their hearts resolute, and these they undoubtedly were.



SCARLOC'S ARCHERS & NAIETH THE PROPHETESS

In the mannish realms, Scarloc's Archers were widely regarded as being amongst the finest sellswords that coin could hire. However, none of their paymasters had ever realised that Scarloc's true payment had always been the opportunity to witness his paymasters' armies in action and bring that information back to Athel Loren. Nevertheless, Scarloc's Archers were peerless shots – far better than any to be found in either Ulthuan or Naggaroth. With Naieth's foresight to guide their shots, they would surely teach all others upon the Isle of the Dead what marksmanship truly meant.

Malekith, the Phoenix King

Prince Imrik

Alarielle, Avatar of Isha

Araloth, Lord of Talsyn

Naestra & Arahan

Teclis

Alith Anar

Naieth the Prophetess
Spellweaver

Adranna
Sorceress

The Dragonspine Princes
Twelve High Elf Princes riding Dragons, five claws of Dragon Princes

The Sisterhood of Avelorn
Five regiments of Sisters of Avelorn

The Shadowfire Guard
Five towers of Black Guard, five blessed hosts of Phoenix Guard

Scarloc's Archers
One kinband of Glade Guard, one kinband of Deepwood Scouts and one kinband of Waywatchers

The Grand Host of Naggarond
Five legions of Dreadspears, four legions of Darkshards, two legions of Bleakswords, three scalegelds of Cold One Knights

The Grand Host of Tor Caleda
Eight claws of Dragon Princes, three legions of High Elf Spearmen

The Grand Host of Modryn
Three kinbands of Warhawk Riders, two kinbands of Eternal Guard, eight kinbands of Glade Guard, one troupe of Wardancers

The Grand Host of Talsyn
Five kinbands of Eternal Guard, three kinbands of Wild Riders, three kinbands of Glade Guard, one kinband of Waywatchers, two kinbands of Glade Riders

The Grand Host of Mathlann
Three flights of Lothern Skycutters, five crews of Lothern Sea Guard, each with one Eagle Claw Bolt Thrower

Durthu's Wargrove
Three Treeman Ancients, four Treemen, three withermarches of Tree Kin and eight briarbands of Dryads

THE DESTROYERS

Tyrion's army wore the trappings of civilisation, but it was by now a stone's throw away from barbarism. Too many in its ranks fought only to see blood spilled, but there was strength in that madness. Had Aislinn's sacrifice not thinned Tyrion's ranks, the Avatar of Khaine would easily have overwhelmed Malekith's host.



TYRION

Thousands of years ago, Aenarion clawed his way out of Khaine's shadow, and came to the Isle of the Dead to fight for his people. Tyrion lacked his forefather's strength of character, or perhaps Khaine's shadow lay heavier upon him. The prince's only goal was to prevent Malekith from gaining the power necessary to end their war, and he did not care who suffered along the way. Tyrion was now almost unrecognisable as the hero he had once been. His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes hard and cruel. The power of Khaine was eating Tyrion from the inside out, though few of his allies had the wit to see it. Even Morathi was ignorant of what was happening, blinded as she was by her own deluded love.

LOKHIR FELLHEART

After months of faithful service to Malekith, Lokhir Fellheart had thrown in his lot with Prince Tyrion. Even the corsair's closest lieutenants did not know whether the betrayal sprang from the corrupting Shadow of Khaine or a more personal attempt at self-advancement. In either event, Fellheart's new allegiance had greatly strengthened Tyrion's hand – not only because it provided the vessels he needed in order to reach the Isle of the Dead, but because it also placed several thousand corsairs at the prince's disposal. Of course, it was entirely possible that Fellheart's true goal was to serve neither master, but to seize power for himself...





THE RIMESHARDS

The war for Ulthuan had not been kind to Morathi's warriors. Of the tens of thousands that marched with 'Drusala' from chill Naggaroth, scarcely a quarter remained. That the Rimeshards had endured as long as they had was testament less to their bravery than their common sense in getting no closer to the foe than the maximum range of their crossbows. Such a strategy had served them well in the preceding months, but as the Shadow of Khaine grew heavier about the Rimeshards, it seemed that bloodlust would finally overwhelm their instincts for self-preservation.

THE AESKHAINE

The power of Khaine sits poorly upon the weak-willed, driving them into a self-consuming madness from which there is no escape. By the time Tyrion's host reached the Isle of the Dead, more than half of his army had succumbed to this state. These aeskhaine were completely without fear, but seldom fought with the skills they once possessed, instead tearing at their foes with fingers and teeth in their desperation to feel blood flowing across their skin. If Tyrion triumphed at the Isle of the Dead, all elves would one day become aeskhaine.





THE SHADOWMANES

Even after Korhil's death, Tyrion retained the tradition of a white lion guard. It was easy enough to arrange. By far the majority of the Chracians had embraced Tyrion's ways, and those who did not were quick to deplore their former captain's deeds in the face of Tyrion's wrath. Sadly, this ensured that a guard once known for its honour and nobility was now thickened almost entirely by scoundrels or cowards. This mattered little to Tyrion, who saw the white lion guard as the rightful trappings of a Phoenix King, and he valued their loyalty – however questionable it may have been.



THE CREEPING DREAD

One of many corsair reaver-bands crewing the *Tower of Blessed Dread*, the Creeping Dread survived Aislinn's storm with comparatively few losses, greatly increasing their standing in the black ark's bitterly contested hierarchy. Now, they were determined to translate their advancement into further glories, by proving their value not just to Fellheart, but to Tyrion himself. To aid in this, the captains of the Creeping Dread broke open the black ark's holds before marching south, freeing several hydras and kharibdysses from the mangled below-decks and drafting the creatures into their ranks.

Tyrion, Avatar of Khaine

Lokhir Fellheart

Morathi, the Hag Sorceress

Prince Dalroth
High Elf Prince

The Ravenspears
Two vanguards of Dark Riders

The Rimeshards
One half-legion of Darkshards, seven Reaper Bolt Throwers

The Swords of the Kraken
One vast crew of Black Ark Corsairs

The Creeping Dread
One crew of Black Ark Corsairs

The Skullbearers
One legion of Bleakswords, two legions of Darkshards

The Voiceless Ones
One legion of Dreadspears

The Knights of Tor Alin
Two sworn-hosts of Silver Helms

The Aestyrion
Five legions of High Elf Spearmen, five legions of Bleakswords, three scalegelds of Cold One Knights, two sworn-hosts of Silver Helms

The Shrine of Red Ruin
One Bloodwrack Shrine

The Scions of Underworld Sky
One tribe of Shades

The Menagerie of Raema
Two War Hydras, two Kharibdysses

The Shrieking Death
One troupe of Sisters of Slaughter

The Shadowmanes
One pride of White Lions

The Aeskhaine Host of Cothique
Roughly ten legions-worth of elves of all ranks and disciplines

The Aeskhaine Host of Chrace
Roughly eight legions-worth of elves of all ranks and disciplines

The Aeskhaine Host of Tiranoc
Roughly eight legions-worth of elves of all ranks and disciplines

THE FINAL BATTLE

As dawn broke the next morning, the *Tower of Blessed Dread* had run aground on the Isle of the Dead's northern shore. The ship had been badly mauled by Aislinn's storm: its flanks were lightning scarred, its masts a shattered and scorched ruin of timber. Of the dozens of other vessels that had once been part of Fellheart's fleet, only five remained. Perhaps ten thousand warriors had survived to make landfall, though many times their number had been lost beneath the waves. Corpses bobbed up against the shore and along the black ark's flanks. Aislinn's last blow had been mighty indeed.

The Isle of the Dead was no ordinary landmass, but one fashioned from waystones of all shapes and sizes. Some were drowned beneath the waves, forming the foundations upon which others rested. Others loomed high against the dawn sky, taller than the grandest towers of Lothern or Caledor, but themselves dwarfed by the swirling column of cloud that was the Great Vortex – the last great enchantment of Caledor Dragontamer. Those waystones that formed the isle's 'ground' were all but invisible beneath a shimmering sand, each grain a fragment eroded from the pale monoliths. Nothing grew in that dust. Legend told that before the Great Vortex, life had teemed here as readily, but of that time only petrified trees remained. Now it was the Isle of the Dead in fact as well as name. It made for a strange and beautiful sight even to the elves, an angular refuge amidst the glittering seas.

When Morathi came to her senses, she knew immediately where she was. The sorceress could see and hear the elven spirits swirling around the waystones, their voices a babble of whispers so quiet that they were often drowned out by the crash of waves upon the uneven shore. Morathi did not fear the dead, for they were bound to their waystones by magics that even she did not know how to break, preserved from the hunger of Slaanesh whilst the stones yet stood.

Tyrion's host marched inland in three great columns that snaked their way through the dunes and waystones. Tyrion and Morathi rode at the centre, whilst Fellheart commanded the west, and Dalroth the east. With every step they took, the winds howled louder, and the whispering of the dead became more insistent. No living thing moved to halt their passage through the majestic tomb complexes of long-dead kings and queens, and even the bridges to the inner isle were bereft of defenders. Only when the base of the vortex was before them did Tyrion at last catch sight of his foes. It was there, arrayed in windswept glory across the tombs of ancient royalty, that Malekith had set his weary army. Behind the banners and speartips, dragons and phoenixes shifted restlessly upon the flanks and pinnacles of waystones. Behind them, eight great columns loomed upon the compass points about the vortex's heart. At the pinnacle of each, a loremaster struggled with the howling winds of magic.

As Tyrion's forces shook themselves into three battle lines, Malekith's army took heart, for they saw that the enemy were no more numerous than they. Then Tyrion's voice boomed out, and everything changed.

Called by Tyrion's command, thousands of sea-drowned corpses hauled themselves onto the shores and lurched towards the centre of the island. They came in two great hordes of seaweed-wreathed dead, each of whom alone outnumbered Malekith's thin lines. Some were the storm-swept dead of Aislinn's curse, and these looked little different to those they fought alongside, save for skin turned already mottled and pale, and limbs that twitched and staggered with a most unelven grace. Most were the dead of centuries past, the slain of who knew how many wars fought upon the Seas of Dusk and Dreams. Their bones had long been picked clean of any flesh, and the rags they wore now gave little clue to the creatures they had once been.

As the hordes staggered nearer, the doors of ancient tombs slammed open. Tall figures took their place at the head of the hosts. They were recognisable even at that distance, for their ancient bones were still clad in funeral armour, and their kingly burial shrouds danced in the wind. The high elves amongst Malekith's host gasped in horror. It was one thing for Tyrion to raise the dead of the seas, but it was a deeper and more terrible blasphemy to rouse the bones of the Phoenix Kings. Even Finubar – dead not more than three years – was naught but ivoried bone, the passage of the seasons upon the Isle of the Dead having played its accustomed trickery. Alarielle saw her husband's corpse stride free of its tomb, and felt a cold wrath settle in her heart.

There were five of these wights in all. Aenarion's and Tethlis' bodies had never been recovered, and Caledor the First had been lost at sea. Caradryel and Bel-Hathor had died peacefully, so Khaine had no command over their bones, whilst Morvael had no remains to speak of, having burnt to ash in the Flames of Asuryan. Furthermore, none of Alarielle's predecessors arose: of all the Everqueens, only Astarielle had died with a blade in her hand, and she had been consumed, body and soul, by a daemon of Slaanesh.

Had Tyrion waited for his ghastly reinforcements to arrive, he could perhaps have swept Malekith's lines aside through sheer weight of numbers. However, the Dragon of Cothique's patience had never been

his strongest attribute, and to have so many of his hated foes within his grasp goaded him to rashness. Giving a great cry, he spurred Malhandir forward to where the ranks of Black Guard and Phoenix Guard clustered about Malekith. Tyrion's battle cry was taken up by the warriors behind, and the whole of the prince's centre launched itself up the slope.

Thus did the first blood run free as guard's halberds vied with hunter's axes, and with the lances of Cothique. Arrows sang as they left their bows, and elves screamed their last as the shots found their targets. Crossbowmen pushed forward at either end of Malekith's line, the rattle of triggers against stocks a constant chatter behind the screams and chiming of steel. Araloth of Talsyn fought in the centre of Malekith's line, his surviving eternal guard close about him, and Skaryn's beak ever hungry for the enemy's eyes.

As the lines clashed, Morathi and her surviving handmaidens drank in the magics swirling in the air about them, using ancient rites to transmute it into dark flames that arced hungrily across the battlefield. The air stank of brimstone and burnt flesh as fire swept the embattled lines, but the elves fought on, oblivious to the charred skin billowing about them. Tyrion's elves fought out of bloodlust, or fear of their prince's displeasure; Malekith's strove because they had no other choice. There was no longer anywhere to run – those who did not fight would perish.

On Malekith's western flank, Imrik spurred loyal Minaithnir into flight. Fellheart's battle line was like a vast, scaled serpent far below, heaving and undulating as it advanced across the dusty wastes. With the princes of Caledor at his back, Imrik dove from the skies like a thunderbolt, the wind screaming in his ears as Minaithnir's talons raked through Fellheart's corsairs. No sea dragon hide could resist the talons of a true Caledorian



drake, and Minaithnir's wake was a bloody gouge through the corsair lines. Roaring kharibdysses reared out of the seething ranks, mouths snapping at Minaithnir's wings, but the aged dragon was too canny to be caught. Banking hard enough to throw Imrik back in his saddle, Minaithnir sped away from the kharibdysses' grasp, belching fire at the scaled horrors as he did so. Other dragons joined their flames to Minaithnir's, and the kharibdysses perished. One went mad with pain before it died, trampling its handlers and scores of corsairs in its attempt to escape.

Imrik's attack had thrown Fellheart's battle line into confusion, and Malekith's western flank surged forward to capitalise on the chaos. High-helmed dragon princes set heels to their horses' flanks as bleakswords from Naggarond charged into the fray. Wardancers leapt forward alongside swordmasters, their exuberant movements a stark contrast to the terse actions of the scale-skirted warriors. Ahead of them all came a hail of arrows, loosed from bows of Caledor, Talsyn and Torgovann. Where the corsairs had kept their order, shots scattered from the scales of raised sea dragon cloaks. However, where dragon talons or stampeding kharibdysses had torn discipline asunder, the arrows brought death. A second volley, then a third, hissed through the air. Then Caledorian lances punched deep into the corsair ranks, and the slaughter began.

To the east, Prince Dalroth's Cothiqui pressed hard against Alarielle's warriors. The Everqueen commanded her surviving maiden guard from atop the tomb of Rialla, her forebear of some five generations hence. She was certain that the long-dead queen somehow lent her strength, for the magics of life never bloomed so full in Alarielle's hands as they did that day. The flow of time was ever uncertain upon the Isle of the Dead, and perhaps Rialla did indeed reach out across history to aid her descendant.

Beyond the ring of maiden guard, warbands of wood elves met the savagery of Dalroth's army with a wildness of their own. Morlanna of Modrynn and Scarloc the Wanderer led them, the former with a greatsword lithe in her hands, the latter loosing arrows with impossible speed. Most of the asrai had departed the isle at dawn, carried aboard the ships of Aislinn's fleet. During the voyage from Saphery, Alarielle had come to fear for Ulthuan's fate, even if Teclis' ritual succeeded, and had sent Athel Loren's lords and spellweavers far across the Ten Kingdoms, ready to enact a desperate plan should the worst come to pass.

Yet there were still plenty of wood elves on the Isle of the Dead, and all had pledged to fight to whatever end awaited them. For some, the end came amongst the dust-strewn approach to Rialla's tomb, pierced by a Cothiqui spear or a Ghrondian bolt. A good many rose again as Alarielle's magics washed over them, sealing wounds as if they had never been and reknitting broken bones. However, so ferocious was the fighting upon that rise that not even the Everqueen's touch could hold death at bay forever. One by one, the wood elves succumbed, but many a foe perished first, for they were so thick amongst Rialla's tomb that scarcely a shot or a thrust could miss.

Still Dalroth drove his warriors on, paying no heed to the deaths around him. In truth, the prince had little idea as to the stakes that drove this battle. He knew only that Tyrion had commanded the enemy be destroyed, and that he would likely reap great reward for bringing the fugitive Everqueen before his master. Thus did Dalroth's every step and thrust bring him closer to the summit of the tomb, and the prize he sought to claim.

One of those who opposed Prince Dalroth was his own sister. Adranna had chosen to make her stand as part of Alarielle's guard. The princess wielded the same sorceries that Morathi had taught her, gladly using the lessons she had so unwillingly learned against her hated mistress' servants. Shards of magic scattered from her hands, lancing deep into the Cothiqui ranks and leaving only bloodied bone and armour in their wake. With each death, Adranna felt icy tendrils worming their way deeper into her soul. Part of her recognised the spreading corruption, and feared it even whilst embracing it as necessity. The larger portion felt only exhilaration and joy as she claimed revenge for Korhil's death.

Glistening tendrils burst from Adranna's fingers, their writhing forms as dark as night. They wound through the front ranks of Dalroth's phalanx, throttling and constricting, crawling down throats and burrowing into eyes. The prince's runesword sliced through a clutch of tendrils, the severed ends twitching as they fell to the ground. Adranna, at last catching sight of her sibling, uttered a sharp cry of recognition and turned them against him. Dalroth leapt away as they drew closer, runesword sweeping out to drive them back, but there were too many. His arms and legs pinioned, the prince could do little but pray for his sister's scant mercy.

Dalroth would have perished there and then had not Morathi noticed his plight. The Hag Sorceress recognised Adranna's enchantment, and knew well the names that would command it. Thus, as other tendrils surged forward to end Dalroth's life, they suddenly wound back upon themselves and struck at their summoner instead. Her instincts clouded by vengeance and shadowed by sorcery, Adranna did not realise her danger until it was too late. As her screams faded, so too did the tendrils holding Dalroth. Gasping, the prince fell to his knees, his eyes falling upon his sister's corpse. For a moment, he stared, his expression unreadable. Then, rising to his feet, he spat on Adranna's body and hurled himself towards the Everqueen once again.

There was murder in the skies above Alarielle. A great cloud of harpies had followed Tyrion's fleet across the sea, and though Aislinn's storm had cast many from the skies, hundreds more swarmed in search of prey. These wretches all but shone with Khaine's fury, their usual cowardice in abeyance as they dove and clawed at those who fought below. Manticore riders came behind, trusting in the scavengers' instincts to find weakness in the Everqueen's lines.

But there were other warriors upon the winds, warhawk riders of Athel Loren and the skycutters of Aislinn's fleet. Their spears scattered the harpies wherever they gathered, their arrows taking the manticores in throat and eye. The mighty dragon Ceithin-Har flew at their head, each sweep of his claws smashing half a dozen harpies from the sky. Naestra and Arahan ran to and fro along the dragon's serpentine back, bowstrings ever in motion as they sent shot after shot into the screeching beasts.

A manticore swooped low under Ceithin-Har's wings, its claws outstretched to rake a phalanx of Avelorni spears. As it passed, Arahan gave a great whoop of joy and leapt from Ceithin-Har's back. Air ripping around her, she slammed into the back of the manticore's rider, who slid sideways and fell into the battle below. The manticore twisted around in mid-air, claws reaching for Arahan, but she was already moving. Running nimbly along the beast's upturned belly, she leapt high into the air. A heartbeat later, Ceithin-Har's foretalons took the manticore in the flank, his mighty jaws closing around its neck. That lunge threw off Arahan's landing, and one of her feet skidded from Ceithin-Har's back. She would have fallen in that moment, had Naestra not offered her a steadying hand as well as a disapproving look. As the dragon hurled the manticore's corpse into Dalroth's ranks, Arahan grinned unrepentantly, looking for fresh prey.

'Must you forever seek new ways of killing yourself?' Naestra demanded, shifting her feet as Ceithin-Har banked back into the flock of harpies.

'Must your envy always drive you to lecture me?' Arahan retorted, snatching her hand from Naestra's and turning to the east. She could see dark shapes moving around the waystones – Morathi's warriors were setting up a reaper battery.

'Gwindalor would agree with me,' Naestra said behind her.

'Then I'm glad that he's not here,' Arahan joined, nocking an arrow and sighting along it. 'That eagle worries more than you do.'

She let fly. The arrow flew true towards the target, then burst into a cluster of shards that tore the dark elves to bloody scraps. Nodding in satisfaction, Arahan drew her sword. Then the skies grew dark with harpy wings.

Whilst his allies fought and died, Teclis wrestled with the Great Vortex. He was kneeling on an outcrop at the vortex's base, his eyes clamped shut with concentration and his palms pressed against the column of winds. Without Nagash's theft of death magic from the vortex, the undertaking would have been impossible. As things stood, it was merely almost so. With the slightest mistake, Ulthuan could be ripped apart, or the winds of magic scattered.

Even after nearly two years of preparation, and with the aid of the Tower of Hoeth's most accomplished loremasters on the pinnacles above, Teclis could barely maintain control over the energies before him. They writhed and squirmed like a thing alive, ever seeking to twist free of the ritual he used to command them. The energies would have escaped his grasp long ago, were it not for aid from within the vortex itself. There, on the other side of the rippling air, Caledor Dragontamer and his time-lost mages performed a ghostly mirror of Teclis' ritual. For them, it had been both an instant and an eternity since the Great Vortex was first formed, but they knew what was required.

Only once did Teclis' attention waver: when chill horns sounded to announce the arrival of the dead in the battle below. His grip on the vortex loosened only for a moment, but that was enough to warn of failure's consequence. A gust of the Wind of Metal burst free across Malekith's ranks, transforming two-score Phoenix Guard into gleaming and lifeless gold. Slivers of Azyr flew into the clouds above, and lightning leapt groundwards, smashing a cohort of Cothiqui archers to blazing dust. Scowling at his lapse, Teclis took a depth breath and tightened his grip.

The blades of the dead fell upon Imrik's flank first of all, the rusted spears stabbing at a hastily ordered wall of Caledorian shields. Ithilmar blades thrust back in return, and grinning skulls skittered through the dust as their necks shattered. Yet it was not the martial skill of the dead that mattered – it was their number. On they came, oblivious to their fallen, a mass of bone and steel that drove the Caledorian line back, even as Fellheart's corsairs redoubled their assault to the front.

Without being ordered, Minaithnir circled high over the embattled Caledorians, flames licking out to char old bones and living flesh alike. Others joined with Imrik, but the dead were many and the dragons few. One dragon prince landed in the midst of the horde, seeking to scatter the skeletons with tooth and claw, but the dead swarmed over the mighty beast like ants at a feast. The dragon prince was torn limb from limb a moment later. His draconic steed bucked and heaved, but it too perished as rusted blades sought the weaknesses between its scales.

Far to the west of Imrik's battle, Alith Anar silently watched the Caledorian lines begin to shuffle back. He had needed no boat to bear him hence, for the shadows had ever been at his service, but he was not entirely sure why he had come. He had told Teclis that he would not offer any aid to Malekith, and he was determined to hold true to his word. Yet the Shadow King had seen and heard much of Tyrion's recent deeds, enough to realise that – for the moment at least – Malekith was the lesser of two great evils. Nevertheless, the thought of allowing the Phoenix King any triumph seared at Alith Anar's soul. Closing his heart to the screams of the dying far below, the Shadow King lapsed into thoughtful silence, and prayed to Lileath for guidance.

Malekith did not fight from the skies as Imrik did, but commanded Seraphon to remain in the thick of battle. As Asuryath hacked bloody ruin through the white lions of Tyrion's guard, Malekith reflected sourly that whilst the Witch King would have inspired his host as a threatening shadow cast from the behind, the Phoenix King needed to lead by example. He longed to goad Seraphon skyward, to hunt down and slay his traitorous mother, and the upstart Dragon of Cothique, but he dared not leave his battle in Araloth's hands. Malekith might have earned a grudging respect for Imrik and Alarielle, but had none for any other.

Seraphon bellowed thick black smoke into the knot of white lions. The elves fell, clutching uselessly at their throats as they struggled for breaths that would not come. Malekith could see Tyrion raging as he drove more Khaine-lost elves forward in their place. However, it was not elves that came next to challenge the Phoenix King, but the dead. So furiously had Malekith and his guard fought, that a great gap had opened up in Tyrion's lines, and the sea-birthed dead pressed forward to fill it. At the head of the horde marched the five tall wights of the Phoenix Kings, their movements stronger and more precise than the skeletons that followed them, the golden finery of their funeral robes glimmering darkly. Malekith recognised them at once, and knew fear for the first time in many an age.

These were the Phoenix Kings of old, risen from death at Tyrion's command, and given license to avenge themselves upon their ancient foe. There was no trace of good or nobility in these creatures. Tyrion had resurrected their bodies, had seized upon their hatred of Malekith and reinforced it with his own. Now the kings past bore down on their successor, frozen in their path.

None save Malekith knew exactly what transpired next. Others simply saw the Phoenix King rise high in Seraphon's saddle, as if shying away from his enemies.



Araloth saw the Phoenix King draw away from the fight, and knew that he was afraid. Others amongst Malekith's ranks saw it too, and his fear fed their own. Haltingly at first, the centre of the Phoenix King's line began to retreat.

Araloth alone stood his ground. 'Talsyn!' he cried, his spear raised to serve as a rallying point. 'Talsyn! We hold here!'

Eternal guards came forward at their lord's word, some shamed by his determination, others glad to be given direction. Spears thickened about Araloth, and shields slammed into place. But there were too few to hold the skeletons sweeping up the rise, too few by far.

The wights were but a score of paces from Araloth now. He could see where teeth had fallen free of jaws, where long ago wounds had marred their skulls.

Others came forward to thicken Araloth's thin line. Not just wood elves this time, but Phoenix Guard and cold-eyed warriors of Naggarond. It was a thin bulwark against the oncoming horde, thought Araloth, but perhaps it would hold long enough for Malekith to recover his nerve.

Risking a quick glance away from the approaching wights, Araloth's keen eye sought out the Phoenix King. Seraphon's shadow was dark against the southern skies, her master's thoughts unreadable. Araloth saw Malekith turn to meet his gaze with one of his own, so filled with malice and bitterness that the Lord of Talsyn nearly recoiled. But Araloth held true, and met Malekith's challenge with one of his own.

As Araloth turned back to face the foe, he heard Malekith's laughter echo across the battlefield,

'Kings of Ulthuan!' the Phoenix King spat the words as a curse. 'You are usurpers and thieves. You owe me a debt. In my name, and in that of my father, I call upon you to repay it now!'



Malekith's voice thundered across the battlefield, and his predecessors shattered, fragments of their bones and armour scattered across the slope by some unseen explosion. Asuryath came about, levelled at the heart of the skeleton host. A bolt of flame burst from its blade and roared towards the timeworn ranks. The fire rippled and transformed as it travelled, taking the form of a robed and armoured figure, war-staff and runesword clasped tight in its outstretched hands. Many who saw the figure gasped, for it bore the aspect of Finubar the Seafarer.

The blazing figure did not slow as it approached the skeleton horde. It struck the undead like a comet. Scores of skeletons collapsed as their bones cracked under the impact.

Dozens more burst apart as a nova of flame gusted outwards from the point of impact, leaving only charred and lifeless bones. The fires burnt out in an instant, but the figure of Finubar remained, bent on one knee amongst the devastation. It no longer blazed with the magic of Malekith's spell but shone with light. For a heartbeat, the figure of Finubar stood motionless. *Asuryan!* it cried in a voice wrenchingly familiar to many, and charged deeper into the mass of skeletons, sword gleaming.

Tyrion, cowed only for a moment by the manifestation of his old friend, now bellowed orders, hurling his forces – living and dead – into the fray with fresh fury. But Malekith was not yet finished. Nine times more the fire burst forth from his blade, each time coalescing into a likeness of a Phoenix King from times past. Tyrion had commanded old bones – or at least those that had been interred upon the Isle of the Dead. However, the spirits of the kings, bound to that island by the royal waystones and given terrible form by the last vestiges of Asuryan's power, now fought for Malekith. Only Aenarion remained at rest, for he owed his people nothing.

The Phoenix Kings came willingly from their rest. They fought both to save their people from Tyrion's madness, and to make amends for subverting Asuryan's plan. Tethlis, dark and brooding where his fellows were suffused with light, ripped into the dead that pressed close on Imrik's ranks. A few hundred paces to the west, Caledor the First hacked through Fellheart's corsairs, his sword trailing fire with every blow. Nearby, another dragon-helmed figure fought with abandon, the son ever more reckless than the father even in death. Even Aethis, whose life was seldom remembered as glorious even by his own descendants, smote the foe as ferociously as his fellows.

Not all of the Phoenix Kings fought with blades. Upon the eastern flank, Bel Shanaar, Bel-Hathor and Morvael rained fire and lightning down upon the Cothiqui ranks. Caradryel, ever a protector, took position at Alarielle's side, adding his magics of shielding and renewal to hers. Bel-Korhadris, first and greatest of the loremasters, walked amongst the mages of Malekith's host, reinforcing their abjurations with his own. Morathi's barrage of dark fire, which had reaped a great toll of lives to that point, dissipated into nothing as the Hag Sorceress' conjurations collapsed in a moment beneath the counterspells of the Scholar-King.

It said much for the madness that was upon Tyrion's host that even the godlike manifestation of kings past could not quench their ardour. Driven on by their prince, the Khaine-lost elves surged forward, a river of bodies that flowed about the glowing kings. Yet the power of the Phoenix Kings lay not just in martial prowess – their sheer presence awoke fresh valour in Malekith's elves. All across the slope, hearts that had begun to waver found renewed purpose, and weary arms knew fresh strength.

Nowhere was this more telling than upon the western flank, where the banners of Caledor held firm against Lokhir Fellheart's corsairs. The dragon princes had always been prouder of their kings than any other of Ulthuan's peoples, and their return had awoken a fire that would not easily be quenched. Not all amongst Imrik's warriors had fully believed that Malekith's cause was just, not until that moment. Booming horn blasts echoed amongst the towering monoliths, the war songs of Caledor swelling in their wake, and the dragon banners went forward into the ranks of corsairs.

Lokhir Fellheart did not notice the Caledorian lines overlapping his own until it was too late. The song of Khaine was loud in his ears, and the red blades in his hands glistened with the blood of high elves. As the Caledorian song grew loud about him, Fellheart lunged forward to pierce the heart of a dragon prince, then darted gracefully away, sea dragon cloak trailing as his backswing disembowelled another. Only then did the captain realise that the sea greens of his own warriors had given way to the colours of the Dragonrealm, and that he and a few-score corsairs were but an island in a sea of battle that had washed further down the slopes. The Krakenlord cared not. Khaine was with him that day, and victory would be theirs.



From her position at the rear of Tyrion's lines, Morathi allowed herself a scintilla of grudging respect for her son's ingenuity. For the first time, a glint of doubt pierced the Hag Sorceress' self-assurance. Had she chosen the wrong side all along? No, she decided, her gaze falling once more upon Tyrion's stern features. That Aenarion alone had not come forth at Malekith's command was proof enough to the Hag Sorceress that she had rightly deemed Tyrion to be her old love reborn.

Even with Fellheart's flank collapsing beneath the Caledorian onslaught, Morathi was confident that the battle would be theirs: the undead were many, and the Phoenix Kings few. Though Imrik's flank advanced, Alarielle's was buckling under the weight of numbers, and the Naggarondi warriors gathered around Malekith were scarcely faring better. However, she thought, looking up at the swirling tides of the Great Vortex, there was no harm in improving the odds. Her voice low and guttural, Morathi reached out her hands and crafted a spectre of her own. Slowly it took shape, weaving into a figure not dissimilar to those Malekith had conjured. No soul lay within this form. It was purely a construct of the darkest magic, though it took Aenarion's form – or rather the brooding and shadowed aspect that Morathi remembered too well. Thus would the father become a weapon against the son.

Malekith did not notice as his hated mother drew upon the seven winds howling through the waystones. No longer did the Phoenix King fight in the press of battle, for he too was weaving a great spell of his own. It was a work inspired by the manifestation of his forebears, and one that could have been called into life nowhere but upon that desolate isle, where magic bloomed so freely that even time folded in upon itself. Thus, he was unprepared when the shadowy Aenarion-construct bore down upon him, smoke and ash trailing behind.

There was no finesse in Morathi's creation, just a warping and unstable power crafted to unmake even Malekith's immortal form. Those elves it passed over fell writhing to the ground, hands clutched to their faces as skin withered to dust, and flesh liquefied across suddenly-tarnished armour. Seraphon saw the danger before Malekith, and she was already climbing skyward, but the Aenarion-form shifted its path to follow.

Malekith's salvation came from a most unlikely source – perhaps the most unlikely of all. Bel Shanaar had not gone far from Malekith's side, and now at last repaid a debt long owed. In the instant before the Aenarion-form reached its target, the king of

old slammed the heel of his staff into the dust and rose aloft upon a column of crackling light. Thus the spell intended to end Malekith's existence instead struck home against his usurper. There was a searing flash of darkness. When it cleared the Aenarion-form was gone and so was that of Bel Shanaar, his spirit ripped apart and cast into the winds of magic by Morathi's spell.

Malekith had little sympathy for Bel Shanaar's final demise, and even less gratitude. However, the other's sacrifice had bought the Phoenix King the time he had needed to complete his own enchantment. The air about Malekith rippled like the waters of a pond disturbed by a stone, flowing outwards in all directions across the Isle of the Dead. Where the ripples passed, ghostly figures coalesced. They were wispy and translucent at first, but grew increasingly solid as the Phoenix King's spell took hold. In a span of heartbeats, they were as corporeal as any who fought that day, and their blades just as sharp.

In the heart of the Great Vortex, all time was one, no moment separate from another, and through the winds of magic it touched everywhere and everywhen. In all the long millennia since its creation, no one – neither mage nor warrior, king nor servant – had lived and died without being touched by the last great enchantment of Caledor Dragontamer. The tapestry woven by the vortex stretched across time, and Malekith's spell had gathered its skeins and twisted them into a new shape. Earlier, Malekith had given life to Ulthuan's kings; now, he called upon the greatest champions from the long history of the elves.

These time-lost heroes came from every era and every realm, the gemstones of their banners shining bright as they fell upon the foe. They knew their purpose and, at last, the spears of the dead found themselves overmatched by those of the living. Eltharion was there, as were a score of great heroes from Moranion's line. Mentheus of Caledor and Temakador of Nagarythe stood at Morvael's side once again, Ystranna, Morelion and Yvraine at Alarielle's. Allisara, once wife to Malekith and now arrayed in the golden armour of the queen she had so nearly been, fought with knife and spear alongside Araloth. She often glanced up at her husband, perhaps seeking to catch his eye, but Malekith was lost in maintaining his spell, and Allisara realised that she was far beneath his sight, as she had so often been. She fought for him all the same.

A great host of Tiranoc chariots, Prince Eldyr and his son Morvai at their head, crashed through the undead assailing Alarielle's wood elves. Dragon princes who had fought beside Caledor the Second during the War of the Beard charged forward to fight beside him once more. Further to the east, a great cloud of dust was stirred up as other knights came to the fray. Valedor of Ellyrion, at another time Morathi's unwitting cat's paw, led this charge, and behind him came many who had perished at Reaver's Mark. They scattered the Cothiqui archers on the eastern end of Dalroth's line, then spurred forward to carry their spears against the flanks of the prince's phalanxes. Spears thrust deep, and Khaine-lost warriors of Cothique fell dead amongst the dust.

Dalroth, panic at last overtaking his madness, bellowed desperately at his warriors and exhorted them to hold fast. The words fell ashen on his lips and his face turned deathly pale as a lion-cloaked figure fought his way through the melee. Dalroth's sword came up in a parry as the axe blade swung for his neck, but the blade split asunder with a dull crack. A heartbeat later, the prince's severed head struck the ground. Korhil gave no sign of recognition, and hacked his way deeper into the Cothiqui ranks. Dalroth's body spurted its last and toppled sideways, coming to rest next to Adranna's sightless eyes.

As the Cothiqui strove to blunt Korhil's onslaught, fresh danger came upon them from the skies. Ceithin-Har plunged deep into their midst, his claws tearing a bloody furrow through the Khaine-lost elves. Behind him came Eltharion on mighty Stormwing, and griffon knights bearing the livery of the Everqueen Ystrielle. The Cothiqui screamed as talons tore them asunder or dashed them upon the rocks, and griffons shrieked their victory, but Arahan's wicked laughter rang out above them all.

From his vantage point to the west, Alith Anar too saw faces from his past. Far below, his sire Eothlir fought alongside a score of aesanar heroes, their volleys directed by Eothlan, his grandsire. The shadow warriors ghosted through the waystones, their arrows flying true to pierce a corsair's armour or blind a hydra's eye. The Shadow King's face was tight with emotion as he watched his long-mourned kin take up arms in Malekith's cause, though no one could have known whether hatred or joy danced behind his eyes. Coming to a decision, Alith Anar made his way down the waystone's flank. He had at last chosen a side.

At the base of the swirling winds, Teclis cursed Malekith for a fool. By manipulating the Great Vortex, the Phoenix King had disrupted the flow of magic, and Teclis could feel his grasp upon the winds slipping away. He was dimly aware of Caledor Dragontamer moving frantically before him, trying to correct the instabilities in his enchantment. The mage was not swift enough. Teclis felt the vortex shift as Ghur, the Wind of Beasts, tore loose from its prison. For a moment, it appeared against the darkening sky as a vast chimera. Then it flew eastwards at the speed of thought, its roars shaking the Isle of the Dead to its foundation. Beneath Teclis' feet, the rock cracked and began to shift.





Far to the north, Tyrion bellowed in impotent rage as the battle shifted against him. The heroes Malekith had summoned were not impervious to harm – indeed, they bled and died as readily as other elves. Nevertheless, they were more than a match for the prince's skeletons, and greatly outnumbered those of his elves who still lived. Moreover, each was a storied hero of old, easily a match for a dozen foes. Yet as Ghur sped away in freedom, Tyrion at last recognised that the battle of spear upon spear was but a distraction from the real threat. Spurring Malhandir forward, Tyrion plunged into the fray, his path straight as an arrow to where Teclis yet strove with the Great Vortex. Morathi, seeing the prince depart, urged Sulephet to follow.



Little trace of the Tyrion that many had known and loved could be seen in the crazed beast that rode to end Teclis' life. He was more Khaine now than mortal, the curse in his blood boiling to overflow. All who stood before the prince died on the Widowmaker's blade – even those of his own host, if they were too slow to stand aside. More would have perished, had only Tyrion stopped to fight, but his one overriding need was to reach the vortex, to prevent Teclis from fulfilling his goal. Thus did many elves feel a malevolent shadow pass over them and leave them unmarked, even though it claimed the lives of their neighbours.

Malhandir's hooves were a blur as he carried his master through the heart of the Naggarondi, and a phalanx that had held so long against Tyrion's lion guard now broke asunder as death personified tore through its ranks. Morvael moved to bar his passage, but burst into shards of light as the Widowmaker lanced deep into his chest. High above, the backlash of the Phoenix King's passing broke Malekith's focus, and at once the magic sustaining his summoned heroes began to fade. In ones and twos, they vanished, dragged back to their rightful places as the skeins of fate settled into the proper pattern. Some disappeared right away, dispersing like smoke on a breeze; others fought on, hacking and thrusting until they lost all substance.

Malekith knew at once he could not remake his spell, but saw that there was no need. What had been a battle on the cusp of defeat was now within a hand's breadth of victory. Too late, he saw the blur of gold that was Tyrion as it closed with an unsuspecting Teclis. Too late, he commanded Seraphon groundward to intercept. The dragon was swift, but Malhandir was swifter still. Cursing with all the fluency bestowed by six thousand years of bitterness and hate, Malekith knew he would not reach Tyrion in time. Fire billowed from the Phoenix King's hand, but Malhandir outran it. Lightning arced from Malekith's blade, but the malign presence of the Widowmaker absorbed the magic of the casting before the bolt struck home.

Tyrion did not so much as glance back. The Widowmaker was dark in the prince's hand, already coming about in a blow that would take Teclis' head from his shoulders. From within the vortex, Caledor saw Teclis' doom unfold and shouted warning, but his words could not pierce the swirling winds.

It might have ended there, but for one last betrayal. Malhandir had borne Tyrion for many years, had been unswerving to his master even as the prince had fallen into darkness, but no more. Malhandir was no mere beast of burden, as were the steeds of man, but a noble descendant of Korhandir the Great, and he at last realised the dishonour misplaced loyalty had brought upon his line. Thus, as the Widowmaker arced round, Malhandir came to a halt and reared up high, the suddenness of the motion hurling Tyrion back out of his saddle and into the outcrop's dust.

Tyrion was on his feet a moment later, the Widowmaker now swinging for Malhandir, but the horse sprang lightly away. Realising he could never catch his errant steed, Tyrion abandoned any attempt at retribution and closed with Teclis. The rock beneath his feet was cracking and shaking, gouts of magic bursting forth like steam. Tyrion paid them no heed and staggered on.

The prince would have died there, but for Morathi's scream of warning. Tyrion threw himself forward, and Seraphon's talons passed clear over his head instead of lodging in his skull. As Tyrion regained his feet, Seraphon banked closer, thick black vapour hissing from her mouth to blind the prince as Malekith readied his own blow.

Again Morathi was Tyrion's salvation. Violet lightning cracked from her hands and smote the dragon, melting her scales and searing the flesh beneath. Seraphon twisted in pain and fell sideways out of the air, crashing to a crumpled heap amongst the rocks. Malekith dove clear at the last moment, one armoured fist slamming down into the dust to steady himself as he landed as sword's length from Tyrion.

Thus, at last, did the Phoenix King and the Avatar of Khaine meet in battle for the last time. Those who witnessed it thereafter claimed that they saw two godly silhouettes mirrored on the clouds above: one masked and lit with flame, the other snarling like a beast, his hands running with blood. Each fought with all the fury and skill at his disposal; with every strike and every parry, the ground beneath their feet trembled and shook. No description could ever do that duel justice, for mere words could scarcely impart the speed and ferocity of the blows exchanged, nor the incredible willpower that drove the combatants on through the most horrendous of wounds.

Malekith's left arm was shattered early on in the fight, his Hotek-forged armour the only thing that stopped the Widowmaker severing the arm completely and hacking deep into his ribs. Tyrion's jaw fractured soon after, when a swing meant to sever his head instead sent Asuryath's tip raking across his face. More often, the two swords clashed in a shower of dark sparks, the Widowmaker driving thin slivers of enchanted steel from Asuryath's blade. On the first three such clashes, the combatants were unable to overcome each others' strength, and leapt apart to seek new advantage. On the fourth, Tyrion ripped the Widowmaker clear, and his backswing split Malekith's helm almost in two.

Long they raged, back and forth, as the Great Vortex began to come apart. On the slopes below, the last of Malekith's time-lost host faded away, but their part in the battle was done. Tyrion's skeleton horde was no more, and his mortal warriors would soon join them. Ystranna of Avelorn was the last to fade, for she had fixed her mind to one final act. Thus, as Lokhir Fellheart leaped to strike Imrik from Minaithnir's saddle, a red-fletched arrow took him low in the spine. The corsair screamed in sudden pain, his strike flew wide and he crashed awkwardly into the dust. As Fellheart's crew dragged their wounded master clear, Imrik caught a glance of his saviour before she faded, and his remorse flooded back, stronger than ever.

Still the battle between Tyrion and Malekith thundered on, though both were now battered and bleeding from dozens of wounds. Morathi watched it unfold from Sulephet's saddle, desperate to aid her beloved, but knowing that her spells would as likely strike Tyrion as Malekith. In any event, the Hag Sorceress hoped that her intervention would not be necessary, for the Phoenix King's weariness was plain.

Malekith was tiring fast, worn away by the magics he had employed. The last spark of Asuryan was fading away, its energy expended to give the Phoenix King a fighting chance against the Avatar of Khaine. Malekith knew this, but fought on all the same, dredging reserves of strength from deep within his immortal soul. He had known defeat too many times before, and refused to meet with another that day. Asuryath swept around, swift beyond belief, but Tyrion was somehow faster still, and the Widowmaker rose to check the blow. This time, there was no metallic ring, but a dull crack, and Asuryath was undone. The blade split in two, the shorn hilt falling from the Phoenix King's hand. Malekith scrambled away, but Tyrion's backswing was as swift as his parry, and the Phoenix King collapsed, dark blood streaming from a rent in his armour.

Weaponless and alone, Malekith spat blood and hauled himself upright as his executioner approached. The prince's ravaged lips were hooked into a triumphant snarl, and the Widowmaker was ready in his hand. High above the combatants, Morathi felt her previous fears melt away. As Tyrion hoisted his blade high, the Hag Sorceress' howls of laughter echoed across the battlefield.

The deathblow never fell. Unheard over Morathi's cruel mirth, a bowstring sang, clear and true. Tyrion staggered back as the arrow punched through the rent Imrik's lance had torn in his breastplate, the blessed shot piercing the prince's corrupted heart. Tyrion fell to his knees, the Widowmaker slipping from his hands. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came, only a spill of blood. At last, the madness of Khaine faded from the prince's eyes, and he saw clearly for the first time in many long months. Then, wordlessly, Tyrion, heir of Aenarion and Avatar of Khaine, toppled sideways and was dead.





Morathi fell silent as her beloved died, denial and disbelief mingling on her face and in her thoughts. Before she could react, the bowstring sang once more, and a second arrow took Malekith in the back. The Phoenix King collapsed atop the body of his foe, limbs twitching.

As Malekith fell, Morathi let loose a scream of purest anguish. It was a terrible, animal sound, owing much to anger, frustration and sorrow, whilst at the same time touching on something darker and more primal. The Hag Sorceress' hands hooked into claws, and violet lightning shattered the cluster of waystones from whose shadows the shots had come. Again and again she hammered at the stone, oblivious to the fact that Alith Anar, his work done, had already departed.

Teclis felt the vortex shudder as Morathi drew hungrily upon its magics. His plan had been to anchor each wind in a mortal vessel. That way, eight champions of Teclis' choosing would command the full might of the world's magic, becoming lodestones to which the raw stuff of sorcery was drawn. Now everything was spiralling out of control, and Teclis knew he would have to choose which of the winds he would save, and which would seek their own lodestones as the Wind of Beasts already had. Trapped by indecision, the choice was made for him.

The sky overhead glowed an angry red as Aqshy, the Wind of Fire – which Teclis had intended to bind to Malekith – snapped free of its prison and swirled into the clouds. Chamon, the Wind of Metal, was swift upon its heels. Three winds were now lost, one taken by Nagash, and four yet to be saved. With an effort, Teclis bent his will upon Azyr, the Wind of Heavens. This too broke free from the anchor-spells, and grounded itself somewhere in the Empire of Man. Yet its loss did not dismay Teclis as the others' had. In that contact, his mind had sensed an intelligence at work within Azyr's essence. The presence was familiar yet alien, and for a moment Teclis was struck with wonder.

It was in that moment that Morathi attacked, hammering at Teclis with violet lightning. As the loremaster convulsed and slumped forward, bloody and bruised, Morathi felt the tremors as the Isle of the Dead started to break itself apart. None of it did aught to allay her madness. One enemy had died, but thousands more waited on the slopes below, and across the Ten Kingdoms of Ulthuan. All would pay for her humiliation, and for the deaths of those she had loved. But how to achieve such a feat? The sky shook as the last three winds fought to escape, and at last Morathi knew what she must do. Spurring Sulephet forward, Morathi dove headlong through the writhing winds, and into the heart of the Great Vortex.

The dark pegasus perished the moment it touched the wall of wind, aged to dust by the sorceries at work. Not so Morathi, whose form had been made immortal long ago. Caledor Dragontamer's mages stood no chance against her, for the whole of their attention was on stopping the vortex from shaking Ulthuan apart. With lighting and fire, the Hag Sorceress slew them all, drawing upon the raw magic of the remaining winds without thought or restraint. Only Caledor survived, protected by counterspells he had spent a lifetime weaving. It was he who first sensed a terrible presence drawing near, he who glimpsed the glittering eye of Slaanesh when it appeared at the very heart of the vortex, on the precipice where the mortal world spilled into the unearthly Realm of Chaos.

Morathi saw the eye too, but in her madness did not care. Indeed, she invited its gaze, casting ever wilder magics to tempt it nearer. She no longer feared oblivion in Slaanesh's gullet, not if it would exhort the thirsting god to lay waste to all Ulthuan. This would be her vengeance, perhaps even her apotheosis, for could not Slaanesh's favour could be courted? Again and again, Morathi hammered at the enchantments of the vortex, and the rift at its heart widened. Caledor begged her to stop, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Slowly but surely, the rift grew wider. A giant taloned hand, its skin formed of faces shrieking in agony and ecstasy, forced its way through, and groped blindly for succulent prey. The air was sweet with the stench of a thousand terrible temptations, and the winds sang in a voice of promise and terror.

Outside the column of winds, Teclis at last came to his senses, and saw disaster at play around him. His fire-scorched skin flaring in agony with every movement, the loremaster dragged himself to the vortex once more. The energies Morathi was unleashing were like a flare to Slaanesh. If the rift grew much wider, the Dark Prince would claw his way through into the mortal world, and there would be no power that could stop him. The rest of the winds had to be dispersed at once, no matter the cost. Plunging his hands forward once again, Teclis wrought Ulthuan's doom in order to save it from damnation.

Even then, he nearly failed. The remaining winds bucked and fought his every command, and had Caledor not abandoned his attempts to reason with Morathi in order to aid him, then it would all have been for naught. As it was, Ghyran, the Wind of Life, gusted away from the vortex, instigating a series of earthquakes from Lothern to Tor Achare. The continental plate that supported much of southern Caledor snapped along its spine. Tens of thousands perished as their cities slipped into the sea. Long dormant volcanoes burst into furious life throughout the Annulii mountains, and lava spilled out onto the plains of Yvresse. Ghyran flew across the northern slopes in brief freedom before Teclis' anchor-spells snapped tight and bound the wind to Alarielle.

The Wind of Life flowed through the Everqueen's body, infusing itself through flesh, bone and spirit, leaving her forever changed. There was no pain, just a sense of warmth and fulfilment, and of incredible power. The surging torrent of life magic within her built to a peak and did not subside. Her eyes, ever a brilliant blue until that moment, flared green, and a wave of shining magical force spread from her outstretched hands. Where it touched, the living felt renewed strength, and the dying felt pain fall away into nothing as mortal wounds suddenly healed.

Before the tremors faded away, Teclis tore Ulgu, the Wind of Shadow, free of the vortex, and the rumbling began again. Tidal waves smashed across the Inner Sea, and Ellyrion all but vanished beneath the deluge; Tor Elyr disappeared beneath the waters even as its citizens scrambled for higher ground. Ulgu billowed like smoke about Teclis' feet. At the loremaster's command, it seethed and writhed through the dust towards Malekith's prone form.

Despite what Morathi had believed, Malekith was not dead, though life had all but left him. Wisps of oily shadow billowed and blossomed around the fallen king, moving to the motion of an unseen wind. There was a dark flash that left an inky afterimage on every eye upon the Isle of the Dead. When it cleared, the clouds streamed into Malekith's burnt flesh, forcing their way in through mouth, nose and eyes, seeping through every pore. As the last skein of shadow vanished, the Phoenix King gave out a piercing cry. His body arched in pain, resting only on his head and heels. The scream faded, and Malekith collapsed, tendrils of shadow flickering from his mouth with every breath.

Only one of the eight winds now remained: Hysh, the Wind of Light. It alone could not sustain the Great Vortex, and the howling winds began to collapse. As the vortex shrank in on itself, so too did the rift at its heart, and a great ululating howl split the air as Slaanesh realised he had been cheated of his feast. The vast, taloned hand groped frantically as the rift contracted, desperate to seize some vibrant morsel. Morathi, at last realising her folly, backed away. She did not see Caledor approach.

The mage held Morathi fast as the giant hand drew near. The sorceress shrieked, and tore at Caledor with nails and teeth. Blood ran as rivers down the mage's face, but still he held on, drawing her into the last embrace that either would ever know. *Your race is run, child,* he said. *Meet your end with the dignity of your heritage.* Something in those words at last pierced Morathi's madness, and she fell limp in Caledor's arms. As the claws closed around them both, she screamed one last time and then there was silence.

When Teclis at last collapsed the vortex entirely and drew the power of Hysh into his staff, the rift had closed. Of Caledor and Morathi, there was no sign.



The vortex at last faded away, but the tremors did not. Waystones rumbled, and great slabs of alabaster stone cracked away from their flanks. At the island's lip, the seas grew angrier, and waves reared high before smashing down on the desolate shores.

This, at last, was too much for Tyrion's host. The elves' madness had begun to fade even as their prince had died, and now they fled. Some, realising the terrible deeds they had committed in Tyrion's name, begged for forgiveness, and thus earned swift deaths, whilst those who fled met only with the chill embrace of the storm-laden seas. As for those who had fought for Malekith, most clustered beneath their banners as the island collapsed, and prayed for salvation.

Alarielle picked her way through the falling stones and hastened to the spot where Tyrion and Malekith lay. Her face was distant and unreadable, her thoughts – perhaps her very being – far afield. Araloth went with her, though he knew that the Everqueen no longer needed his spear for protection. As he walked, Araloth felt fresh energy in his tired limbs, saw his wounds close as if they had never been. The eyes of elves who had hovered on the brink of death snapped open as the Everqueen passed, their broken bones reknitting and their agonies receding.

Alarielle stooped briefly at Malekith's side. Araloth watched as her fingers brushed the arrow-shaft protruding from the Phoenix King's back, and started in surprise as the wood burst into a fine cloud of seeds. They hung in the air for a moment, gossamer against the light. Then the wind scattered them across the rocky ground. The seeds sprouted with impossible speed wherever they landed, questing roots bursting from the husks to burrow into cracks. Alarielle's presence was all the nourishment the seedlings required. Decades of growth occurred in seconds, and soon a thin but glorious glade of oaks stood at the isle's heart.

Malekith's fists clenched and unclenched as the strange forest unfurled about him, but otherwise made no move. Alarielle paid him no further heed. Without a word, she knelt in the dust beside Tyrion. Araloth watched as a single tear spilled from the Everqueen's cheek, splashing across the prince's brow. In death, all the malice and cruelty had faded from the prince's face, and his aspect was again that which had brought hope to his people. Araloth lingered a moment, but then saw Teclis standing silently amongst the rocks, and left the Everqueen to her private sorrow.

The ground rumbled once again, more forcefully than before. A short distance from where Alarielle knelt, a waystone collapsed, showering the ground with dust and shards of stone. The rock where the vortex had once stood fell away, replaced by a seething cauldron of white water.

Malekith, at last roused, staggered to his feet. No one moved to help. Not all of the Phoenix King's wounds were healing. The shaft of the arrow had been transmuted by Alarielle's touch, but the tip remained, lodged close to his heart. Every motion was agony, but then Malekith was no stranger to pain. He reached out for the Widowmaker, which lay where it had fallen from Tyrion's hands. Malekith's form blurred as he moved, every motion leaving an afterimage of shadow in its wake.

It was Alarielle who first recognised what Malekith intended. She cried out in alarm and moved to block his path. Araloth heard the warning, and started forward. Both were too late. The shadowy fingers of Malekith's right hand closed around the Widowmaker's hilt, and the Phoenix King gave a snort of triumph.

'What happened here?' Araloth asked.

'What happened is that I failed,' said Teclis bitterly. The mage's voice was cracked, his face burnt and streaked with blood. 'We needed eight winds bent to our service. Now, three have escaped. They seek bearers I would not have chosen, and our hopes fade. I had planned to infuse Malekith with fire, to cement his future. I fear shadow will instead draw him back into the past.'

Teclis' gaze shifted, and Araloth followed it to where Alarielle knelt by Tyrion's body.

'I gambled with my brother's life, and I failed,' Teclis said. He looked sharply at Araloth. 'Tyrion would not have, had our positions been reversed. He always found a way.'

There was an odd note in Teclis' voice, thought Araloth, though he did not know the other well enough to understand its meaning. 'Can Alarielle restore him?'

'No,' Teclis replied distantly. 'Reviving Tyrion would also restore Khaine. We are better for the Destroyer's passing. You feel it, do you not?'

Araloth's brow furrowed, but then he realised what Teclis had meant. A spark of malice, unnoticed until that moment, had gone from his soul.

'Khaine has now joined his brothers and sisters in a realm beyond our own,' Teclis said softly. 'Thus does the cycle of destiny close. For better or for worse, we choose our fate now.'

'And Lileath?' asked Araloth with sudden urgency.

'I have played her part in this, so that she could act as she wished, rather than be doomed to repeat the past. Lileath alone has escaped the fate that has claimed our gods, and even now walks Elthin Arvan. She may yet be the saving of us all.'

For a long moment, Malekith stood silhouetted against the billowing sea spray, the Widowmaker outstretched. Then the Phoenix King turned and hurled the sword into the frothing waters. For a heartbeat, the Widowmaker glinted darkly. Then it was gone to the depths of the ocean. With its master's passing, the legendary sword of Khaine was naught but steel; it could neither command Malekith, nor offer him anything that a dozen other blades could not provide.

As the Widowmaker vanished, another great tremor struck the Isle of the Dead. Jagged spurs of rock burst from the ground, and waystones sank into the whirling waters. Stone by stone, inch by inch, the island began to slip into the sea. It was the same all across Ulthuan. For thousands of years, only the magic of the Great Vortex had kept the continent above the waves. Now, with the magic scattered, the hungry ocean laid claim to a prize long denied.

But this moment had been planned for. All across Ulthuan, Alarielle's spellweavers began the almighty labour of evacuating the elves. Across the Ten Kingdoms, the worldroots were coaxed into life, and great columns of asur and druchii began the long journey to the only place that was any longer safe: Athel Loren.

Thousands were saved, but many thousands more perished, drowned as tidal waves flooded across the Sapherian plains or smothered by smoke and fire as the volcanoes of the Annulii erupted into dreadful rage. In Chrace, prides of lions roared as one as the forest-covered hills broke apart and slipped into the waves. In Cothique, underground halls collapsed as seawater flooded through them, dooming hundreds to a lingering death as they sank to the ocean floor.

Not all the elves readily departed. Too many of the asur – proud to the last – chose to perish with their beloved homes. There were patriarchs who ordered the doors of their mansions sealed, choosing to die with their families at their sides no matter how their sons and daughters pleaded for escape. Others did not trust the wood elves, and chose death over the possibility of betrayal. A few even believed that times were not cataclysmic as others had said, and remained in their halls even as their lands drowned beneath fire or water.

Invisible to the eyes of all but a few, the spirits of the dead spiralled away from Ulthuan. Slaanesh, having raged at his banishment from the mortal world, now rejoiced at the banquet that lay before him. However, so vast was the tide of souls sweeping through his realm, that even the thirsting god's appetite was briefly overmatched. In that eyeblink, flocks of rephallim stripped the Dark Prince's table bare. Howling with delight, they dragged the stolen souls back into the catacombs of the mortal world, and presented them to their mistress Eldyra.

During the long weeks of Lileath's tutelage, Eldyra's power had blossomed. She was no longer truly mortal, but not yet wholly divine. Quelling her last shreds of compassion, Eldyra devoured the spirits of the dead, letting their power flood through her. But she did not keep that power for herself. Instead, she shaped and channelled it, reaching out beyond the mortal world's bounds. Lileath's divine power was already denuded, expended to aid a ravaged Empire. What remained she gave gladly to Eldyra's work, marvelling as the newly-risen Queen of the Dead accomplished a feat far beyond her own gifts, and created a dark realm that would lie beyond the Chaos Gods' sight – for a time, at least. Tens of thousands of souls had been destroyed to lay the haven's foundations, but Lileath's concern rested with the survival of the living, not the dead.

For those who had fought on the Isle of the Dead, salvation came at Alarielle's hands. The seeds she had sown across the island had not just created a forest, but had bound the long-sundered isle into the worldroots once more. Thus did the living depart as the Isle of the Dead crumbled around them. Malekith, still slowed by the wounds that should have seen him dead, at last consented to assistance, and was borne from the isle by his royal guard.

Soon, only Imrik, Alarielle and Teclis remained. The isle was little more than a windswept and wave-lashed outcrop amidst the boiling seas, with a few battered trees to maintain its ties to the worldroots. Teclis had wearily seated himself next to Tyrion's body. The loremaster refused to depart, and would not change his mind, no matter how Alarielle and Imrik argued. At last, the Everqueen could maintain the worldroots no longer and, with a last glance at Tyrion's corpse, she departed. Imrik tarried a while longer. The prince of Caledor knew that Minaithnir would carry him to safety, and he offered Teclis the same salvation, only to be refused as Alarielle had. *Leave me,* Teclis told him. *Let me sup this bitter brew alone.*

At last, the waters rose so high that even mighty Minaithnir could not remain, and Imrik departed. As his dragon climbed above the crashing waves, Imrik looked back and saw Teclis at last rise to his feet. Demonstrating a strength that Imrik would not have known he possessed, the loremaster gathered Tyrion up in his arms. Then, the waters of the ocean crashed down upon the Isle of the Dead one last time, and Teclis was lost to Imrik's sight.

With weariness in his heart, Imrik bade Minaithnir travel eastwards. They did not sight land again until they reached the Bretonnian coast.



Ulthuan was gone, but Athel Loren bloomed. Where Ghyran had once been drawn into the Great Vortex, and thence out into the Realm of Chaos, now it flowed to Alarielle. She was still mortal, but had been made one with Ghyran. Thus infused by one of the primal magics, the Everqueen became a beacon of life. As Alarielle journeyed through Athel Loren, the blight that had beset the glades soon receded, and new life sprouted wherever her feet touched the forest's rich soil. Alarielle's return to Athel Loren brought greater joy than she could ever have expected. For the first time, she was weary of battle; now, she longed to be healer and protector.

Yet Athel Loren was also a realm of shadow. Malekith, whose mortal shell was bound to Ulgu, walked ever in darkness, even under the brightest sun. The Phoenix King's form seemed to billow and shift when his concentration was elsewhere, and all knew when his brooding eyes were upon them. Asuryath had been reforged, though the blade was no longer what it had once been. It was now a weapon of living shadow, bound to its master's will.

Alarielle had tended Malekith's wounds, but no artifice could remove the shard of Alith Anar's arrow. It lay near to Malekith's heart, its pain with him in every waking moment, but the Phoenix King bore it without complaint – if not without ill temper.

Where once Malekith had ruled over but one race of elves, now all three peoples looked to him for guidance. None of them loved him, but the Phoenix King was well used to that, and it wearied him not. It was Ulthuan's destruction that troubled Malekith more. For six thousand years, its domination had been his singular goal. What was he to do now? For the first time in his long life, Malekith was without purpose.

The hunter ghosted through the trees. His every footstep was silent, his movements precise. He had tracked his quarry for hours, and confrontation was at last here.

Silently, the hunter entered the glade, approaching the Phoenix King from behind.

The hunter's bow was slung upon his shoulder, but his hand was on his sword's pommel. He had advanced to within a dozen paces when his quarry's voice broke the silence.

'I have been expecting you,' Malekith announced without turning. 'Have you come to finish what you began?'

At last Malekith turned, his gaze falling across the other.

'I do not know,' said Alith Anar, the uncertainty strange upon his tongue. 'I should kill you, avenge the horrors you have wrought...' His words faded into the darkness.

'And yet your sword remains sheathed,' Malekith noted, with a faint trace of mockery.

'As does yours,' remarked Alith Anar.

'Perhaps we are neither of us what we used to be.'

'Perhaps,' the other conceded, 'I wish I could believe that.'

'Then you have come as my assassin.'

'No, but I do come bearing a message,' Alith Anar took a step closer, his gaze unflinching. 'My arrow-tip rests next to your heart, and you will never be able to remove it. The agony it causes shall suffice as my vengeance for as long as you serve our people. Fail them, and my next shot will take your life,'

'Your threats mean nothing,' Malekith growled.

'Then you have nothing to fear,' Alith Anar replied.

The moon passed behind a cloud. The Shadow King departed, leaving Malekith alone with his thoughts.

For the high elves, it was a time of despair. The land of their birth – the ancestral realms that untold generations had fought and died to protect – had been lost, and that failure haunted them. Worse, with Ulthuan's destruction, thousands of waystones had been shattered, dooming countless billions of souls to Slaanesh's gorge. In one fell stroke of fortune, the high elves had lost both their home and their past. Many took their own lives, unable to live with the grief and the shame. Most of the Ulthuani considered the failure to lie at their own door, and in time this would forge itself into fresh determination. For the present, only Imrik's stoic example, and the love that all felt for their Everqueen, kept the high elves from complete despair.

The dark elves felt none of their cousins' regrets. To them, Ulthuan had ever been a foe to be vanquished and conquered, and many of the Naggarothi believed that they had done exactly that. Now, they saw that Malekith had delivered them to a new realm where their caprices could be easily indulged, and they were well-content. Forbidden by Malekith to prey upon those who lived within Athel Loren, the dark elves raided deep into the shattered remains of Bretonnia, slaking their cruel passions in human blood.

The wood elves had lost the least from Tyrion's war, and Alarielle's return promised to restore the forest to a greatness it had not seen in many a lifetime. There were those amongst the lords and ladies who resented sharing their homeland with their displaced cousins. However, most wood elves judged the reunification of the elven race in Athel Loren to be proof that they had ever followed the true path from which others had strayed. On this matter, the spirits of the forest remained silent, although rumours began to spread that a great army of dryads was mustering in the Wildwood, their intent unknown.

Alarielle's foresight had not only been the salvation of the elves, but of other creatures also. Rescued from Ulthuan's demise through chance or design, many wild beasts sought new homes beneath Athel Loren's eaves. The forest absorbed the newcomers as readily as it had the elves, and bound them seamlessly into the weave. Prides of white lions prowled the glades, harpies nested amongst the crags and monstrous hydras swam in the hidden lakes. The dragons of Caledor sought refuge amongst the caves of Wydrioth, phoenixes in the fires of Vaul's Anvil.

Thus did only one faction truly suffer from the elves' change of fortune. The beastmen, ever a curse upon Athel Loren, found the forest defended as never before. The high elves and dark elves – the former seeking a distraction from their guilt, and the latter an abeyance of ennui – gladly threw themselves into the extermination of the beastmen. The Children of Chaos were slaughtered in their thousands, and driven into the darkest depths of the forest. But the threat of the beastmen was not ended. The power of Chaos was still rising, and the herds continued to multiply.

At the first full moon after the sinking of Ulthuan, Alarielle at last gave herself in marriage to Malekith. In the preceding days, Malhandir had borne the Everqueen in a procession to every hall in Athel Loren. It was a journey of pomp and ceremony, rivalling the grandest days of old Ulthuan. A thousand-strong honour guard accompanied their queen, and the banners of three realms were lowered in allegiance wherever Malhandir carried her. It was a solemn event and, for many, an uneasy one.

This sense of foreboding was deepened when Alarielle at last arrived in the firelit King's Glade. In all his long life, Malekith had knelt before none save his father, but he knelt in respect to the Everqueen as she trod the petal-strewn path to his side. The ceremony of joining was to have been conducted by Naieth the Prophetess. However, another had taken her place, her midnight dress dark against the shadows, and the stars in her hair a match for those gleaming high above. Thus was the union forged not by mortal words, but by the blessing of Lileath herself, the last survivor of the elven pantheon.

Long had Lileath been away from the children she loved as her own. Now the goddess had returned, and her presence at last sparked celebration. Eldyra did not return with her. The Queen of the Dead now ruled the realm she had created, just as Ereth Khial had once ruled the underworld of myth. Sorrow was never far from Lileath's thoughts, though she hid it well from others. Only Araloth, who knew the goddess better than any, marked the fatigue that dogged her footsteps, and he feared its meaning.

Thus, at last, were the three races of elves united once more, but not beneath the rule of a Phoenix King. Lileath decreed that the time of Asuryan's creation had gone forever, and recrowned Malekith as Eternity King, to rule alongside his Everqueen for all the turnings of the world yet to come. At last, the crowds cheered, and the feast that followed lasted all through the next day, and well into the following night.

None heard the words that Lileath shared with Malekith and Alarielle in private, and it was well that they did not, for any celebration would have died stillborn. The power of Chaos was still rising, the goddess told them, and wove a tale of a world upon the brink of destruction, and of horrors yet to come. Thus, whilst their subjects laughed and drank, the Eternity King and Everqueen looked into the future and saw only ashes and death.



The night after Malekith's recoronation, Araloth met with Lileath on the bridge beneath the Icefell waterfall. He came alone, save for his faithful Skaryn, and marked at once how worn Lileath looked. The stars in her hair had lost their lustre, and her face was lined.

Lileath must have marked the concerned look her appearance provoked. 'I am a goddess no more,' she said, 'not in any way that matters. The last of my power I gave willingly to slow the blight of Chaos – and to one other task...'

So saying, Lileath turned back towards the waterfall. At her gesture, the wild waters shifted and writhed, curling together to create a tunnel that appeared to lead into the rock beyond.

Araloth peered into the tunnel, but spied only swirling darkness. 'Where does it lead?'

'To a haven,' the goddess replied, turning to face him once more, 'one built by Ereth Khial's inheritor, and defended from the Dark Gods by the spirits of Bretonnia's greatest knights. It is my last gift to you.'

'I cannot,' Araloth said at once. 'How can you ask me to cower in safety whilst my people stand upon the brink of destruction?'

'Because I love you, and because our daughter needs you.'

Araloth blinked away his sudden surprise. 'Our daughter?'

'She waits for you beyond, and she will require your guidance.'

'I don't believe you,' Araloth's outburst was intinctive, incredulous.

'Listen to me,' Lileath pleaded, hands outstretched towards him. 'Everything I have done – everything that you, Teclis and Caledor have worked for at my urging – it was not about victory. It was never about victory. The Dark Gods cannot be stopped. The last sparks of the heavens are extinguished, and mortal strength alone cannot defeat the power of Chaos. Survival is the best that any of us can hope for in what follows.'

Araloth said nothing. He could hear the ring of truth in Lileath's words, but his thoughts were a jumble. He had a daughter? The joy of the revelation momentarily overcame his horror at all else the goddess had said.

'Step through the waterfall,' Lileath begged. 'In the world beyond, you can nurture a new realm, and our daughter will one day scatter the seeds of life.'

With an effort, Araloth focused on her words. 'How can you be sure of that?'

'Because it is the cycle,' Lileath replied. 'A Creator arises from the darkness, and life follows him. His family quarrels, blows are exchanged, and the Dark Gods pour in through the wounds. The world, once so vibrant, collapses under the weight of Chaos, but its glory can live forever so long as one remains to remember it.'

Araloth closed his eyes, recalling the vision he had seen at Haladra, of his own face revealed beneath Asuryan's mask. At last, he knew the vision's meaning, but there was no joy at the revelation, only anger.

'Before he died, Vaul warned me that you were keeping things from me. You once said that I was to be a hero to lead the elves in the coming darkness. How can I do what you ask and honour that path?'

'This was always your destiny,' Lileath replied softly. 'I have but helped you on your way. I wish I could forever walk with you beneath the trees of Athel Loren, but such was never to be our fate.'

The goddess' sorrowful tone extinguished Araloth's anger like an icy wind.

'You cannot join me, can you?'

'No. If I leave, the Dark Gods will follow me, and everything that we have suffered for will have been in vain. Besides, my place is here, with this world. I walked upon its hills as the first light dawned, and I will stay and fight for it as long as I am able.'

'But you said victory was impossible.'

'And so it is, though Teclis believes otherwise,' said Lileath sadly, 'but whilst mortal strength cannot vanquish the Dark Gods, it can leave them so weakened that it will be millennia before they threaten you.'

'And our daughter's name?'

'Choose it well, for names have great power.'

Araloth stood silently for a long time, struggling to bring order to his thoughts. In the end, he realised that he believed Lileath's words, and he knew that he could not abandon his child – even one he had never known.

'I will do as you ask,' he said at last.

Without a word, Lileath stepped forward and put her arms around Araloth one final time. Time passed; how much, Araloth could not be sure. Then, at last, the moment could be put off no longer. Skaryn at his side, Araloth drew away from the embrace and walked into the tunnel of mist and spray. Darkness enveloped him, and he saw nothing more.



