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THE END TIMES

NAGASH

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NAGASH

The End Times - Volume I

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I have seen this world's demise. Morrslieb, the accursed orb, waxes against crimson skies. Magic rises and reality subsides, leaving only madness in its wake. Vermin cease their gnawing and swarm to the surface, answering their horned master's call. First to fall are the temples of the Old Ones, abandoned by defenders who know that the end draws near.





Mankind does not recognise its doom – not yet. They hear only the drums in the north, and know that war is come. Some will fight. Others will abandon reason, seeking salvation in scripture or the scourge. They are deceived. The Dark Brothers are stronger than ever before, and the old gods fade. Only in death will any respite be found.



In a land of mist, the danger is closer still. Pride has ever been the folly of that shrouded land, and so it will be again. When the dragons fly as one, an ancient lie will at last be exposed, a revelation that will shake Ulthuan to the roots of its mountains. The mirror of light and dark will shatter, and Aenarion's heirs will fight for the legacy of Khaine amidst the ashes of the phoenix.





The three-eyed king has long awaited this moment, the hour in which his destiny is at last unveiled. He leads an army of madness and rage, against which no sane being would willingly stand. Perhaps I am not sane, as I will fight one last time. Not for victory, but for survival, for the hope that a spark can endure. It is a slender hope, and the laughter of Dark Gods rings loud in my ears.

These are the End Times.





Advocate Tekto, Speaker of Hexoatl's sacred council, knelt silently before the golden dais. A telepathic summons had brought him to mighty Mazdamundi's meditation chamber, and he had expected to find the slann already awoken. Instead, the Great One remained motionless, save for the steady rise and fall of his chest. Tekto could not tell whether Mazdamundi was lost to meditation or to dreaming, and there was no way to know until the slann chose to grant him enlightenment. It mattered not to Tekto. The Speaker had been summoned, and he would attend upon Mazdamundi – wakeful or not – until dismissed.

Tekto felt the humid mists of the chamber stir as another entered through the golden gateway. The newcomer wore the feathered mantle of Quetzl, He Who Protects, proclaiming his sacred duty to safeguard Tlaxtlan. Turning away from silent Mazdamundi, Tekto rose to his feet and offered the ritual bow of greeting, as was protocol.

'Warleader Kroq-Gar confirms that the dark ones cluster about the City of Echoes in great numbers,' proclaimed High Scalechief Inqala. 'He requires reinforcements to contain them.'

Despite the stifling warmth of the meditation chamber, Tekto felt a chill settle upon his scales. Nothing had been the same since the twin-tailed comet had returned. Already the ratmen had begun to rise around Itza and Tlaxtlan, and now ruined Xahutec was once more under the sway of the old enemy. Tightening his grip on his staff of office, the priest calmed himself. Cold times were ahead, but the Great Ones would guide them through the chill as they had before.

'Three grand cohorts were granted to him already this lunar cycle,' he told Inqala. 'This breaks all precedent.'

'Indeed,' the other replied. 'Yet still he requires more. Many have fallen in Xahutec's defence. Kroq-Gar asks that the Thunderscale Cohort be allowed to bask in the battle's heat.'

Tekto's lids slid closed over bulbous eyes. The Thunderscale Cohort were Hexoatl's foremost guardians, and not lightly sent to fight elsewhere. 'Is the situation that dire?'

'The warleader believes so,' Inqala replied. 'We should trust to his intuition.'

Tekto stood silently for a time, tail flicking from side to side as he considered. 'Already the geomantic web shudders with the dark ones' presence,' he said at last, opening his eyes. 'Kroq-Gar shall have what he requests. His instincts have never failed us before; we should heed them now.'

'I shall give the order,' Inqala confirmed, turning to leave the chamber.

'Wait,' boomed Mazdamundi.

The word echoed around the chamber, halting Inqala in his tracks. Both skinks turned to look upon the slann, roused at last from his silence. Tekto felt warmth enfold him as the Great One made telepathic contact.

Images flooded through Tekto's mind, scenes of slaughter and destruction, of jungles afire and temple-cities cast into ruin. He saw the cursed moon loom low over the skies, heard the chittering of rats, felt the cruel laughter of the dark ones in his mind. He witnessed two elves – one dark, one light – duel across a sea of skulls, whilst around them great armies gave battle without quarter. That vision quickly faded, replaced by images of human cities overrun by grasping vines and twisted trees. Across the world, the dead of ages tore free of their graves, mustering beneath one oppressive will. Tekto saw the mountains fall and the seas rise, the land torn asunder and the skies shatter. In the end, darkness swallowed all.

The telepathic contact severed abruptly, and Tekto fell forward against his ceremonial staff, his breathing shallow and quick.

'What is it? What did you see?' Inqala asked, the feathers of his headdress bobbing as his head twitched from side to side.

Tekto trembled as he sought the words to describe the vision, but already the images were fading from his mind. They scattered like the echoes of dreams even as the priest tried to recall them, leaving behind only a memory of stark terror.

'Fire and destruction,' Tekto muttered weakly. 'The comet is no omen of hope; it is a portent of doom.'

'You speak of the impossible,' Inqala objected. 'The comet is Sotek's sign! Tehenhauin declared it to be so, and the Great Ones confirmed it.'

'And perhaps Sotek returns,' Tekto rejoined, 'but the comet brings only death. There can be no stopping what is coming.'

'This cannot be,' countered Inqala. 'The Great Plan–'

The priest fell silent as Mazdamundi's corpulent bulk shifted upon the dais. 'The Great Plan has failed,' the slann intoned heavily. 'The Exodus must begin.'

THE BEGINNING OF THE END



The world was dying, but it had long been so, ever since the coming of the Chaos Gods.

For years beyond human reckoning the gods had coveted the physical realm, had sought to infect it with their madness. They had sent daemonic legions to conquer it by force, seduced mortals to their cause with honeyed words and the temptations of glory. Even the physicality of the mortal world warped under their influence, their magical lifeblood corrupting the soil and the air, until no living thing escaped their touch.

Many times did the Dark Gods breach the barrier between the realms, but each time heroes arose to confront the madness. Through deeds of valour and sacrifice, the daemonic legions were cast back into the blasphemous realm that had sired them, and those mortals who had fallen into the Dark Gods' grasp were slain or driven out into the wilderness. Alas, these victories were fleeting, for the gods are eternal, and mortal fortitude all too brief. Each time, the cycle soon began again, heralded by a twin-tailed comet in the northern skies; each time the corruption was more widespread, and the carnage more glorious. Each time the gods retreated, so too did magic recede as the barrier between the realms healed. Yet these wounds never truly closed, and the mortal realm was never truly free of the gods' magic, or the strife that came with it.

As the millennia passed, great nations arose from amidst the strife, bastions of order in a world awash with chaos. However, though these realms were strong without, they were hollow within, for they were maintained by hatred and distrust; ruled through pride and fear. Such emotions were as meat and drink to the gods, and they feasted in defeat almost as greedily as they did in victory. The mortals unknowingly crafted their own downfall, for even their triumphs hastened their inevitable doom.

Thus, as a twin-tailed comet was again seen in mortal skies, the Dark Gods flexed their husbanded might once more. The barrier between the realms fractured, and the trickle of magic into the world became a flood.

Storms of roiling, unadulterated Chaos swept across the mortal realm, lashing the lands with arcane fury. Blood fell as rain, seething and searing wherever it touched living flesh. The skies and fields blazed with multicoloured fire, the clouds and stars twisting into leering faces to witness the destruction. Proud cities that had stood for hundreds of years collapsed into foetid squalor, as the water they relied on for life turned black and noxious. Everywhere, mortals were overcome by selfish desire and wanton impulses, throwing themselves into the most obscene and blasphemous of acts.

The storms spread quickly, for neither mountain nor ocean could stay their passage. From out of these maelstroms marched the daemonic legions, loosed once more to wreak their masters' vengeance upon the world. While the daemons of Khorne wrought their bloody carnage, Tzeentch's emissaries pulled upon interwoven schemes thousands of years in the making, revelling at how the mortals danced as the strands shifted and unravelled. Nurgle's plagues blossomed and spread, ushering mortals into fevered deaths, but even then it was whispered that the Plaguefather had ordered the creation of a pestilence that would overshadow all that had come before it. And Slaanesh's handmaidens? They too acted according to their nature, bestowing upon mortals joys so rare and exquisite that the death they granted quickly afterwards was both the kindest and cruellest of acts.

The world over, mortals prayed with a fervour they had never before known. Some prayed to the Dark Gods, and so surrendered their souls to blackness. Others prayed to their own sainted deities, and these walked with hope and disappointment for the final fleeting days, for the other gods had faded as the Chaos Gods had arisen. In every city of every land, seers, madmen and prophets spoke of the End Times, of the fiery doom of the world brought nigh. Even the boldest felt a frisson of fear to hear those words pronounced, and they hoped that the portents would yet prove false.

Discord broke out amongst the blasphemous ranks, for the daemons of the different gods were as varied in character as the deities that had spawned them. In many places the daemons forgot the mortals altogether, and turned on one another, transforming great reaches of the world into hellish battlegrounds where the slights and insults of millennia were at last repaid. The gods cared not, for their appetites were vast, and their palates simple. Strife was strife, and it mattered not from which fields the harvest of suffering was reaped. The gods supped of the heady brew their minions had created, and grew stronger for the tasting. And as the gods' might swelled, so did the woes unleashed upon the world increase.

However, victory yet eluded the gods' grasp, for though the tides of Chaos were rising, they were not yet at their height. Many storms of magic collapsed as suddenly as they broke, banishing the daemons once more to their distant realm. The hold of Karak Izor was besieged and battered by such a tempest, its defenders assailed by so vast a legion of blood-starved daemons that they fought on only from defiance, with no hope of victory. Then, without warning, the storm scattered upon the winds, replaced in an instant by blue skies. The bewildered dwarfs, their mail rent and shields dinted, were left staggered, unsure whether to maintain their shieldwalls or bury their dead. Elsewhere, the river Aver turned to blood and birthed a slavering host that overran every town and village along its banks. Only Averheim survived the onset, and then only because the daemons faded within moments of reaching its walls.

Alas, seldom did suffering end with the daemons' departure. When the Maggot King, Epidemius, brought his Festival of Disease to Middenheim, pox-scarred victims were sent to the fires long after the fly-swathed host had departed the packed streets. Even after the lurid flames ceased writhing over Tor Achare, cackling daemons haunted the nightmares of all who slept within the city bounds, and many such dreamers never awoke, their souls stolen away from their slumbering bodies. In Tilea, the town of Trantio was, for three days and three nights, engulfed in a swirl of perfumed murk. No two stones lay together when the storm lifted; the daemon-wrought destruction was so complete that not a single building survived, and every soul trapped within now served, in manners both horrific and diverse, before Slaanesh's silken throne.

In many places, the breaches between the realms were larger and more stable, and there were fought the bloodiest battles of those days. In Lustria, the vast rift in the heart of Xahutec was torn open anew. Although the lizardmen had long prepared for that moment, and had surrounded the ancient ruins with troops and wards untold, the onslaught was only contained, not defeated. As the days of unrelenting battle ground on, the saurus cohorts were gradually driven back. In Ulthuan, Yvresse was all but overrun as the daemon N'kari led his legions forth from the enchanted mists to bring suffering to the high elves once more. In Athel Loren, the Vaults of Winter cracked asunder, and spewed legions of daemonkind into the glades of Summerstrand.

Yet all these incursions were as nothing compared to what occurred at the world's northern pole, at the site of the greatest rift between the mortal and immortal realms. There the daemonic legions congregated in numbers beyond measure, marshalling into four great hosts of damnation assembled beneath the most exalted servants of the Chaos Gods. It was an invasion of a magnitude not seen for thousands of years; the beginning of the end, a declaration of the death of the world. One by one, the four exalted daemons bent knee in fealty; not to a god, or another daemon, but to a mortal man, a traitor to his kind chosen by the Dark Gods to be their agent of annihilation. For the acts he would perform, so had the gods named him. He was Archaon Everchosen, Lord of the End Times, and the hour of his glory was fast approaching.





The coming of the daemons heralded a time of dark rejoicing for the barbarians of the Chaos Wastes. For long months, the shamans and seers of the northern tribes had read signs of glory in the stars and omens in the shifting winds. The black moon hung heavier in the skies each day, green flames raging across its surface and sparking into the void, waves of dark blessings rippling through the tribes with every flare. A twin-tailed comet blazed across the sky, its wake branding the heavens with sigils of flickering fire.

Tidings spread that Archaon had at last ascended to his throne of bone and brass, the Crown of Domination set upon the Everchosen's brow by unholy Be'lakor, the First-Damned. Truly was Archaon the Lord of the End Times, highest in the sight of the Chaos Gods, and their weapon against the world. Such was the Everchosen's glory, or so it was said, that even the immortal servants of the gods now offered him fealty. Not all believed that the daemons intended true allegiance to the Everchosen, for the legends of the northlands were replete with tales of how such creatures obeyed only when it served their own interests – but it hardly mattered. There would be opportunities for the strong, the devious and the devoted to win the favour of the gods.

Tribes beyond counting were drawn north to the Inevitable City, their chieftains driven by ambition to kneel before Archaon's grim throne. As each night fell and the dark moon blazed overhead, drums boomed through the darkness. Bellowed chants echoed south across the wastes, tens of thousands of voices raised in guttural clamour. All who heard that ancient prayer felt something impossibly old and hungry stir in their souls. Lunatics, seers and daemon-touched wanderers found their steps guided northwards by unknown compulsion, or by the insidious whispers dancing in their minds.

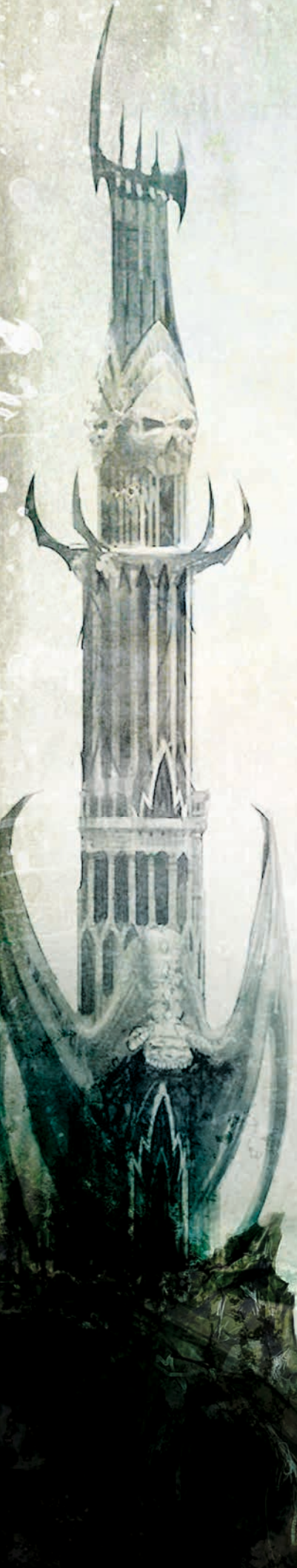
As the winds carried the dirge south across the Old World, even faultless souls who had never heard the call of the dark powers felt its summons. A few – too few – resisted, drawing upon the strength of dwindled gods to preserve their fragile sanity. Some went mad, scooping out their eyes so that they might blind themselves to their unwanted visions, or hacking out their tongues to keep from uttering blasphemous truths. Others welcomed the changes that were upon them, sensing at last the fulfilment of a need that they had never before acknowledged.

In Bretonnia, in the great cathedral of Gisoreux, a bishop was suddenly compelled to anoint the Lady's Fountain with the slime from his own blackened sores. As contagion rippled through the pilgrims who drank from the waters, he bellowed with laughter, a terrible blood-choked sound that gave out only when his lungs collapsed beneath the weight of the writhing maggots within. In Altdorf, a Sister of Shallya completed her morning's devotions, took up a carving knife from the refectory, and slaughtered those with whom she had lived and worshipped for two decades. When the city watch finally breached the temple a day later, they found her sitting amidst bloody and half-eaten bodies. The captain of the watch made the mistake of thinking her catatonic; soon he had a ragged gash where his throat should have been, and she had a sword as well as a knife. Thus began a trail of carnage that stretched to the border of Troll Country, and ended at last in a hail of bullets somewhere on the Nordvast-Streckhein road. All across the Old World, soldiers turned on their comrades before fleeing into the beastmen-haunted forests, or north into the Chaos Wastes, humanity sloughing from their minds and bodies with every step they took.

Hour by hour, day by day, Archaon's army grew, its numbers swollen by traitors and madmen from the south. Yet still the Everchosen made no move to march. Many chieftains grew restless. They chafed at the inactivity, and longed to raise their axes against the weak nations of the world. Some warred amongst themselves, but others led their tribes south in search of plunder and victory.

Archaon cared not. The horde could not be controlled, he knew that well enough, but it did not matter. The Eye of Sheerian had granted him a vision of the future: of a world swallowed by fire, in which civilisation had crumbled and every voice exulted to the glory of the Chaos Gods. This future was not to be brought about by war as the civilised world had so far seen it; this would be war without end. The Realm of Chaos was rising, and those not swept away at its onset would drown as the dark waters closed over their heads. Let others be the first to break upon the shore, expending their strength before the full swell of the tide. Let the weak and worthless be winnowed out, let the reckless and glory-mad grind themselves to offal against defences long prepared; they were of no consequence. Those who survived would be the stronger for it; those who perished would glorify the gods with their deaths. Soon, the Swords of Chaos would raise Archaon's banner, and the greatest horde ever seen would march to cease history.

The End Times were upon the world, and Archaon's hour was nigh.



As elsewhere, northmen spilled south across the Ironfrost Glacier into Naggaroth. Their banners were black against the storm-laden sky; the tramp of their iron-shod feet a rumble of thunder in distant lands. This was the Bloodied Horde, and Valkia was its dread mistress. She had heard Khorne's voice bellowing through the thunderous skies, and now drove her followers south to claim skulls in his name. The Gorequeen cared not for Archaon's strategy – she knew only that Khorne called for blood, and thus she set forth to slake his monstrous thirst.

The horde marched with harsh cheer and boom of drum, yet, incredibly, the Naggarothi were caught unaware. Too long had they relied upon the sorceresses of Ghrond to alert them to such perils, but the Tower of Prophecy lay silent behind a shield of sorcery. Raven-cloaked border patrols fled before the northlanders, turning their swift steeds south towards the safety of the Watchtowers. One by one, the dark riders were overtaken by yowling daemons and plucked from their horses. Only a handful reached the tower of Volroth, there to perish from their wounds.

Yet the warning had at last been given, passed from tower to tower until it reached Naggarond. Ebnir Soulflayer, most trusted of the Witch King's generals, rode to Volroth with what forces he could muster, but found the fortress already fallen. The once proud obsidian walls had been torn down by the roaring spawn-creatures of the Chaos Wastes; all that remained of a garrison some eighty thousand strong were towering cairns of bloody skulls. Soulflayer set his army to the slaughter of those invaders who had tarried amongst Volroth's shattered spires, but the bulk of the Bloodied Horde had already passed beyond the line of watchtowers.

The northlander invasion splintered as it headed further south, its chieftains abandoning Valkia's path to claim skulls of their own. The Gorequeen stayed true to her course, sweeping aside the Naggarothi hosts arrayed against her, and laid siege to grim Naggarond. Other warbands travelled east to assail Har Ganeth, and there found themselves assailed by warriors whose thirst for slaughter eclipsed even their own. Some chieftains headed south, only to be confronted by the cold-hearted legions of Hag Graef. Malus Darkblade proved himself an inspired warleader in those weeks, burying the Dark Road with the corpses of the slain. However, the Lord of Hag Graef sought only to prevent the northlanders assailing his city; he cared not if Naggarond fell, so long as Malekith fell with it. Yet of Malekith, there was no sign.

It was Kouran Darkhand, faithful master of the Black Guard, who led Naggarond's defence. Twice he faced Valkia in single combat as her army stormed the walls, and twice the duel ended in stalemate as the tides of battle swept them apart. Alas, whilst Kouran was an adroit and loyal soldier, he lacked the spark of brilliance to break the siege. As the conflict dragged on, the lords and ladies of the Black Council were torn between desires. As much as they wished for the Witch King's return, so that he might smite the northlanders for their impertinence, so too did they fear Malekith's wrath on seeing what had become of his realm. At last, after three months of siege, the Witch King returned. Of where he had sojourned, he offered no word, and none dared ask, just as they dared not ask whose dried blood was crusted thick upon his gauntlets. Some said he had travelled through the Realm of Chaos, others that he had trod the gloom of the Mirai, but none could say for sure.

Initially, Malekith was of good humour, though this dispersed like blood in the chill ocean as his council apprised him of the realm's woes. It had long been the Witch King's plan to commence a new assault against hated Ulthuan, but such a thing was impossible whilst Naggaroth was beset. Calling the dragon Seraphon to his side, Malekith cast the Bloodied Horde from Naggarond's walls, and ordered the return of all Naggarothi forces bound for Ulthuan. Ancient vengeance would wait until the upstart invaders had been taught the folly of their actions.

'Worthless, all of you! Worthless!' Malekith shouted, slamming his fist down on the stone table. Dried blood flaked from the gauntlet, speckling the map with crimson dust.

Kouran watched as carved finger bones, each marking the last known location of a barbarian horde, skittered across the inked expanse of flayed skin. As a cartographer, Rath Blacktongue had been a severe disappointment; as a map, he was invaluable.

Perhaps fifty inner councillors, all that could be swiftly assembled following the breaking of the siege, were present in the shadowed chamber. None of them spoke; no one wanted to be the first to draw the Witch King's attention. Kouran marked those who had flinched as Malekith's fist had crashed down. Those were the ones who lacked the courage to defy their master; those were the ones that could be trusted.

Most of the council wore solemnly respectful expressions, Kouran noted, but not all. Malus Darkblade, bastard ruler of Hag Graef, could hardly hide his triumph. Something would have to be done about that one, Kouran decided. If his spies could be believed – and Kouran had tortured too many to death over the centuries to think that more than a handful had the stomach for misleading him – then the ambitious Darkblade was gathering allies for a rebellion. Yes, something would have to be done about him, and soon.

'Our campaign against hated Ulthuan will be delayed until the barbarians have been… humbled,' Malekith continued in a dangerous whisper, his temper perhaps subsiding. 'Accept our apologies, Lady Brackblood, for we know that this was to have been your finest hour.'

The Witch King's temper was under control once more, if it had truly been roused in the first place. Even Kouran could not always tell when his master played at rage for theatrical effect.

To Kouran's left, Drane Brackblood gave a predatory smile. 'Your majesty is most gracious,' she said, her voice like silk torn on broken glass.

She had plotted long and hard to be given command of the invasion fleet, Kouran thought, but she knew better than to express her disappointment in council. That would be taken out on her household and, if rumour held true, the very special prisoner chained in the deepest dungeon of her manse.

'All forces at anchor in Naggarond and Hag Graef are to disembark and begin the march north immediately,' Malekith announced. 'We shall take command of the counter-attack personally.' He paused. 'But perhaps some consideration should be given to our royal mother. She has, after all, proven to be a good and loyal servant in the past.'

Kouran watched as Malekith's gaze tracked around the room. Despite being couched in terms of a royal favour, this was a dangerous and thankless task. Who would be chosen? He was too valuable at Malekith's side. Ebnir Soulflayer, perhaps? He certainly deserved worse for his failure in the north. Or maybe Hellebron? There was amusement to be had in sending the Blood Queen of Har Ganeth to aid her greatest rival, but Kouran suspected that even Malekith could ill-afford to offend the Cult of the Murder God.

'Lord Darkblade,' the Witch King said at last, chill regard dripping from every syllable, 'perhaps you will do us this very personal service? Be assured that you may choose the finest warriors at our disposal to accompany you.'

Kouran watched with secret amusement as Malus Darkblade's mask slipped for a second. The Dreadlord of Har Ganeth plainly understood the perils of the mission, but he could hardly refuse.

Darkblade bowed his head. 'Of course, majesty.'

'Understand, Lord Darkblade; we are concerned that there may have been an element of treachery at work in the north. Take any action you think proper, but know that we expect our mother to be returned to us… unharmed. All other concerns are secondary. Perform this task, and perform it well, and we shall prove not ungenerous; but be warned, we have had more than our fill of failure.'

'It shall be as you command, majesty,' Darkblade replied, his intellect doubtless at work already.

Kouran let his mind wander as discussion turned to the details of the forthcoming campaign. The natural order of Naggaroth had been restored, or nearly so. The barbarians would be crushed and, with luck, at least one ambitious scut would meet a deserved demise.

Today had been a very good day, and those that followed promised to be even better.





On Ulthuan, the lull in Naggarothi attacks did not go unnoticed. Shores that had known scant peace in the preceding centuries went weeks without sighting a black sail upon the horizon, and even in the war-torn Shadowlands the bitter conflict between the divided houses of Nagarythe was stilled for a time.

Alas, the high elves had little chance to revel in this unexpected calm, for the rising power of Chaos soon made its presence known in the Ten Kingdoms. On a night riven by red lightning, the clouds atop the Annulii Mountains descended, a tide of wild magic flowing in their wake. Wherever the mists touched, madness followed. Trees twisted into vile shapes, and bellowed in a language that was old when the world was young. The creatures of the sunlit meadows fled before the magic's onslaught, or else warped into new and terrible forms. Spirits of the rivers and the hills screamed in agony as the power of Chaos flooded through them, then cackled with laughter as their broken minds came to glory in their remade bodies. Of all Ulthuan's creatures, only the elves were unaffected. They had resisted the influence of Chaos for millennia; they would not succumb now, nor would they willingly surrender their beloved homeland.

Wherever the magic flowed, the walls of reality wore thin, and daemons poured in through the breaches. In Saphery, the shores of the Sea of Dreams came alive with writhing tentacles. The forests of Chrace burned as Tzeentchian hosts set warpfires for no other reason than to revel in the destruction. The rivers of inland Cothique and Ellyrion flowed thick with festering slime as the noxious emissaries of Grandfather Nurgle brewed contagions amongst the headwaters. Howling hosts of bloodletters ran rampant across the elven heartlands, putting towns to the sword and claiming the skulls of the slain for their dark masters. The great cities of Elisia and Tor Dynal were overrun by the screeching hordes; the walls of Tor Achare, the Tower of Hoeth and countless other fortress-cities were brought under siege.

Here and there, the elves succeeded in stemming the tide of corruption. Banners were raised across the Ten Kingdoms, and armies marched to oppose the daemonic assault. Protected from the daemonic malice by the steel of Sapherian swordmasters, elven magi drew upon every known shred of sorcerous lore, and dispersed the roiling magic into the Great Vortex. Such was dangerous work; no few mages lost their sanity in the striving, minds driven beyond the precipice of reason by daemonic whispers. Only in Yvresse did spear and bow alone hold the tide at bay, for the mistwalkers of those parts had long fought such threats.

Now, more than ever, the elves of Ulthuan looked to the Phoenix King for guidance, but Finubar was nowhere to be found. The official word from the Phoenix Court was that he had sealed himself in the Heavenlight Tower and, with solitude his only companion, cast his mind upon the winds of magic to divine the cause of the enfolding disaster. At first, this was sufficient to quell the mutterings at court and beyond. However, as time passed and the situation grew ever more dire, discontent began to spread through the noble halls of Ulthuan.

With Finubar isolated from the world, the task of leadership now fell to the Ten Kingdoms' greatest heroes. However, many of these were still overseas, returning from a failed rescue attempt. Aliathra, firstborn daughter of the Everqueen, and thus destined to one day be the Everqueen herself, had been captured by the vampire Mannfred von Carstein. Tyrion and Teclis, the heirs of Aenarion, had led the expedition to Nagashizzar, but the fiend had spirited the Everchild away at the very hour of his defeat.

Others came forth to bear the burden. Imrik of Caledor, last of that kingly bloodline, fought tirelessly throughout many lands not his own, as did Morvai of Tiranoc and Caradryel of Eataine. But it was not enough. Little by little, the elves were losing control of their ancestral lands. Chrace and Cothique were now all but overrun; Ellyrion and Avelorn seemed sure to follow. Hope was fading. Not only was the Phoenix King nowhere to be found but the Everqueen, warned by a mother's intuition that Aliathra's dire fate had not been averted, had abandoned her beloved Avelorn and retreated to the Gaean Vale.



Finally, it was Imrik of Caledor who spoke the words that lay on many minds. The Phoenix King's first duty was to defend his realm, claimed Imrik, not play at prophecy whilst the Ten Kingdoms burned. By his inaction, or so Imrik asserted, Finubar had ceded his right to the Phoenix Crown. If the Seafarer would not lead, then another must take his place.

Many there gathered knew Imrik's mind. Long had there been a rivalry between the kingdoms of Lothern and Caledor, and the Dragon Prince had seldom hidden his ambitions. Not one lord in that chamber questioned the fact that Imrik sought the Phoenix Crown for himself, yet not even his most ardent opponent could deny the truth of his words. Ulthuan needed leadership if it were to survive. As the days passed and the door to Finubar's tower remained locked, more and more lords of Ulthuan raised their voices in support of Imrik.

So it was that when Tyrion and Teclis returned in failure, they did so to a land overrun and a council divided. Teclis was appalled. He quickly perceived that Imrik's motives were mostly honourable, but he saw also the division that the Dragon Prince had wrought. Though not an adept of strategy, it was plain to Teclis that too many battles were being fought not to martial advantage, but to further Imrik's cause. Those who supported the Dragon Prince could rely upon the full might of Caledor's armies in return; those who opposed him were left to fend for themselves.

Deeming there to be no other choice, Teclis resolved to breach the wards about Heavenlight Tower. To intrude upon the Phoenix King's private sanctum went against all tradition, and Teclis was guarded with his intentions. It took the mage three days to prepare an incantation that could defeat Finubar's wards, and another to perform it. When finally the spell was complete, the protections faded just long enough to allow Teclis to enter the room. When he emerged again at midnight that same day, he was paler even than normal.

Tyrion had spent the days since his return to Ulthuan preparing another expedition to rescue Aliathra. He had spared little attention for the horrors engulfing Ulthuan, and none at all for the growing political divisions. Thus when Teclis arrived, and begged Tyrion to take command of Ulthuan's armies, the prince was less than receptive to the idea.

Torn between the calling of his heart and his duty, Tyrion travelled north to the Shrine of Asuryan, his intention to seek the Creator's guidance. With him, he took but two companions: Eltharion of Yvresse and Princess Eldyra of Tiranoc, the one grim as a Naggarothi winter, the other as wild as the wind. These two were his most trusted confidants, and the only elves other than his brother with whom he had shared the truth concerning Aliathra.



The door to the muster hall swung open at a wave of Teclis' hand, and the mage passed through into the chamber beyond. This was one of the oldest mansions in Tor Alin, dating back to the reign of Caledor I. How much longer would it stand, Teclis wondered? How much longer would anything on Ulthuan endure in these dark days?

Tyrion stood in the centre of the room, his palms braced upon the top of the silverwood table, his eyes focussed on a map of the upstart Empire of Men, and occasionally darting to a scroll that contained troop readiness reports from across the Ten Kingdoms. To Teclis' certain knowledge, he had been here for at least a day and a night.

'You must not leave Ulthuan,' Teclis said, crossing to his brother's side and glancing down at the map. 'Not even in order to save Aliathra.'

'I must,' Tyrion replied in a tone that invited no argument. 'This task cannot be left to other hands; she is the future of our race.'

'Is she?' Teclis asked sadly. 'You've never been able to lie to me, brother.' He sighed. 'I always wondered what evil our bloodline's curse would wreak through you. Now I know a part of it. If our most ancient of legends is true then we were doomed long before Aliathra was taken – you doomed us, Tyrion, long before then. What could have possessed you to commit such folly?'

'I would never expect you to understand,' Tyrion snapped, sweeping back his hand dismissively. 'You have ever been passionless and distant, fonder of your dry and dusty tomes than of anything that walks and breathes.'

'It astounds me that I can be so misjudged by one who knows me so well,' Teclis replied icily, and turned wearily away. He knew his brother's anger was not directed at him, but it cut him to the quick nonetheless. Shaking his head, Teclis drew himself up to his full height once again.

'I did not come here to quarrel, brother,' he said, his face still to the door. 'I came to discover the truth, and I have done so. I shall not speak of it to another; not to the council, not even to the Everqueen herself.'

'Would you have me do nothing?' Tyrion demanded quietly, his anger cooling into something altogether more dangerous. 'Would you have me abandon her?'

'I would have you be the leader your people need in this time of blood and fire,' Teclis said softly, turning to face his brother again. 'Even if you save her, Aliathra can never be the Everqueen, and if you depart Ulthuan, thousands will perish. Can one life, any life, be worth so much death?'

There was no answer, so Teclis pressed on.

'I will weep for your daughter later, brother. For now, it is the fate of our entire race that concerns me, as it should concern you. Unless we can find a way to cheat fate, the Asur will no longer be anything other than a memory. I will see the world itself unmade before I allow that to happen. What will you do?'

'Whatever I must,' Tyrion replied darkly.

'But will you do it to assuage your guilt, or to protect a people who rely on their greatest champion now more than ever?' Teclis felt his brother's baleful glare upon him, but the mage met it unflinchingly.

Teclis sighed. 'Very well. I know the folly of trying to change your mind once it is made up, and I too have errands that will not wait.' With a sweep of robes he turned and strode briskly towards the door, but paused for a moment on the threshold. 'I forgive you for what you have done, brother. I only hope that when the time comes, you can forgive me for what I must do now.'

As the three travellers approached their destination, they found the causeway blocked by the serried ranks of the Phoenix Guard. It seemed the whole shrine had emptied, for the length and breadth of the causeway was resplendent with shining armour and gleaming cloaks. They would not allow Tyrion to pass, but stood shoulder to shoulder as the travellers approached. Drawing back on Malhandir's reins, Tyrion demanded to know the reason for this display. At first there was no answer. Then, as one, ten thousand knees bent and ten thousand blades lowered in fealty.

Eltharion counselled Tyrion that this was the sign he had sought, and bade the prince remain on Ulthuan, to take command of the realm's defence; he and Eldyra would lead an army to rescue Aliathra from the clutches of the undead, or they would die trying. Tyrion looked long into Eltharion's shadowed eyes before nodding and turning back for Lothern.

Tyrion returned to the Phoenix Council at the height of one of Imrik's speeches. He entered the room in full armour, and challenged every lord there to lay aside their differences and marshal their forces to the defence of the Ten Kingdoms. If any sought to quarrel further, he declaimed, then he would happily settle such arguments with Sunfang's keen edge.

All there present were shamed by Tyrion's words, or were cowed by his manner; all save Imrik, who flew to his feet and demanded under what authority Tyrion dared speak so. Aenarion's heir smiled without humour, and told the Dragon Prince that he was but the herald of Asuryan, and of the Phoenix King who was the Creator's mortal servant – under such authority there was nothing he would not dare. A cold rage now descended upon Imrik's heart. Declaring that Caledor would stand alone, he swept out of the chamber and abandoned forever his dreams of claiming the Phoenix Crown.

Soon, a great host marched out of Lothern, with Tyrion and the Phoenix Guard at its head. With them rode the lords and warriors of nine kingdoms. Imrik had stubbornly clung to his pledge, and refused to look to the defence of any kingdom save Caledor. Nonetheless, when Tyrion's host marched, it did so with hope rekindled. The elves swept north along the shores of Eataine and Saphery, and thence into Yvresse and Avelorn. They cast the daemons back into their loathsome realm, and Teclis used ancient magics to halt the spread of the mists. Tyrion fought with a fervour that most accredited to his bloodline, or else to the blessings of the gods. Only Teclis, who battled ever at his brother's side, knew that Tyrion's determination grew not out of supernatural means, but out of frustration at his duty to fight for his homeland whilst Aliathra languished in Mannfred's clutches.

A second, smaller army, with Eltharion and Eldyra at its head, took ship east a few days after Tyrion's army had marched forth. They had no illusions about the dangers before them. Belannaer, Loremaster of Hoeth, travelled with the fleet, leaving Finreir to guide the mages of Saphery in his stead; he could hear the Everchild's voice upon the wind, and had determined that Aliathra was now held captive in the region known to men as Sylvania, land of the vampire counts. It was plain now that Aliathra's capture was part of some dark plot, and Belannaer advised Eltharion to seek aid from the other nations of the Old World. Eltharion had resisted at first, for he loathed that Aliathra's fate could be placed in the hands of men and dwarfs, but at last he relented. The forces of darkness and destruction were on the march, that much was evident. Better that Ulthuan ally itself with willing primitives, he judged, than stand alone in defeat. Swallowing the last of his pride, Eltharion ordered the ships of his fleet to head due east, for the Empire of Sigmar.





In the Empire, times were bleak, and growing steadily bleaker.

The portents had not gone unnoticed in the land of Sigmar, though few realised the ominous times that proceeded in their wake. Many looked upon the twin-tailed comet and saw only hope, a renaissance of power and, perhaps, the return of their ancestral warrior-god. Then the skies blazed with multicoloured fire, and the priests reminded their congregation that Sigmar had come during a time of mankind's darkest need, and warned that such times could well be nigh once more. And so it proved.

As the comet grew brighter, the Drakwald was alive with rumour concerning a being the commoners named Malagor. For centuries, there had been tales of this winged beastman, stories of villages cursed and crops blighted by the coming of the one they called the Dark Omen. These stories had always been discounted as superstitious drivel by the learned men of the cities, but now Gregor Martak, head of the Amber College, claimed to have caught sight of the creature amidst the ruins of a small village near Middenheim, and the naysayers had fallen suddenly silent. By day, travellers, caravans and patrols vanished from the Drakwald's roads. By night, commoners cowered behind boarded-up doors and windows, praying that Taal would preserve them from the howling beasts beyond the palisade.

On the comet sped – past glowering Morrslieb – and cases of mutation flared, not just in the squalid rookeries of the cities, but amongst the wealthy classes as well. Some of the afflicted heard dark singing upon the winds. Abandoning their lives, they journeyed north, lured by a growing darkness in their hearts and minds. Disease too had soared, most prominently in Altdorf, where the Sisters of Shallya woefully declared the blight immune to their prayers. Thinking that the outbreak was an artifice of evil men, rather than the will of cruel gods, Arch Lector Kaslain led an expedition into the Unberogen ruins buried deep beneath the city, but he found naught in those tunnels save for rats and a sense of mocking eyes watching his every move.

In response to the sicknesses of mind and body, unscrupulous merchants amassed fortunes in gold crowns, selling tinctures and elixirs that would proof one against the stigmata of Chaos. Seldom did such palliatives work, for most were simply coloured waters or even distillations of poisons. None of this mattered to their vendors, who had invariably moved on to the next market by the time their deceit was uncovered. Not all escaped, however. In Middenheim, the

Elector Count Boris Todbringer strung such a merchant from the city walls after he lost a nephew to a lethal infusion of hagbane and docksnare. The elixir trade in Middenheim was noticeably curtailed after that, but it continued to bloom elsewhere in the lands of the Empire.

Cure-peddlers were not the only ones to profit from the doom-laden times. Doomsayers and zealot priests found their congregations burgeoning with believers as the portents became ever more frequent and malign. As the flagellants' numbers swelled, so too did they become more violent. When the twin-tailed comet sailed past noble Mannslieb, state troops were mobilised in several cities to aid watchmen in containing the baying crowds. In Nuln, even this proved insufficient. The city was overwhelmed with fanatics to such an extent that the nobility scarcely dared venture beyond the gates of their estates. As it transpired, walls were no barrier to the mob, and the mansions were soon ransacked for valuables. Bonfires were lit on every street corner, fed by the possessions of the wealthy. Some nobles were imprisoned; others were pilloried. The Countess von Liebwitz would have been sent to the bonfires as a witch and adulteress, were it not for the actions of a retired dockwatch captain. Gathering a desperate band of watchmen and militia, this captain rescued the countess from the flames, reclaimed the city's old quarter and held it long enough for the Knights Griffon and reinforcements from Reikland to finally quell the riots.

As the twin-tailed comet sped past the constellation of Kerr, the Slayer of Fiends, Mannfred von Carstein seceded Sylvania from Imperial rule, and cloaked the province in impenetrable darkness. Volkmar, Grand Theogonist of the Cult of Sigmar, was overcome by righteous outrage; spurning cautious counsel, he plunged headlong into Sylvania to confront the vampire.

He did not return. Worse yet, Sylvania's border was soon fortified with towering ramparts of bone, and those witch hunters who managed to escape the cursed land spoke of an apostatic enchantment that rendered even the most potent of their holy weapons useless. The only glimmer of light in a dark situation was the fact that Balthasar Gelt, Arch-Alchemist and Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic, had succeeded in crafting an enchantment of his own. Dubbed the wall of faith by those who learned of it, Gelt's spell encircled Sylvania, drawing upon the power of holy artefacts that Mannfred had sought to place beyond use. No undead creature could cross that invisible barrier, or so it was said, but for many this was still not enough.

All things being equal, not even the staunchest of traditionalists would have objected to the loss of that benighted region, for it had ever been a reluctant and burdensome province. Alas, all things were not equal, and the Emperor's council feared that Sylvania's independence was but the precursor to a new campaign of terror. At Karl Franz's order, the armies of the Empire began to converge upon Sylvania, determined that gunpowder and steel would serve if faith would not. There were those in the Emperor's inner circle who cautioned that Mannfred was likely prepared for such an attack. However, Karl Franz took the view that Sylvania had gone from being an occasional dagger in the Empire's side – albeit one that had several times come close to victory – to an open threat he no longer had the luxury of overlooking. If the vampires could not escape Sylvania, then they would be cornered and destroyed.

Then came the riders from Kislev.

Syrgei Tannarov, Boyar of Chebokov, and his escort of ungol horsemen came to Altdorf at dawn, two days before the Emperor was due to depart for the Sylvania campaign. The comet was now so bright in the skies that it was visible by day, a second sun peering down from the heavens. The Kislevites had ridden their steeds half to death, and carried dire news – the northlanders were on the march once again. Kislev was already half-fallen, Tannarov warned, with all the lands north and west of Bolgasgrad awash in a sea of barbarians and daemons. Given the severity of the news, Karl Franz had expected the Ice Queen to invoke the terms of their old alliance, and call upon the Empire to march north to Kislev's salvation. Tannarov made no such demand. Kislev was already gone, he said, and went on to tell of a series of battles along the River Lynsk, battles the Tsarina fought not out of hope for her own people's survival, but so that the Empire might have time to avoid a similar fate.



Within the hour, hundreds of heralds had set out from Altdorf, beginning the task of strengthening the northern border, and redirecting those armies already nigh upon Sylvania. Nevertheless, Karl Franz knew the situation was grim. He had fought alongside the gospodars of Kislev many times, and knew them to be a hardy and resourceful people. If they had all but been swept aside…

For the next few weeks, the fate of the Empire hung in the balance. Armies were force-marched north in a desperate race to reinforce the border before the Chaos hordes could break through. Many of the

troops who began the journey never reached their destination. Beastmen and greenskins, hungry for slaughter, harried the advance. Soon, Karl Franz's logisticians and strategists advised that certain tracts of the Great Forest and the Drakwald be avoided entirely. Even then, the attrition continued. Entire regiments were wiped out as plague spread through their ranks. Some soldiers perished from exhaustion, abandoned at the roadside by comrades desperate to continue their advance. Others deserted, fleeing to their homes to protect their loved ones.

All in all, for every ten men that headed to the Kislev border, only seven reached their destination. Those who did survive the journey found themselves fighting almost from the moment of their arrival. The Chaos hordes, winnowed of their weak and feckless during the fighting for Kislev, had spilled over into the Empire in many places, and the armies of Ostermark and Talabecland were hard-pressed to keep them at bay. Most dangerous of these was a ragged host marching under the banner of Vilitch the Curseling. Where other hordes shattered against the Empire's entrenched battle lines, Vilitch's followers pressed on, insensate to the losses inflicted upon

The room was full of candles, but the girl sat in shadow. Only the sleeves and skirts of her long white dress showed in the darkness, and Balthasar Gelt wondered again why he had come. The signet ring that accompanied the message was to be trusted, or so his father had always told him, but for it to summon him here, of all places? Even the air stank of decadence.

'Sit, please.' The girl's accent marked her out as a foreigner, Gelt thought. One of the mountain provinces of Bretonnia: Montfort, or perhaps Parravon.

'Thank you, but I prefer to stand,' Gelt replied.

'As you wish. Can I offer you wine?'

'I must decline.'

'Must you indeed?' The girl reached out a lace-gloved hand to the decanter on the table between them, and poured herself a polite measure of the ruby liquid.

'All Altdorf speaks of you as the gaoler of Sylvania.'

'An exaggeration, I assure you,' Gelt answered carefully. 'The concept was not even mine.'

No, he thought, it had been young Dieter who suggested the idea. It had been an uncharacteristic display of cleverness from an otherwise unpromising acolyte. Such a shame that he had been found dead two days later, his throat torn out as if by a wild animal. One more victim of the von Carsteins, Gelt supposed. Perhaps the last, if all went well.

'Ah, but it was your genius that saw it enacted, was it not?' the girl asked.

'Perhaps, but it does not take any genius on my part to know that you did not summon me here to say as much. Deliver your message, and let me be on my way. I am not accustomed to patronising such establishments.'

'You take issue with the decor, perhaps?' The girl's amusement was plain.

'I disapprove of the trade,' Gelt corrected.

'You needn't fear for your reputation. This is a house of discretion.'

'Amongst other things.'

'Indeed. You of all people know that we are none of us what we seem on the surface.' The girl took a sip from her glass.

'As to the reason for the meeting, I already told you.'

'To express your admiration for the caging of Sylvania?' Gelt made no attempt to hide his disbelief.

'Indeed.' Suddenly serious, the girl leaned forward, though not so much that her face left the shadows. 'You should go further.'

'Explain.'

'You have delivered the southern provinces from the menace of Sylvania, but what of those to the north? A melding of magic and faith could serve there as well. What if you could fashion a rampart that not only kept out the barbarians, but sustained itself from the wild magic that gives life to the daemonic?'

'Such a thing has never been done.'

'Of course it has,' the girl laughed. 'The world is far wider than this tiny realm.' She pushed a withered scroll across the table, revealing a delicate hand which she quickly withdrew. 'Magic is rising. Much is now possible that was not before.'

Gelt unfurled the scroll and pored over its contents with growing surprise. The ritual it described would be a great undertaking, but it might very well work. He would not have considered such a strategy before the triumph over Sylvania, but he had found his horizons broadening of late.

Yet still he had his doubts. 'But what manner of genius would I be if I succumbed to such transparent manipulation?'

'What manner of genius would you be if you did not?' the girl countered, levity once more in her voice. 'In any case, I have delivered the message as I was bidden. I care not what you do with it.'

'And may I ask who sent you to me?'

'You may, but you would be a fool to expect a reply,' the girl said sharply. 'Suffice to say that I am no fonder of her than she is of me, but strange times make for stranger alliances.'

Those last words stayed with Gelt as he made his way back through the busy streets. He knew there was more at work here than he could see, but he would think on the matter. He would think very hard indeed.

them. Thus was Castle von Rauken besieged, and only a series of brilliant harrying attacks masterminded by Aldebrand Ludenhof, the Elector Count of Hochland, saw the fortress preserved. Yet for all Ludenhof's successes, he could not raise the siege, nor could he stem the tide of northlander reinforcements.

The first real successes came with the arrival of troops from Altdorf. Karl Franz had not yet joined the fighting in the north, for he had bent his efforts to seeking assistance from the Old World's other realms. His efforts had, as yet, failed to bear fruit, for it seemed every land teetered upon the brink of destruction – even the dwarfs were strangely reluctant to commit their aid. Nevertheless, the Emperor persevered in his attempts and, in the meantime, was generous with the forces under his personal command. So it was that Ludenhof soon found himself the master of fully half of the Reiksguard, as well as a great many regiments from Altdorf and Reikland. Thus reinforced, the Elector Count of Hochland was able to at last inflict meaningful defeat on the barbarians. He relieved Castle von Rauken and, at the Battle of Lubrecht, personally placed a long rifle bullet in the back of one of Vilitch's skulls, forcing the sorcerer to retreat. Bereft of their master's guidance, the Curseling's host scattered to the winds, and for a time the Empire knew hope.

Then, as the twin-tailed comet reached its perigee, outriders and ungol horsemen brought word of other hordes of northmen drawing south across the steppes, hordes that far eclipsed those thus far encountered. Ludenhof's army, the largest Empire formation yet that fought in the north, barely outnumbered even the smallest of the newcomers' forces. In Altdorf, Karl Franz heard tell of the worsening situation and redoubled his diplomatic efforts. If the Empire were to endure this war, it would need allies. If there were no allies to be had, it would need a miracle.







As the Empire battled for survival, the insidious influence of Chaos continued to spread.

With every orbit since the coming of the comet, dark Morrslieb had drawn closer to the world. Now, beneath the moon's leering face, the firmament began to writhe. From the ground rose monoliths – jagged spikes thrust out of the bedrock like spearpoints. Some were black splinters of long-ago meteors now pulled to the surface by the moon's sickly green glow. Others were ancient idols, toppled and overgrown or else cast down into ruin by other powers. As the nights grew longer, dark magic reknitted broken stone; fell runes, long-eroded, cast forth baleful light once more.

From the Drakwald surged a monolith so immense it towered over the tallest structure built by man, its crown wreathed in lightning. The malformed pillars that grew in the Arden Forest oozed, while a monument of living flame arose out of the glacial fields of Naggaroth. The dreaded Six Spikes herdstones, levelled after the loss of so many stouthearted men, once again stood tall in the Great Forest. A number of contaminated sites rose in Athel Loren, despite the best efforts of the wood elves. Soon each of these herdstones pulsed with dark energy, emitting the corrupting influence of Chaos into the air around them.

And from out of the dark woods came the beastmen.

Primal needs called them. Savage lusts drove them. Answering a summons they did not understand, the true Children of Chaos gathered. They came alone or in packs, whole warherds following the ancient paths through the wild places of the world. They were joined by twisted and mutated things not seen by light of day for generations. They converged at these sites of power, drawn to the newly risen herdstones and those long established. As the congregations milled, the dark acts that followed were as unnatural as the creatures that performed them.

The raucous rites followed no pattern; there was no discernible ritual. Instead, it was naught but a blood orgy – a savage feast where depravity and anarchy held sway. Gory trophies were stacked high as more and more of the beasts' twisted kind emerged to join the grisly bacchanal. The grounds grew slippery with blood and the fruits of debased acts. Through it all, braying howls were lifted to the moon as its strange rays imbued all with a grotesque and unquenchable vitality.

The strongest gathered there, and the herdstones whispered dark secrets long promised; the fulfilment of dreams beyond the comprehension of reasoning creatures. A myriad scents and sensations all said the same thing...

The Time of the Beast was coming.



For the folk of Athel Loren, the resurgence of the beastmen could not have come at a worse time. The Battle of Quenelles had been won, but at a terrible cost – Ariel was dying, and the forest was dying with her.

So far as any knew, the Mage Queen had come through the battle unscathed, but her strength had failed the moment she had set foot within the forest's bounds. A sombre procession of eternal guard had borne Ariel away to the Oak of Ages, hoping that she might heal within as she had many times before. A week later, the first signs of rot appeared upon the Oak of Ages' boughs, and the sickness soon spread throughout the forest. Glades that had gone unaffected by the shifting seasons since the first turnings of the world withered, madness spread like wildfire though the dryads and treemen, and ancient trees cracked asunder to spill their maggot-ridden innards upon a forest floor heavy with decay. To make matters worse, beastmen were drawn to these desolate glades in their thousands. These were not merely the herds that perennially roamed beneath the forest canopy, but mutants and bray-spawn lured from hundreds of leagues in every direction. No matter how desperately the wood elves fought, the Children of Chaos were never repulsed for long.

All Athel Loren despaired. None amongst the wood elves could deem the cause of their queen's sickness, though they all believed it to be tied to the forest's plight. Some speculated she had been cursed during the dying moments of the Battle of Quenelles. A few claimed that the malaise had been visited upon her by the Lady of the Lake, an act of retribution for a recent quarrel. However, most saw their queen's sickness as a sign that the balance of the Weave was shifting, that the terrible events they had fought so long to prevent were at last upon them. Alas, just as none could identify the source of the blight, none could posit a cure.

Orion, desolate that he could heal neither his home nor his beloved queen, sought refuge in battle. Again and again, the Wild Hunt rode out across the ravaged glades and swept away all in its path; no malformed beastman was safe from Orion's wrath. Alas, in his sorrow, the King in the Woods grew ever more reckless; soon it was rage, not reason, that came to dominate his thinking. Thus did many wood elves perish in needless battle, victims of their king's grief as much as the crude weapons of the Children of Chaos. Denied the guidance of both king and queen, the Council of Athel Loren could not divine the proper path.

Several months after Ariel had first begun to diminish, a new intruder came to the forest. She travelled through the worldroots, a perilous journey for one not born of Athel Loren, but she came alone, appeasing their guardian spirits with offerings of purest magic and innocent blood. Of course, none could tread the ancient trails of the world without the wood elves' knowledge, and when the intruder stepped out into the light of King's Glade, she faced a ring of levelled spears. So it was that the folk of Athel Loren greeted Alarielle, Everqueen of Ulthuan.

The wood elves beheld Alarielle with distrust. Though relations with Ulthuan had improved much in recent years, the betrayals and slights of old were not easily forgotten. Nonetheless, Alarielle was granted an audience before the full council, and she told them of the circumstances that had driven her eastward. She spoke of her daughter Aliathra, held captive by the malice of the vampire Mannfred von Carstein, and of the failed attempts to rescue her.

As a mother, Alarielle wept for Aliathra's fate. As a queen, she feared the doom her daughter's death would wreak upon Ulthuan. But Alarielle's fears went deeper even than this. She too had felt the shifting balance of

the Weave, and feared that the Everchild's fate was part of some larger calamity, one that might forever upset the fragile balance between the powers of life and death. She told the council of Eltharion's mission to save Aliathra, but she told them also that she did not believe the high elves could win this battle alone. So saying, Alarielle abased herself before the council, an act that none there expected of so proud a queen, and she begged the wood elves to send whatever aid they could, if not for Aliathra's sake, or for Ulthuan's, then for that of the world.

Long did the council debate Alarielle's request. Few had any desire to weaken Athel Loren's defences against the rampaging beastmen, but nor could they ignore the wider consequences of refusal. If the Weave sustained lasting harm, Athel Loren would be first to suffer, as it had done in the past. But could the Everqueen's reading of events be trusted? None were sure. Alarielle had spoken without guile, but this was no guarantee that she herself had not been deceived.



In the end, the matter was settled by an unexpected influence. Durthu, Eldest of Ancients, had seldom addressed the council in recent decades, for his mind had been too often far afield, but now he spoke lucidly and without wrath. The cycle of the world was beginning anew, he proclaimed in stentorian tones, and just as the forest had aided the elves of Ulthuan in days of old, it would do so again now. But, he warned Alarielle, there would be a price, just as there had been in those ancient times.

The Everqueen knew nothing of the events to which the elder referred, but she accepted without hesitation. The council, unwilling to contradict Durthu's decision, ordered that a host be assembled to pierce dread Sylvania and aid the high elves in their rescue attempt; perhaps this might also restore balance to the Weave, and to the forest. This task was entrusted to Araloth, Lord of Talsyn and Ariel's champion, for it was well known by now that he commanded the favour of the goddess Lileath, and such would serve him well in the dark land of the vampires.

Araloth's host set out in the dead of night, striking north towards Axe Bite Pass. Their course took them close to the walls of Parravon. Duke Cassyon, woken from his slumber by a sentry's call, wondered what errand drew the fey folk eastward, then drove the idle fancy from his head. Bretonnia had enough problems of its own…

The moon was full overhead as Alarielle stood in the heart of the great clearing.

There was ancient power in this place, the Everqueen knew. She could feel the slumbering consciousness pressing at the back of her mind, a thousand echoing whispers – all different, yet all the same. It was the sweetest music she had ever heard. The trees of Avelorn had never sung to her thus, not in all the years she had walked their groves and, for all the strangeness of Athel Loren, a part of Alarielle felt that it had at last come home.

This had been a magnificent tree once, Alarielle thought, staring at the glorious crown of branches high above her head. Perhaps it would be so again, but now its leaves were withered and shrunken, its bark peeling and marred by livid splotches of colour. She ran her fingers across the trunk, but snatched them back in dismay as the bark shrivelled at her touch.

The sisters who had guided her to the clearing looked at her expectantly.

'The Oak of Ages,' Naestra told her solemnly. 'It is dying.'

'It is perhaps already dead,' said Arahan.

'Can it be saved?' Alarielle asked.

'That is not for us to say,' Naestra replied.

'It is for you to prove,' Arahan said.

'Or to disprove,' her sister echoed.

With a creaking sigh, the ground in front of Alarielle sank away, revealing a stairway of roots that stretched away into the darkness beneath the tree. Pinpricks of light sparked in the gloom below as spirits, disturbed by the shifting of the roots, flittered into the night sky. The Everqueen felt an unfamiliar pang of terror.

'There is nothing to fear,' Naestra said.

'Do not lie to her,' Arahan chided. 'It is better that she knows the truth.'

'Truth is not absolute, whatever you might believe,' Naestra argued. 'In any case, the bargain is made; it cannot be reneged upon without cost.'

'A cost we can ill-afford,' Arahan agreed.

'Indeed. But you are right,' Naestra conceded, 'the choice must be hers alone.'

Alarielle's grip tightened on her stave. Naestra was correct, she thought; the bargain had been made. The Everqueen would not dishonour the Asur by refusing it now.

Without a word, Alarielle began her descent. The soil's rich scent was thick all about her, but the bitterness of corruption also hung in the air. As she alighted from each stair, the roots shifted behind her, rising up to weave away the sky. As the last tendril writhed into place, the Everqueen heard one of the sisters call out.

'Please, save our mother.'

When the folk of Bretonnia, common-born and noble alike, recalled the horrors of recent years, they concluded that the kingdom was surely damned.

First had come the Year of Woe, when daemons had ravaged the four corners of the realm. Then had followed the uprising of 1543. Mallobaude, bastard son of the king, had long been gathering an army in Mousillon, and on Winter's Eve of that year, he loosed it to seize the throne. Disgraced knights from across the realm flocked to Mallobaude's serpent banner and, as King Louen, Royarch of Bretonnia, gathered his own scattered armies, the situation worsened. After the Battle of Châlons, and the calamitous disappearance of Morgiana le Fay, the Dukes of Carcassonne, Lyonesse and Artois declared themselves for Mallobaude, and rebellion blossomed into civil war.

At first, the forces of the king had the upper hand. Mallobaude's followers fought with the desperation of traitors, but the Lady's blessing lay with those who rode at King Louen's side. One by one, Leoncoeur bested the treacherous dukes and brought their rebellious provinces to heel. A year into the campaign, it seemed that the serpent's hour was done. It was then that the true depth of Mallobaude's evil was revealed; he had struck a pact with the ancient liche Arkhan the Black, and as the serpent's human allies foundered, the dead marched to swell his ranks.

By the time Leoncoeur faced his bastard son at the Battle of Quenelles, Mallobaude commanded a horde far greater than the king's army. So dire had things grown by this point that the elves of Athel Loren lent their strength to King Louen's cause. In the end, for Bretonnia, it was all for nothing. At the height of the battle, Mallobaude fought Leoncoeur in single combat, and cast his father's broken body into the mud. With their king's fall, the Bretonnians lost all will to fight. They fled the battlefield, leaving the wood elves to make what escape they could.

As to the fate of the king, no one knew. Some said that seven sisters had borne him from the battlefield, and carried him north to the Silverspire so that the Lady herself could heal him. Others said that the king had perished from his wounds, and was buried high on the hillside above the city he had fought to save. The darkest of the rumours said that Leoncoeur still walked the southern provinces, a mindless thrall to the necromancers who were Mallobaude's allies. Whatever the truth of the king's fate, his absence harmed Bretonnia greatly. Unity fled the land. Each duke was ill-inclined to aid another province while his own lands were beset. One by one, the southern provinces fell, and Mallobaude drove his army north, to Couronne.

With his hour of victory close at hand, Mallobaude would not be stayed. The traitorous prince's shadowy benefactor had promised that no mortal son of Bretonnia could lay him low, and Mallobaude proved the truth of those words time and again. At Gisoreux, Adelaix, Montfort and a hundred more, he offered a challenge to any knight who would face him in single combat. Each time he emerged victorious without so much as a scratch. Yet in his arrogance, Mallobaude forgot that not all of Bretonnia's champions were truly mortal. When the bastard prince's army of the dead reached Couronne, he found the surviving dukes of Bretonnia united against him once more, their banners raised together. This mattered not to Mallobaude, whose army far outnumbered the one assembled against him. Once again he sent forth his challenge of combat, but this time it was no mortal duke or baron who answered, but the Sacremor: the legendary Green Knight, returned from the Lacrimora in the hour of his peoples' need. In that moment, Mallobaude recognised his doom, but before the prince could flee, the Green Knight spurred forwards and struck the traitor's head from his shoulders. With its master slain, Mallobaude's army was soon overcome; however, Arkhan the Black had long since fled, and no trace of him could be found.

In the aftermath of battle, Mallobaude's body was burnt, his ashes scattered to the winds. With victory at last achieved, the dukes' thoughts strayed to the succession. By now the dukes believed Leoncoeur slain, and with no obvious heir left alive, each sought to take the throne for himself. Civil war could have begun anew at that point. Indeed, it would have done, had not the Green Knight revealed himself to be none other than Gilles le Breton, the founder of the realm, gifted new life by the Lady in order that he could lead his people once more. Awestruck, the dukes immediately ceded the throne, and the folk of Bretonnia had reason to celebrate at last. Or so they thought. The prophecy of Gilles' return promised that he would lead his people in their darkest hour. In their rapture, the Bretonnians believed that those words referred to the now-ended civil war. They were to soon learn that they were wrong.

Days after Gilles' recoronation as Royarch, plague broke out in the southern provinces, laying waste to what remained of Quenelles and Carcassonne. Then came warpstone meteors, blazing from the skies to bring death and mutation to the ravaged land. With each passing day, the power of Chaos waxed ever fuller, and Bretonnia's plight grew ever more desperate. Each night, the skies blazed with blue fire, and each morning the survivors praised the Lady for their salvation, or else slunk into the woods in shame, their bodies writhing with mutation and minds lost to madness. Emboldened by their swelling numbers, beastmen warherds roamed the land. Shrines, villages and

even towns were wiped off the map as the Children of Chaos exulted in the bountiful favour of the gods. The forests became filthy and corrupted places where only the foolish dared to tread. Even the blessed sites where grail chapels stood were not immune, and many Grail Knights perished trying to stem a tide of corruption that had no end. On one wild night, when the wind screamed with the voices of the damned and blood-red rain fell from the skies, the city of Bordeleaux vanished without a trace. A great keep of brass and bone stood in its place, the skulls of the vanished citizens set as trophies upon the walls by the same cackling daemons who prowled the surrounding lands.

Through it all, the knights of Bretonnia did not sit idle. Many embraced the dark days as an opportunity to prove their valour, to perform deeds worthy of legend and song. Yet their bold examples were but pinpricks of light in the choking gloom. A quarter of the population had been slain, by daemon-fire, by plague or by kinstrife, and another quarter had fled over the mountains, seeking safety in the lands of the Empire or Tilea. Even as Bretonnia rejoiced at Gilles' return, it lamented the horrors heaped upon it. The peasants grew ever more sullen and miserable; the nobility looked out across what had once been the fairest land in the Old World, and wondered what they had done to deserve such a fate as this.

From his throne in Couronne, Gilles marked the land's malaise, and knew it a harbinger of more perilous times to come. Summoning his heralds, the Sacremor declared an errantry war, the scope of which would surpass any before it. The Sons of Bretonnia were the most valiant in the world, he decreed. They would not wait meekly whilst the realm crumbled around them. The land would be cleansed, the creatures of Chaos slaughtered and driven into the ocean. Bretonnia would ride out once more: for honour, for the king, and for the Lady!





Far to the east of Bretonnia, High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer brooded. He could sense the world was changing, and not for the better. From atop his throne, nestled in the great hall of the Everpeak, he pored over reports, more and more of which were brought to him every hour. All were tidings of ill portent, and beneath his magnificent beard his scowl grew.

The dwarfs have ever been a dour race, and a grim mien is as much part of their character as is their habit of pointing out the decline in everything that has taken place since the days of their forefathers. However, even a race that likes to find fault was shocked at just how ominous the signs were. Long dormant volcanoes rumbled and the very foundations of the planet shook and trembled. Even the steadiest of veterans – those hoary elders whose beards had grown longest – conceded that they had never witnessed such a multitude of troubles, nor had they themselves been as full of foreboding as they were now.

From atop lookout towers amidst the snow-covered peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains the dwarfs looked out upon the oncoming storm. They marked the encroaching murk of the Dark Lands, a rising tide of gloom broken only by meteoric streaks of sickly green that blazed downwards from the cursed moon. They observed enemies gathering in numbers hitherto unseen by living dwarfs. The Badlands – those breeding grounds of greenskins – were bursting their borders and every day brought more ogre tribes stomping out from the enshrouding dark of the east. Something awful was brewing in Sylvania, for its borders grew hulking battlements of bone to encircle the land, while clouds of black magic swirled overhead. Along the slopes, dire beasts stirred from their slumbers with a greater frequency and ferocity than even the oldest, most malcontent tellers of tales could recall.

From the north came the most menacing and portentous sights of all. Strange lights writhed upon the horizon and arcane gales swept across the lands. Reports from Kraka Drak, that most distant of strongholds in Norsca, spoke of daemons scouring the lands and a great mobilization; the barbaric warriors of the Dark Gods amassing. Oldbeards who remembered the black days that preceded the Great War against Chaos conceded that the looming signs looked every bit as threatening as those which heralded that infamous invasion, maybe worse.

These grim tidings were the reason Thorgrim brooded. Although his people had waned since their golden age, that time when the mountain kingdoms were filled with riches and the forgecraft of the dwarfs was at its lofty pinnacle, they still remained strong. Enemies crashed and broke upon their impenetrable holds like the tides. Time and again the dwarfs marched forth to sweep away invading armies or to clear the highland passes of nightmarish monsters. Since that distant era, when their Ancestor Gods walked amongst them, the dwarfs had endured. As the Great Book of Grudges attested, they had overcome daemonic incursions, mountain-shattering earthquakes, invasions from the north and the greatest armies their age-old foes could muster.

Yet the prospect of facing each of these threats again, all at the same time, was daunting. Even Thorgrim, relentless avenger of his people's wrongs, was thunderstruck by the rising enormity of the task at hand.

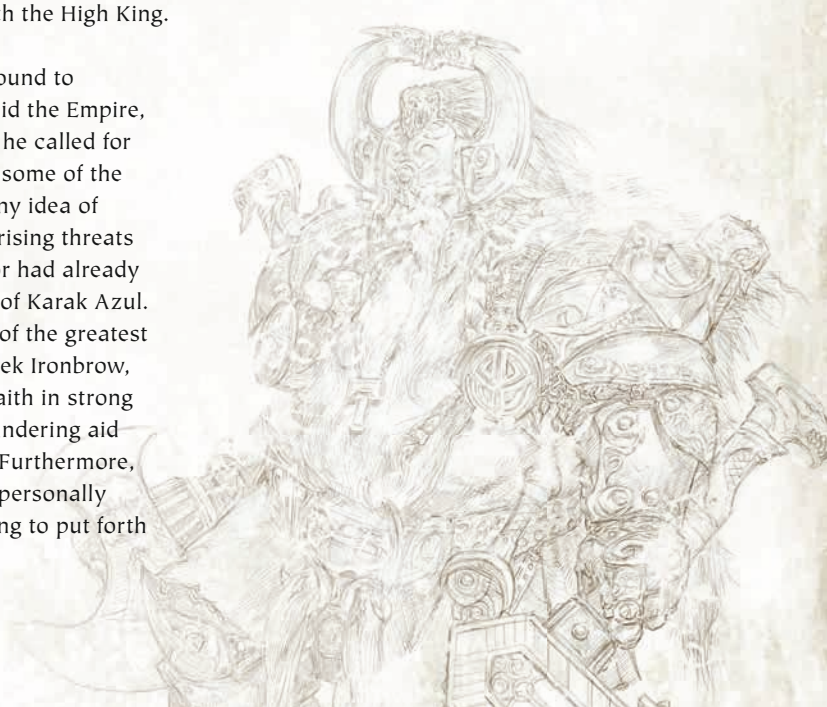
Some clans, including the influential runesmiths guild, pointed to the swelling numbers of foes and pronounced it was time to seal the holds – to lock out the woes of what were sure to be troubled times. Then, as during past calamities, the dwarfs would be secure, protected within their matchless mountain fortresses, safeguarded while the surface world burned with war. While they would still be vulnerable to underground assault, those who swore that closed gates would be the dwarfs' salvation pointed out the slackening pressure from their age-old nemeses, the night goblins and the verminous skaven. Many holds, amongst them Zhufbar and Karak Azul, reported that the constant attacks afflicting the Underway had recently slowed or halted altogether. However, those dwarfs most skilled in mining – those who ranged deepest into the underdark – felt that this watchful peace was a lull, a sign that their wily foes were planning something ominous. They asserted their enemy was building up their strength, and some even made claims of uncovering bold new access tunnels that sought to undermine the dwarfs.

As ever, Thorgrim Grudgebearer received his varied councils with a sour expression. He too looked upon the glowering skies, bestowing upon them the same heaped disdain with which he received the ill-omened reports. Seasoned with age and many battles, Thorgrim knew that his people were divided. Many still begrudged his decision to aid the elves of Ulthuan – a failed attempt to rescue the Everchild from the vampiric clutches of Mannfred von Carstein. But the very idea of barring the gates and hoping to weather the looming disaster sat poorly with the High King.

Though he was oathbound to uphold the pledge to aid the Empire, Thorgrim knew that if he called for a muster of the holds, some of the kings would oppose any idea of marching to meet the rising threats head-on. King Kazador had already sealed the main gates of Karak Azul. Such was the counsel of the greatest living runesmith, Thorek Ironbrow, who advised putting faith in strong walls rather than squandering aid upon wayward allies. Furthermore, the master runesmith personally petitioned the High King to put forth all efforts to recover ancient artefacts, for it was his hope to uncover some mighty heirloom of the Ancestor Gods to aid their cause. Thorek was adamant that he had almost uncovered the hidden whereabouts of the fabled portal stone of Valaya – the rune-covered post and lintel through which the Ancestor Goddess first stepped out of the living mountain. Long-trusted lore suggested the finding of such artefacts would mark the onset of a new golden age, a time when the gods would once more walk amongst their people.

Of course, there were others that would more readily obey the High King's wishes, even if that required marching in force out of their own holds. King Alrik of Karak Hirn had sent his pledge of support to Thorgrim, while Ungrim Ironfist, the Slayer King of Karak Kadrin, was always looking for battle. Even King Belegar of Karak Eight Peaks, under siege as he was, vowed to do what he could to serve his oaths to the High King. If the signs were being read correctly, every warrior would be needed, for a time of great calamity was fast approaching.

Heavy sat the crown of the High King, as he watched the sun set over his mountain realm. Thorgrim had vowed to strike out every entry in the Great Book of Grudges, or die trying. And Thorgrim was a dwarf of his word.





War was in the air, spreading through the lands like wildfire. Smoke rose on every horizon and clouds of carrion birds circled low, anticipating slaughter. With the promise of violence carried further by every gust of the rising winds, the orcs and goblins began to amass, readying themselves for a new and bloody age.

Greenskins have always thrived on war. Individual tribes exist in a constant state of battle, feuding with foes, rivals or amongst themselves if no better victim can be found. However, sparked by the increased violence that now beset the world, the greenskins gained a stronger focus. From the most skulking and weedy specimens to hulking warbosses, they all began to feel a pulse-quickening rush of indescribable but awesome purpose. It grew within them until they were bursting with energy, yet despite the barely contained fervor, the infighting that constantly plagued their kind all but ceased. It was as if the greenskins intuitively knew that such acts of belligerence would not satisfy them. Instead, the orcs and goblins pent up their destructive craving, holding it within until they could bellow to the skies and unleash it in one savage moment. Previously, an orc or goblin might go his whole life, short and brutal though that tended to be, and only feel but a twinge of such direction. Next to the pure joy of battle, this was the closest greenskins ever felt to divinity, and now, such feelings washed over them.

The overwhelming feeling that something big was brewing struck greenskins no matter how far flung they were. In the most remote of locales, lone tribes felt compelled to seek out and join others of their kind. From the deepest wilderness came nomadic tribes of savage orcs, while forest goblins emerged out of their web-strewn woodland lairs. In the north, beneath ominous clouds, Troll Country saw the scattered tribes begin to mass. Brutal warchants were lifted to the strange skies.

Where greenskin populations were highest, the rising tide of compulsion reached fever pitch, exponentially increasing until the green masses crackled with Waaagh! energy. In the cave-riddled Worlds Edge Mountains the night goblins gathered in great hordes, growing overeager. Armies from out of the darkness of the Wolf Lands howled at the strangely hued moon that leered down at them. The most active site of all was the Badlands: anarchic homeland to orc tribes beyond count. The region seethed with energy, a bubbling and over-filled cauldron ready to boil over, a powder keg awaiting only a spark.

In that moment the greenskins could have dominated the world, launching a crusade to sweep across every continent. If a single warlord could have united all the tribes across the globe and harnessed their might into a unified nation, then no lone force could have stood before them. There were a number of powerful greenskin leaders, and each of these drew off a portion of that gathered strength.

In the northern range of the Worlds Edge Mountains, orcs and goblins flocked to follow Grimgor Ironhide – pure violence distilled into the muscle-laden body of a black orc. Although perhaps the most ferocious fighter of his kind, Grimgor lacked any real desire to lead. He relished slaughter and sought the hardest foe he could fight, but he cared not if an army followed him. In fact, when the greenskins that flocked to his inspiring brutality got in his way, he carved a path through them with as much relish as he killed anything else. Naturally, this display of strength drew more greenskins to his banner, orcs and black orcs particularly. Waaagh! Grimgor was sprawling and dangerous, but its commander could not care less for conquering lands or ransacking towns, and instead marched north, seeking to challenge the great champions that gathered there. Little did Grimgor know that his rampage had long ago been foretold...

When it came to ambition, there was one greenskin who could not be matched: Skarsnik, Warlord of the Eight Peaks. Countless tribes gathered around him. Chief amongst them were the night goblins, but many others joined him: spider-worshipping forest goblins, ironclad orcs from the mountain passes and huge numbers of lumbering trolls. It was his intention to unleash Waaagh! Skarsnik against the much hated dwarf realm, but for good measure he would eradicate any skaven that came within arm's reach – or, as the goblins put it, 'anything worth jabbin' at'. In the mushroom-filled great hall of his lair – formerly the dwarf hold of Karak Eight Peaks – the night goblin warlord promised plunder untold to the warlords that had gathered to fight under his banner.

In the heart of the Badlands, the drums of war beat night and day. Amidst the furore, Wurrzag, great prophet of his people, searched beneath the gaze of the totems raised in those forsaken lands. Out of the thousands of tribes that amassed there, no less than a dozen warlords rose to prominence – splitting the gathering hordes between them.

It had ever been Wurrzag's dream to find one Great Warboss that could claim the favour of both Gork and Mork, an ultimate greenskin warlord who could smash the world asunder. Never had the oft-addled Wurrzag moved with such clarity; never had his visions been more lucid. Wurrzag flung and read the bones, and then flung them again – letting them point him in the right direction. He vomited out pure green mystical energies, bathing in the visions they supplied. Wurrzag lurched and gyrated around the fire doing his best shamanic wardance at each crude encampment he visited. Yet despite his frantic searchings, he met with no success.

Dimly, Wurrzag began to realise that perhaps he sought not one almighty warboss, but two – a Fist of Gork, and a Hand of Mork...

Not all shamans could attune their mind like Wurrzag and harness the surge of Waaagh! energy, however. When surrounded by highly agitated members of their race, orc and goblin shamans became imbued with extraordinarily powerful magics. Some could not cope with the massive influx of power, their very minds filled beyond capacity with rampant magic. These individuals were a menace to themselves and all around them, for when they could contain no more, they overloaded in head-bursting explosions that showered lethal energies in a deadly radius. Others, who remained at least in partial control, were able to vent the surplus force skywards – sending incandescent green beams into the heavens, there to tear apart the unnaturally low and brooding clouds.

Beneath these ominous signs, the fractious groups set off – each a roiling mass of troops, beasts and monsters that began its own crusade of destruction. They were willing to fight anything and everything that got in their way. Once more, the world quaked to the resounding roars of the greenskin Waaagh!





In the Mountains of Mourn, change was in the wind. Wild creatures were first to sense the shift, their instincts recognising the rising signs. Soon enough, however, even the ogres themselves, ponderous and brutal as they are, had to acknowledge the portents. They could not fail to observe the multi-coloured lights that blazed brightly on the northern horizon, still visible through daytime. Nor could they ignore the fireballs that tore across the night sky, the blazing green contrails that stung the eyes to witness. Most of the meteorites fell in the Dark Lands, but some struck close enough that their momentous impacts could be felt. Clouds of debris blossomed to mark the strikes, triggering innumerable avalanches and landslides that rumbled loudly into the valleys below.

Most troubling of all was the volcanic activity. The Mountains of Mourn are rife with volcanoes, and the ogres and the beasts of that land were well used to fitful rumblings or occasional eruptions. Now, however, all of them began spewing smoke and shaking the surrounding slopes. At first, this excited the ogres, especially when the father of volcanoes, the mighty Firemouth, sent forth great geysers of lava. The firebelly priests who worshipped this living mountain god increased their sacrifices tenfold, hoping to placate his hunger and thereby earn his favour. Over the land, immense plumes of smoke mingled with the now oddly swirling clouds.

Thus began a season of blood, as the unsettled atmosphere incited creatures to terrible feats of wrath. Beasts woke from long slumber and howled their anger from the snow-covered peaks. Rhinox herds clashed with wolf packs beneath the eerily luminescent second moon. Chimerae, driven southwards by the growing turmoil in the north, terrorized the peaks, savaging everything they espied. Hunting manticores prowled everywhere, and no matter how much

they killed, they could not satiate their bloodlust. The bellowing challenges of stonehorns echoed over the valleys, and even ogres travelling in tribe strength were not safe from attack. Many tribes entered into prolonged Beast Wars – titanic struggles to defend their valley camps from a near-continuous onslaught.

Yet the ogres were not unduly troubled, for they were made for fighting and for survival under even the harshest of conditions. Instead, like a sabretusk coming across a bloody trail upon the mountainside, the ogres shrugged off all signs of lethargy and sloth, greeting the gale force winds from the north with toothy grins. They knew that where there was fighting there would be bountiful opportunity, and the ogres had eager expectations of the feasts to come.

The ogres were no longer acting like a unified kingdom, however, breaking apart into many different factions rather than a single nation. The bruising goodwill between tribes that Overtyrant Greasus Goldtooth had instilled with his triumph at the Battle on the Firemouth had, at least partially, dissipated. Greasus' great might and strong-arm tactics ensured that a core of tribes remained loyal to him. However, ogres have always been independently minded, and prone to spur of the moment reversals. Many tribes, particularly those out of immediate reach of Greasus, forgot their oaths to their Overtyrant at the first signs of improved opportunities for themselves. Given the choice of obeying the whims of a distant lord, or availing themselves of a chance to immediately glut their desire for food and riches, many ogres followed their gut instincts.

The largest number of tribes that split from their Overtyrant's rule resided in the northern reaches of the Mountains of Mourn. The barbarian humans of the wastes had put forth a call to war, mustering further to the north, beneath a growing maelstrom. Promises of easy pickings had lured many ogres to join the northmen, disappearing into the growing storm. Others, like Golgfag Maneater and his army of battle-hardened lootmasters, stomped off westwards, heading for the smoke that hung over many of the passes and dwarfholds of the Worlds Edge Mountains. War was brewing there, as it was in the human lands beyond. Where there was war, there would be plunder. Led by the Thunderguts and Rock Clubs, numerous tribes dared to enter the Badlands, where they rampaged amongst the swelling numbers of greenskins, rising to the top of a hierarchy where might is right.



Greasus Goldtooth was vexed to learn that his every word was no longer being obeyed. The Overtyrant was enraged that tribes were striking out to seek their own gain, with no heed for his orders. For a fleeting few years, when Greasus could claim obedience from nearly every tribe within the Mountains of Mourn, he boasted a kingdom that could pit its strength against any nation in the world. And now? Now he was watching it slip from his grasp, running through his fingers as slippery as the grease that oozes from a roasted joint. His wrath grew with each gnoblar scout that brought him word of new defections.

Ogres do not overthink matters. Their way is to vacillate between two polar extremes. When victorious, they will wallow in slothful abundance – perhaps never satiated, but certainly willing to spend days and weeks on end doing naught but lolling about, shovelling food into their maws. When roused, however, be it by pride or hunger, ogres are like unto a force of nature, striking suddenly and with relentless fervour, plundering so as to leave behind only a ruinous wake.

Greasus was an ogre who could out-eat any of his race, indeed, any five of his kind. But he had had enough of feasting for now. It was time, once again, to show his subjects the vast and domineering power he alone wielded. Greasus Goldtooth and his loyal tribes were a lumbering force that could strike fear into any realm and beat any opposition into dust.

Then it happened. Even as Greasus gathered his tribes and set out on the trail of recently departed traitors, the Firemouth erupted.

The massive volcano vented its fury into the heavens as it had never done before. Such was the force of that fiery blast that it was visible even through the gloom that enshrouded the Dark Lands, a deep red glow that could be seen through all but the thickest ash fall. Furthermore, the Firemouth's roar began a chain reaction: up and down the Mountains of Mourn, other volcanoes began to erupt, joining in a hellish chorus that shook the land. So violently did the Firemouth explode that the firebellies had to abandon its steep sides altogether, except for a few stubborn ogres who stayed and were swallowed by the lava.

Amidst the black rain and boulder storm, racing before the magma flow, the great exodus began. The ogres, all of them, were now on the march. It was a migration on a scale not seen since they left the Ancient Giant Lands. And the world would pay a heavy price.

The skaven had bided their time long enough. The Under-Empire had always been a slave-driven hive of activity, but now the ratmen's frenetic pace accelerated. Every clan, stronghold, and underlair swarmed with activity and ambitions. Grinding labour, plotting, warring and even the brokering of inter-factional alliances – all had been ratcheted up to new extremes. It was as if the skaven had all been injected with warpstone stimulants, which, in a few instances, was in fact the case.

The skaven network of informants had infiltrated many nations. Embedded across many kingdoms, these spies, turncoats, and moles were bursting with news. Meteors rained from the skies, volcanoes erupted and unnatural storms swept the lands. Deeming the time was right, the ruling Council of Thirteen unleashed the first stage of their Master Plan. And with that surface invasion, a new era of skaven domination had begun.

Boldly leaving their lairs, the skaven surged upwards in seemingly endless numbers. So did the kingdoms of Tilea and Estalia fall, overwhelmed by a masterful campaign of sudden violence. Under-tunnelled and overrun, every major city was now a blasted ruin over which a ragged clan banner openly flew. Long lines of human survivors were chained and herded underground; new labourers that would fuel the next stage of the Master Plan.

The taste of victory only served to spur on the race of ratmen further. From ambitious claw-pack chieftains to the rulers of the ascendant clans, each despotic tyrant recognised the opportunities. As war and ruin spread throughout the lands, their own time drew nigh. And so the skaven drove their slaves cruelly, urging the abused masses onwards at a reckless pace. Untold numbers of them were worked to death, and their corpses served to feed those who remained.

The verminous race had always grown via bursts of prolific upheaval. In the past, such surges were notoriously short-lived, typically followed by utter collapse. Yet this time it was different. With the malefic winds growing stronger, with raw entropy flooding into the air and with the green-hued moon looming larger every night, unnatural vitality replenished the skaven anew.

The ever more frequent showers of glorious warpstone that rained from the skies further invigorated them. It was as if the great Horned Rat himself were filling his children with infernal vitality and energies.

Soon the skaven would rise up, as never before.



The Council of Thirteen sat in oppressive silence. The chamber lay deep under the Great Temple of the Horned Rat, but was so imbued with entropic energies that it might as well have existed in a different realm. It was dark, lit only by a sickly green glow from the censers, and empty, save for a thirteen-sided pillar and a stone table. Both had runes scratched into them that pained the eyes to look upon.

Around the table sat the twelve rulers of the Under-Empire: the thirteenth throne was empty, the symbolic seat saved for the great Horned Rat. All was still, yet the air was filled with agitation.

In the restless hush, a tail twitched. The hitching rasp of fluid-filled lungs identified the presence of Arch Plague Lord Nurglitch, who sat upon the seat-that-is-tenth, a simple throne of bone. Long had he awaited this hour. He savoured the strained silence, marking the passage of time by the whirr of cogs and the hiss-vent of steam from the rebreathing apparatus of Warlord Vrisk.

Seer Lord Kritislik, who sat in the coveted first seat, broke the suffocating quiet to address the Lords of Decay. Kritislik's thin voice crackled with rage while the air surrounding him shimmered with undisguised power.

'I am displeased, yes-yes. Lord Morskittar, I gift-granted no leave to trade devices with lesser clans. Why was this claw-pact broken with Clan Mors?'

For a long moment, the most ancient of grey seers looked over his council members, his beady eyes examining each in turn. Lord Nurglitch fought down the urge to shift, willing his rheumy, pus-filled eyes not to blink unnaturally.

Lord Morskittar, the Most Exalted Warlock and Master of Clan Skryre, shifted slightly, his telescopic eyes whirring as he fixed his attention upon the horned seer. Lord Nurglitch knew, as did all the other council members, that Kritislik regularly banned the trade-sale of weapons to clans that did not do the grey seer's bidding. Although Clan Skryre had sold their wares to a few of the banned clans, the general lack of advanced weaponry had made the invasion of Tilea much more costly for the Skaven. Without warpfire throwers or gas grenades to exterminate pockets of resistance, many defenders had to be slain by tooth or spear.

When Lord Morskittar finally answered Lord Kritislik, he did so in a metallic voice that echoed in that vast chamber. 'We have many-many machines for trade. Clans Mors offered the most warptokens. Why should I not deal with Lord Gnawdwell? Why-why do I care if you think he has grown too powerful?'

The bulbous mounded lump of muscle and sinew that was Lord Verminkin, the ultimate commander of Clan Moulder, nodded several of his heads in agreement.

For a moment, sibilant splutters escaped Kritislik, making Nurglitch's tail spasm in wicked delight. Airing private conversations amongst the Council was a common way to undermine others; indeed it was Kritislik's favoured tactic. This time, thought Nurglitch, the roles were reversed. It was the grey seer's authority that was now being belittled.

It was Lord Sneek who next broke the ominous silence. Nurglitch, and all the others, turned their eyes to the shadow that was the ruler of Clan Eshin. Even when the censers' light pulsed brightest, he remained obscured – not for nothing was he named the Grand Nightlord. 'Seer Lord Kritislik, I have withdrawn Deathmaster Snikch from his targets and informed Doomclaw of your doublecross,' said Lord Sneek in his whisper-like voice. This was followed by a heavy thud as Kratch Doomclaw slammed the vast apparatus that had replaced his left arm onto the table. He was the Lord of Crookback Peak, Supreme Warlord of Clan Rictus, and he bared his yellowed fangs at Kritislik in a challenge display. Again, Nurglitch's tail quivered, for this sign was universally understood amongst skaven, from the lowliest slave upwards. It was the posture a common clanrat struck before openly fighting for rank.

Kritislik was incredulous, his curved horns glowing with a nimbus of power. 'You dare? I speak in the name of the great Horned Rat. I alone am…'

But before he could finish, his words turned to a screech, a wail of purest pain, as his body convulsed. Dark vapour issued from his distended jaws – a growing plume of blackness. The Great Pillar flashed and from the cloud's midst black lightning arced forth. Convulsing inwardly upon himself, Kritislik was reduced to a skeletal form in an instant, then burst into ash.

Nurglitch was shocked, and the startled looks upon the other council members told him he was not alone.

As the last flakes of the grey seer drifted downwards, the black cloud coalesced over the symbolic head of the council table. Beacon-like eyes blazed from out of the darkness. This was too much for Lord Nurglitch, who fell to the floor alongside the other Lords of Decay, prostrating himself in awe and terror.

The Horned Rat had come.

As he writhed upon the floor, unbidden knowledge filled Lord Nurglitch's head. In his mind, the Plague Lord saw visions of the malevolent Shadow-moon: swollen and huge it had grown. Then came the voice. It spoke in a discordant roar that was both a scratchy whisper and the screeching of a million million rats. Lord Nurglitch knew and understood. The great Horned Rat was displeased, no longer amused by his children's squabbles. A new Seer Lord would touch the pillar and join their council. He would rightfully speak in the Horned Rat's voice.

Before departing, the Horned Rat spoke aloud a single prophecy that threatened to rip apart the very fabric of reality:

'Children, We Shall Inherit!'



Settra, the King of Kings, did not slumber like the lesser potentates of his land, his innumerable vassals. He watched vigilantly over his territory – studying the signs.

Dark clouds of scavenger birds gathered over the sun-drenched deserts of Nehekhara. The Fell Moon burned brightly, its sickly form forever waxing stronger. Strange storms rose up suddenly to wreak havoc. The daemons from beyond the spirit realm once more stalked the lands, attacking in great numbers.

Perhaps most perturbing of all to Settra were the portents brought before him by a few priests of the Mortuary Cult. These liches, individuals who Settra counted most loyal, spoke of strange whisperings that drifted upon the Wind of Shyish, fervent beckonings that offered promises of power.

With a command unprecedented in the chronicles of Nehekhara's past, Settra summoned his Hierophant and bade him wake all the kings, to rouse from slumber every legion.

It had been many ages since even half their number had been stirred from deathless sleep. The only time in their history when all were awoken was during the War of Kings. Nagash's Great Ritual had sent dark magic coursing across the lands, invigorating the mummified and preserved kings of Nehekhara and stirring up the charnel pits of the dead cities.

Now, such was the looming threat descending upon Nehekhara, that Settra would dare to risk the great King Strife again.

Across the Land of the Dead, the Mortuary Priests lurched to their duties. Their bodies, having had to last far beyond any natural span, were hunched – bound too tightly by their wizened skin. Yet for all their shrivelled and feeble appearance,

they possessed a vitality, working tirelessly, moving from tomb to tomb. They were the shepherds of the long sleep, the Wakers of the Dead. The sacred seals to tombs were broken, the age-old ritual incantations recited, the long, monotonous droning begun. And then begun again.

Once more the great cities of Nehekhara began to stir and move.

From out of the ruling city of Khemri rode Settra's herald, Nekaph, and thousands of others. They brought messages from the King of Kings and sought council with those newly risen from their tombs. They bore scrolls assigning commands, sending forth patrols, tithing legions to be sent elsewhere in the realm and setting forth marching orders. The will of Settra would not be denied.

In the Charnel Valley, the Great Valley of the Kings, the necrotects began to re-sculpt the eroded visages of the monarchs' monumental statues – beginning the long rituals that would suffuse stone with the controlling spirits of the dead. At the bidding of Settra himself, the master of their craft, Ramhotep the Visionary, marched a long column of stone warstatues to Khemri. There he was instructed to augment the wall of that greatest of cities – to build something no one had ever seen before. So did Ramhotep, with all his merciless drive, begin his greatest work yet.

To the steady beat of the drums, the Warfleet of Khemri rowed up the Great Mortis River. There, it joined the armada of Zandri – the Fleetport of Terror. The whole Mortis Delta was filled with fighting craft.

In Lybaras the great reliquary of High Queen Khalida was forbidden ground for the priests, but their rites were not required. Weeks before the Mortuary Cult received their message, the power of Asaph, the Asp Goddess, had awakened her champion with sibilant hissing. So it was that Khalida, High Queen of Lybaras, met the wizened priests from her throne. Her archer legions were formed up and ready as she welcomed the heralds to her city.

Legion after legion marched across the blazing sands, taking up positions to repel invaders. Thousands of chariots sent up dust clouds to the heavens. Beneath the shifting sands creatures buried themselves, ready to spring up in ambush at the first sign of intruders.

From their burial pyramids, the liche priests also looked upon the latest portents and were deeply troubled. The world's great powers were moving, and there was a shifting in the winds of magic that carried with it tidings of war and change.

War was nothing new, for the realm of the tomb kings was built upon a foundation of battles – its unconquered legions were as strong and numerous as they had ever been. Indeed, in their pride and arrogance, most of the newly awakened kings were hawkish – embracing the onset of a great war. In battle they saw a fresh chance to demonstrate their own superiority.

Change, however, was not welcome in the Land of the Dead.

Settra's rule was known as the Reign of Millions of Years. The Great King of Nehekhara intended to see that it was so. Any who dared challenge his rule or his immortality would swiftly face his wrath.

Khenteka, liche priest and Hierophant of Khemri, walked alone from the golden-pillared chambers of the Palace of Monarchs. He came from the glorious presence of Settra the Imperishable, Greatest of Kings, Ruler of Nehekhara, and he bore a new decree for the Mortuary Cult.

Hunched over, Khenteka leaned upon his staff of office more heavily than usual, using it as a walking stick to aid his dragging gait. Khenteka felt the great weight of years upon him as he never had before. The enormity of his task seemed fit to push him into the ground.

Accompanied only by the echoing click-clatter of his staff and footsteps, Khenteka made his way through the Necropolis of Kings to the burial pyramids. His mind was still in awe over his recent summons, the magnitude of his mandate and the dire situation it forebode.

When his subordinates saw him, they halted their work renewing the seals on the portals of the tombs. As one the priests rose and began the ritual chants that were traditional when the Hierophant graced them with his presence.

With a tap of his staff that sent shockwaves through the floor like the footfall of a striding colossus, Khenteka interrupted the droning priests. He held up his hand while the echoes of the gesture faded.

'There is no time – abandon your tasks. We have other, more pressing ceremonies to perform,' said Khenteka to the silenced assembly.

It was Nebamun, the Bearer of the Staff of Ages, who first spoke the question. 'What did the Lord of the Four Horizons, the Mighty Lion of the Infinite Desert say? What has our King, the Vanquisher of our Enemies, asked of us, oh Revered One?'

With practised obedience the cluster of hunched priests bowed low, awaiting the word.

'Mighty Settra, Lord of the Sky and Earth, has ordered us to wake the kings and summon the legions once more,' said Khenteka.

'How many, oh Revered One?' asked Nebamun after a respectful pause.

'All of them,' said Khenteka, as he turned to stride out of his tomb once more. 'Awaken them all.'



Far to the north of Nehekhara's blazing sands, darkness lay upon Sylvania. The air was thick with apostatic enchantment, an unholy miasma that sapped the courage from even the most valorous soul and dissipated the cleansing energies of the faithful. Sylvania was now a land beyond the power of prayer.

In the dungeons of Sternieste Castle, lately the chief stronghold of Mannfred von Carstein, lay nine vessels of godly power; nine mortals teetering on the precipice of death, whose blood pulsed with the blessings of the divine. That blood was crucial to Mannfred's plans; it was the foundation upon which his greatest design had been built. For centuries, the vampire had yearned to free Sylvania from the Empire's yoke, to transform it into an independent realm where darkness ruled and faith had no power. Now, the blood of the nine had done its work. Walls of bone towered upon Sylvania's boundaries, transforming the twilight province into a sprawling fortress.

This project had been the work of many mortal lifetimes, for the nine had not been whimsically selected; rather, their bloodlines had been identified by an enciphered prophecy buried in the books of Nagash. Decrypting the code had taken Mannfred decades, and for a long time his greatest fear had been that one or more of the bloodlines had withered. Fortunately, this proved not to be the case.

Amongst the nine godly vessels were three great prizes. These individuals were nothing less than demigods, whose power lay but scantly concealed beneath a thin veil of flesh. Morgiana le Fay had been the acquisition that Mannfred had feared most, for historically his kind had met nothing save ruin in Bretonnia. As matters transpired, she was the first to be ensnared, delivered into Mannfred's clutches by Drycha of Athel Loren. The branchwraith gave no explanation for her deeds, and Mannfred accepted the gift with but a token attempt to slay the giver. Aliathra, the Everchild of Ulthuan, was the next prey taken, whisked twice away from beneath the protection of her own people and the dwarfs of Karaz-a-Karak. Last to fall, and symbolically most important, was Volkmar, Grand Theogonist of Sigmar, lured to Sylvania by pride and taken in battle during that arrogant invasion. It was Volkmar's blood that had completed the apostatic ritual and transformed the very land he had sought to cleanse into the dark paradise it was now.

Ultimately, though Mannfred's design had been performed to perfection, not everything had unfolded as the Lord of Sylvania had intended. His realm had not been immune to the upheavals of recent months. Dark portals had appeared in those places where the dead had lain heaviest, spewing forth daemons to spoil Sylvania's order and tranquillity. Few such incursions had lasted long, for Sylvania was not a squabbling mortal province, and its armies were easily roused to crush the invaders.

More worryingly, Mannfred discovered that the humans of the Empire had soured his grand design. In preparation for his enchantment, Mannfred had bidden his teeming packs of ghouls strip every Sylvanian temple, shrine and burial ground of its holy symbols, and bury them deep so that their sanctity would not trouble the undead. In the moment of Volkmar's capture, these icons had been plucked from the dank soil by a sorcerous hand, and set about Sylvania's bounds to form a cage of faith and light to trammel the dark. Neither Mannfred, nor any of his minions, could cross that ring of holy light and step into the world beyond.

Mannfred deemed this imprisonment to be the work of Balthasar Gelt, Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic. It helped little to identify his tormentor. Gelt was in Altdorf, far beyond Mannfred's reach; thus his magics would have to be opposed instead. For long months, Mannfred tried to overcome the wards set about his realm, but to no avail. The magic that Gelt had used to bind the holy symbols to Sylvania's border was proof against every counterspell and banishment that the von Carstein could conjure. The wall of faith was an enchantment far subtler and more enduring than Mannfred had come to expect from the crude minds of human wizards, and the vampire quickly came to suspect that Gelt was not its true conceiver.

With each failure, Mannfred's mood grew blacker, the veneer of civilisation he wore as a cloak becoming ever more tattered as his patience waned. Was he not the greatest of the von Carsteins, and heir to the power of Nagash? It was impossible, or so he was sure, for the pitiful sorceries of a mere human to countermand his own dread power. Yet, impossible or not, Gelt's wall of faith withstood every attempt to see it unmade.

The other vampires of Sylvania knew of Mannfred's black mood and the cause, but there was little they could do to appease their master. Indeed, most soon forsook any attempt, especially since Mannfred had personally flayed Tomas von Carstein for even daring to broach the subject of Gelt's enchantment. They were, for the most part, an unambitious get; most of those with a taste for aught beyond the domination of superstition-ridden peasants had been eliminated long ago. Thus were they quite content with the situation as it stood. In time, perhaps, the ennui brought about by eternal life would drive the vampires of Sylvania to action but, for the present, they saw no reason to court their master's wrath. Let Lord Mannfred lurk in Castle Sternieste, poring over dusty tomes and parched scrolls; Sylvania was dark, night and day, and there were cruel pleasures without end to be slaked at whim.









CHAPTER 1

An Accursed Alliance

Autumn 2523 – Summer 2524



As winter fell on the land of Sylvania, and portents of doom grew heavier in the skies above, Mannfred von Carstein slowly became aware of an intruder in his realm.

For some weeks now, the Lord of Sylvania's spies had whispered of a great battle fought on the edge of Bretonnia, a battle in which an undead force led by Louen Leoncoeur's bastard son, Mallobaude, had bloodied both the armies of his father, and of Athel Loren. Mallobaude had been defeated, and many of the necromancers gathered to his cause had fled over the mountains, drawn across the forests of the Empire and to the darkness of Sylvania. Most had lacked the wit to breach the walls of bone upon the border, but Mannfred had quickly bound the survivors to his service. If nothing else, their arrival had taught the vampire one vital thing: Gelt's wall of faith worked only in one direction. It was genius that Mannfred could have appreciated under other circumstances, for it was a perfect combination of lure and trap, and the vampire was inclined to commend Gelt for his craft before tearing out his throat.

Yet this newest intruder was not like the other vagabond necromancers who had entered Mannfred's territory. He had made no move to announce his presence to the Lord of Sylvania and did not attempt to offer fealty as others had. The vampire could taste a challenge on the air and moved swiftly to meet it. After many weeks spent in fruitless attempts to unmake the wall of faith, he welcomed the distraction offered by a confrontation.

Mannfred journeyed swiftly south upon a steed of bone and black magic. He made no attempt to hide his approach. Now was not the time for subtlety, for it too easily could be taken for wariness, or some other frailty of purpose. The Lord of Sylvania sent out wolves and bats to shadow the intruder's course, but each time such minions came to within eyesight of their quarry, the vampire's hold over the creatures slipped away into nothing. Mannfred was now close enough that he could sense the intruder's formidable willpower crowding in on his. It had been many decades since he had last faced so worthy an adversary.

A day later, Mannfred and his foe met upon Valsborg bridge. They came alone. Each deemed that to ride at the head of an army would be taken as a sign of weakness, and knew that the shallow graves of Sylvania would yield warriors enough if the need arose. The intruder waited at the centre of the bridge, his cowl twitching in the listless breeze. Rising high in the saddle, the Lord of Sylvania demanded that the intruder prostrate himself. The other did not move, but his dry laughter echoed across the foetid river. He had not come, the figure said, to bend his knee, but to reclaim relics that were his by right: a crown, a severed hand and seven books of blood-inked flesh.

Mannfred knew those items well; indeed, he had drawn upon their power to bring eternal darkness to Sylvania, and he demanded why he should yield them.

Nagash must rise, the figure intoned. He went on to remind the vampire that the Lord of the Undead was not ungenerous to those who served him loyally and well. There was a place to be claimed at his side, if the vampire was but bold enough to claim it.

In that moment, Mannfred knew who it was he faced, for none other than Arkhan the Black, first of the Nine Dark Lords, would have had the audacity to undertake such a mission. Mannfred now suspected the path the future would take, and it was little to his liking. He sought to extend the darkness of Sylvania to every corner of the world, but what reason was there for such a venture if another ruled that paradise in his stead? It could not be permitted. With a cry, the vampire smote the liche with a bolt of writhing shadow. Yet when the skeins of darkness cleared, Arkhan still stood, and his hollow laughter echoed across the river once more.



Thus did the Valsborg bridge become the site of a sorcerous duel of grand proportions. For hours, the vampire and the liche battered at each other with spell and counterspell, each striving for a weakness in the other's defence. The clinging black sod of the river meadows heaved as the unquiet dead were summoned forth to do the bidding of one dark master or the other. Evenly matched though they might have been on neutral ground, this was Sylvania, and here Mannfred was the master – or so it seemed. Though Arkhan hammered at the vampire's defences, he could not breach them, and was sorely pressed to counter Mannfred's own spells. The mouldering warriors who fought in the cloying mud were well-matched in number, but Mannfred called black wolves from the distant tree line and bats from the gloom-laden sky, and these tore into Arkhan's corpse-puppets with fang and claw. Arkhan channelled more magic into his ailing minions, but his own defences were crumbling. Seeing his foe founder, Mannfred let out a mighty cry of victory and began to intone the guttural syllables of another spell.

Without warning, a shaft of sunlight burst from the clouds high above, and struck the bridge between the vampire and the liche. At once, Mannfred realised that victory would bring him nothing but disaster. In his drive to vanquish his foe, the vampire had unconsciously drawn upon the same magics that sustained Sylvania's enchantments. If he continued on this course, the work of decades would be undone, but if he did not, would he have power enough to best Arkhan?

Mannfred let the energies of his murderous spell dissipate, and dismissed his risen legions with a wave of his hand. As the dark skies billowed to choke away the rays of sunlight, the Lord of Sylvania struck a truce with Arkhan the Black. If victory this day concealed disaster tomorrow, or so the vampire reckoned, perhaps a false defeat might yet offer up a bounteous future. Nagash was a being of great power, but Mannfred had spent centuries learning how to harness power to his will; this would be no different.

Arkhan saw clearly what was in Mannfred's mind, but agreed to the truce all the same. Let the Lord of Sylvania think himself the master here; the liche knew better. The vampire, like all his line, was but a by-blow of an ancient and glorious dynasty; he did not know what true power was.

But he would know soon enough.

Mannfred regarded Arkhan impassively as the liche spoke of dire fates, and of his dread master's return. The vampire still regretted his brief display of fear when the shaft of sunlight had hit the bridge, and he was determined not to lose further face. He just wished the intruder would come to the point.

How he hated the desiccated creature before him. Arkhan's history was one of defeat and grovelling servitude. Now he came to Sylvania demanding to be treated as a conquering lord, or even as an equal? It was unthinkable. It was beyond arrogance.

'You have read the signs as clearly as I.' The liche's voice droned on. 'The growing power of Chaos makes no distinction between the living and the dead. Nagash must rise, or our realms of silence will fall. And yours will be the first.'

Mannfred marked the unsubtle threat, but remained unmoved. He had no intention of serving Nagash. He had not plotted the demise of his own bloodline only to bend his knee to a long-withered necromancer whose legend held more power than his body ever had. If the choice lay between oblivion at the hands of the Dark Gods and eternal servitude to Nagash, then he would reluctantly choose the former. And yet...

And yet, there was opportunity in what the liche proposed. Mannfred knew the ritual that Arkhan intended to use, and knew also the ways in which it could be subverted to another cause. Yes, he thought, the opportunity was worth the risk.

'Very well,' Mannfred said at last. 'We have a pact, at least for now. Come; we will discuss the matter further.'

Did the vampire know how transparent his thoughts were? Arkhan considered Mannfred's palpable arrogance as he followed him from the bridge. The ancient granite of its stones still bore the signs of their duel, a contest Arkhan had carefully gauged to learn the true extent of his opponent's power. The liche acknowledged no rivals when it came to mastery of the black arts, but he had found Mannfred's ability worryingly impressive all the same. The vampire would make a dangerous foe, and an even more dangerous ally.

Arkhan was no fool. He knew that Mannfred would never trust him, but that was the smallest of burdens. He had not come to Sylvania in search of an ally, but out of need for a cat's paw. Matters were coming to a head, and he alone could not achieve all that needed to be done. Nagash's voice had whispered in the liche's mind for centuries, but it had never spoken with the urgency it did now. Chaos was rising, and time was growing short.

Let Mannfred think that he was the master, thought Arkhan. The vampires had always been prideful and wayward; they had no concept of loyalty, and lived only for their own capricious pleasures. This one was the worst of a particularly rebellious bloodline, his desires often gorged, but never sated. Whether the vampire realised it or not, he would be Arkhan's puppet from this moment on, and it would surely be little consolation to Mannfred that his strings had been woven from his own upstart ambitions.

Nagash would rise, Arkhan swore, and Mannfred, willingly or not, would play his part.

When the reluctant allies arrived at the bleak towers of Castle Sternieste, many of Mannfred's inner circle were somewhat surprised to see how accommodating their master was to his unwelcome guest, but the keener-witted of them soon realised the truth of the matter. Mannfred afforded Arkhan every courtesy because he knew well that the line between ally and enemy was vanishingly thin, and could be crossed as a consequence of the smallest act. The more Mannfred dwelled upon the idea of raising Nagash and breaking the supreme necromancer to his will, the more he yearned for the immense power that outcome would bring. Arkhan would be a necessary trial in the meantime, and the Lord of Sylvania had no wish to jeopardise his cooperation.

In any event, the liche bore watching. Proud and manipulative as Mannfred was, he knew Arkhan to be a creature far older and craftier than himself. Wisdom dictated that the Lord of Sylvania remain alert for treachery. Thus, in those fleeting moments where Mannfred was not at his guest's side, there were always bats or thrall-spirits through whom the vampire kept a careful watch. Arkhan made no attempt to blind these spies; he too needed his ally's cooperation and, for the time being, was content to let the vampire play his games.

At no time did Arkhan make any attempt, nor any suggestion of intent, to remove the relics from Sternieste's dungeons. The items would be needed to restore Nagash, or so the liche declared, and in the meantime he could think of no better use for them than ensuring Sylvania remained a land beyond the grasp of meddling mortals. He did, however, ask to see the relics and, after some consideration, Mannfred led him into the dank depths of the castle.

Nine prisoners were held in chains about the walls, each shackled to a great lectern of dark iron. Seven of the lecterns held treasures Arkhan had journeyed far to seek: the missing books of Nagash. Long had it been since so many of those blighted tomes had been gathered together, and the dank air of the chamber resonated with their barely contained power. A jagged crown sat in the very centre of the room, its gemstones glittering darkly even though there was little light for them to reflect. This was the infamous Crown of Sorcery, rescued at last from the vaults of Altdorf, waiting only for its rightful master to claim it.

On the floor around the crown ran a series of deep grooves. These were inlaid with a rich gold that was almost invisible beneath the blood that pulsed and flowed over it. There was no obvious pattern to these scarlet lines, no pleasing symmetry nor artistry of design. It was only from a distance that a watcher could see the true shape they described. This was a cartograph of Sylvania's boundaries. It was the foundation upon which Mannfred's apostatic enchantment had been built, and its channels were fed by trickling rivulets of the captives' holy blood.

Those captives were broken and beaten, their flesh mangled by their gaoler's cruel attentions. Some had been crippled by wounds taken in battle, or inflicted by torture. All hovered on the brink of death, kept in the living world by their captor's sorcerous artifice rather than out of any desire to remain alive. Only two were awake. One was an old man, his armoured robes of office crusted with his own blood, and his bald head marred by a livid wound that wept red tears onto his face. His eyes were clouded with pain, but still glared defiantly at the monsters who held him prisoner. The other wakeful captive was an elf, her once-radiant blond hair matted with blood and filth, a silver tiara hanging askew amongst her tangled braids. Her eyes were closed, and her lips worked constantly, suggesting a mind in the grip of madness.

The vargheists that watched over the dungeons knew Arkhan for an outsider as soon as his bloodless scent reached their nostrils. The creatures retreated to the shadows at Mannfred's command, but hissed and snarled as the liche ran his fleshless fingers reverently across each of the relics in turn. Arkhan paid them no heed. He had borne the final two books of Nagash with him on his journey, and these he now placed upon the empty lecterns. As he picked his way across the blood-stained floor, Arkhan's empty eye sockets alighted on the nine whose sainted blood fed the ritual, lingering perhaps a moment on the elven Everchild's slender brow. Much of what would be required was already assembled, he judged, and that which remained could be claimed with ease. Three more relics were essential, three relics tied to the Lord of the Undead's demise. All lay within reach of Sylvania; all were ripe for the taking.

Of greater concern was the holy barrier around Sylvania; whilst it remained in place, any expedition beyond the realm of darkness was impossible. For this, however, Arkhan had a solution, albeit a costly one. There was, he said, a long-forgotten ritual that could make a small breach in the wall of faith, but it required holy blood. One of Mannfred's prisoners would have to be sacrificed. The Lord of Sylvania disliked this news, but saw the necessity of the sacrifice; the rewards had the potential to outweigh all of the risks.

By the time Arkhan's preparations were complete, Mannfred had gathered an army on the western border of Sylvania, the Drakenhof banner twitching fitfully above silent ranks. In the middle distance lay Gelt's wall of faith, the symbols of Morr, Sigmar, Ulric and a dozen other gods suspended in midair and glowing with holy light. At the side of the roadway, Arkhan stood within a ritual circle; at his feet, pinioned by stakes driven through flesh, lay his offering; Lupio Blaze, a Knight of the Blazing Sun. His blood was not the strongest of the nine, but it was powerful enough. Black candles, their tallow rendered from human flesh, guttered in the wind whipping around him as the liche intoned words not heard since the days of Alcadizaar. As his chant grew louder, thunder rolled overhead and black lightning split the skies. Wisps of dark mist spiralled madly about Arkhan's outstretched arms, wolves howled in the distance and the bitter air grew thick with roiling power.

With a triumphant cry, Arkhan took a bone dagger from his robes, and slit Lupio's veins at the wrist and thigh. As the last of the knight's blood pulsed onto the ground, the liche clenched together the fingers of his empty hand and the candles toppled inward, setting light to the blood. Of everything within the circle, only Arkhan was untouched by the flames, and once their fury had been expended, he beckoned for the Drakenhof banner to be brought forward. The liche anointed the von Carsteins' ancestral standard with the ashes at his feet, and bade the bearer approach the wall of faith. As the Drakenhof banner approached the barrier, the nearest of the shining symbols grew dull and dark.

The way ahead was open, and the hunt could begin.

Once beyond the borders of Sylvania, Mannfred and Arkhan elected to divide their forces – at least for the moment. It was only a matter of time before their travail drew the attention of meddlesome eyes, and the more swiftly they could gather the last relics, the greater the chance of ultimate success.

It was agreed that Arkhan would travel far to the west, to the land of Bretonnia. It was there that Alakanash, Nagash's fabled staff of power, lay sealed within the holy vaults of La Maisontaal Abbey.





Arkhan saw little challenge in this charge. His support of Mallobaude's uprising had been only partially successful, but it had left the once-mighty kingdom in poor shape to oppose him a second time, especially in the south where his quest now took him. Arkhan sought to journey alone, his plan to gather forces nearer to his goal, but Mannfred insisted that the liche accept a 'bodyguard' of Drakenhof Templars to ensure that he reached his destination without incident – or, at least, without incident not of Mannfred's design. If Arkhan resented this insistence, he gave no sign. He was well aware that the vampire would likely attempt to dispose of him once the work was done, but had drawn plans against such an eventuality.

Mannfred's course would take him further south, to Mad Dog Pass and the lair of Clan Mordkin. These skaven had once masterminded the downfall of Nagash, and it was the weapon they had created for that task that Mannfred sought to recover. Known to darkest legend as the Fellblade, the sword had been the tool by which Alcadizaar – Nagash's bitterest foe – had once destroyed the Lord of the Undead. Alcadizaar had died soon after, overcome by the Fellblade's baleful magics, and Clan Mordkin had recovered the weapon. Yet the power of the Fellblade was greater than even the skaven knew, for though Nagash had returned several times since his destruction at Alcadizaar's hands, the Fellblade's curse ensured that each manifestation was weaker than the one that had come before it. So dire had this state of affairs become that the final time Nagash had walked the living world – on the so-called Night of the Restless Dead – his spirit had dispersed before dawn on the next day. For Nagash to live once more, the Fellblade's vile enchantments would have to be broken forever.

Only when Alakanash and the Fellblade had been recovered would Arkhan and Mannfred join forces once more, for the final relic would likely prove the hardest to reclaim. This was Morikhane, the black armour of Nagash. It had been taken as a trophy during Sigmar's defeat of the Lord of the Undead, by warriors who had fought at the Heldenhammer's side. Many centuries had passed since those days, but the spiritual descendants of those warriors still held Morikhane, and guarded it as closely as they did their forebears' honour. Now the black armour lay at the heart of Heldenhame, a sprawling chapter keep closely guarded by the Knights of Sigmar's Blood. Heldenhame lay on the border between the Imperial provinces of Stirland and Averland, and any assault there would quickly reveal that the denizens of Sylvania were not so contained as the rulers of the Empire believed. That ignorance had to be maintained as long as possible, lest the humans take it upon themselves to besiege Sylvania once again.

Aliathra's eyes opened with a start as the vampire seized her jaw. It was a purely instinctive response, for she had been all but blind for many months now. She felt his talons sink into her flesh, but there was no pain. There hadn't been any pain for weeks, not since her veins had been opened to fuel the cartograph. Was she even alive any longer? The Everchild didn't know.

'Still alive? Good.' The vampire's voice was polite, even cultured, but Aliathra wasn't fooled. She had been his unwilling guest too long, had experienced first-hand the creature's endless capacity for cruelty. 'It appears that you are even more important to me than I had previously believed.'

'My people are coming for me. When they arrive, you will burn,' Aliathra hissed, and took satisfaction from the flicker of concern that crossed the vampire's face. Despite his arrogance, the creature still feared the power of the elves, as well he should.

'Indeed, my dear?' the creature mocked, his momentary weakness gone as if it had never existed. 'Then I shall break them again, as I broke them beneath Nagashizzar. But don't concern yourself; nothing will go to waste.'

The words were a distraction, a feint, as they had been so many times before. Aliathra tried to turn away, but the vampire held her fast, his inky black eyes boring into hers. She could feel the pressure of his will as he sought to probe her mind. She knew that he could sense something amiss, that the supposedly enthralled captive still kept a secret from him. Each time, the vampire took a better measure of her defences, and each time the struggle to resist grew harder.

'What are you hiding?' the vampire demanded, twisting Aliathra's head viciously, his eyes tracing the contours of her skull as if seeking some physical imperfection that might aid his interrogation.

Aliathra gave no answer. The pressure grew stronger, and she could feel her will crumbling. The desire to surrender was overpowering. Despite the Everchild's defiant words, she had no certainty of rescue. She had spun her silent song every moment of these terrible months, a call so subtle that the even the vampire's finely attuned senses could not hear it. Alas, it had gone unanswered. For all Aliathra knew, she had been abandoned. Only a desperate hope remained, and hope was hard to maintain in Sylvania.

Why not yield and end the pain? suggested a whisper in Aliathra's mind, and she could not tell if the thought was her own, or her captor's.

The Everchild was on the brink of submitting when another voice sounded in the dungeon. It was as dry as the distant desert, and took no effort to disguise its disparaging tone.

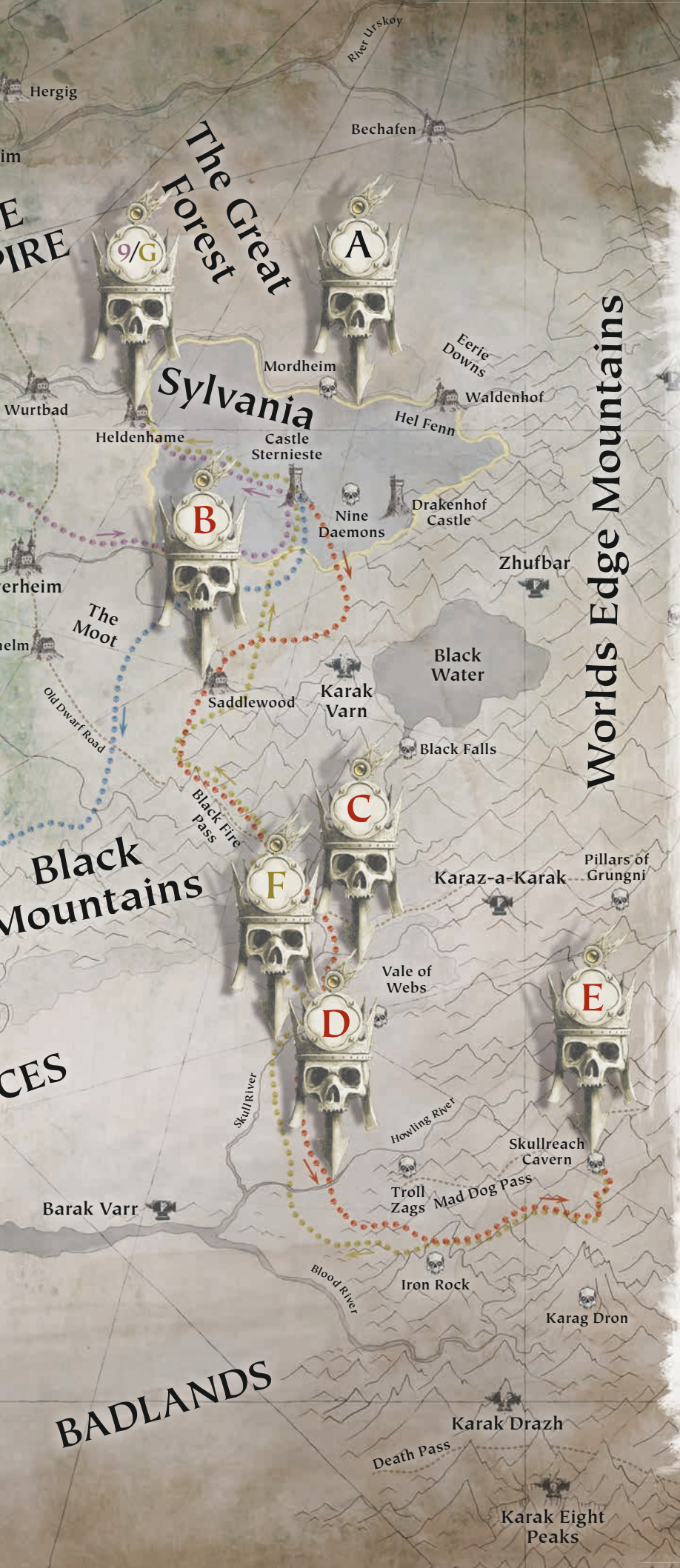
'Captivating though it is to watch the great Mannfred von Carstein demonstrate his mastery over a shackled mortal, we have other business, and little time in which to accomplish it.'

The vampire's attention wavered only for a moment, but it was enough. Aliathra rallied, and rebuilt her defences stronger and thicker than before. The vampire sensed the renewed defiance and, snarling in frustration, he abandoned the questioning of his prisoner and stalked back into the shadows that crowded on the Everchild's sight.

With a brief prayer to Isha, Aliathra closed her eyes and began the silent song anew.




The Cursed Marshes
Marienburg
The Black Pit
Old Dwarf Road
Forest of Shadows
Howling Hills
Midden Moors
River Reik
Weismund
River Talabec
Talabhe
Forest of Arden
Gisoreux
Carroburg
Altdorf
Drakwald Forest
The Barren Hills
TH
EMP
5
6
7
8
BRETONNIA
La Maisontaal
Mousillon
Grünburg
Reikwald Forest
4
Montfort
Forest of Châlons
Massif Orcal
Parravon
Grey Mountains
Beechervast's Sigmarite Temple
Bordeleaux
Blood Keep
Nuln
River Aver
Wissenburg
River Sol
Upper Grismerie
Tal Hakan
3
ATHEL LOREN
Upper Reik
Pfeildorf
Brionne
2
1
Quenelles
Yn Edyl Koiran
Karak Norn
Bugman's Brewery
Carcassonne
Tal Stornos
Grimhold
Karak Hirn
Stonewrath Peak
The Vaults
Karak Bhufdar
Skavenblight
Zombie Swamps
Karak Izor
Miragliano
Crystal Gap
BORDER PRINC
Tobaro
Trantio
Fester Spike
River Orco
Isles of The Sirens
Tilean Sea
TILEA
Zarakzil
N
Remas
Pavona
Black Peninsula
Black Gulf
Dragonback Mountains
Verezzo



A. THE NIGHT OF THE VANISHED
Mannfred despatches Erikan Crowfiend and his Hounds of Night to silence a line of deathknell watchposts along the river Stir.

B. THE GREAT FIRE OF SADDLEWOOD
The village of Saddlewood is razed to the ground. The fire conceals the fact that the slain had been drained of blood, and the halflings blame the Stirlanders for the attack.

C. THE LOST DUKE OF ALFORI
The hunting party of Duke Farnio Forzini goes missing in the mountains. Superstitious peasants later claim to have seen the duke, pale save for the blood dripping from his mouth, riding alongside a host of the dead. These witnesses are quickly put to the fire by the Forzini family, to prevent rumour from spreading.

D. THE BATTLE OF HOWLING RIVER
Ironclaw orcs, heading north to besiege Barak Varr, encounter Mannfred von Carstein's army instead. The resulting slaughter swells the Sylvanian ranks by many thousands.

E. SLAUGHTER AT SKULLREACH CAVERN
Mannfred breaches the squalid lair of Clan Mordkin, and battles to claim the Fellblade.

F. THE DEATH OF HOUSE FORZINI
Mannfred looses Duke Forzini to ravage his former family's lands.

1. A CONCLAVE OF THE DEAD
Arkhan reunites with the Lichemaster Heinrich Kemmler and Krell – his vassals during Mallobaude's abortive campaign.

2. THE VENGEFUL DEAD ARISE
Arkhan and Kemmler raise the wights of Stonewrath Peak to form the core of the army they will lead into Bretonnia.

3. THE RAZING OF CARCASSONNE
Arkhan's army advances across the plague-ridden southern counties of Bretonnia. Scores of villages and towns are overcome by his legions, which grow larger with every victory.

4. DUKE TANCRED'S FALL
Duke Tancred II, recognising the work of his father's old foe, the Lichemaster, musters the survivors of ruined Quenelles to face him in battle. Tancred succeeds in dealing Kemmler a vicious wound, but is hacked down by Krell in return for his temerity. Tancred's army is routed soon after, and the duke raised as a zombie so that Kemmler might slay him again and again.

5. THE TWELFTH BATTLE OF LA MAISONTAAL
Arkhan's forces breach the sanctified walls of La Maisontaal Abbey to reclaim Alakanash.

6. BARON CASGILLE RIDES OUT
Baron Casgille receives word of a dark presence making its way across his lands. Summoning the knights of neighbouring villages, he rides out to challenge it. Casgille and all who follow him are slain when Arkhan raises a horde of plague-ridden dead to pull the horrified knights from their saddles.

7. ORION'S WRATH
Athel Loren's Wild Hunt falls upon Arkhan's army as it crosses Parravon. Realising his minions are outmatched by the wood elves' fury, Arkhan escapes into the mountains whilst Krell's forces hold the Wild Hunt at bay.

8. BETRAYAL AT BEECHERVAST
Anark von Carstein, commander of the Drakenhof Templars, attempts to destroy Arkhan and claim Alakanash (and Mannfred's favour). Arkhan defeats the would-be assassin, and leaves him manacled to the gatepost of Beechervast's Sigmarite Temple.

9/G THE FALL OF HELDENHAME
United once more, Arkhan and Mannfred lay siege to Heldenhame, and slaughter the Knights of Sigmar's Blood.



Arkhan did not head directly to his prize after parting with Mannfred, for he knew that he would need more than the mindless dead at his command if he were to meet with success. Thus his path took him into the foothills of the mountain range known as the Vaults. There, he rebound to his service the self-titled Lichemaster, Heinrich Kemmler, and the ancient wight Krell. These two had served Arkhan well during Mallobaude's rebellion, reinforcing the renegade prince's army of brigands and traitors with legions of unquiet dead. Krell's loyalty was without question, for he was as driven as Arkhan to see Nagash restored, but Kemmler was a different matter entirely. The Lichemaster loathed indenturement to any master, and Arkhan knew he would follow only whilst it suited his own interests.

The three travelled deeper into the Vaults, seeking out the web-strewn tombs that lined the mountainside. Great battles had been fought there in ages past, and the selfish spirits of the slain rested uneasily in their mausoleums. Arkhan and Kemmler broke the elf-set seals, and roused the spiteful dead to their cause. It was yet a small army, but one with a potency that far outreached its slender numbers. And besides, there would be corpses enough in Bretonnia to swell the ranks.

Arkhan's march north was not a thing of subtlety, but tore straight through the already ravaged hearts of Carcassonne and Brionne. These once great provinces had been reduced to desolation by rebellion and plague. For every village that yet struggled to scratch a living from the soil, another two or three were corpse-choked charnels. Castles stood empty on hillsides and in vales, manors were fire-blackened ruins. Arkhan marched through them all, the unburied dead stirring to life in his wake. The liche had never truly believed that Mallobaude had possessed the will to

seize his father's crown, but had given the traitor every support nonetheless. In this he had been driven partly by a malicious desire to see exactly how Mallobaude would fail, but chiefly because he knew that Bretonnia would be greatly weakened, no matter the victor. Now Arkhan looked upon the grim results of his manipulations, but felt no satisfaction. Events had simply unfolded as he had foreseen.

Despite Bretonnia's dolorous state, Arkhan's advance did not go entirely unchallenged by her defenders, but only one such encounter could even have been considered a battle. Duke Tancred of Quenelles, the second of his line to bear that name, met Arkhan in battle as the undead host crossed the border into Brionne. Tancred and his knights were amongst the last survivors of ravaged Quenelles, battle-scarred veterans of the civil war that had seen their beautiful city toppled into the mud. They struck at Arkhan's army in a lance of brilliant blue and silver, striving as men possessed as they sought to win victory in the Lady's name. For Tancred, this was a battle of honour; revenge blinded him to the true scale of the undead force and goaded him on ever deeper into a sea of bone and rotting flesh. For Arkhan, this battle was an inconvenience. Not wishing to be troubled with its prosecution himself, he commanded the Lichemaster to end the duke's struggles. This Kemmler did with malicious glee, for Tancred's line had been a thorn in his aged hide for many years. Tancred perished that day, his flesh withered by the Lichemaster's sorceries and his spine split by Krell's axe. With the duke's death, those knights who yet lived turned their steeds to the east and fled for the comparative safety of Castle Brenache, one of the last remaining strongholds in western Quenelles.

With the loss of Duke Tancred II, the duties and privileges of the baronetcy of Quenelles fell to a distant cousin, Jerrod, Palatine of Asareux, who had fought at Tancred's side during the duke's last ride. Alas, at the battle's height, his steed had been struck with terror and borne him far afield. By the time Jerrod had mastered the beast once more, Tancred had been slain, and his knights scattered.

Jerrod's blood boiled with the need for revenge; he prayed for guidance and sought counsel of Lady Elynesse, the Dowager of Charnorte, and a prophetess of great renown. Though Elynesse agreed to lend her aid, the scrying was a troublesome affair. The waters of the future had been befouled by daemons, and the Lady's voice drowned out by the laughter of the Chaos Gods. For three days, Lady Elynesse took no food, and teetered on the precipice of madness. Then, at last, the Lady appeared in the prophetess's fevered dreams, and revealed that the unliving were marching on La Maisontaal Abbey. With the undead legion's destination at last known, Jerrod gathered what knights he could and rode north with all haste.

This was not the first time La Maisontaal had been threatened. Within its vaults lay a trove of ancient relics, of origins both fair and foul, and over the centuries many attackers had sought to pluck these artefacts from their rightful resting place. After the last major battle, some thirty years earlier, Duke Tancred I had financed an ambitious series of fortifications about the abbey. It had been his intention to render La Maisontaal into a fortress as mighty as any in Bretonnia.

However, following the duke's death at the Battle of Montfort Bridge, corruption and apathy stripped the works of any momentum, and the barely-begun walls had soon been stripped by peasants. Nonetheless, Tancred's efforts had not been entirely fruitless. Garrison quarters had been completed before work upon the walls had even begun, and these now housed a force of many hundreds of archers and men-at-arms, as well as scores of knights drawn from all fourteen provinces. Though the peasants had little inkling as to the honour bestowed by service at La Maisontaal, the nobility considered it amongst the highest of callings. Most determined of all was Duke Theodoric of Brionne, who had come to La Maisontaal out of penance for a chain of unchivalric deeds. Under his leadership, the garrison of La Maisontaal was more active than it had ever been, maintaining patrols and watchposts deep into the surrounding countryside.

Thus protected, La Maisontaal had ridden out the tide of slaughter that had engulfed the lands south of the River Grismerie. The irony was, of course, that in its earliest days, the campaign against Mallobaude had swung back and forth on the slenderest of numbers, and had Theodoric led his garrison to join the king's army, the traitor's threat could have been ended all the sooner. Quenelles and Carcassonne would not have fallen, and Brionne and Aquitaine would not lie in ruins. As it was, Theodoric had sought absolution so desperately that it had blinded him to all else; he had remained as La Maisontaal's guardian even whilst his ancestral lands had burned.

Now it seemed that Theodoric's ardour would be the salvation of La Maisontaal. He was a man afire with purpose; before him was his moment of redemption, a chance to atone for his weakness of mind and body. What better way for a true knight to prove himself anew than in battle against the vile undead? Scorning Jerrod's advice, Theodoric ordered the garrison to muster in the meadows south of the abbey. That, he declared to all who would listen, was where they would win a great victory for the Lady, and prove to all Bretonnia that hope had not yet forsaken the realm.

The Twelfth Battle of La Maisontaal was about to begin...

THE MUSTER OF LA MAISONTAAL

This is the army that fought to preserve La Maisontaal Abbey from the undead horde of Arkhan the Black. Duke Theodoric's garrison was drawn from across Bretonnia, and largely untouched by the recent struggles. Jerrod's force was battle-weary, but their determination was nevertheless undimmed.



DUKE THEODORIC OF BRIONNE

Theodoric's past drunkenness and lechery ensured that he was never destined to pass into history as a paragon of nobility. Nevertheless, as the duke crawled out of the bottle and attempted to rebuild his reputation, he did earn renown for feats of bravery upon the battlefield. It remains to be seen whether he is remembered as sozzle-wit or saviour, if he is even remembered at all.



DUKE JERROD OF QUENELLES

Jerrod lost much in the weeks leading to the Battle of La Maisontaal, and that loss perhaps made him reckless. Certainly he didn't give thought to his own mortality, so determined was he to avenge his fallen cousin Tancred. Of course, recklessness is not always a bad thing in a warrior, as many knights errant have proven.



ALDRAD'S LANCE

The aging Duke Adalhard of Lyonesse, not believing that his son Aldrad was yet ready to inherit the dukedom, despatched his wayward heir to join his old friend Theodoric at La Maisontaal. It was the duke's plan that Aldrad would learn a certain pious discipline under Theodoric's watchful gaze – all the more so as his drinking companions would remain in Lyonesse. Sadly, Aldrad swiftly found new friends amongst the muster, all as fond of ale as himself, and whatever lessons Theodoric was able to impart to these reckless knights were quickly washed away by insobriety.



THE THREE SISTERS OF ANCELIOUX

It is a rare and sad honour to have three daughters chosen by the Fay Enchantress, as Evroul of Mousillon did. The first, Jeneva, was taken a week before her tenth birthday; the second, Alisse, when only five years old. Distraught at losing another child to the Lady's service, Evroul's wife fled their castle with their youngest child, Guerrite, who had seen but two summers at that point. The wife was found two days later, slain by some wild beast – of Guerrite, there was not sign. Evroul did not see his daughters for some ten years after Guerrite's disappearance – not until the Lady sent them to kill him for siding with Mallobaude in the civil war.

THE COMPANIONS OF QUENELLES – GIOFFRE'S LANCE

In a more hopeful age, each of the Companions of Quenelles would have passed into legend, for there was not a knight amongst them who had not performed deeds worthy of Gilles. There was Gioffre of Anglaron, who had slain the dragon Scaramor, and Taurin the Wanderer, who alone held the Pass of Taintêle against the ghoul king Straxos for two nights and a day. Leon of Toular, slayer of the treacherous Baron Hernald, and of course Comte Raynor, who had set a goblin horde to rout, by the expedient course of making as much noise as a small army. There were many more, heroes all, but such was Bretonnia's fate, there were few minstrels left alive to tell of their deeds.





THE COMPANIONS OF QUENELLES – FASTRIC'S SKYLANCE

Though a knight of Bordeleaux, Fastric Ghoulslayer had fought alongside both Tancred and Jerrod in the attempt to save Quenelles. Such renown did Fastric earn, that soon he was joined by pegasus knights from across the realm, eager to display valour alongside the famed Fastric Ghoulslayer.



ENNAR'S OUTLAWS

These archers, inspired by the legends of Bertrand the Brigand, fled the service of Baldemar of Bastonne, thinking to live a carefree life in the Forest of Chalôns. A close encounter with a beastman warherd quickly convinced the peasants to return to Baldemar's castle and throw themselves on the knight's mercy. Fortunately for them, Baldemar was forgiving that day, although he bestowed the regiment's name so that its members would never forget that their lord knew of their attempted desertion.



THE RAPSCALLARDS

This peasant regiment was named by Duke Theodoric during one of his drunken stupors, long before he sought redemption at La Maisontaal. What the duke intended was never made clear, but most assume that he couldn't make up his mind between 'rapscallions' and 'cowards'. For their part, the men-at-arms of the Rapscallards hated their duke as only aggrieved commoners can, and would have happily deserted, save for the certain knowledge that their lot would have been little better elsewhere in the realm.

THE BLACK HOST

For the most part, Arkhan's host was formed from those resources he had immediately to hand – the plague slain dead of Bretonnia. What truly martial regiments he commanded came from the depths of Sylvania, or ancient tombs in the Vaults.



ARKHAN THE BLACK

Arkhan had been planning his assault on La Maisontaal for many years, having bent his will first to the corruption of Duke Maldred, and then to his adopted son, Mallobaude. In truth, the Bretonnian civil war had dealt the realm an even deeper wound than Arkhan had expected, and granted him a far greater abundance of willing corpses than he had predicted. Were it not for Nagash's urgent need, the liche would have gladly conquered Bretonnia for himself, but for Arkhan, old loyalties far outweighed personal vanity.



ANARK VON CARSTEIN

Perhaps the most ambitious vampire of Mannfred's get still surviving, Anark was set at Arkhan's side by his father-in-darkness. His chief mission was to ensure that the liche was not destroyed until after Alakanash was recovered. Anark entirely understood Mannfred's wishes. He would safeguard Arkhan during the Bretonnian campaign – beyond that, it would depend very much on whether or not the liche had outlived his usefulness to the von Carsteins.



HEINRICH KEMMLER & KRELL

Kemmler had long been a plague upon Bretonnia, and when he joined forces with Krell he became something altogether more dangerous. At the direction of Arkhan the Black, they aided Mallobaude's failed coup, and then ransacked the lands ravaged by the civil war. Though Kemmler and Krell were notorious in Bretonnia, none can say with any certainty which of the two was the guiding force. Sometimes, as at previous battles for La Maisontaal, it appeared to onlookers that Krell was bound to Kemmler's will. At other times, survivors insisted that the wight was the master and the necromancer his slave.

THE DRAKENHOF TEMPLARS

The original Drakenhof Templars were a genuine knightly order. Founded long before Otto von Drak was usurped by Vlad von Carstein, they had the noble goal of driving the darkness out of Sylvania. Needless to say, they failed, and Konrad von Carstein tore the last grand master apart hundreds of years ago. There were several iterations of the order, for Vlad and his heirs were ever imitators of human tradition. The bodyguard that fought with Arkhan at La Maisontaal was composed entirely of vampires Mannfred did not consider worthy of the von Carstein name.





THE HUNGRY

The anarchy loosed on Bretonnia in past years had proved a feast of plenty for the ghoul-kin, for corpses went unburied more often than not. Villages across southern Bretonnia became cannibalistic haunts, as the hunger-wracked survivors looked to their slain kinsmen for sustenance through a harsh winter and a bloody spring. By the time Arkhan marched north to La Maisontaal, the meadows of Quenelles were alive with ghouls hungry for their next meal, and they followed in his army's wake like a carrion flock.

THE SILENT LEGION

La Maisontaal marked the first appearance of Nagash's morghasts since their creation nearly three thousand years earlier. It is doubtful that any of the Bretonnians realised that only the increasing strength of the winds of magic made such a thing possible, or recognised that they were witnessing the advent of a new and mightier strain of undead being.



THE WIGHTS OF STONEWRATH TARN

Over the course of many thousands of years, Arkhan the Black seeded many desolate and isolated places with unliving servants, so that he might have warriors to call upon in times of need. The Wights of Stonewrath Tarn were but one of these legions, hidden deep to thwart chance discovery, and warded with enchantment to stop another necromancer from squandering them on his own petty goals.





THE ARISEN

The vast majority of Arkhan's army was composed not of his indentured Nehekharan legions, but the graveborn victims of plague and civil war. This was not entirely to the liche's liking, for he felt it sullied the ancient art of war to go into battle with what were essentially the undead equivalents of mercenary hirelings. In the end, Arkhan reconciled himself, partly through the recollection that the Bretonnians were northern savages, and therefore unworthy of honourable battle, but mostly because the dead lay so plentiful throughout Quenelles that it would have been foolish to waste them.

THE BATTLE OF LA MAISONTAAL

It was night as war came again to La Maisontaal.

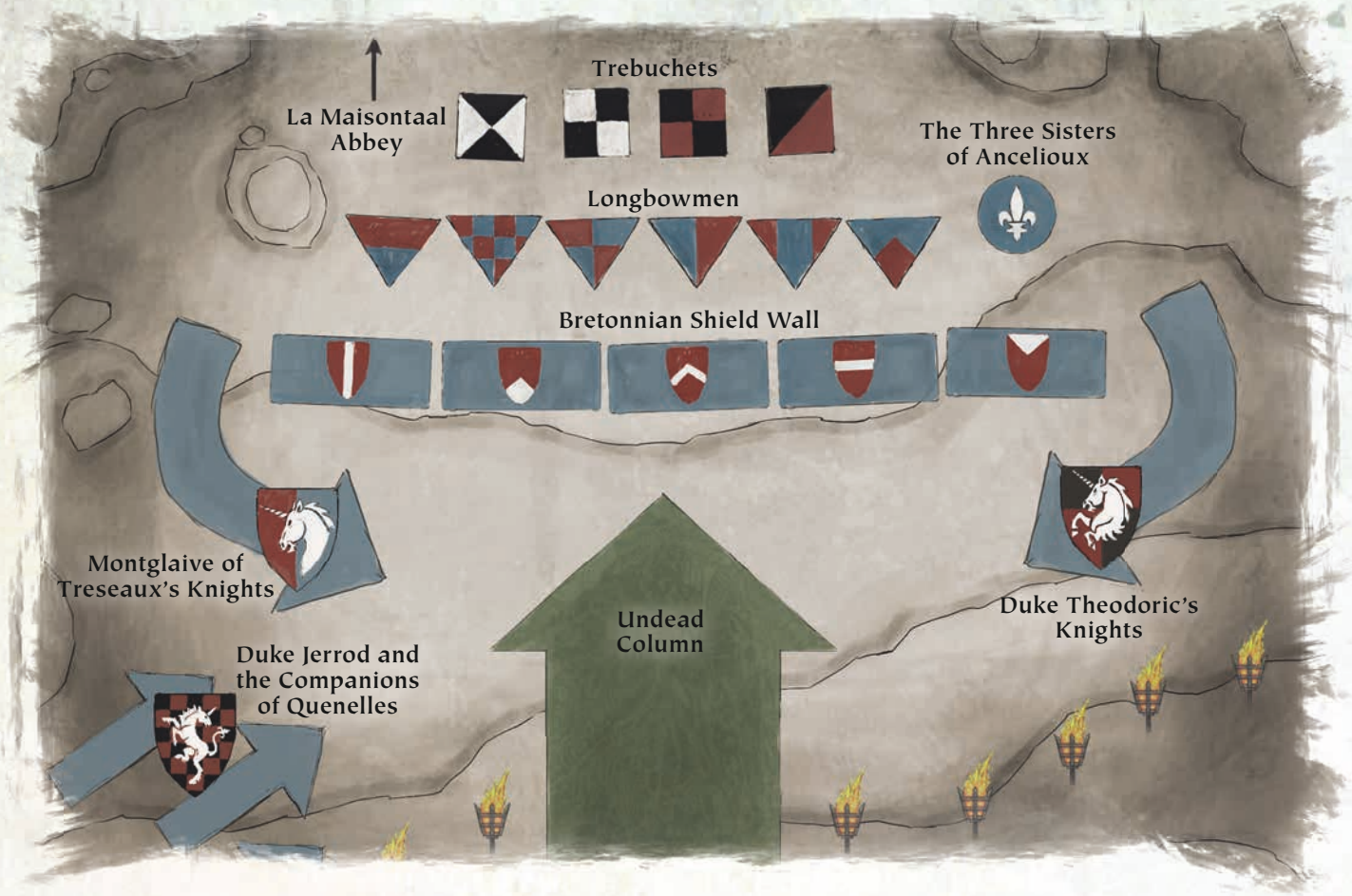
In all the centuries of his long existence, Arkhan the Black had studied the myriad ways of war. He had learned of the art of the refused flank, and of the feinted manoeuvre that drew the enemy headlong into a trap. He had mastered the ideals of the coordinated onslaught, of how bombardment and blade were more effective together than apart. Few such strategies had lingered long. For Arkhan, they had been but techniques to master, stimulating whilst the challenge lasted, but discarded and forgotten soon enough. Time and again, he had returned to the ancient Nehekharan way of war, of unleashing overwhelming force against the enemy's strongest point.

So it was at La Maisontaal. At Arkhan's command, his army formed a giant battering ram of rotting flesh and time-worn bone, aimed at the centre of Theodoric's hastily assembled line. Krell marched at the head of the assault, driven in death, as in life, to seek the glory that only battle could bring. Behind him came the wights and skeletons of the Vaults. Their armour gleamed dully in the light of the beacons and watchfires that warned of their approach, the embers of their near-forgotten battle-lust reawakened by Krell's own desire for slaughter. Behind them marched rotting corpses plundered from every burial pit and graveyard that had lain in the army's path.

Arkhan and Kemmler advanced with this wave. It was their will that drove the mindless thralls onwards, for any semblance of determination had long since fled these rotten hearts. Packs of ghouls had been drawn by the stench of death upon the wind, and they stalked along the army's flanks, anticipating the feast to come.







Theodoric of Brionne was also a creature of tradition, and intended to win victory in the same way as generations of his forebears; the peasantry would hold the line, and the knights would crush the foe in a decisive counter-attack. He knew that such a strategy would prove hard on those called to fight and die in the shield walls, but the peasants were plentiful and, if they did not know their duty, they at least feared the price that accompanied failure. The duke had assembled his army with commendable haste and now, as the undead marched through the line of watchfires, he roused his forces to battle. Many of Theodoric's knights dreaded fighting under darkened skies, but the duke had no such concern. He did not fear the darkness, for was not the Lady with them? Theodoric's only regret was that the gloom would rob his trebuchets and archers of accuracy. Then the duke saw thousands of witchfires glimmering in the night, each pair of pinpricks the eyes of some reanimated horror, and he knew that the fields before him were so choked that it would be an unlucky shot that did not hit. With one last prayer to the Lady, he gave the command to open fire.

Arkhan's host had crossed no more than half the field when the bombardment started. In one moment, the night sky was dark and empty; in the next, it was alive with fire. Volleys of flaming arrows tore into the advancing ranks of skeletons and wights, tearing through the sinews of magic that bound their bones together. Again and again the missiles came, scant seconds between each volley; testament to the long practice of the Bretonnian longbowmen. Arkhan willed his minions to raise their shields high, but so withered were their timbers that many caught light and had to be abandoned before the fires spread to the dry bones and grave-cloth beneath. Larger fireballs fell too as the trebuchets found their range, and the impacts tore great ragged holes in Arkhan's ranks.

Still the undead marched on. Dark magic flowed across the meadow, rousing the fallen dead to fight again. Kemmler and Arkhan knew their unholy work; indeed, there were few in the world who knew it better. At their command, shattered bones danced to unlife and rejoined the assault. As the dark enchantments blossomed, the attrition from Theodoric's bombardment slowed almost to nothing. Krell noticed none of this as the head of the column reached the Bretonnian lines. He saw only a frail barricade of living flesh to be hacked apart and, as the enemy skirmishers flooded back behind their shield walls, he raised his black axe high and unleashed his wights to the slaughter. With a battle cry audible only to wizards and madmen, the long-dead wights of the Vaults came after him, and the killing began.

Scores of men-at-arms died in that first clash of steel, but the Bretonnian line held. Theodoric was not well-loved by the garrison

of La Maisontaal, but the duke's confidence had been plain in the hours before battle, and the memory of it inspired even the meanest peasant to courageous acts. The line of shields buckled, but it did not break. At Theodoric's command, horns sounded in the darkness, and along the flanks, knights thrust back their spurs and joined the battle. The right was commanded by Montglaive of Treseaux, slayer of the wyrm Catharax; the left by Theodoric himself. The duke's charge was first to strike home, and Theodoric the first knight to claim a kill. His axe had been anointed in the holy font of La Maisontaal on the battle's eve, and its blade shone with blessed light as the duke hacked left and right.

Heinrich Kemmler acknowledged the knightly counter-attack, but paid it little heed, for his attention was needed elsewhere. Little by little, he had become aware that his magics of reanimation were growing less and less effective. As the Lichemaster searched for the cause of the waning, the skull atop his staff cackled a warning. A trio of damsels, safely distant behind the embattled shield wall, were marshalling the magics of life to counter his sorceries of death. Now he knew what he was looking for, Kemmler saw his challengers plainly, or rather his witch-sight pierced through the mundane and perceived the pale swirl of their rising magics. The Lichemaster was outraged that a coven of witches would have the temerity to challenge him, and at once began weaving a new spell to rid him of their meddling. He snorted with satisfaction as the pattern of the damsels' magics shifted into a doomed counterspell. A heartbeat later, a bolt of black lightning leapt from the clear sky, reducing the damsels, and their knightly escort, to charred bones.

Deep in the undead ranks, Theodoric didn't see the damsels perish, but he did mark the renewed vigour of his foes. Half the knights who had followed him into battle now lay slain upon the field, or worse, had risen to fight at the attackers' side. The duke's armour was battered, but his axe still glowed with the Lady's blessing, and his desire for victory remained undimmed. Dawn was rising, and in its wan light he saw a robed figure atop an unholy bone-construct, his withered arms outstretched to the brightening skies. At once Theodoric knew that this liche was his chief foe. This realisation gave the duke new strength, and he struck every blow with the sole intention of carrying him onward to the foe. Skeletons moved to bar his path, but these Theodoric battered aside with the armoured bulk of his purebred steed, or smashed down with the gleaming axe-blade. The duke was but a handful of paces distant now, but still the liche paid him no heed. Theodoric cared not; there would be no honourable challenge, not against a foe like this. He spurred his horse to one last effort, and brought his axe about.

Arkhan never even saw the blow coming, for his mind was everywhere upon the battlefield. In the north, it drove Krell's wights to fresh efforts; in the south it goaded the shuffling hordes of zombies to keep pace with the rest of the column. What remained of the liche's attention was fixed on Kemmler, alert for any sign of betrayal. All of this ended when Theodoric's blessed axe crunched through Arkhan's breastplate, smashing his ancient bones to splinters and throwing the liche to the ground. Had Arkhan any longer possessed a heart, it would have been split asunder. As it was, the black magic flowing through his ancient body immediately began to mend the damage. It would be too late; Theodoric's axe was already descending for a second time. Then, with a blur of blood-red steel, Anark von Carstein, Kastellan of the Drakenhof Templars, was at the liche's side. Moving with supernatural speed, he parried the duke's deathblow and unleashed a ferocious strike of his own to sweep Theodoric from his saddle. As Arkhan rose to his feet once more, he saw Anark hack the duke's head from his shoulders, and realised with distaste that he now owed a debt to the von Carsteins. Unnoticed by all, Theodoric's axe fell to the ground; with his death the enchantment had fled, leaving it as mere metal.

Victory had lain within Theodoric's grasp but, with his death, the tide swiftly turned. Alas for the sons of Bretonnia, the men-at-arms had fought bravely, but now their courage deserted them. Like a levee bursting under rising floodwaters, the shield wall tore apart. Here and there, regiments kept their order, islands of desperate pride in an unholy sea, but most gave in to their terror and fled for a nonexistent refuge. Krell's wights stormed mercilessly through the breach. Soon the lines of archers and trebuchets were overrun by slavering ghouls, the embattled knights surrounded. Desperate peasants sought safety in the abbey's grounds, but there was to be no shelter there. As Krell advanced, long-dead saints and nobles stirred to ghastly life and prowled through the tombs, throttling all they encountered.

Now fully recovered from Theodoric's strike, Arkhan was pleased. The greater part of the Bretonnian army was dead or fleeing, and those who fought on were surrounded, and would soon be overcome. But then the liche marked Kemmler's sudden absence, and his mood darkened. In that moment, Arkhan knew he had been betrayed, and made all haste into the bowels of the abbey. Kemmler's path was not hard to follow, for he had left a trail of smouldering corpses in his wake, and Arkhan soon came to a great stone vault deep beneath the surface. The chamber's sigils of warding had been seared away by sorcery, the golden fonts spilled across the floor, their holy waters mingling with the blood of the knights who had stood guard.

Kemmler turned as Arkhan entered the chamber. The Lichemaster's claw-like hands gripped Alakanash, the Great Staff of Nagash, and his face held only gloating triumph. For decades, Kemmler said, he had trodden where Nagash had wished him to, his steps guided by whispers from far beyond death's veil. But when he struck a pact with the Chaos Gods, they had not only restored the necromancer to the glory he had known centuries before, they also revealed to him the manner in which he had been used. He laboured for the glory of Chaos now, Kemmler crowed, not the withered legend of the Great Necromancer. Nagash had promised power, but the Chaos Gods were power itself, and they shared it freely with those who served them. Heinrich Kemmler raised Alakanash high, and gave utterance in a forbidden tongue. Dark fire rippled along the gnarled length of the staff as the Lichemaster called the winds of magic to his bidding. Arkhan gripped his own staff tightly, and willed life into the corpses strewn throughout the vault. It was time to discover if the Lichemaster truly lived up to his name.

Outside, the battle raged still. Theodoric had been slain, hacked down by Anark von Carstein, but at last Duke Jerrod and his knights had arrived. They had ridden hard under mournful skies and, seeing their countrymen sorely beset, roused to one last effort. Along the south road they came, retracing the same route Arkhan's host had trodden just hours earlier. Ghouls scattered at the onset, zombies were trampled beneath iron-shod hooves, and Jerrod plunged deep into the heart of Krell's skeletal legion. At his back came the Companions of Quenelles, knights who had shared his every battle since that black day when Mallobaude had cut down their king. They saw not the vast and outnumbering horde before them, only a series of abhorrent foes to be overcome by valour and skill at arms. They struck the wights of Stonewrath Tarn like a battering ram. Lances thrust forward, swords hacked down and ancient bones were trampled beneath iron-shod hooves. The banner of Stonewrath fell into the

'Kemmler!'

The aged necromancer turned as Arkhan's challenge echoed through the darkened vault. Kemmler had abandoned his Skull Staff, the liche saw, and his withered hands were now grasped tight around Alakanash. Kemmler's betrayal had always been a possibility, Arkhan allowed, though he would never have believed the necromancer to have the courage to act so openly.

'You and your masters are desiccated relics of a dead age,' Kemmler sneered. 'A new dawn beckons, one that belongs to the Chaos Gods, and to their loyal servants.'

'You forsake Nagash's patronage for that of fluxsome deities?' Arkhan asked drily. 'No lasting power flows from their thrones. The gods will use you, as they have used all others. When your antics bore them, they will destroy you.'

Kemmler gave a shrill laugh. 'And what greater prospect do I have in Nagash's service, a future of mindless servitude in an unchanging world?' Kemmler demanded angrily. 'The "Great Necromancer" is a selfish child. Though assured of his power, he remains forever terrified that another will take it from him. He will not be satisfied until his is the only will in existence, for only then can he be safe.'

Arkhan took a step forward, the sound of the footfall echoing through the vault. Kemmler marked the advance, but made no move to challenge it. Arkhan took another step, and the necromancer's angry expression grew sly.

'Perhaps you should join me,' Kemmler suggested. 'The power of Chaos is rising, and surely even you tire of millennia of thankless servitude.'

'Thank you, but no,' Arkhan stated. 'This *desiccated relic* chose his allegiance long ago, and will not renege now. In any event,' the liche went on, his flat tones becoming grating, 'do you truly believe that I would abandon my master to serve alongside the likes of you?'

Kemmler's eyes flashed. 'It might suit you to be an extension of Nagash's will, but some of us yearn for more. Not that I would expect better from an empty husk such as yourself.'

Arkhan took another step forward. 'How many battles have you lost in your unremarkable existence?' the liche challenged. 'How many defeats have you known at La Maisontaal alone? You have always been a pawn, Kemmler. It matters not the side upon which you fight.'

Kemmler let out a screech of rage, and purple flame burst forth from his outstretched hand. The fires swept across the floor towards Arkhan, but the liche had expected such an attack from the moment he had entered the vault. Arkhan brought the heel of his staff down hard on the tiles, and the flames flickered and died.

Taking another step forward, Arkhan began a silent incantation of his own. In the corner of the vault, discarded when Kemmler had taken up Alakanash, the Skull Staff detected the build up of magic and chattered nonsensically to itself, the gibberish growing louder with every syllable.

Kemmler intoned the words of an ancient curse, but the liche swept the clumsy strands aside before they could fully form. Inconvenient as the necromancer's betrayal was, there was some satisfaction to the moment, Arkhan decided, as the final element of his incantation slid into place.

'You call yourself the Lichemaster, do you not?' Arkhan asked. 'To leave this chamber, you must prove that hollow boast.'

mud as the wight bearing it was torn from its feet by Leon of Toular's lance, and the Companions of Quenelles spurred deeper into the mass of unliving bodies.

Up and down the battlefield, those Bretonnians still fighting on saw the Companions' banner pierce the enemy ranks and felt hope rekindle. Someone began to cheer, the sound weak and thready at first, but other voices soon took up the call and the volume quickly grew. Men-at-arms, who only moments before had been on the brink of flight, bellowed defiance and found fresh confidence in the sound. Shields rammed forward into the masses of graveborn flesh, and the Bretonnian line began to reform.

Krell saw the urge to fight return to his beaten foes, and sought to banish them once and for all. Again and again, the Black Axe rose and fell, each blow followed by a spray of blood as the cursed blade hacked through shield, helm and flesh. Every stride brought Krell closer to Duke Jerrod, but now the press of bodies conspired to keep them apart. Roaring with frustration, the wight laid about himself without discrimination, hacking down living and dead alike if they stood between him and his chosen foe.

Then, with a deafening crack, La Maisontaal Abbey exploded.

As battle had raged without, a contest of sorcery had been fought within. Heinrich Kemmler and Arkhan the Black were well matched in both power and knowledge, and their efforts had grown ever more desperate as they sought to break their foe's defences. At last, the magic had spiralled out of control, feeding on itself and its surroundings like a thing alive.

The windows went first. Great expanses of stained glass, many of them dating back to the days of King Guillaume, fragmented under irresistible pressure from within. Razor-sharp shards scythed across the fields, shredding living and unliving warriors alike. Green fire came soon after, gouting through the gaps in the stonework, incinerating those who survived the storm of shards. An eyeblink later, the walls shattered and burst outward. Long had those stones stood. They did not yield easily, but yield they did. A tornado of wild magic whipped about the ruins, scooping up the shattered walls and flinging them across the battlefield. Stone slabs the size of lesser buildings ploughed through columns of knights, broken statues plunged from the skies like meteors and rubble fell like rain.



The Lady was with Duke Jerrod that day. His horse had been slain, but though the Duke of Quenelles was caked with ash and blood, he would live to fight for Bretonnia again. The same could not be said for those who had followed him into battle. Almost all of the Companions had perished, and most of those that survived now staggered unhorsed and aimless through the charnel fields, their wits broken by the concussive blast. That the undead had fared worse was of little consolation to the Duke of Quenelles – he saw only one of Bretonnia's holiest sights in ruins, and too many brave sons of the realm dead upon the field. As Jerrod hoisted himself up into the saddle of a masterless horse, he saw broken bodies lurch and heave. The explosion had buried Krell in a grave of dead flesh, but the wight clawed his way to the surface and advanced once more.

One of the unhorsed Companions, Gioffre of Anglaron, had regained his senses now, and giving voice to a challenge on his lips, hurled himself into Krell's path. The wight did not so much as check his pace. The Black Axe whirled once about Krell's head, then split Gioffre from gullet to groin with a single mighty blow. Without so much as a glance at the fallen knight, Krell checked his axe's swing and strode on through the bloodied dead. For a moment perhaps, Jerrod considered spurring forward to face the grinning monster of bone and iron himself; to avenge Gioffre and those others who had been slain that day. But only for a moment. Wild magic still howled across the battlefield, and its caress brought renewed vigour to Arkhan's army. Skeletons staggered to their feet as shattered bones reknitted, and fresh horror visited itself on the surviving Bretonnians as the recently-slain rose with glassy eyes to hack and tear at their former comrades. Jerrod watched the enemy ranks reform with a pain that had nothing at all to do with his many wounds. The battle was lost; La Maisontaal was lost. So much was certain: no good could come of fighting on. Raising a voice choked by dust and shame, Jerrod, Duke of Quenelles, ordered the retreat.

In the depths of what remained of La Maisontaal's ravaged vaults, a fire-blackened figure heard the thunder of voices and the blare of horns as the Bretonnians retreated. With a grim chuckle, Arkhan drew himself up to his full height and swept thick ash from his robes. It had been close-run, but his opponent had overreached himself at the last moment. The traitorous Kemmler had been disposed of, Bretonnia had been humbled and, most importantly of all, Alakanash was now his.

Nagash would rise.







Upon leaving Sylvania, Mannfred von Carstein's course diverged from Arkhan the Black's almost immediately. With him, he carried the Claw of Nagash. Long ago, the Fellblade had severed this withered hand from its master. Magics still tethered the two relics together, and it was this bond that guided Mannfred's steps.

The vampire's course lay across the southern states of the Empire, and through fractured provinces of the Border Princes. The Lord of Sylvania did not travel alone, but marched at the head of a column of knights. It might have suited the liche to scrabble his way across the living lands like a beggar, but Mannfred was determined to travel as befitted his station; appearances would be maintained. Most of those who rode with Mannfred were wights, roused from their sepulchres to accompany their lord in distant lands, but the riders who clustered closest beneath the Drakenhof banner were the templars of Mannfred's personal guard. Each had been raised to darkness by Mannfred himself, and was as loyal to his master as it was possible for a vampire to be.

Yet for all his arrogance, Mannfred was no fool. It suited his vanity to play the indomitable liege, but he was wary of the Imperial chattel still – their tenacity had surprised him too many times for it to be otherwise. The Lord of Sylvania knew that no other could defend his land so well as he, and determined that no one in the Empire – not even the dullest peasant – would mark his departure in case it could be exploited. He used magic to shroud his army's passage where he could; if battle was necessary he struck hard and fast, using every merciless artifice learned in a lifetime of war. Normally, Mannfred strove to leave survivors in the aftermath of his attacks; heralds to his dread majesty, whose tales of terror would weaken the resolve of all who heard them.

Not this time. This time patrols went missing and entire villages vanished overnight, with nary a witness as to what had occurred.

The counts and dukes of the southern states reacted to these disappearances slowly. This was not out of any laxness on their part, but a lack of resource. The portents of doom Mannfred had espied from Castle Sternieste had not gone unmarked by the citizens of the Empire, and many regions now teetered on the brink of riot. Between containing the panic of their own people and curtailing the increasingly bold raids of the beastmen, the rulers of Wissenland and Averland had few troops to spare to investigate isolated incidents far from their capitals and trade routes. Thus did Mannfred's army cross into the Border Princes unmarked by all save the dead he left in his wake.

Mannfred had worried little about crossing the Border Princes. He had travelled widely through its provinces some years before, and had found the so-called 'realm' to be little more than a collection of fractious and inbred nobles ever at war with one another. Allegiances and loyalty were famously for sale here, and gold won more battles than steel ever had. There were few standing armies in the Border Princes. Instead, most of the dukes employed mercenary bands, who sold their services to the highest bidder. Not all such sellswords were entirely human. Mannfred knew of at least two mercenary armies whose ranks contained naught but the walking dead, and he thus doubted that his own forces would provoke the same martial response they would have within the bounds of the Empire. The very worst that could happen was that he would have to masquerade as a sellsword captain himself. It would be an inglorious and chafing deception, but the Lord of Sylvania had little desire to fight his way through the Border Princes in order to see his mission done.

However, as Mannfred descended through Hvargir Forest he realised that his plans would have to be revised. The plains and fenland before him should have been dotted with proud cities and fortified outposts, the gaudy devices of nobles and captains fluttering upon the pennants. What the vampire beheld instead was a land in utter ruin. Castles were scorched piles of toppled stone, towns were smouldering embers choked with unburied corpses, and everywhere the signs of plague lay heavy on the land.

The architects of this destruction revealed themselves before dusk on that day. A warband of skaven, fresh from plundering the lands further west and invigorated by their accomplishments, scurried eastward across the blighted plains. The skaven warlord had met with much success in recent days, and his swarm now travelled back to their burrows with the spoils of victory – trinkets and gewgaws of all kinds, as well as the hundreds of filthy humans he had taken as slaves. Buoyed to false confidence, the warlord mistook Mannfred's banner for that of another Border Princeling, and drove his verminous kin to the attack. It soon proved to be a calamitous mistake.

Once the slaughter was done, Mannfred walked amongst the dead, raising their blighted spirits long enough to question them. He found it a most trying exercise. This was not because the act of necromancy itself was draining – on the contrary, it was amongst the most basic of conjurings in the vampire's repertoire. Rather, it was because the souls of the skaven remained as deceitful in death as they had been in life. Only by framing questions precisely could Mannfred extract the information he sought. The process of doing so quickly sapped the vampire's never-abundant patience, and he tore more skaven spirits to ghostly shreds in the battle's aftermath than he had slain living ratmen at its height. Fortunately, there was no shortage of dead skaven

to interrogate, and Mannfred at last gleaned enough information to understand what had befallen the Border Princes. The skaven were rising; Tilea had already fallen, and both Estalia and the Border Princes were now assailed. Mannfred found this news troubling, for he had never known the ratmen to possess singular purpose enough to bring low an entire realm, let alone two or three. Arkhan the Black had been correct; dire times were afoot.

Resolving to tarry no longer, Mannfred rode with all possible haste. His last action before doing so was to set loose the terrified slaves. He did this not out of compassion – no trace of any such emotion lurked in the vampire's black heart – but because they would doubtless prove a valuable distraction for the skaven. If the ratmen were unified and in de facto control of the Border Princes, such distractions would be worth a great deal indeed.

For days, Mannfred headed further south and east, drawn onward by the call of the claw. The vampire could feel the strength of the bond growing with every step, but still the prize lay out of reach. Scarcely a league passed beneath the hooves of Mannfred's steed without another contest with the skaven. Most were mere raiding parties, quickly broken beneath the lances of the Sylvanian knights, but as he crossed Skull River, Mannfred found himself drawn into battle with a swarm so great that its squealing bodies and ramshackle war engines spanned the horizon. What followed was the closest battle of Mannfred's march so far, and prevailed only by raising the dead of three ravaged fortress-towns to bolster his ranks. As the waters of the river washed away the skaven dead, the Lord of Sylvania realised that speed alone could no longer serve.

By the time Mannfred reached the entrance to Mad Dog Pass, thousands of rotting corpses and tormented spirits followed in his wake. The Ironclaw orcs tried to bar the vampire's entry to the pass, but they fared no better than had the skaven. The call of the claw was stronger than ever now, the Fellblade so close that the Lord of Sylvania could sense the dark magics of its creation. On it led him, luring him into the ancient tunnels buried deep beneath Mad Dog Pass.



THE ARMY OF STERNIESTE

When he had set out from Castle Sternieste, Mannfred had intended only to use the finest troops at his command. However, the nearer he drew to his prize – and the more obvious the growing numbers of skaven – the more readily Mannfred drafted war-slain dead into his ranks.



MANNFRED VON CARSTEIN

Mannfred elected not to share command of his expedition with any of his minions. He knew he could afford no failures, and deemed that the chance of such inadequacies would only increase if he trusted others with even a part of the task.



THE DRAKENHOF TEMPLARS

Only one brotherhood of templars had accompanied Arkhan the Black. The rest of the vampire knights – four brotherhoods in all – followed Mannfred south beneath the Drakenhof banner. Though Mannfred would never have admitted it, he was greatly reliant on the Drakenhof Templars in the battle beneath Mad Dog Pass, as they were the only troops he could rely on to act autonomously – all others were slaved to his will.



THE DOOM RIDERS

The Doom Riders were legendary even before the rise of the vampire counts. Legend tells that they were part of Nagash's army during his final cataclysmic battle with Sigmar, and that after the Great Necromancer's defeat, they rode into the shadows of the Drakwald and haunted the surrounding lands for centuries thereafter. Nearly two thousand years later, Vlad von Carstein sought out the Doom Riders and bent them to his will. They performed as fearsome heavy cavalry within the army of Sylvania.

THE GRAVEBORN

One tendency all von Carsteins had shared since the days of Vlad was to ape the human society they claim to despise. Mannfred was no less prone to this behaviour than were his predecessors, to the extent that he habitually ordered his newly risen dead into separate fighting regiments. This was as true of his march to Mad Dog Pass as previous campaigns. It can certainly be argued that such distinctions mattered little in the cramped confines of the skaven lair, but it pleased Mannfred to preserve some standards of civilised behaviour in that squalid nest.

The zombies that broached Clan Mordkin's tunnels fought not as a faceless mass of undead, as was the case for those who toiled for Arkhan far to the northwest, but under the banners and colours they had borne in life. That said, Mannfred often changed the regimental name to something more to his liking. Thus did the Varenka Sharpeyes become the Deadeyes, the Tolsburg Hawks become the Dreadwings, and Baron Richter's Sellswords become the Blood Pack. Mannfred raised Baron Richter himself as a wight, and placed him at the forefront of the first wave, for no better reason than the man reminded him of a Stirlander he had once known and hated. Only the notorious mercenary band known as the Death's Heads were permitted to keep their own name, not that it would have been much consolation.





THE SPECTRES OF CORPSE WOOD

Corpse Wood has a great many legends attached to it, and one of the more famous concerned the spectral horsemen who rode through its sombre glades. Otto von Drak, angered by the vast numbers of profligate halflings plundering his southern border, instigated a series of mounted border patrols to catch the thieves in the act. When the halflings proved too canny for his enforcers, the Count of Sylvania had an entire company of the riders buried alive in Corpse Wood. The next Hexensnacht, these wronged souls returned to the mortal world as hexwraiths, aiming to claim Otto's soul. Unfortunately, that prize had already been taken by the same vampire who had stolen both the count's title and his daughter.

CLAN MORDKIN

Clan Mordkin's fluctuating fortunes had done little to impact their means of making war. There were always mercenaries in the Under-Empire desperate enough to take even Feskit's paltry payments. Thus was the swarm that faced Mannfred von Carstein vast of number, if not necessarily possessed of great skill or valour.



WARLORD FESKIT

Under Feskit's leadership, Clan Mordkin recovered much of the wealth and influence it had lost in the preceding centuries. Unfortunately, nothing lasts forever and, at the time of Mannfred's attack, Feskit was growing old. Potential successors were circling, smelling opportunity and waiting for Feskit's one crucial mistake that would allow a challenge. Though the warlord was no longer as physically impressive as once he had been, his mind was still sharp, and what he could not protect with strength, he defended with cunning, keeping the chieftains of his clan locked in a permanent battle for survival with one another, so that they had no time for plotting against their ailing leader.

CHIEFTAIN SNIKRAT

The most openly ambitious and cunning of Feskit's chieftains, Snikrat would have torn Feskit's throat out long ago, had his arrogance not gotten the better of him. He had launched his challenge too soon – that is to say, before Feskit's supporters had been properly disposed of. Snikrat had barely survived Feskit's wrath on that occasion, and had sworn to be more careful in his next attempt. Unfortunately for Snikrat, Feskit's eye was ever afterwards fixed on the chieftain, the warlord waiting for an opportunity for him to meet with an 'accident'.





THE BONEHIDES

The Bonehide clawband came to prominence during the skaven war with Nagash. Though the original Bonehides are long since dead, the name and the tradition were passed down (and often purchased) through the centuries. Indeed, at one point in the early 2300s, there were no fewer than three separate clawbands of stormvermin claiming to be the true successors of the original Bonehides. The matter was eventually settled, as is the skaven way, by a mixture of assassination and outright bloodshed. Once again, there was only one clawband of Bonehides in Clan Mordkin, though whether those skaven were the rightful inheritors, who can say?

THE MORDRAT GUARD

Feskit's personal clawband, the Mordrat Guard displayed a most un-skaven loyalty to their leader. This is chiefly because Feskit's patronage ensured that they seldom saw battle – after all, the warlord scarcely desired to risk his most reliable warriors and thus leave himself vulnerable to a rival. Unfortunately for Feskit, this moebius-like arrangement soon rendered the Mordrat Guard indolent and their battle-skills rusty.





THE LURKERS

No one knows from which clan the Lurkers originally hailed, only that they came to Mordkin Lair in the dead of night, gifting Feskit many warptokens and pledging service in exchange for protection. Not wanting to provoke the wrath of another clan, Feskit quite sensibly decided to have the Lurkers eliminated after he extorted what he could from them. However, the warlord stayed his hand after they not only proved instrumental in putting Snikrat in his place, but also showed themselves to be ferocious and bold fighters (by skaven standards at least).

BONEFODDER

The Bonefodder were composed almost entirely of slaves captured during Clan Mordkin's struggles for supremacy in the Under-Empire. They lived in the foulest and most polluted reaches of the fortress-lair, and were so desperate to escape those confines that they would gladly enter even the most hopeless battle if it offered them a chance to escape their bondage. Naturally, the Bonefodder's false valour would evaporate almost as soon as the fight turned against them, but by that point it was invariably too late for them to do anything but fight and die.





THE SKULLSPLINTERS

The Skullsplinters were sharpshooters, and thus commanded a high price of warptokens, slaves and breeding rights for their service. An outsider would never guess this value from the state of their weapons, however, which were a form of jezzail branded as obsolete by Clan Skryre; they were possibly the most corroded and ill-maintained guns in the whole of the Under-Empire.

THE WARP RUNNERS

The recent influx of wealth from the plundered Border Princes tempted Feskit to contract with Clan Moulder for several fangpacks of their finest creations, after he saw a particularly fine two-headed specimen best a giant. What Feskit didn't know was that the giant had been drugged, and the rat ogre pumped full of skavenbrew, but Clan Moulder had always maintained a strict 'no returns' policy, as well as a complete lack of trader's integrity.



THE BATTLE OF MORDKIN LAIR

Mannfred von Carstein would never remember the slaughter beneath Mad Dog Pass as one of his finest battles. Indeed, once the matter was ended, he didn't even consider it a battle at all. The Lord of Sylvania was a proud creature, and ordinarily his every act was a continuance of some greater plan. However there was room for neither subtlety nor cleverness waiting for him beneath Mad Dog Pass, just a press of bodies and a savage battle of attrition.

Still, Mannfred had done what he could to ensure some semblance of control. He had known that the skaven tunnels would be deep and labyrinthine, and he determined not to commit his best troops until he had a more complete knowledge of what awaited him. Instead, he willed wave upon wave of zombies into the dank and filthy reaches. His main goal was to use the eyes of his puppets in place of his own, to map out a path his Drakenhof Templars could follow through the festering pit. If the zombies thinned the swarms of ratmen in the process, then so much the better.

The deeper Mannfred's army descended, the grander the scale of the tunnels grew. This was a place unnamed by the realms of the sunlit world, gnawed long ago from the roots of the mountains by the ratmen of Clan Mordkin. Unspeakable poisons dripped from filth-encrusted stalactites, and the rough walls were marked by untold generations of crude scrawl or hidden beneath ramshackle structures of warped wood and tarnished brass.

Skaven resistance to the encroaching undead was sporadic at first. The upper tunnels were home only to chieftains so far out of favour with Warlord Feskit that they had been forced to nest on the periphery of Clan Mordkin's territory. Such ratmen had little to gain by risking their own lives on Feskit's behalf. Most drove their paw-warriors from the invaders' path, craftily preserving their strength, and hoping that unfolding events would weaken Feskit sufficiently that a challenge could be made. In others, ambition burned so brightly that they sought confrontation directly, to recoup their lost status by proving their value to the lair. Whatever their motivations, few of these chieftains realised the scope of the invasion. Most blundered headlong into tunnels already thick with mindless dead. Soon the upper tunnels were cacophonous with the desperate squealing of skaven with nowhere to run.

In the deepest part of the burrow, nestled against the back corner of a great vaulted cavern, stood Clan Mordkin's fortress-lair. It was a ramshackle and mismatched thing, built from materials scavenged and stolen from many lands. Its towers, though canted over at worrying angles, reached almost to the stalactite encrusted ceiling, and its wall bristled with all manner of warp-fired weaponry. Deep within the fortress-lair, Lord Feskit heard death-shrieks echo down from the tunnels above, and knew his realm was beset. He did not despair then, nor when the first trickle of survivors began spreading tales of vampires stalking through the darkness. True, the upper tunnels were almost certainly lost, but he still had many thousands of teeming clanrats to unleash. Raising himself from his battered seat of power – actually a dwarfen throne plundered from the hold of Karak Kan – Feskit began issuing imperious orders to his slaves. Some he sent to fetch his armour and weapons from his scavenge pile, others he sent as messengers to his (mostly) loyal chieftains, calling them to battle with promises of preferment and plunder. The warlord did not know what had brought Mannfred into his domain, nor did he particularly care. His thoughts lay only on the opportunity for profit – a vampire's ashes would fetch a high price on the undermarket, and he intended to claim that wealth for his own.

As the undead forced their way deeper, Clan Mordkin made their first concerted counter-attack. A discordant clamour of bells echoed through the caverns, and the bone gates of the fortress-lair swung open. The gates themselves were a trophy of one of Clan Mordkin's greatest successes, the slaughter of Ithragar the Firewyrm. Snared by shock nets, poisoned, chained and dragged beneath the surface, the dragon had been kept stupefied for weeks; many litters had grown strong on its flesh before the mighty beast's life had finally given out. As the immense ribcage split apart, hordes of clanrats and stormvermin issued out of the fortress-lair and into the tunnels. This attack was not led by Feskit, who saw no reason to risk himself so early in what promised to be a long and dangerous battle, but by Snikrat, a chieftain of middling rank. Snikrat had his own designs upon Feskit's throne, but thought the warlord ignorant of his ambitions. Accordingly, he misconstrued the undertaking as an opportunity for his own advancement, when in fact it was actually Feskit seeking to rid himself of a challenger.

As Snikrat's swarms advanced to meet the oncoming tide of dead, Clan Mordkin's lower tunnels became the feed lines and waste pipes of a gigantic and soulless machine, whose only function was to grind flesh and bone into lifeless spoil. In places, this was the literal truth. Cogs, corroded pistons and acid-pitted flywheels projected into the passageways and caverns at all angles. These skaven-made mechanisms were of vast scale and always in motion, their

incredible mass driven by convulsing warp-reactors deep within the lair. Surrounded as they were by this press of machinery, it was often impossible for the combatants to form lines greater than five or six abreast and, even then, a single misstep could see a warrior whisked into some clanking mechanism and pulverised. Yet the living and the undead had their parts to play as well. Their weapons were the blades of the machine, their blood and ichor the oil that lubricated its workings.

The zombies, driven onward by Mannfred von Carstein's implacable will, marched blindly onto the spears and swords levelled against them, their rotten fingers reaching for skaven throats and eyes even as their bodies were sliced apart. The skaven were scarcely less determined. Fighting as small groups on territory not their own, they are cowardly and opportunistic fighters, but when a clan is forced to defend its lair, the ratmen fight like the cornered beasts they are. So it was now. The skaven hacked at the zombies with halberd and spear, and when the fighting was too close for blade-work, or when the weapons were plucked from their grasp, they tore at the enemy with claws and chisel teeth. Rats surged out of the depths, and swarmed over the undead in a maddened frenzy, burrowing deep into decaying torsos and devouring them from inside out. Yet no matter how desperately they strove, no skaven could match a vampire-thralled minion for sheer, uncaring relentlessness. Little by little, the ratmen were driven back.

Snikrat now ordered warpfire throwers forward. At his shrieked command, the Skryre-forged weapons belched green flame into the tunnels. The fire raged indiscriminately, incinerating clanrats and zombies alike. Rats flooded out of the passageways, squealing madly as they sought to escape the flames. Still the undead came on, striding remorselessly through passages and



chambers strewn with flame-twisted dead. Some were still ablaze as they advanced, their flesh crackling and popping as the warpfire tore through them. Again Snikrat ordered the fires unleashed, and again the green flames whooshed through the tunnels, but still the undead came on, blazing like torches. Snikrat realised that the tunnels were lost, and fled deeper into the lair. He gave no order to retreat, but clanrats flooded after him nonetheless. The ratmen could smell defeat upon the air, and tore at one another as they fled, abandoning the weak and the slow to the merciless dead. As the skaven retreated, timber props, weakened by the gushing warpfire, gave way. Many tunnels collapsed entirely, sealing the living and the dead together in rocky tombs.

The fighting now drew nigh to the last defence – a bottomless chasm that split the outer tunnels from the great cavern that was the heart of Clan Mordkin's lair. This chasm was spanned by a long and winding bridge of sorts, a broad and uneven roadway of planks, spars, tar-clogged ropes and other detritus. It was not a structure of which any dwarf or human would have approved – or even have trusted to bear their weight – for it was entirely too rickety, but it served the skaven well enough. There was no other way to cross the chasm, not for a league in any direction, for Clan Mordkin had long ago undermined all other routes, the better to prevent infiltration or attack by rival clans.

As Snikrat fled across the bridge, he ordered its ramshackle timbers set alight. The flames took reluctantly at first, for the wood was thick with slime and refuse, but the searing warpfire would not be denied. Soon the entire span was blaze. As the vanguard of Mannfred's shambling horde reached the centre of the bridge, the tortured structure groaned, shifted and then, with a grace utterly alien in that squalid and dismal place, toppled lazily into the chasm.

Safe on the lair-ward edge, Snikrat cackled as more zombies emerged from the tunnels, and were pushed into the chasm by the mindless ranks that came after. His strategy had worked perfectly, or at least that's what he'd tell Warlord Feskit. The intruders were now stymied by the chasm, and the skaven could bombard them at their leisure. Snikrat ordered the warplock weapon teams along the ledge to open fire, and then strutted away to inform Feskit of his 'success'.

The severing of the bridge was at last reason enough for Mannfred to involve himself personally in the battle. By no means had all of the tunnels collapsed during the fighting, and the Lord of Sylvania and his knights now rode down through the widest of those that remained. By the time he reached the chasm, a small army of clanrat weaponeers had assembled on the far ledge. The air was full of the stench of crude Skaven black powder, and resounded to the whine and crash of warpstone bullets hammering across the divide. The zombies made no attempt to avoid the fire, because Mannfred had not willed them to do so, and a great heap of shattered bodies had built up on the edge of the abyss.

Ordering his templars to remain in the comparative safety of the tunnel, Mannfred dismounted and



strode to the edge of the precipice, seemingly careless of his danger. On catching sight of the vampire, many of the skaven weaponeers brought their weapons to bear on him. Most fired too hastily, and shots wasted their fury on stone, or on the flesh of zombies. However, one jezzail gunner's aim was true, and with a sharp crack sent a chunk of warpstone spinning towards Mannfred's skull. Without even appearing to take notice of the attack, the vampire twisted gracefully to one side, and the bullet hammered past him.

Mannfred stood motionless, ignoring the missiles whistling around him, his whole concentration bent on drawing the magic from the rocks of the cavern, and from the shards of expended warpstone. Nothing happened at first, but then the corpses that lay thick about his feet began to move. As one, the bullet-riddled and fire-blackened dead hauled themselves upright, and walked to the edge of the chasm. Some were struck by shots from the far side and collapsed, but still they crawled on. As the first zombies reached the brink, Mannfred gave a sharp twist of his hand. The wave of undead shuddered as their bones twisted into jagged and unnatural shapes, reforming into jagged spears that burst free of the ruined flesh and anchored deep into the bedrock. The next zombies approached the edge, and there was a wet tearing sound as these too sloughed off their flesh. This wave did not latch onto the ledge as their predecessors had, but crawled over and anchored onto those who had come before. More and more zombies staggered through the hail of bullets and, moment by moment, the bridge of bloody bone grew.

The weapon teams on the far side of the chasm were not fools. Their rate of fire quickened as the ghastly bridge took shape. Not one could bring a shot to bear on Mannfred, and any holes they battered in the bridge were quickly filled by the zombies that came after. Still they struggled on, loading and firing for all they were worth, pistols and jezzails and ratling guns hammering shot after shot across the gap. In their haste, some grew careless and booming coughs rang out across the chasm as weapons started to misfire, often crippling or killing the wielder alongside. Others began to take a pace backward after every shot, shrinking steadily away from the approaching doom. They would have done better to flee outright. As the final jagged bones dug into the rock on the skaven side, Mannfred swung up into his saddle, and loosed the Drakenhof Templars to the charge.

The bridge of bone shook as the vampire knights charged across its ghastly deck, but it held. Seeing death riding hard toward them, the skaven released one last volley, abandoned their weapons and fled into the tunnel beyond. Not one of the ratmen made it more than twenty paces before the lance of a templar plunged into its spine or skull. Without pause, Mannfred swept down into the tunnel beyond. The Lord of Sylvania wanted this business done. He could feel the Claw of Nagash throbbing with power as it drew nigh to its nemesis – the Fellblade was close.

At the far end of the tunnel, in the great cavern-fortress of Clan Mordkin, Snikrat lay dying, his throat torn out by Feskit's teeth. The warlord was outraged – he had at least expected a competent defence from his underling, but Snikrat's failure ensured he would now have to face the vampire on his very doorstep. Feskit could win, he knew that, but he had already lost thousands of clanrats to the undead, and it seemed victory would be more costly still before the end.

Over the hours that followed, Feskit drove his minions into the tunnels in his attempts to drive the vampire away. There were mutated beasts purchased at great expense from Clan Moulder, weaponeers from Clan Skryre, turn-tails from other warlord clans, seven whole regiments of stormvermin, and slaves and clanrats almost beyond counting. All told, it was might sufficient to invade a large city, but it wasn't enough to stop the intruders. The vampire and his knights far outmatched the defenders, even when outnumbered six or seven times over, and the confines of the tunnels prevented Feskit's chieftains from bringing greater advantage to bear. Worse, those whom the invaders slew soon twitched to fresh life and assailed their former comrades. It was bad enough when the arisen were mere clanrats, but the vampire had possessed the gall to reanimate the abomination that had, before its death upon the points of a dozen lances, been Feskit's pride and joy. The beast's thrashing crushed nearly two score stormvermin before it finally perished for a second time.

Feskit was dismayed that his underlings could not accomplish the task before them, and many times considered commanding the defence personally. Each time, he reminded himself of how Clan Mordkin would suffer were he slain, and sent another chieftain out to take his place. The problem was, he was running out of underlings to send. Feskit had started by sending out those of dubious loyalty, like Snikrat. When they had perished under the tide of dead, the warlord had despatched those chieftains that he *almost* trusted, and when those too perished, he even allowed those he considered loyal to risk themselves in battle. All failed; all died.

Soon, the invaders were nigh to the fortress-lair's walls, and Feskit had little choice but to risk the prosperity of his clan by going personally into battle. Consoling himself with the high token-price of vampire ash, Feskit ordered the gates sealed. He yet had one weapon that would lay the intruder low, and he now went to claim it.

Mannfred arrived before the high walls of the fortress-lair and sighed theatrically. The walls were, like all skaven constructions, a derelict mismatch of building materials – hardly a challenge to one who had humbled some of the finest fortresses the Empire had to offer. The Lord of Sylvania had no doubt that he could overcome the walls – even under the barrage of mortar fire and warp-lightning that was beginning to spit forth from the lopsided towers – but it would take time, and every hour lost was one in which Arkhan could return to Sylvania to wreak mischief. For the briefest of moments, Mannfred considered attempting a parley with the skaven warlord, then decided he couldn't bear to speak with the verminous fool. It would have to be a conventional siege, he decided. There were dead enough in the upper passages to overcome the walls, if he roused them to it. Then the vampire's eyes drifted across the gates again, and he smiled a thin smile.

Feskit had just emerged from the cave that served as his scavenge pile when the screams began. In his claws of one hand he held his trusty blade, in the other a sword of warpstone-laced gromril. The sword had come into his possession over a decade ago, shortly after he had slain the previous ruler of Clan Mordkin in single combat. Feskit had only taken up the weapon a handful of times in all the years since; partly because he feared one of his loyal underlings slaying him for the blade, but chiefly because he always felt strangely drained whenever he set the sword aside. He had only learnt of the weapon's true provenance some years later, after paying an extraordinary quantity of warptokens to a blind seer, who had assured him that this was the Fellblade of legend, slayer of kings and worse than kings, and bringer of madness and death to any who wielded it. Feskit had not taken up the blade since that day, fearing what harm it might wreak upon him, but he had always known that he would be driven to risk its use again. Besides, he had convinced himself moments before, those who had been driven to madness by the blade were clearly weaklings, pale imitators whose will was but a shadow of his. Feskit would master the Fellblade where others had failed; he would slaughter this meddlesome vampire and set his skull atop a banner. Across the Under-Empire, all would know that Feskit of Mordkin was a power with which to be reckoned! Then the warlord reached the refuse-choked ward beyond the main walls, and realised that the vampire was no longer his chief problem.

Feskit beheld the sight before him with a mixture of rage and despair. His fortress-lair, proud bastion of Clan Mordkin these past millennia, had been breached. Plate-armoured knights, some with the pallid flesh of vampires, some with no flesh to speak of at all, rode hither and yon behind the walls, their lances and swords tearing through the clanrats and stormvermin who battled to keep them at bay. In the gaping ruin where the gate had once stood, a lone figure sat astride a horse of bones, his cloak twitching as the spirits bound to the cloth strove hopelessly to escape. As to the gate itself, the mortal remains of Ithragar, empowered by dark sorcery, now roamed at will behind the walls, wreaking a long-sought and bloody vengeance on the descendants of those who had eaten of his flesh. Feskit watched with mounting horror as the reanimated dragon reared up, sank its claws into the flank of a tower, and pulled the whole structure down in a shower of rubble and screaming clanrats.

Feskit's eyes twitched back towards the ruin of the gate, searching for the architect of his woes, but his gaze had lingered too long on the dragon, and Mannfred was no longer there. In most confrontations, the Lord of Sylvania took cruel delight in toying with his opponents, mocking the duelling culture of the man he had once been, but not now. The vampire knew well the Fellblade's power, and had no intention of facing its wielder – even though he was a fourth-rate leader of a craven race – in anything that bore a passing resemblance to a fair fight. Warned by an instinct born of a lifetime of distrust, Feskit span around to see that the vampire was now standing at his side. With a cry of defiance and frustration, the warlord swung the Fellblade in a mighty arc. Had the blow landed, it would have cloven even the supernaturally resilient vampire in two, but it was an eternity too slow.

With contemptuous ease, Mannfred stepped inside the arc of the swing, locked one hand around the warlord's forearm, and snapped it back in one savage motion. In the same moment, the vampire thrust the point of his own sword through the warlord's rusted breastplate and scabrous torso. Feskit screamed and collapsed to his knees, the Fellblade clattering to the ground. The warlord cradled the mangled bones of his forearm with his free hand, but blood – too much blood – was gushing from the wound and pooling at his feet. With a last whimper, Warlord Feskit of Clan Mordkin toppled forward into his own sticky gore.

Plucking the Fellblade from Feskit's bloodied corpse, Mannfred climbed back atop his mount, and called for his knights to withdraw. Then, ignoring the skaven who still fought across the length and breadth of the cavern, he turned his back on the battered fortress-lair and began the long trek to the surface. His parting gift to both Ithragar, and to the skaven of Clan Mordkin, was enough magic to sustain the dragon's tooth-gnawed bones for several days to come, but as to which would emerge the victor, Mannfred cared not. The Lord of Sylvania had his prize, and there was yet much work to be done.

Nagash would rise, and Mannfred would rule.













When Arkhan and Mannfred returned to Castle Sternieste, they should have known quiet satisfaction in their achievements. Alakanash and the Fellblade were now in their possession, and only Morikhane, the Black Armour of Nagash, remained to be recovered from the bowels of Heldenhame Keep. As matters transpired, however, neither liche nor vampire was much inclined towards celebration – if, indeed, they any longer knew the meaning of the word.

Arkhan the Black brooded on Kemmler's betrayal, and what it portended. Through the long decades of their association, the Lichemaster had ever been a vain and inconstant ally, but Arkhan had never suspected that Kemmler's true allegiance lay with Chaos. Indeed, he had long thought the Lichemaster guided – or at least manipulated – by the spirit of Nagash. So long had Arkhan been in Nagash's service that he no longer knew nor cared whether his desire to bring about the Great Necromancer's return was his own goal, or whether he too was being manipulated. Arkhan was simply aware that his purpose was to bring about Nagash's return. That purpose had driven him onward for centuries now; not in the frenetic manner that the zealous living pursued their chosen causes, but with a cold, calculating determination. If Arkhan felt even a trace of excitement at this long-held goal coming to fruition, he did not acknowledge it.

The Lichemaster's last words were often at the forefront of Arkhan's mind. Kemmler's implication had been that his treacherous actions had been carried out at the behest of the Chaos Gods. At the time, Arkhan had dismissed those words as the boasts of a triumphant braggart. He had not believed that the Dark Gods would seek to intervene so directly in order to prevent Nagash's return. But intervene they had, and not just through Kemmler. The final part of Arkhan's return journey to Castle Sternieste had taken him through the Great Forest, and it had seemed that every Chaos-touched beast had been drawn to his path. A lesser being than Arkhan would have been deceived into thinking the creatures had merely been lured by Alakanash's power, but the liche had not been fooled. A grim intelligence had guided the beastmen to his trail. Arkhan had seen the creature, just once, during a rain-lashed battle on the Lieske Road. As the beastmen had fled once more in disarray, the liche had caught a glimpse of a winged shaman far to the rear of the frothing herd, bellowing in a crude tongue as it tried to stem the retreat.

With new clarity, Arkhan considered some of the misfortunes that had dogged his steps, and those of his allies, in recent decades. The liche had spent long years grooming Mallobaude into a worthy pawn through which he could bend Bretonnia to his will. Arkhan had brought the half-prince power, wealth and had even arranged for him to receive the blood kiss of the vampire. Yet just as the rebellion had been due to begin, Mallobaude's stronghold of Mousillon had been beset by daemons. Though the servants of the Chaos Gods had gone on to ravage much of Bretonnia, the ravaging of Mousillon had set back Mallobaude's plans – and therefore Arkhan's – by almost a year.

By the same token, Arkhan wondered how Balthasar Gelt had come by the knowledge to forge his wall of faith. The liche acknowledged that the Supreme Patriarch was a brilliant mind – by the lesser standards of mortals, at least – but Sylvania had long been a thorn in the Empire's side, and to contain it thus only now smacked of convenient timing. Was Gelt also an agent of Chaos? Arkhan dismissed the idea as preposterous – no servant of the Dark Gods could have shackled the power of Sigmar as he had – but that didn't mean that he was not an unknowing pawn. And what of the Silver Pinnacle, dwelling place of the third and final servant of Nagash to have survived the centuries? That too had been beset by daemons – might even have fallen to them, so far as Arkhan now knew. Indeed, if Krell had been destroyed by the elves of Athel Loren – an eventuality that the liche conceded was possible – it could very well be that Arkhan the Black was now the last of the Nine Dark Lords to walk the mortal world.

Were the Chaos Gods so afraid of Nagash that they were acting to prevent his return? The idea seemed unlikely, but whatever else Arkhan was, he was no creature of whimsy and wild imaginings. Given recent events, such deeds were not only possible, but likely. Nevertheless, the liche resolved to say nothing of this to Mannfred von Carstein. At best, the vampire would assume that Arkhan had been consumed by paranoia; at worst, the Lord of Sylvania would believe the tale so completely that he would abandon their current course and seek other routes to power. Vampires were predators, after all, and reacted poorly when they became the prey of beings more powerful than themselves.

For his part, Mannfred was already displeased with his ally, and for good reason; the apostatic enchantment was failing. Arkhan's assurances that losing one of the Nine would have negligible effect had proven hollow. With every day that passed, the enchantment weakened, its dark magics were slipping away, and Mannfred could do nothing to abate this passage. It would take days, perhaps weeks, before the enchantment failed entirely but, when it did, the Church of Sigmar would make its move. Witch hunters, zealous madmen and firebrand priests would prowl Sylvania once again. In the meantime, Gelt's wall of faith stood as impenetrable as it ever had, and showed no signs of weakening.

When Mannfred had confronted the liche, the other had denied any foreknowledge of the enchantment's failure, but had simply proclaimed that Nagash's return would render such things unnecessary. Mannfred knew the truth of the matter. Arkhan had always known that this would occur, and had done nothing to prevent it. The liche doubtless thought that it would force the vampire's unwavering commitment to the task at hand and, though the Lord of Sylvania was loathe to admit it, Arkhan was quite correct in his assumptions. Mannfred was no fool. He had seen the portents, and in the ruin of the Border Princes he had seen the first consequences. The world was changing, that much was clear, and if Mannfred wished to ensure that Sylvania remained a power in the times to come, he would have to continue along his current course. He would not, however, surrender rule of his realm; not to Nagash, and certainly not to the liche who seemed determined to play the Lord of Sylvania for a fool. It was time to remind Arkhan of who was the true master of the undead, and the attack on Heldenhame Keep presented a suitable opportunity.

From the battlements of Castle Sternieste's tallest tower, Mannfred set his voice and his will upon the winds, calling forth every unholy creature that owed him allegiance. Bat-winged monstrosities emerged from dank caves, and ghouls slunk from their charnel-pits at his call. Chill-hearted spirits felt the touch of Mannfred's mind and abandoned their haunts, unable to resist he who was their master. Before midnight had passed a day hence, a mighty army marched north from Castle Sternieste. Mannfred and Arkhan travelled at its head, the former still seething angrily at the liche's deception, the latter silently amused by the vampire's display of unbridled dominion. They would need such power if they were to emerge victorious at Heldenhame Keep.

THE DEFENDERS OF HELDENHAME

Heldenhame was a major city situated on several key trade routes. Thus, in addition to the knights that called Heldenhame their home, there were many militia and guard regiments ready to be roused to defend the walls. Only time would tell if they would prove to be enough...

GRAND MASTER HANS LEITDORF

Brother to the deceased and famously mad Elector Count of Averland, Hans Leitdorf had a legitimate claim on the vacant title, but considered his position in the Knights of Sigmar's Blood to be of greater importance. Leitdorf had become increasingly convinced that the Empire was being bled white by callow nobles who placed greater importance on balls and parades than the crucial business of blood and steel, and had no desire to join their ranks. Instead, Leitdorf threw his efforts into preparing his knights for what he saw as the Empire's inevitable collapse.





COMMANDANT OTTO KROSS

Otto Kross was a bully and a tyrant, his grubby soul calloused by nearly thirty years' military service. He regarded command of Heldenhame's defences as a rightful reward for his loyalty, and didn't care who knew it. Kross left most of his day to day duties to the officers under his command, and could variously be found in Heldenhame's taverns, or sleeping off the previous night's bounty from innkeepers too afraid to turn him away.

SENESCHAL RUDOLPH WESKAR

Rudolph Weskar was Leitdorf's second in command. He had been severely wounded in the greenskin assault on Heldenhame, but the care he received from the Sisters of Shallya, and his own intractable stubbornness, saw him pull through. Nevertheless, Weskar was still unfit to ride into battle, so he reluctantly accepted the post as Heldenhame Castle's seneschal. Like Commandant Kross, Weskar was something of a tyrant to those under his command, but his abruptness was tempered by moments of kindness and wisdom wholly absent in the other.





CAPTAIN WENDEL VOLKER

As the fourth son of a largely unremarkable noble line, no one expected a great deal from Wendel Volker. Indeed, Commandant Kross resented his presence in the garrison, as he knew well that Volker's rank had been acquired through the outlay of gold and patronage, rather than good, honest service. Heldenhame's other captains scarcely thought more of Volker, and mocked the rigour with which he pursued his fencing lessons, and how earnestly he treated the men under his command. By contrast, the rank and file, who disliked Commandant Kross, were staunchly obedient to Volker's orders – something that scarcely endeared the captain to his fellow officers.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL

The Knights of Sigmar's Blood famously spurned the practice of maintaining an inner circle, claiming that all knights were as brothers in the Heldenhammer's sight. Nevertheless, many of the order looked to the Brotherhood of Steel for the example and leadership they provided. Ten years previously, the Brotherhood of Steel had followed Hans Leitdorf into Sylvania, to assist the witch hunter Tibalt Greer in destroying the Black Dame of Kervheist. This they had done, though it cost many good knights their lives. Many of the survivors of that day fought at Heldenhame, and were determined that the horrors of Kervheist would not be visited on their city.





THE TALABHEIM VI

Heldenhame was an important trading outpost for many of Talabheim's merchants. Thus had the Grand Duke of the city state for many years made a point of reinforcing Heldenhame's defenders with some of his own regiments. Whilst this might have seemed a generous measure, it was performed as much as a cost saving measure as anything else – any regiments stationed in Heldenhame were provisioned and paid from that city's coffers, not Talabheim's. The Talabheim VI were one such regiment, and were greatly welcomed, for Heldenhame had few of its own handgunners, and eight veteran companies went a long way to strengthening the city's defences.

THE HELDENHAME HOLDWATCH

The tradition of the Holdwatch was a proud one, reaching back to the days of Heldenhame's founding. It was the duty of these soldiers to ensure the castle did not fall whilst the order's knights were abroad, and it was the Holdwatch's proud boast that it never did. Service in the Holdwatch was an honour sought by all those who defended Heldenhame, whether they were the castellans of the fortress itself, or the state troops who garrisoned the city.



THE FALL OF HELDENHAME

The Knights of Sigmar's Blood had founded Heldenhame Keep seven centuries earlier, when the order had returned from the Arabyan Crusades enriched by stolen wealth. It had been a modest bastion then, with little more than a stone tower and a wooden palisade as its defences. However, as the order of Sigmar's Blood grew richer and more renowned, so too did their fortress grow to new magnificence. First, the keep itself was expanded, then the palisade replaced by a broad stone wall. A century later, the fortress was further enlarged: the wall was extended to protect the town that had grown prosperous in the order's shadow, and the keep itself was torn down and replaced by a sprawling castle many times larger. Now Heldenhame Keep was the grandest fortress in Talabecland, the town was a bustling city, and the merest gatehouse of the city wall stood far taller and more intimidating than the long-vanished keep from whence the name Heldenhame had sprung.

Though neither Mannfred nor Arkhan admitted it, they both saw the conquest of Heldenhame as no small challenge. Indeed, had time been less precious, they might have sought methods other than conquest to retrieve Morikhane from the fortress' trophy vaults. Mannfred had already investigated the possibilities before journeying to the Border Princes; even with Sylvania's borders closed, he had informants and spies enough in every city in the Empire. Unfortunately, every scrap of information the vampire could garner told him exactly the same thing. The Knights of Sigmar's Blood would be difficult to infiltrate, and almost impossible to corrupt. Mannfred and Arkhan had time for neither, though each had their own reasons to make haste. Arkhan feared the growing opposition of the Chaos Gods, whilst the vampire needed the power of the Great Necromancer harnessed to his will to defend and expand Sylvania in the coming days of trial. Heldenhame would have to be taken, and quickly.

Whilst Mannfred's informants had brought many poor tidings from Heldenhame, they had at least managed to learn of a weakness in the fortress' defences: a large battered span along the city's western wall. Only the previous year, the green tide of Waaagh! Bludtoof had broken upon the stone of Heldenhame and, though the greenskins had been slaughtered or driven off, the assault had battered the western wall almost to the point of collapse. Hans Leitdorf, the current grand master of the order, had spared no expense making good the damage, but such repairs were hard to rush. A determined bombardment of the west wall, or so the informants said, would swiftly yield a breach. They also cautioned, however, that Leitdorf had greatly reinforced the garrison of that wall with several batteries of Nuln-forged cannon, the better to destroy any attackers seeking to exploit the weakness. Neither Mannfred nor Arkhan were particularly enamoured of so obvious an assault, but concluded that predictability – or



at least the appearance of the same – was as valuable a weapon as its absence, if properly employed.

As night fell, and the citizens of Heldenhame slumbered in their beds, Arkhan walked the steep slope beneath the western wall. The worms had fed well from the previous year's siege. The liche could sense thousands of dead beneath his feet, waiting impatiently to be roused to fight again. But Arkhan knew that it would take more than swords and spears to take the wall; it would take artillery too. Carefully selecting a spot where the dead lay particularly deep, the liche planted his staff in the ground and began to whisper in the ancient Nehekharan tongue. The restless wind brought occasional snatches of Arkhan's chant to the midnight watch stationed along the wall; those who heard them made the sign of the hammer for protection against the evil spirits lurking in the dark, and longed for the sun to return.

As dawn broke, Otto Kross, commandant of the city garrison, was stirred to wakefulness by his second-in-command. Kross was not pleased to be awoken thus. He had drunk well the previous night, and his dreams had been haunted by a lissom and accommodating Bretonnian maiden when Captain Deinroth's insistent hand had dragged him back into the waking world. Kross was about to launch into a stream of invective, when the familiar sounds of battle permeated the fog surrounding his brain: the sharp crack of cannons, the scream of roundshot hurtling through the air, and there was something else as well, short snatches of a wild and maddening sound that was half laughter and half scream. The city was under attack! Cursing his sore head, Kross dressed swiftly and left his quarters at a run – or as close to as he could manage. Minutes later, he had joined the troops and wind-whipped banners on the western ramparts, and was staring down at the nightmare below.

The approach to the wall was thick with worm-picked skeletons, their dead hands clasped grimly around the hilts of swords or the staves of spears. They were distant, but steadily advancing. Further back, on the edge of the tree line, Kross could make out the shape of catapults, their silhouettes too rough and uneven for them to have been made of wood or steel. As he watched, the torsion arms of the war engines snapped upward, and two dozen flaming comets trailed across the sky towards him. The fireballs shrieked as they approached, not the whistling of boulders being propelled at high speed, but an insane and tormented cackle that set Kross' teeth on edge. One of the shots fell short, gouging a muddy smear through the slope below, another sailed high over the commandant's head, slamming into a tavern and setting its timbers alight. The rest of the missiles struck the wall, either shattering against its outer face, or dashing themselves to pieces on the ramparts. Kross saw one land in amongst a regiment of handgunners, there to explode in a spray of blood and bone. Perhaps a dozen men perished in that one shot, but Kross was more worried about the impacts against the wall on which he stood. The attackers were clearly aiming for the scaffolded and ragged tear a few paces south of the Rostmeyer bastion. There was no facing stone there to defend the wall's core, and with each strike more rubble trickled onto the slopes below.

Kross saw a cannonball plough through a mass of skeletons in the middle distance, and he bellowed at the gun crews to ignore the advancing infantry and concentrate on the catapults beyond. The undead had not brought siege towers or scaling equipment of any kind, at least so far as he could see. If the war engines were destroyed, the walls would defeat the attackers; Kross had seen it happen the previous year, and was sure he would see it again today. The pounding in his head forgotten, Kross began issuing orders. Garrisons were ordered to abandon their posts on the other walls and hurry westward. Marksmen were sent to the upper levels of the Rostmeyer and Sigmundas bastions, where their view of the enemy would not be impeded by the clouds of acrid gun smoke already billowing across the walls. The catapults were beyond the 'official' range of the Hochland long rifle, but all it took was a lucky bullet to bring down a crewman. Messengers were sent to the castle, informing Grand Master Leitdorf of the situation and requesting him to mobilise his order. Some knights were already on the walls, but Kross reckoned a sally might yet end this sudden siege in a swift and decisive manner.

The marksmen had just begun firing when a great cheer went up from the ramparts. A gust of wind had temporarily snatched the veil of smoke aside, granting the defenders a clear view as a cannonball, guided by a gunner sergeant's experienced eye, struck the leftmost upright on one of the distant catapults. Shattered bones flew in all directions, and as the massive torsion forces within the catapult's frame met sudden release, the machine tore itself and its crew apart in a whirl of fragments and flailing ropes. The defenders cheered again, heartened at having struck meaningfully against the foe. Then tendrils of dark magic emerged from the tree line to enfold the crippled catapult. Shattered spars remade themselves, the crewmen who had been torn asunder returned to their station. As the wind slackened once again, and the mist hid the catapults from view, the cheering atop the city walls faded and died.

For a time after that, there was nothing for Kross and most of his men to do but take shelter behind the ramparts and endure the bombardment whilst their cannons and marksmen traded fire with the catapults. The Empire gunners

had the range now, and hammered roundshot after roundshot at the enemy war machines. Each time a cannonball struck home, the walls had a fleeting reprieve, but it lasted only until Arkhan's sorcery undid the fruits of those desperate labours. Again and again, the cackling missiles slammed into the weakened wall, or sent fire coursing across the ramparts.

Only Janos Odkrier, a stern-faced priest of Sigmar who had confronted the horrors of Sylvania many times, stood tall amidst the onslaught. With no sign of weakness, he strode the span between the Rostmeyer and Sigmundas bastions and, where he walked, men felt the terrors of the siege ease.

At last, lookouts shouted warning that the skeletons had advanced into handgun range, and Kross gave the order to open fire. As sergeants took up the cry, the battered defenders rose to their feet, pulled hard on their triggers and rained fire onto the slope below. Balls of lead hammered into the unholy mass, shattering bone and tearing through the invisible magics that took the place of flesh.

Soon the approach to the wall was thick with gun smoke, but the volleys continued. The handgunners loaded and fired, loaded and fired, always with the determination of men who know that their survival depended on their swiftness. They did not aim now, for the smoke from their own volleys made that impossible, but fired at whatever shadow loomed through the swirling shroud, certain that the enemy were so thickly clustered that no shot would be wasted. Through it all, the catapults kept firing. The defenders hardly noticed, each man fighting on until he was swept from the wall. Halberdiers hurried fresh ammunition to the walls, and toppled the dead over the parapets so that the living could take their place. Their weapons were useless unless the ramparts were assailed, and it seemed to Kross that no such assault could take place; he had seen no siege towers, and no ladders for escalade.



The commandant's spirits were rising. A messenger had at last brought word to him that the Knights of Sigmar's Blood had left the city through the south gate, and would soon carry their lances against the besiegers. As far as Kross was concerned, the skeletons could mill around beneath the walls as much as they wished.

Fate makes a mockery of surety, and it laughed loud and long at Kross that day. No sooner had the commandant assured himself that no assault would be made upon the walls, than the mass of skeletons below surged into fresh activity. Gripped with sudden purpose, they clambered and climbed over one another like a swarm of ants, building unliving ladders of bone and magical sinew that grew taller and taller by the moment. In this manner, the tide of dead clambered up the walls of the Rostmeyer and Sigmundas bastions, their skeletal hands grasping ever for the ramparts. Handguns barked and flamed, shattering sections of the growing construct and toppling the uppermost climbers to the ground far below. Kross had two batteries of helblasters, one on each of the bastions, and these now gouted smoke and lead into the foe. Each battery fired not in the defence of its own bastion – the gun barrels would not depress enough for that – but directed its fury to save the other, firing across the expanse of wall that separated the two towers. Bone fragments clattered against stone as the volley tore the heart out of the unliving ladder. A ragged cheer sounded again from the battlements, but then skeins of dark magic flickered through the gun smoke, the dead hauled their broken bodies back together, and the escalade began again. Kross bellowed at his gunners to reload, but it was no good. The same magic that had healed the skeletons had lent them fresh vigour. Here and there, a gun flamed, but the pace of the ascent barely slowed. Some handgunners abandoned any attempt at reloading, and heaved rocks over the ramparts to smash the skulls of the climbers. Most were pulled back from the brink by halberdiers, who took their places to hack down at the attackers. The time for gunplay upon the bastions was ended. Now was the hour of steel.

On the Rostmeyer bastion, the undead could find no lasting purchase. Captain Deinroth led the defence there and, so thinned were the skeletal ranks from the helblaster volley, that steel and courage saw the walls kept clear. The Sigmundas bastion was not so fortunate. One of the helblasters positioned on the Rostmeyer bastion was famously cantankerous, and had malfunctioned badly during the firing. A volley that should have been thunderous lost all force well short of its target, and the swarm of skeletons that reached the ramparts of Sigmundas was far less eroded than that which assailed Rostmeyer. All along the length of the parapet, skeletal arms reached up out of the smoke to assail the defenders with rusted swords and grasping hands. Halberds gleamed as they thrust down, but for every skeleton whose bones clattered away down the face of the bastion, two rose up to take its place. Soon Arkhan's minions gained their first bloody foothold upon Heldenhame's defences.

Slowly, inexorably, the defenders of the Sigmundas bastion were driven back, and perhaps would have fled entirely had it not been for the arrival of Father Odkrier whose faith was a light in that dark moment. The old priest swung his great hammer with the fury of a much younger man, and where it struck undead bone it blazed like the twin-tailed comet of yore. Odkrier's doughty example roused the men of Talabheim and Talabecland to fresh bravery, and a motley band of halberdiers, handgunners and artillerymen followed in his wake, determined to retake the bastion. As he advanced, however, the priest strayed too close to the parapet, and bony hands from below latched onto his cloak. Odkrier tore free and smashed his hammer downwards, but more arms crested the battlement and clutched at his arms and legs. With a last oath of defiance, the warrior priest was plucked from the bastion and torn apart by the vengeful dead. With Odkrier's loss, the spark of defiance faded from Sigmundas' defenders. Abandoning the bastion to the attackers, they flooded north and south along the walls, seeking shelter in Heldenhame castle, or amongst Kross' men.

Kross watched in horror as the defenders of the Sigmundas bastion fled. Behind Kross, at the foot of the inner wall, Captain Volker had at last brought reinforcements from the unassailed eastern front. However, there was no way that they could mount the wall in time to stop the spill of dead that was even now falling upon Kross' right flank. Things could not get worse, or so the commandant thought as he pushed his way through to join the fight.

Once again, fate heard Kross' surety, and made a mockery of it. As another wave of missiles slammed into the battered wall, the battlements lurched beneath Kross' feet. His mind lost in battle, the commandant didn't realise the significance of the shudder at first, thinking it merely another impact against the wall. Then the battlements lurched again, and the awful reality sank in. Kross yelled at his men to fall back towards the Rostmeyer bastion, to clear the ramparts, but his warning came too late. With a mournful rumble and a great gout of dust, the centre of the wall at last collapsed, spilling rubble and mangled bodies across the newly created breach. Robbed of the central section's support, the destruction spread along the wall, buckling the ramparts and tearing them apart. Men and skeletons alike were thrown over the battlements, or toppled to their doom amongst the spoil. Kross died amongst the destruction, bellowing with frustrated fury as he tumbled helplessly to his death.

Behind the wall, Captain Volker was aghast, but the sight of skeletons climbing methodically over the dust-choked breach quickly snapped him back to this senses. This was the last chance to contain the undead – if they spilled into the city streets the slaughter would increase tenfold. Drawing his sword of fine Kriegst steel, Volker kissed the twin-tailed comet embossed upon its hilt and threw his men forward. There was not a man in Volker's ranks who did not feel the icy grip of fear at that moment, but every one of them had family behind the walls, and they knew that there was no one else to stem the tide. Giving voice to a mighty battle cry, they hurled themselves up the rubble slope. Scattering the skeletons in their path, they surged on to the crest of the breach, and there formed a ragged line of swords and spears, which tightened moment by moment as sergeants bellowed the formation into shape.

Volker's line was barely formed when the next attack wave struck, but it held. The skeletons came on mindlessly, their only actions the half-remembered motions of the beings they had once been. They attacked in silence, and perished the same way. Men gave wailing screams and collapsed as ragged spears ripped through their flesh; others fought on through the pain, spitting and snarling defiance until their last breath left them. Soon the crest of the breach was slippery with blood and strewn with shattered bones. Through it all, the catapults continued to fire. Much of their fury was directed against the Rostmeyer bastion, whose defenders now poured fire down into the breach, but every few moments a cackling fireball would plunge into the melee upon the slope, for the undead cared not if they hit their own kind, so long as enemies perished alongside.

Though he took pains not to show it, and fought on no less furiously than he had before, Volker had begun to despair. His flesh was scorched along one side from where a catapult shot had torn away the three files of men to his right, and he was bleeding from a deep wound to his scalp. Perhaps half of the captain's men had already fallen, but he could see no end to the attackers. Little by little, Volker's ranks were gaining reinforcements, survivors from the wall's collapse and stragglers from his own march across the town, but these new forces didn't bring him any closer to victory; they merely slowed the pace of defeat. Where were the knights? the captain wondered. If they did not come soon, it would be too late.

Far to the east, from his vantage point deep in the tree line, Arkhan was greatly pleased by how the battle was unfolding. He'd never expected both the bombardment and the escalade to succeed, but succeed they had, and gloriously so. Yet it would all be for nothing if the Knights of Sigmar's Blood refused to take the bait. Arkhan had suggested this diversionary attack in order to thin Heldenhame castle's defenders and, while the liche didn't care whether Mannfred's forces suffered in the assault, it would be disastrous to his purposes if it failed. It was unthinkable that the knights would seal themselves in their castle and leave their city to burn. The mortal conceits of honour and chivalry could surely not allow it? Then, a blare of trumpets pealed through the air, and Arkhan knew his plan was unfolding. Yet even now he felt no satisfaction, just an infinitely distant pity for the humans who had proven themselves so predictable.

Hans Leitdorf also felt no satisfaction as his trumpeters sounded the charge. It had taken far too long for his knights to reach the city walls, and it seemed to the grand master that every merchant's cart in Heldenhame had been strategically placed to slow his order's progress. That this was manifestly untrue helped Leitdorf's temper not one whit. He felt the loss of the city's outer wall as a personal failure, and one for which victory would only partially atone. As a result, when Leitdorf's leading brotherhoods rounded the southwest corner of the city wall and beheld the thousands of skeletons advancing on the breach, the grand master saw not an enemy to be feared, but a target upon which to vent his righteous anger.

The trumpet clarion sounded for the third time, and the column of knights began to move forward. Nearly the entire order rode under Leitdorf's command. The rest stood sentinel over Heldenhame castle itself, or were abroad on the order's business, but they were not missed that day. Once loosed to the charge, a full plate armoured knight was nothing less than a battering ram of metal and flesh whose impact could break the thickest of shieldwalls. Leitdorf had nearly twelve hundred such knights at his command, and with a bellow of vengeance he loosed them against the skeleton legions beneath Heldenhame's walls.

So swift and destructive did the knightly charge strike home, that to Captain Volker it seemed as if the reaper's scythe had again come for the unliving host before him. In one moment, there was a sea of bleached bones and ragged banners. In the next, the middle distance was awash with shining steel and shields the colour of spilt blood, and the thunder of hooves melded with the crack and splinter of bone. Given fresh hope by the knights' arrival, Volker hacked down at the grinning skull in front of him and pressed forward into the gap.

Even then, the defenders of Heldenhame could have fallen to Arkhan's legions had recklessness overtaken them, but Leitdorf wielded the weapon that was his order with incomparable skill that day. Again and again, the Knights of Sigmar's Blood crunched skeleton phalanxes into fragments, only to wheel in good order and charge home against a fresh target. Catapults still fired



from the tree line, and even the steel plate of knightly armour could not defend against their impact, but Leitdorf loosed two brotherhoods of his knights to smash the war engines to splinters. Soon the catapults fell silent, and in the flush of a victory hard-won no one thought to question why the dead did not rise again as they had earlier in the battle. The answer was, of course, that Arkhan had made his escape in the moment Leitdorf's charge had first struck home. The liche had played his part to perfection – it was time for Mannfred to play his.

Hans Leitdorf knew that something was wrong when the wind suddenly shifted. All morning a listless easterly breeze had played across the city, but now a gale buffeted the city from the north, its gusts howling with unholy voices. The grand master looked on with mounting wrath as black clouds gathered around Heldenhame castle, and knew in that moment that his trials had not yet ended. Knowing even then he would be too late, Leitdorf set spurs to his charger's flanks and, calling for his brothers to follow with all haste, charged over the breach and back into the city, scattering Volker's surviving defenders aside as he did so.

Even with its knights elsewhere, Heldenhame castle could have withstood a conventional assault for months. Though many of Heldenhame's castellans – swordsmen and handgunners recruited from the surrounding land and trained by the knights they served – had been despatched to aid the defence of the western wall, near four hundred still manned the walls, and they knew their duty well. The walls were thick, and the artillery towers were well-served. No barbaric horde or outland army could crack Heldenhame castle's defences, or so the boast went, and even with the city's west wall collapsed and broken, the castellans' resolve did not falter. They took their lead from the Knights of Sigmar's

Blood who commanded the defences in Leitdorf's absence, and strove to prove themselves worthy. Alas for them, Mannfred had no intention of resorting to a conventional assault.

Vargheists came first, diving from the teeth of the gale onto battlements little prepared for an assault from the skies. Handguns flamed, but few men could hold their aim in those howling winds and but a handful of the attackers were punched from the skies. The rest tore across the battlements in an orgy of blood and hunger, tearing at the members of the denuded garrison with razor-sharp claws and casting the survivors onto the rocks below. Still the castellans held their ground. Though daunted by their casualties, the defenders saw that the advantage of numbers lay with them. Drawing their swords, they hunted across the ramparts and towers, through passageways and barrack rooms, overwhelming the bestial attackers with weight of numbers and desperate steel.

But the vargheists were not the only weapons in Mannfred's arsenal; he had others at his disposal, which he now loosed to the battle. At the vampire's unspoken command, spectral shapes flowed over the rocks dotted with broken bodies of the castle's defenders. These were the ghostly echoes of ancient warlocks and witches, suicides and madmen. Long ago, they had possessed bodies; now they were cruel spectres who yearned only to abate their own suffering by revelling in that of others. Through the walls they passed, and they fell eagerly upon defenders still reeling from the vargheist attack. These immaterial creatures could not be harmed by mortal weapons, though the castellans made every effort to prove otherwise, and their touch was enough to slay all but the bravest. Now the defenders died by the score, driven mad by the piercing soul-song of spectral witches, or their hearts stilled by the terror of a ghostly embrace.

Now the defenders' salvation came from the weapons of the past. Many of the blades wielded by the castellans had been forged during the Arabyan crusades, and had been blessed against the infidel warriors of the desert kingdoms by the priests of those times. Those aged blades blazed like torches when the spirits drew near, and the flames burnt spectral flesh as easily as they did that of the living. Swiftly, the castellans rallied around those of their number that carried the blessed weapons, and the spectral assault stalled.

Then, at last, Mannfred von Carstein came to the battle on a steed of twisted bone. Two terrorgheists heralded his coming, dropping from the darkened sky into the centre of the castle courtyard with shrieks so piercing that every window, goblet and mirror in the castle shattered. The monsters had no fear of the blessed blades, only a gnawing hunger that could never be sated. They knuckled their way across the stones, scooping terrified swordsmen into mighty jaws, seemingly unaware that the gory remains slithered back through their decaying gullets moments later. Mannfred's lip crooked slightly at the delicious slaughter his minions had wrought, then the vampire turned away, his mind set to the search that had brought him there.



Rudolph Weskar was the castle's seneschal, a great bear of a man whose efforts had seen the castle vaults remain unbreached throughout the assault. As Mannfred dismounted, Weskar immediately recognised the vampire as the architect of Heldenhame's woes. Imploring Sigmar to lend him strength, Weskar rallied a handful of knights to his side, and charged forward to smite the evil in their midst.

The seneschal had taken just five steps when one of the terrorgheists struck his flank. One knight was slain immediately, crushed beneath the creature's taloned foot, but the others held their ground and struck out at this new peril. Bones fractured and cracked as the knights' swords hacked down. The terrorgheist screeched and lashed out with membranous wings, sweeping two knights aside like broken dolls. Abandoning his shield, Weskar ducked low under a flailing wing and brought his sword around in a brutal two-handed strike against the monster's jaw. Bone splintered under the impact, and the terrorgheist drew back, but it did so too slowly. Weskar stepped forward, raised his sword high, and shattered the creature's skull to fragments. As the terrorgheist collapsed into a heap of bone, Weskar turned again to face Mannfred and, bellowing a challenge, threw himself towards the vampire once more.

Mannfred heard the battlecry as Weskar charged, but he saw no threat, merely a desperate man who led an equally desperate rabble. He stalked forward to meet the charge head on, raising his sword in a mocking parody of the salute favoured in this part of the Empire. His first swing took off Weskar's head as cleanly as a cleaver carving a haunch; his second clove two knights into offal. Mannfred felt the blade resonate with power as it tasted blood, and with the merest effort of will he sent that magic spiralling outward to drain every drop of life-essence from his opponents.

The vampire lord sneered as the last of the attacking swordsmen fell, casting his gaze at the slaughter around him. Everywhere, the castle's defenders lay dead or dying, and those few that still lived were of no challenge to him. Ahead lay the entrance to Heldenhame's vaults, and the prize he sought. No one could stop him now.

Nagash would rise!



Hans Leitdorf slammed his gauntleted fist against the parapet. He had been fooled, and Heldenhame, honoured stronghold of his order for centuries, had paid the price.

'How many survivors?' Leitdorf demanded. From where he stood on the north tower, all he could see were the bodies of the dead.

'We've pulled another three out from under the rubble of the gatehouse,' replied the preceptor at his side. 'One will lose a hand unless the surgeons are quick, but they'll all fight again.'

'That makes what, forty all told?'

'Forty-two, my lord,' the preceptor corrected him.

Leitdorf swore and punched the wall again. Forty-two survivors out of a garrison of four hundred, and that said nothing of the thousands who had died on the city walls. Worse, the castle vault had been breached, and one of its oldest treasures stolen. The order's honour was in the mud; his honour was in the mud.

At least the identity of the perpetrator was clear, indeed, it could hardly have been clearer. The cage is broken. Those were the words Leitdorf had found daubed in blood on the wall of the inner keep. And this less than three months after the Supreme Patriarch had proclaimed himself 'the man who had caged Sylvania'.

Leitdorf had argued long and hard that Gelt's solution was a temporary measure at best, but the Supreme Patriarch's gilded tongue had proved itself more persuasive than the knight's bitter years of experience along the Sylvanian borders.

'I've a mind to travel to Altdorf and wring Balthasar Gelt's scrawny neck,' Leitdorf growled.

He wouldn't make good on his threat, of course. Even in his anger, Leitdorf knew that the wizards weren't the true enemy. Vengeance lay along the dark roads to Sylvania. No sane man would willingly take that path: indeed, after his last journey into the haunted land, Leitdorf had sworn he would never return. Yet as he looked again at the bloodied bodies strewn across the inner courtyard, the grand master wondered if he perhaps bore a touch of his late brother's madness, for now he was considering just that.

'Spread the word,' Leitdorf ordered. 'We ride south at first light. The wizards have had their chance; we'll settle–'

His final words were drowned out when a crude blaring of horns sounded in the distance. Leitdorf knew that sound. Looking to the west, he saw that the trees which had so recently been alive with undead were now thick with braying beastmen who trampled one another in their eagerness to reach Heldenhame's breached wall.

They had been drawn by the sound of battle, Leitdorf guessed, come to pile further horror on Heldenhame. Not today, he swore, his anger rising to meet the new threat. Vengeance would wait. At least for now.









CHAPTER 2

The Ritual

Autumn 2524



As the Imperial Year 2524 wore on, there came a sudden and momentary lull. It was as if the gods had paused in their fury to take stock of the changing situation. For one blessed night, the kingdoms of the world knew a cessation of the horrors that had gripped them these past months. Fresh portents came with the unexpected calm. To those who had the wit to read such signs, they spoke of a new player destined to walk upon the stage, a being who was neither immortal god, nor death-cursed mortal. For one glorious day, it was as if the natural world held its breath. Then the power of Chaos rose anew, the signs shifted and madness ruled once again.

In the lands of the Old World, many eyes had witnessed pieces of Arkhan and Mannfred's scheme, but none had yet perceived the whole work. In Couronne, the reborn Gilles le Breton learned of La Maisontaal Abbey's destruction and brooded upon what it portended. He did not know what had been stolen from the vaults, for many ancient relics and terrible evils had been destroyed in the explosion, but still he sensed some wider scheme at work. Deep in the nether realms beneath Skavenblight, the Council of Thirteen learned of the Fellblade's theft, and felt a collective surge of fear. The ancient sword had changed many hands over the years, but had never before dropped entirely from their scrying sight. In the hours after the news arrived, the hierarchy of Skavenblight shifted again as scapegoats were sought and executed. For the men of Bretonnia and vermin of the Under-Empire, these were troubling events, but ones upon which they could not afford to act. Gilles le Breton still fought to preserve a disintegrating kingdom, whilst the full energies of the skaven were bent to following the course laid out by the Horned Rat. Only in the Empire was there one determined to act. Vengeance drove him; vengeance and the reclamation of honour.

Geheimnisnacht was but a month distant when Hans Leitdorf, Grand Master of the Knights of Sigmar's Blood, arrived in Altdorf. He and his escort rode on exhausted steeds, their armour still crusted with the blood of the beastmen they had slaughtered beneath Heldenhame's walls. The second battle for Heldenhame had gone far better than the first. The Children of Chaos had recklessly hurled themselves at the breach in the western wall with little thought as to the consequences, and a charge by Leitdorf's vengeful knights had been sufficient to set them to rout. When he was sure that the city was no longer in immediate danger, Leitdorf had left the defences in Captain Volker's charge, and come west to summon support. Leitdorf intended to lead his entire order into Sylvania, but he knew other forces would be needed if his vengeance were not to become abject folly.

Alas, as the knight travelled, he saw again and again that the Empire was in no position to commit to a full invasion of Sylvania. Beastmen were running wild and unchecked across Talabecland and Reikland, burning and pillaging at will. Every noble, innkeeper and merchant to whom Leitdorf spoke whispered tales of darker creatures even than beastmen lurking amidst the trees, and of villages and towns obliterated by fire from the heavens. Doomsayers and flagellants were abroad in incredible numbers, and grimy, lice-ridden crowds blocked the knight's passage through many a village. They clustered around the temples like vultures around the recent dead, proclaiming the arrival of the End Times to all who would listen, and exhorted the wealthy and the poor alike to atone for their sins.

At first, Leitdorf paid little heed; tales of horror and madness were far from uncommon in the Empire, but the knight gradually found himself believing that, for once, the zealots had the right of things.

Upon reaching Altdorf, Leitdorf found little support. The Emperor had granted him an audience, and promised to give the matter his most urgent consideration, but then Leitdorf had heard nothing for three days, and his repeated attempts to broach the matter with Markus Lofdtir, the Emperor's chief aide, met with a wall of polite, but unyielding, silence. Refusing to abandon his cause, Leitdorf sought out old comrades and tried to convince them to lend aid. Again and again, he heard the same story: that between the tumult in the heartlands and the threat of invasion from the north, not so much as a man could be spared. Then, at dawn on the fourth day, everything changed.

Roused from his lodgings by an Imperial herald, Leitdorf made haste to the Emperor's palace. The knight allowed himself hope as he travelled, thinking that Karl Franz had at last relented and would now provide the soldiers he needed. He was disabused of the notion upon arrival. The Emperor had ridden north with the Reiksmarshal, Lofdtir informed him, the better to marshal forces against the growing threat. His patience increasingly frayed, Leitdorf demanded the reason for his summons, at which point Lofdtir ushered the knight into one of the palace's many splendid reception rooms, and introduced him to the guests waiting within.

There were three of them, and it was obvious to the dimmest wit that they were no citizens of the Empire, but elves from across the sea. Two, a male and a female, were garbed in fine scale. The third, another male, was far older than his companions. He wore no armour, only flowing blue robes and a bejewelled diadem upon his brow. All carried themselves with the surety of accomplished warriors. No, Leitdorf thought, it was more than that, it was arrogance; a surety of word and deed that no human could ever hope to achieve. Even in the heart of the Emperor's palace,

amidst the fineries and treasures of generations, the elves made the surroundings look cheap and tawdry; worse yet, they knew it.

Speaking with a deference and precision that belied a lifetime of political service, Lofdtir issued the introductions. The older male was named simply as Belannaer, the younger as Prince Eltharion of Yvresse. The woman was Princess Eldyra of Tiranoc, and she was the only one who offered Leitdorf even the ghost of a bow. The names meant little to the knight, but their purpose in the Empire more than piqued his interest. They had come, they said, to effect the rescue of one of their folk from the depths of Sylvania.

It was the one named Belannaer who did most of the talking, speaking in an archly precise form of Reikspiel that even Leitdorf's long-dead tutors would not have attempted. Princess Eldyra seldom interrupted, and then only to add clarity when Belannaer's archaic language plainly escaped Leitdorf's grasp. The tall, grim-faced prince uttered not one word the whole time. Leitdorf had the distinct impression that, though Eltharion was the titular commander of the elf expedition, he greatly resented the indignity of the meeting.

He soon learned why. The elves had not come to Altdorf merely to seek permission to cross the Empire – Leitdorf suspected that they cared little about such things – but to seek aid. Their own nation was beset, much as the Empire was beset, Belannaer explained. Though the captive they sought to free was a personage of some importance – Leitdorf noted the deftness with which the elf avoided giving any clue to the individual's identity – only so many spears could be marshalled to rescue one lost soul, however valuable.

This was no chance meeting, Leitdorf realised, as he explained his own circumstances. He and the elves





had all come to Altdorf seeking the Emperor's aid and Karl Franz, ever the master statesman, had found a way to satisfy all parties without cost to himself – it even placed them in his debt for having arranged things so. Yet Leitdorf found that he didn't care. The knight wanted Mannfred von Carstein destroyed and his foul get slaughtered; the elves wanted their missing kinsman delivered from the vampire's grasp. These two desires came together like the boards of a good shield.

By the time Lofdtir excused himself from the room, an alliance had been struck. Before night had fallen, Leitdorf and his escort were riding eastward once more. With them went a silvered host from across the sea. Some days later, their ranks were further reinforced, as the full order of the Knights of Sigmar's Blood marched to join them. Yet, unbeknownst to Leitdorf or the high elves, other forces were converging upon Sylvania.

From the southwest came a host of Athel Loren, led by Araloth, Lord of Talsyn. They marched not to avenge ills their people had suffered, but at the desperate request of Alarielle, the Everqueen of Ulthuan, who had pleaded with the wood elves to rescue her daughter. For his part, Araloth felt little kinship with the high elves, and none at all with the Everqueen, but the Mage Queen Ariel had bidden him to this task, and the Lord of Talsyn had sworn to see it done. The elves had journeyed for many days, guided by an enchanted locket bequeathed by Alarielle herself, and travelling always by night or beneath a shroud of sorcerous glamour.

The wood elves had thought to seek no needless conflict as they crossed the Empire. However, Araloth's trusted hunting hawk, Skaryn, flew far and wide as the army marched, and his keen eyes espied many beastman warherds at their destructive sport. Few in Araloth's host had not lost kin to the Children of Chaos, and for them it was unthinkable that they should pass within bow-shot of the creatures and seek no recompense. So it was that many a Wissenlander village knew rescue from the roaring horde at its gates, though it is doubtful that any within ever learnt the source of their salvation.

Araloth spoke little as the wood elves travelled. His reticence was marked by many, for it was ordinarily his way to be ready with a tale or good-natured jest. Now, however, he was all but silent, speaking only to issue orders, or seek information from the scouts who foreshadowed his army's passage. His thoughts were ever on the path ahead, on the bleak roads of Sylvania. Some years ago, Araloth's fate had crossed with that of a goddess, and that encounter had transformed him from a callow lordling to a hero amongst his folk. Since that day, Araloth had shared a portion of the goddess' prophetic gift, and had been able to see hope in even the most perilous of days. Now, when Araloth bent his sight to the times to come, he saw nothing but darkness. Yet still he journeyed onwards, for such was his duty.

As the wood elves advanced from the west, another army descended from the east. They advanced with relentless tramp of feet, so obviously grim and determined of purpose that the goblin tribes of the lower mountains scattered before them rather than offering battle. This was the great dwarf throng of Karak-Kadrin, and it marched under the banner of its king, Ungrim Ironfist.

Several days before, an Imperial herald had come to Karak Kadrin, bearing a scroll sporting the seal of Karl Franz. Therein, the Emperor had told of the arrival of the high elves at Altdorf, and of their mission to rescue one of their own from Sylvania. Whilst the Emperor recognised that there was little friendship between dwarfs and elves, he asked that King Ungrim

Ironfist give serious consideration to aiding that effort. It was plain that a great evil was being worked within Sylvania's bounds, and the thwarting of such efforts was surely in the interest of all.

Though the thought of bringing aid to the arrogant Ulthuani sat ill with Ungrim, he had conceded that the Emperor's request contained some merit. Sylvania lay on the foothills of Karak Kadrin's territory, and the Slayer King had long watched with concern as its shadow had deepened. It could only be a matter of time before the vampires grew tired of toying with the humans and turned their attentions to the mountains. The dwarfs had enemies enough clamouring at their gates.

The scroll gave no clue to the captive's identity, but Ungrim had guessed it all the same. Some months earlier, Thorgrim Grudgebearer had convened a kingsmeet at Karaz-a-Karak, and had there spoken of a battle at Nagashizzar; a battle that had failed to free the Everchild of Ulthuan from Mannfred von Carstein's clutches. Much to his amusement, Ungrim realised that he very likely knew more of the high elves' quest than did the Emperor. The high elves might have found the humans useful allies, but they would have told them no more than was absolutely necessary for fear of the shame.

Ungrim had sought council from his thanes. Many advised that Karak Kadrin should not waste their strength defending the human lands, let alone granting aid to the elves – not in times so dire as these. Yet in so arguing, those thanes managed only to feed their king's determination to act. Ungrim had heard many similar arguments of late, often from the mouths of his fellow kings, and he had tired of their repetition. It was time, he had decided, for an example to be set, and for the dwarfs to give firm reminder that they were still a force to be reckoned with.

The last of the forces to assail Sylvania came from the north, but this host shared little purpose with the others. Indeed, it would have been wrong to describe this assemblage as an army at all, for there was no discipline in its ranks. This was a horde driven by primal appetites; where its cloven-hoofed warriors journeyed, they left only ruin in their wake. None amongst the beastmen knew their destination, only a burning instinct that drove them ever onwards. Even the creature that led the horde, he who was known as Malagor to the men of the Empire, did not fully know his purpose.

Ever since the dark moon had waxed full in the sky, so too had the words of the Dark Gods grown stronger in Malagor's mind, burgeoning from whispers to strident tones. It was they who had bidden him destroy Arkhan the Black and his army of risen bones. Malagor had known not the reason for his instructions, but the motivation mattered little to him – the gods had commanded, and he had obeyed. Yet though Malagor was a fit vessel for the purpose of the gods, his bestial kin were less so, more driven by primitive hunger than by divine will.

Three times had Malagor come close to destroying the liche, and each time the wildness of the beastmen had been his undoing. Worst had been the massacre at Heldenhame. There, Malagor had come so close to his prey as to be able to smell his acrid spoor upon the breeze. However, before the bray-shaman could fulfil his purpose, the warherd noted the breach in Heldenhame's wall, and the desire to feast upon the vulnerable city soon eclipsed all other needs. By the time Malagor had regained control of the beastmen, the quarry had departed far to the south, and the greater part of his horde had been ridden to ruin by vengeful knights.

Malagor had expected punishment for his failure, but it seemed that the Chaos Gods favoured him still. As the voices in the bray-shaman's mind drove the horde southwards, more beastmen emerged from the trees and submitted to his will. By the time that the horde approached the wall of bone that was Sylvania's northern border, it was a bellowing tide that trampled fortresses and towns alike into blood-stained rubble.

Mannfred von Carstein knew at once of the five armies intruding upon his realm, for almost every eye and ear in Sylvania was his to command. Before long, Mannfred knew the size and composition of each invading force, as well as the identities of their leaders. He found the situation far more amusing than worrisome; never had the realm been so unassailable, and yet still his enemies threw themselves against it. It was a compliment of sorts, Mannfred supposed, that so many great nations saw Sylvania as so great a threat, but the timing was unfortunate. Summoning his captains, Mannfred made preparations to defend his realm.

Had the intruders entered Sylvania together, united of purpose, then they would have presented an unassailable challenge. As it was, only two of the armies – those of the high elves and of the Knights of Sigmar's Blood – had as yet joined forces. These, at least, Mannfred knew he had invited by his arrogance, by adding insult to injury in previous encounters. Not that he much cared, for those he had crushed before he could surely humble for a second time. Of the other armies, he saw little threat from the wood elves, whose host was by far the smallest. The beastmen and the dwarfs were of far greater concern. Malagor's warherd was an undisciplined and sprawling horde, but its numbers eclipsed those of the other invaders combined. The throng of Karak Kadrin, however, lacked neither for numbers nor discipline. It was also the only invader Mannfred truly feared. Over the preceding century, he had taken great care not to antagonise Ungrim Ironfist, lest

the old alliance between the Empire and the dwarfs find fresh cause in Sylvania's destruction. Now, it seemed, that effort was for naught, for the Slayer King was at his gate.

As for Arkhan, he paid the encroaching armies no mind, and instead began preparations for Nagash's return. Wagons of bone and tattered skin carried the necessary artefacts and sacrifices eastwards to the Glen of Sorrows and the ancient stone circle known as the Nine Daemons. Peasant lore recounted that these were not monoliths at all, but the calcified bodies of daemons imprisoned for eternity. Arkhan did not care whether or not this tale was true – he was concerned only that the circle sat upon a confluence of the geomantic web, and thus the winds of magic blew strongly about its stones. Come Geheimnisnacht, Nagash would rise again!

Mannfred's first blow fell against the beastmen. Count Nyktolos of Vargravia led this assault with a winged host of terrorgheists, rotting bats and other cave-born denizens. Again and again they tore into Malagor's army as it stampeded through Hunger Wood, always striking at the warherd's flank and retreating eastward before the Children of Chaos could pursue. For days, these attacks continued, and despite Malagor's attempts to drive his followers on to the Nine Daemons, the beastmen were drawn steadily and inexorably eastward.

Meanwhile, Ungrim Ironfist was frustrated. Gyrocopters, arcing north to avoid as much of the unnatural darkness over Sylvania as possible, had borne messages back and forth between the dwarfs and their allies in the west. The town of Templehof had been the agreed rendezvous point, and the dwarfs had journeyed swiftly to begin with. Their siege engines had quickly carved a breach through the walls of bone on Sylvania's boundary, but progress had slowed to a crawl as soon as the dwarfs had entered the oppressive and spirit-haunted woodlands of northeast Sylvania. Mannfred had despatched three captains to confront the dwarfs, though it had done him little good. All had perished under the Slayer King's axe, their forces scattered or hacked apart soon after. Yet the unlife of Sylvania was not constrained to creatures of flesh and blood. The trees of that benighted realm too were victims of long-abused magics, rendered to husks of withered bark and maggot-ridden flesh. That they occasionally spurred themselves to attack was of little concern to the dwarfs, for they had axes aplenty which bit as deep into rotten wood as they did into rotten bones. The problem arose from the fact that the trees constantly shifted, swallowing up the road ahead, and had to be hacked apart before the way could be made navigable again.

Ungrim Ironfist could have maintained his pace had he abandoned his siege engines but he could not bear to do such a thing. Once again, the gyrocopters set out, on this occasion carrying bitter news of delay, but this time they did not return. His mood growing blacker, Ungrim ordered his forces to press on, little knowing that he was doing precisely as his enemies wished. Count Nyktolos, whose terrorgheists had swatted the gyrocopters from the skies, now lured the rampaging beastmen to the east one last time…

The dwarfs heard the clamour of Malagor's horde some leagues before they saw it, and Ungrim, correctly interpreting what the raucous bellowing foretold, marched his own army to the nearest open ground. As the trees around them came alive with primal roars, Ungrim's dwarfs realised the depth of their predicament. Cannons were unlimbered, oath stones were laid down, death songs were sung, and prayers to Grimnir given voice. Thus began the Battle of Red Cairn.

The beastmen emerged from the twisted woodland into the mouths of dwarf-wrought cannon. The first volley tore bloody great furrows in the warherd's ranks, but the hundreds who perished were nothing to those who thundered forward in their wake. The beastmen, glad at last to face a foe of warm and succulent flesh, had gone berserk, and the scent of their savage kin's blood upon the air served only to drive them to greater ferocity. The air was full of the roar of the guns, the scream of roundshot and the maddened braying of the horde. Then the ragged banners of the beastmen were upon the doughty dwarf shieldwalls, and the true slaughter began.

Many slayers fulfilled their oaths that day, and many warriors brought fresh honour upon their lineage. Runes of Valaya glowed hot as they fought to contain the untamed sorceries of Malagor's shamans. Gors and bestigors crashed against the tight-locked shields and were cast back in bloody sprays. Thunderers loosed volleys at point-blank range, and then looked to their axes for salvation. Minotaurs hacked at helm and shield, gorging themselves on the fallen before they came bellowing to the slaughter once more.

In the end, the Battle of Red Cairn lasted for two days and a night – at least, so far as could be reckoned beneath Sylvania's sunless skies. As the second day came to a close, Malagor's horde at last broke and fled into the trees, leaving behind them a battlefield choked with mangled and half-devoured dead. Ungrim Ironfist was left the master of the battlefield, but the throng of Karak Kadrin would march no deeper into Sylvania.

As ever, Ungrim's desire to fulfil his Oath of the Slayer fought with his responsibilities as King of Karak Kadrin. The slayer within him longed to continue the march, to perhaps meet a glorious death against the evils of this land, but the king knew his

responsibilities lay with his people. And there would be only death if the march continued. For every ten dwarfs that had followed their king to war, eight lay dead and a ninth was too wounded to hold both an axe and a shield. Though a great victory had been won – perhaps the greatest victory against the Children of Chaos in the annals of Karak Kadrin – the dwarfs had failed their allies. Ungrim Ironfist sent a small band of volunteers west to attempt contact with Eltharion and Leitdorf. Then, his heart heavy, the Slayer King ordered the retreat.

Far to the south, Araloth's wood elf host had troubles of its own. The folk of Athel Loren were well accustomed to woodland that moved of its own accord, but nonetheless found the necrotic trees of Sylvania unsettling. The forest spirits of Athel Loren could be spiteful and angry, even murderous, but none of them reeked so thoroughly of despair and thoughtless malice as the trees of the Forsaken Forest.

The captain Mannfred had loosed to destroy the wood elves was not a vampire, but Kalledria, Queen of Sorrows: a banshee who had clung to the world since the time of Emperor Sigismund. She was a mistress of dreams and nightmares, of terror on the edge of sight, and she assailed the elves not with steel, but with dread.

Blood-hungry spectres shadowed the wood elves' every step, forcing the host's spellweavers to sustain a tiring regimen of abjurations in order to keep the spirits at bay. Even then, Araloth's host steadily shrank. Scouts vanished into the forest, never to be seen again, or else for their bloodless bodies to be found strewn across the trail the following morn. Few slept, and those that did rested only fitfully, awakening from dreams of ice-cold kin, and courts of dancing dead. Some even died dreaming, their souls plucked from their bodies by Kalledria's cruel grasp.



Of the wood elves, only Araloth was immune. Kalledria's horrors could find no purchase on his heart, and his fellows drew great strength from his example. None could have guessed that the Lord of Talsyn dwelt upon his own mortality as keenly as any who followed him. Before Araloth had left Athel Loren, Naieth the Prophetess had embraced him in farewell, and there was little more ominous than a seer's fond parting.

Araloth was certain that the elves' afflictions were guided by a keen intelligence, but Kalledria took care that no elf saw her and lived to speak of it. As the host crossed the Corpse Run and headed north, Araloth bade his spellweavers capture one of the spirits and plumb the darkest of magics to discover its mistress. This path was not undertaken lightly, for none of the mages who accompanied him had walked the dark path of sorcery, and now risked their sanity by treading upon it. Three perished in the attempt, and as many again were driven mad with fear, but the seventh endured, and came to perceive the invisible tethers of power that shackled the captive spirit to the cursed revenant, Kalledria.

Thus did Araloth lead an assault on the Banshee Queen's lair, a crumbling tower in the depths of Ghoul Wood. This forest was well named, for countless tribes of those debased creatures dwelt beneath its desiccated trees. It was a savage battle, where Daith-forged spears clashed with venom-crusted claws. Again and again, the ghouls were driven off, but they never fled far and returned as soon as their hunger overcame their cowardice. Even when Araloth's remaining spellweavers at last banished Kalledria and her coven of spirits, the ghouls fought on. Elf flesh was far sweeter than anything the ghouls had gnawed upon in many a year, and only when their situation was beyond hopeless did the pallid fiends at last scramble back into the surrounding shadows.

Finally, Araloth and his host were free to continue their northward journey. The locket was humming urgently now, and the wood elves forced their weary limbs to obey its summons. Yet before they had travelled so much as a league, the moon broke through the darkness above, and a slender elf-woman moved to bar their path. She was pale, yet still beautiful beyond measure, and clad in a simple white dress that gleamed like the stars. Araloth gave out a great cry of joy and embraced the newcomer. Some of his fellows were not so trusting. They had seen fairness hide many a foul form since entering that dark land, and feared that the woman was but another such trial. However, most of the elves looked upon the newcomer and saw only her greatness, and knew that truly they were in the presence of a goddess.

They talked awhile, Araloth and his goddess, though their words were too low for any to hear more than snatches of their discourse. All could



tell that the goddess' words were little to Araloth's liking, but at last the Lord of Talsyn acquiesced and handed to her the locket that had guided the host thus far. Kissing Araloth once upon his brow, the goddess crushed the locket to dust between her fingers, and scattered the remains through the air to create a starlit portal on the path ahead. Only then did Araloth address the host, telling them that the Everchild's fate was no longer theirs to influence, and that a greater battle awaited them on a distant shore. Then, without a word of insistence that any follow him, the Lord of Talsyn took the goddess' hand and stepped through the portal. The remainder of the host did not hesitate. Though not all yet believed in the goddess' nature, they all trusted and loved their lord. If his words proved true, they would fight the coming battle at his side; if the goddess proved false, they would free him from her influence, or die trying. Thus did the host of Athel Loren pass from Sylvania and from mortal sight.

By now, word of Ungrim Ironfist's retreat had reached Templehof. Alas, the small and bloodied band of dwarf rangers who bore the message had arrived too late – the combined host of elves and men had given the dwarfs up for lost, and had already departed. Geheimnisnacht was now but a week hence, and Belannaer had divined that whatever evil fate was planned for the Everchild, it would occur on that fateful night. Speed was needed now, or so Eltharion reckoned, but not reckless haste.

As the armies advanced through the Sylvania's heartlands, Eldyra led vanguard parties to seal or cleanse the sepulchres that lay along the route. The elves were greatly aware that they were but an army of modest size in a hostile land, and it was better to delay and stem the potential tide of enemies, rather than rush headlong to their destination and find themselves assailed from every direction. Belannaer had guided the expedition thus far, following the strains of Aliathra's silent song as he had from the very beginning, yet still he had enough focus to divine which of the ancient tombs and ruined mansions they passed near to required Eldyra's attention.

Leitdorf could not abide what he saw as a needlessly slow advance, and many times attempted to speak on the matter with Eltharion. He was politely but firmly rebuffed on every occasion, and his temper grew fouler with each rejection. He had an equal stake in this matter – more perhaps – and chafed at what he perceived as his allies' contempt.

Unable to influence the elves, the grand master drove his own forces all the harder. The men of the Empire marched further each day until, as Leitdorf rode through the village of Klodebein, fully five leagues separated his rearguard from Eltharion's vanguard forces.

It was then that Mannfred struck.



Leitdorf should have realised that something was amiss long before the attack began. Like many of the villages that he had ridden through, Klodebein was all but deserted. Perhaps as many as a quarter of the ramshackle houses had lights showing through the windows, and no one came out to greet the knightly column. Even the watchman – a filthy weasel of a man whose tricorne hat and greatcoat had seen their heyday several decades earlier – offered neither challenge nor greeting, but ducked back into his cottage with the air of one who expected to die before the hour was out. Leitdorf, a man of high breeding, simply interpreted this as the natural truculence of the lesser orders when confronted by warriors, and thought nothing of it. Only as his column wended its way through the vast garden of Morr on the village's southern border, and the vargheists burst from concealment amidst the tombs, did the grand master realise that it had not been his knights the villagers had been scared of.

Caught unawares in a column of march, the Knights of Sigmar's Blood stood little chance from the outset. Trumpets sounded as the knights attempted to reform, but their efforts were hampered by the closeness of the tombs. Leitdorf watched on in frustrated horror as his vanguard was torn apart in a maelstrom of blood and sundered armour. Death magic spiralled up from one of the sepulchres, purple against the darkened sky. Silhouetted against it, his lips crooked into a disdainful smile, stood Count Mannfred von Carstein. Then the zombies forced their way out of the cemetery's damp embrace and Leitdorf's thoughts turned to his own survival.

Leitdorf urged his destrier through the zombie horde, the blade of his sword glowing as it struck rotting flesh to the bone. The knights came behind him. Lances abandoned, they hacked and stabbed at the clamouring dead and bade their horses champ and stomp at the creatures in their paths. The undead pressed close, worm-eaten fingers and rusting blades reaching for the knights. Had the odds been even, or as great as five to one in the zombies' favour, still the knights could have prevailed. The graveyard of Klodebein had vomited forth hundreds of shambling cadavers, and many more lurched from the tree line towards the warriors of Heldenhame. Soon there were ten zombies for every living soul, and Leitdorf's men began to die.

The knights perished in ones and twos at first, dragged from the saddle by dozens of groping hands and stamped into the soft loam. As many warriors choked on the graveyard's mud as perished upon a blade. The death toll shelved steeply as the hissing vargheists entered the fray. The winged ones dashed knights from their steeds, claws tearing through plate armour as if it were sun-parched skin, briefly lowering their hideous mouths to the spurting lifeblood before finding new foes to feast upon. One such beast downed the banner bearer to Leifdorf's right, then stood stunned for a moment when the grand master turned his horse to slam his heavy shield full into the creature's face. Before the vargheist could recover, Leitdorf buried his sword in the creature's throat, and exulted his victory.

The grand master's cheer faded as he took in the battle's course. The broken and bloodied bodies of knights lay scattered around the crypts. Most were motionless, but a few had risen to new and unholy life under the influence of Mannfred's spell. Leitdorf knew at once that the battle was quickly becoming hopeless, but he did not despair. The torrent of death magic still raged on the graveyard's edge, and the self-styled Lord of Sylvania stood clearly visible in front of it. Leitdorf swore to himself then and there that even if his order was doomed, the vampire would perish as well – then at least they could face Sigmar with honour in the beyond. Away spurred Leitdorf, the knights of his bodyguard charging in his wake. They struck a knot of vargheists head on. Leitdorf had a memory of blood and pain; then he was through the creatures and riding across the uneven cobbles of the graveyard's lych way. Scarce half of the knights who had joined his charge were still in their saddles, the rest had fallen to claws and fangs. But the path ahead was clear – Mannfred von Carstein was almost within reach.

Mannfred saw Leitdorf's reckless charge, and was struck by the knight's determination. As he had many times before, the vampire touched on the mixture of bravado and stupidity that only humans seemed to possess. Then, pulling his attention back to the present, he stretched out a hand and let the magic flow free. Long had the skeletons lain beneath the lych-path, their bones old when Sigmar was young, but they dug their way clear eagerly enough at Mannfred's call. The vampire gave a twist of his hands, and the line of bleached bones and timeworn spears formed a tight phalanx immediately to his front – right in Leitdorf's path.

Leitdorf saw the skeleton ranks snap to, and knew that he was a dead man. It was too late to turn, too late to slow his steed's reckless pace, so he did the only thing he could – he raised his sword high and screamed his defiance. The knights struck the phalanx a moment later, the air choked by screaming men and horses as the impetus of the charge flung them onto the spears. Leitdorf's horse collapsed, a rusted spearhead in its lung, and the grand master was thrown deep into the mass of skeletons. There was a snapping and cracking of bone as a pair of undead unwittingly broke Leitdorf's fall, and then the grand master was on his feet, sword flashing as he fought to stay alive. Leitdorf no longer thought further ahead than his next parry, his next counterblow. He shattered

a skeleton to fragments, then felt a stabbing pain in his right calf as another's spear thrust through his armour. He parried a rusted spear, then abandoned his shield as two skeletons gripped its rim in an attempt to drag him down. Cut, parry, thrust, and another skeleton fell, then another. Suddenly, remarkably, there was space around the grand master. Leitdorf thought he had broken free, but then he saw that the skeletons had merely backed away. There, from the far end of the widening corridor of bone, Mannfred von Carstein was watching him with interest. With a defiant cry upon his lips, Leitdorf launched himself at his hated foe. Mannfred smiled, canines flashing in the moonlight, and raised his sword.

When Eldyra's vanguard reached Klodebein, they found many traces of a battle fought, but no survivors. The village was a gutted and stinking ruin. Of the knights, all that could be found were broken bodies and trampled banners. Only Leitdorf himself was recognisable, and that only because his blood-drained body was found hanging from a tree some distance south of the village. The standard of the Knights of Sigmar's Blood had been draped around him like a cloak, and the words 'And then there was one' carved into his forehead.

The high elves were now in truly a grim situation. Recklessness had cost them their mannish allies, and ill-fortune had denied them the aid of the dwarfs. Yet still they did not turn back, but fought their way through all other opposition Mannfred sent their way. The Lord of Sylvania did not seek to confront them personally, for as Geheimnisnacht grew nigh, his thoughts were bent upon turning Arkhan's ritual to his own purposes. Thus, again and again, did Mannfred send his captains against the elves, and knew increasing frustration as each failed to check their advance.

Guided on by Aliathra's silent song, the high elves at last came to the Glen of Sorrows as Morrslieb and Mannslieb waxed full, and Geheimnisnacht began. Far below, they saw the ring of Nine Daemons, and the vast and unmoving army of the dead mustered around it. When Eltharion and his fellow commanders saw the forces arrayed against them, they knew that the quest had become a suicidal one, but they did not turn back, for they knew what was at stake. And so, they decided, should those who followed them. Until that moment, none save the expedition's leaders had known the identity of she they sought to save, but as the warriors of Tiranoc and Yvresse mustered upon the edge of the glen, Eltharion told them how the fate of the Everchild, and thus the fate of Ulthuan itself, rested in their hands.

For a time, the host was still and silent, but then one elf, a noble of the Court of Seledin, swept his sword flat against his chest in the ancient Yvressi salute. *Iselendra yevithri anthri*, he proclaimed: *by our deaths we serve*. As Eltharion watched, a ripple of motion spread across the assembled host as the salute was echoed by every warrior gathered there. His heart full of warrior's pride, Eltharion returned the salute, and gave the order to advance.



THE STORMRAKER HOST

The Stormraker Host was largely formed from regiments of Tiranoc and Yvresse, but forces from other kingdoms were present also – largely because their captains owed a debt to either Tyrion or Eltharion. It was the grandest host to seek battle in the Empire for many long decades.



ELTHARION THE GRIM, PRINCE OF YVRESSE

Eltharion and Tyrion had grown to be fast friends during the previous expedition to rescue Aliathra. For this reason, Eltharion was quick to agree to a second rescue attempt, even after the truth of the situation was revealed to him. Yet Eltharion saw the greater peril at play. He knew that if he did not travel east, Tyrion would do so in his stead and, bereft of the prince's leadership, the Ten Kingdoms would fall. It would be of no benefit to the elves to save Aliathra if there were no Ulthuan to which they could return.

ELDYRA, PRINCESS OF TIRANOC

Unlike many nobles of her kingdom, Eldyra forsook battle from a chariot's fighting platform. In part, this was a throwback to her days as Tyrion's squire, when no chariot could have kept pace with glorious Malhandir. Eldyra preferred to place her faith in living creatures, rather than machines. She was greatly envious of Eltharion's mount, Stormwing, and would have dearly loved to know the loyalty of such a beast. As it was, she was content to see battle from the saddle of her steed Maladhros who, though not as swift as Malhandir, nor so ferocious as Stormwing, was a canny and quick-witted stallion.





BELANNAER, LOREMASTER OF SAPHERY

Since yielding the position of High Loremaster to Teclis, Belannaer had increasingly become content to bury himself amongst the tomes of yesteryear, forsaking the crude necessities of the physical world for an existence of study and contemplation. All of that changed with the capture of Aliathra, for Belannaer knew better than any the fate of Ulthuan if the Everchild was lost. Thus did he don armour that had grown dusty through lack of use, and take up the sword with which he had tutored untold generations of swordmasters.



THE STORMRAKER BANNER

To the courtiers of both Eltharion and Eldyra, it was unthinkable that a host of Tiranoc would march under a banner of Yvresse, or vice versa. Another standard was hastily woven, and anointed with the waters of the moon glades, that it might gain Lileath's blessing. On it, the hawks of Yvresse and Tiranoc shared equal prominence, representing the talons of two hunters, striking together.



THE SENTINELS OF ASTARIL

When Eltharion set sail from Ulthuan, he was loath to take any mistwalkers of Yvresse, for their daemon-hunting expertise would be greatly needed if Ulthuan was to endure the onslaught of the Chaos Gods. However, Tyrion argued that one band of mistwalkers, more or less, would make little difference to Ulthuan's fate, but might spell the difference between victory and defeat for Eltharion's expedition. Knowing wisdom when he heard it, Eltharion accepted the service of the Sentinels of Astaril, the very company with which he had honed his own skills as a youth.



THE KNIGHTS OF DUSK

Tor Ethel sits on the western coast of Tiranoc, or rather half of it does. The remainder of the city lies beneath the waves, cast there when the realm shook itself apart during the Sundering. As each year passed, coastal erosion taook its toll, and the remorseless sea claimed gardens, sanctuaries and palaces. Tor Ethel has became ever more deserted, until only one noble family dwelt there. The Knights of Dusk were descended from this family line. Brothers and sisters all, they fought without fear, so that other cities might not suffer Tor Ethel's fate.



ATHEL TAMARHA FAITHBEARERS

Moranion, Eltharion's father, perished in Grom's destruction of Athel Tamarha, but not all of his household were slain. A few elves, their courage overcome by the sheer size of the Waaagh!, escaped into the woods, leaving their home to its fate. Though these elves soon reclaimed their valour, and harried the goblin army as it advanced on Tor Yvresse, they ever after blamed themselves for Moranion's death. Since those days, they fought at Eltharion's side as the Athel Tamarha Faithbearers, hoping to erase their guilt for the father by offering service to the son.

DEATH AT THE NINE DAEMONS

The elves entered the Glen of Sorrows like a silver thunderbolt in a dark sky. The sons and daughters of Ulthuan knew they were outnumbered, knew even that they were unlikely to live through that day, but they lifted their voices in song and charged forth all the same.

Eltharion the Grim led them, his loyal griffon Stormwing a blur as the beast pounced from foe to foe. Every impact scattered bones across the withered heath; every thrust of his Fangsword stilled a spirit's restless soul. Behind the prince came the elves of Yvresse: mistwalkers, courtly guard and warriors of the citizen levy. They showed no fear. All had drawn steel with Eltharion before that day. At the prince's order they had broken the gates of Naggarond, scattered the teeming hordes of Grom the Great and brought death to the greenskin-infested Badlands; they would not desert him now. Borne upon wings of courage and need, they drove deep into the ranks of the mouldered dead, fine-wrought steel flashing to pierce grave shrouds and rusted armour. Not to be outdone, mages urged the withered vegetation of the glen to vicious life, roots and briars grasping and tearing at the undead hordes.

Onwards the elves drove, ever onwards through the faceless dead, for to halt was to perish. The overwhelming ranks closed around them, trapping them in a prison of seething dead. Skeletal hands thrust forth from the damp sod, clutching at boot and greave, grasping elves in place whilst the spears and swords of the already risen did their bloody work. Monstrous ghoul-kin, taller than elves and broader than ogres, hurled themselves into the fray, trampling skeletons beneath their clawed feet in their eagerness to close with the foe. Bowstrings sang and spears thrust forward as the crypt ghouls closed in. Many a brute fell back with black ichor oozing from its wounds, but others came on with redoubled fury. Poison-slicked claws tore through armour and flesh with ease. One by one, the elves succumbed, and ultimately their advance slowed.

Yet there were more elves on the battlefield that day than the scions of the Kingdom of Mists. Even as Eltharion's attack stalled, the ground trembled as Princess Eldyra ordered the knights of Tiranoc into battle. This new assault struck the undead massing on Eltharion's left flank, and swept over them as the seas had once swept over Tiranoc. Scale-armoured steeds and swift chariots surged into the undead ranks, their riders giving voice to battle cries that drowned out the sound of splintering bone. Skeletons were ground beneath steel-bound wheels, and ancient wights found release as their bodies were split asunder.

At the heart of the glen, at the centre of the stone circle known as the Nine Daemons, Mannfred von Carstein looked upon the carnage wrought by the elf assault, and saw that he needed to act. He knew Eltharion from the battle beneath Nagashizzar, and noted the prince as a foe not to be taken lightly. The vampire was loath to leave the circle, for if he were elsewhere, he would no longer be able to wrest control of the ritual from Arkhan. However, Mannfred also knew that if the elves were not stopped there would be no ritual, and everything he had worked for would be undone. Nonetheless, the vampire was confident that there was still time to scatter the impudent elves and confound the ancient liche. Leaving the circle, he summoned the Drakenhof Templars to his side, and rode to join the battle.

Much of Arkhan's attention was given over to the ritual, yet still he found amusement in the vampire's departure. Everything was proceeding as the liche had planned. He cared little for the battle that raged beyond the twisted stones. The first stages of the summoning were complete: a Book of Nagash had been placed at the foot of each of the Nine Daemons, and one by one, Arkhan had used Alakanash, the staff of the Great Necromancer, to awaken their power. Now, scarlet light pulsed deep within the stones, and a swirling barrier of magic coalesced on the edge of the ritual circle.

The first of the sacrifices, Morgiana le Fay, lay dead at Arkhan's feet, her blood drained into the great cauldron at the circle's heart. The rich fluid sparkled and shone with the magics of life, and Arkhan had taken great care that not so much as a single droplet had touched his ancient body. In the centre of the cauldron, ankle-deep in the Fay Enchantress' blood, stood the second sacrifice, Grand Theogonist Volkmar. Morikhane, the black armour of Nagash, was bound to his body by the same web of iron chains that held the old man upright. Volkmar had been roused from his trance some hours ago, for the ritual required him awake and aware if it were to succeed. Yet, even now, the old man did not give in to terror. Though weakened by months of torture and abuse, he swore and cursed at Arkhan, attempting time and again to call down the holy power of Sigmar to smite his captor. None of it worked. For now, at least, the apostatic enchantment still held true, and Volkmar's curses were naught to Arkhan but the droning of flies.

The last victim lay bound on the edge of the stone circle. Aliathra, Everchild of Ulthuan, was still alive and, though she did not rant and rail as Volkmar did, she regarded the liche with defiance nonetheless. Eltharion's arrival had given her hope, for she

knew the warden's determination to be second only to her father's. What Aliathra did not know was that Arkhan had long been aware of the silent song she had used to guide the elves, and had, in fact, gone to some lengths to keep Mannfred from discovering it. Arkhan did not fear the elves; indeed, he welcomed their presence as a means to delay the vampire's inevitable treachery.

Mannfred knew none of this as his foul mount bore him across the heath. The vampire reached out into the swirling currents of magic and breathed new life into his servants. Or rather, he sought to. Twice he stood on the cusp of completing an incantation, yet the winds of magic gusted unexpectedly and the power slipped from his grasp. A third time he tried, and again the currents shifted to thwart him. The vampire knew at once that this was not merely the ficklesome nature of the eight winds, but the trickery of elven magi who thought to match his wits. Snarling, the vampire rose up in his saddle, his gaze tracking across the battlefield. He caught sight of one mage, and no sooner had he done so than a pack of slavering dire wolves pounced at the elf and dragged him to the ground. Mannfred permitted himself a thin smile, and reached out into the winds of magic again, but to no avail. Still he was stymied.

A moment later, his eyes fastened on the one he sought. A knot of high-plumed elves fought some distance to Eltharion's rear, their greatswords whirling with lethal artistry. At the swordmasters' heart, his hands a blur as they traced fiery runes in the air, an aged elf mage surveyed the battlefield from atop a floating column of rocks. Mannfred knew immediately that this was the one who had the temerity to thwart his works; once the decrepit fool was dead, the other mages could be swept aside with ease. That portion of the battle was still some way distant from Mannfred, but it mattered little, for was not every cursed soul in Sylvania his to command? With a guttural howl, the vampire called upon his minions to slay the meddlesome mage.

In all his long life Belannaer had never known magic to flow so freely as it did that day. There was too much power. Since before the first blow had been struck, he had striven to calm the winds of magic, but still there was a surfeit for his enemy to draw





upon. Only through complete focus could the mage counter the vampire's spells; the slightest distraction and he would be undone. Distraction now came in the form of a yowling spectral host that flowed like water over the embattled elves, their chill fingers reaching for the mage. The swordmasters' weapons were useless against these foes, and Belannaer knew at once he must look to his own defence. With a roar, a tidal wave of flame burst from the mage's upraised hands and surged outwards in all directions. The fire left the living untouched, but the dead burned in its embrace. Spirits sizzled and burst into clouds of ash, zombies blazed like torches as the fires consumed their flesh. In the blink of an eye, the elves found themselves surrounded by an expanding ring of blackened dead. Some cheered at their moment of reprieve, but Belannaer's face was bleak. He could feel necromantic magics shifting and stirring across the battlefield, and he knew he could not regain his focus swiftly enough to resist them. He had been outmanoeuvred, and now the elves would pay the price.

Mannfred exulted as the resistance to his incantations collapsed; mastery of the battlefield was now his. With a flourish, he intoned the invocation's final syllable and watched with satisfaction as the charred and shattered bodies of his minions twitched to fresh unlife. Within moments, fully half of his army's losses had been replenished, and more were rising all the time. Even so, Mannfred could feel Belannaer again trying to unravel his necromantic bindings, and now resolved to deal personally with the mage. The Lord of Sylvania raised his sword high, and the horde of skeletons massing about the elves parted at his unspoken command. Mannfred held his blade steady, savouring the moment of control. Then his hand dropped, and the sword slashed down. The signal given, the Drakenhof Templars lowered their lances and charged.

Eldyra saw the danger and ordered her knights to meet the Drakenhof assault at full gallop. Shields splintered and blood sprayed as the two lines of cavalry met. Vampires cursed one final time and passed into death as starwood lances found their hearts. Knights of Tiranoc breathed their last and tumbled bloody from their saddles. Eldyra's lance shivered against a templar's breastplate. Abandoning the useless weapon, the princess drew forth her runesword and took the vampire's head with a single sweep. Before the body had fallen from its saddle, Eldyra was moving forward again, her blade flashing as she cut deeper into the templars' ranks. She could see Mannfred von Carstein fighting beneath the tattered folds of the Drakenhof banner, and knew that the vampire's death could turn the tide of battle. Eldyra was a proud warrior of an ancient and honoured line; she did not hesitate.

Mannfred heard a voice cry out in challenge, and turned his mount to meet the princess' charge. With a ring of steel, his blade met hers and turned it effortlessly aside. Again, the elf struck at him, and this time the vampire caught the blade by its flat. For a moment, the sword burned and hissed against his skin, then Mannfred tore the weapon from his opponent's grasp, the momentum hauling her from the saddle. Casting the stolen blade into the press of battle, Mannfred leaned low across his beast's neck to deliver a final blow, but Eldyra was not yet done. Twisting aside from the strike, she plucked a dagger from her belt and sprang at the vampire. Mannfred hissed as the blade sliced into his shoulder, and again as the elf – still mid-leap – reversed the dagger and tore a deep furrow in his arm. Eldyra landed, coiled herself and lunged at the vampire again, but this time Mannfred was ready. With a quicksilver motion he struck the dagger from the elf's grip and fastened a taloned hand around her throat. Yet even as the dagger tumbled from Eldyra's right hand, her gauntleted left slammed into his face, and the vampire felt a fang shatter under the impact. This one had spirit! In Mannfred's experience, most elves were a knotwork of vanity and hubris that shattered like glass, but this one he could use.

At the vampire's call, fell bats swooped from the darkness above, their membranous wings enfolding the still-struggling elf. When the flock cleared, Eldyra was gone, and the vampire set his sights on Belannaer once more.

Not content with besting a warrior-princess in physical confrontation, Mannfred now sought to prove himself a greater sorcerer than a loremaster of Saphery. The Books of Nagash had lain in his possession for long months now, and they had taught him many things that were beyond the darkest dreams of any elven conjurer. Ignoring the battle raging around him, the vampire began to chant in a guttural tongue. As the incantation grew in volume, a storm of raw magic burst into life above Mannfred's outstretched hands. He held it there for a heartbeat, feeling the power blossom and writhe out of control; then, with an almost contemptuous gesture, the vampire hurled the storm at Belannaer.

The elf mage was ready. He had felt the winds of magic shift and Mannfred had gathered his spell, and now worked quickly, his incomparable intellect pushed to the limit as he sought the proper combination of cantrip and counterspell. After one heartbeat, the mage had discarded a hundred possibilities; after another he had discounted as many again. At last, Belannaer found the solution and strove desperately to weave a shield that would deflect Mannfred's assault. He made it, but only just, and even then his shield did not disperse the storm outright, but merely held it at bay. Belannaer was not concerned; with the worst of the attack blunted, he had a few moments to disperse its remaining force – or so he thought.

The storm had been Mannfred's main thrust, but it was not his only assault. Even as Belannaer had conjured his shield, the vampire had focused his dark will on one of the swordmasters who served as his bodyguard. It was no easy battle, for the adepts of Hoeth had honed and disciplined minds, but Mannfred was in no mood to be bested at a battle of wills, and certainly not in a battle of wills with a mortal. Battering aside the swordmaster's defences, he planted an irresistible compulsion in the elf's mind. Unaware of his own actions, the swordmaster raised his greatsword high, ready to strike Belannaer's head from his shoulders. Some instinct warned the mage of his danger before the stroke fell, and so a blow intended to decapitate instead carved a livid wound across his back. Not that it mattered. As pain flared through the mage's body, his concentration shattered and his conjured shield faded away. Belannaer had just enough time to realise that he had finally been bested, before the crackling storm of magic swept over the remains of the shield and consumed him.

At the centre of the Nine Daemons, Arkhan had sensed the explosion of power that heralded Belannaer's death. A moment later, he heard the quiet, almost wistful sigh as the winds of magic swept the mage's soul towards Ulthuan. For a moment, the liche was tempted to seize the immortal remnant and add it to his collection, but grander matters required his attention now. Ominous clouds swirled overhead, screeching spirits swarmed around the circle like ghastly fireflies and the wind was howling; not with the raw fury of a natural gale, but with the echoed death-agonies of a creature slain many centuries before. Turning, the liche reverently took the Crown of Sorcery from its cushion of human flesh and lowered it onto Volkmar's

head. The old priest had gone still now, his eyes pools of agony as he felt a mind far older than his own scratching at his thoughts.

Mannfred heard Nagash's voice upon the winds, and knew that the ritual was at its peak; he had to return to the circle! Ramming his sword through a silver helm's throat, the vampire wheeled his mount and made for the Nine Daemons. The liche would not rob him of his prize.

Eltharion knew that an already bleak situation had grown worse. Elves lay dead or dying all around the Warden of Tor Yvresse. Of the thousands who had marched with him to Sylvania, only a few hundred yet had the strength to wield a sword. They had fought like heroes born; for every warrior of Ulthuan that had fallen, half a dozen of Mannfred's thralls were cast back into the abyss, but the undead soon rose again. Eltharion knew that without Belannaer to hold the vampire's sorceries at bay, the battle was lost. Victory was impossible; survival a distant dream. As the winds about the Nine Daemons reached a howling crescendo, Eltharion made a fateful decision. The prince could no longer save Aliathra as he had promised, but he could end the Everchild's suffering, and perhaps thwart whatever evil her captors had planned. Urging Stormwing into the air, Eltharion reluctantly abandoned his warriors to their fate and sped towards the stone circle.

So consumed was he by his mad charge to the Nine Daemons that Mannfred did not sense Stormwing's approach until the moment the griffon was upon him. However, for one such as he, the shadow of the griffon's strike was warning enough. As talons raked at his back, the vampire threw himself forward over his steed's neck: an attack aimed to tear Mannfred apart merely tumbling him from the saddle. Scarcely had the vampire hit the ground than he was on his feet once more. Stormwing banked hard, sweeping around in a great arc so that Eltharion could bring his lance to bear. Down the griffon swooped, faster than a mortal eye could follow, but Mannfred was ready. An instant before the lance's point would have rammed home into his black heart, the vampire twisted aside, his own blade spearing upward in the same moment. Eltharion's lance missed its target by a hair's breadth, but Mannfred's strike fell true, plunging deep into Stormwing's chest and dealing the griffon a mortal blow. At once, Stormwing's strength left him and, with a mournful shriek, he crashed from the sky a few feet from the barrier surrounding the Nine Daemons. Eltharion was thrown clear as the griffon's impact gouged a great furrow in the cursed ground. Battered but unbowed, the prince rose up and threw himself at Mannfred.

The vampire was the greatest of his twisted kind; he was mightier than the elf, and tireless besides. For his part, Eltharion was weary from battle, his strength sapped and his reactions slowed by a dozen poisoned wounds. It seemed that the prince had no chance of prevailing. However, this was not merely a battle of flesh; it was also one of will, and Eltharion's was indomitable. Where Mannfred fought for power, and for his own selfish ascension, Eltharion strove for his people's future, and to fulfil an oath made to a friend. The one could never be the equal of the other.

Mannfred claimed first blood, and the second; his blade cheating the elf's guard. Eltharion staggered with each blow, but he did not fall, and came to the attack once more. Tyrion would have gone berserk at that moment: his anger ever lay close to the surface, and he would have harnessed that rage and bent it to his will. However, Eltharion was of different mettle: he won his battles not through fury, but with clinical precision and a skill far beyond the grasp of lesser races. The prince shifted styles as he fought, battering aside Mannfred's blade in one moment, then giving graceful parry in the next. A great cleaving blow worthy of an orc warlord was followed by a riposte as graceful as any taught in the fencing schools of Tilea, and the vampire was slowly driven back.

Mannfred could not match the elf's skill. For too many years he had relied upon unnatural strength and reflexes to best his enemies; he had toyed with too many foes as prey, rather than as equals. Now he found himself in a dangerous position. The vampire brought his sword up to block a great, sweeping blow, but Eltharion used the parry's momentum to whirl the Fangsword about and lay the flesh of Mannfred's chest open to the bone. With a snarl, the vampire drove forward a great disembowelling thrust, but Eltharion knocked the blow aside and followed up with a savage cut that would have taken Mannfred's head had the vampire not flung up his free hand to suffer in its stead. The vampire howled in pain as the Fangsword smashed into his forearm. The enchanted blade clove through undead flesh as sunlight cleaves through darkness, shattering bone and leaving the limb hanging from a tortured strand of flesh.

In that moment, Mannfred knew he could not beat the elf in a physical contest. Cradling his crippled arm, the vampire backed away, reaching out into the winds of magic as he went. At Mannfred's command, death magic coalesced out of the air, forming into six black swords bound to his vengeful will. As the gleaming black swords bore down on Eltharion, the elf strove to counter their blows. Had he but a moment to think, the prince could have harnessed the Talisman of Hoeth, and dissipated the magic that gave life to the blades. But Eltharion's instincts were those of a warrior; faced with a physical threat, he responded in kind.

Mannfred knew that the sable swords were but a temporary distraction, and

prepared a writhing bolt of raw magic with which to end his adversary's life; Belannaer's fate would be Eltharion's also, the vampire swore. Eltharion saw none of this. He was too busy fighting for survival, and would have surely perished in that moment but for Stormwing's intervention. Though the griffon's noble spirit hovered on the edge of death, he roused his broken body to one last act of loyalty. With a final shriek, Stormwing hurled himself at Mannfred. The griffon perished before he struck, his valiant life quenched at last by the spell meant for his master but, even in death, the griffon's aim was true. Mannfred von Carstein was borne to the ground, Stormwing's talons deep in his chest.

Instantly, the swords menacing Eltharion vanished. Bloodied and weary, the prince glanced at the motionless bodies before him. The prince would have liked to bid one last farewell to his old friend, but Eltharion knew that there was no time. He could sense the magics within the stone circle coming to a peak; through the swirling barrier he could see the liche leading Aliathra to the cauldron. He would have to act now, or it would all have been for nothing.

Laying a hand on the magical barrier, Eltharion knew at once that he lacked the knowledge to unmake it, so he again fell back upon the his warrior's instincts. The Fangsword had served him well these many long years; it would not fail him now. Taking up the weapon in a two-handed grip, Eltharion thrust the sword's point into the barrier. The magic crackled and spat as the two made contact, the runes upon the Fangsword glowing an angry red as their magic fought Arkhan's enchantment. For a moment, nothing happened; then a section of the barrier melted away from the ancient blade and Eltharion pushed his way through into the ring of the Nine Daemons.

Behind him, Mannfred von Carstein's eyes flicked open.

Eldyra awoke, alone and weaponless, in a dank parody of a nobleman's hall. The carpet was mildewed, the walls hung with tapestries of flayed skin, and the only light came from candles whose tallow had the unmistakable stench of dead flesh.

'Welcome.' The voice was cold and precise, with the slightest hint of an accent Eldyra couldn't quite place.

Spinning round to face the source, the princess saw a thin, immaculately-clothed figure step from the room's shadowed eaves. He seemed human enough at first glance, but for the pallor of his skin and the predatory cast of his eyes. Eldyra grasped for a sword that was no longer buckled at her waist, then sprang forward, fist clenched to strike the vampire.

As the blow was about to land, a chorus of sibilant voices coursed through Eldyra's mind, the cacophony agonising in its volume and intensity. Eldyra flinched away from the vampire, clasping her hands over her ears and falling to her knees. At once, the sound stopped. Taking a deep breath – her first, she realised with horror, since she had awoken – Eldyra looked up at her tormentor. The vampire hadn't moved, but was regarding her with amusement.

'You are one of us now,' the vampire told her with a sharp smile, 'and our lord does not permit us to fight one another. Welcome to Drakenhof castle.'













Mannfred von Carstein watched through slitted eyes as Eltharion cast aside his battered helm and passed into the circle of the Nine Daemons. With a snarl, the vampire heaved aside the deadweight that had once been Stormwing, and pounced at the gap in the magical barrier.

He was too slow. With a ripple, the barrier healed its wound, sealing Eltharion inside the Nine Daemons, and isolating Mannfred on the outside. Biting back his frustration, the vampire probed at the wall before him, but it was old and powerful magic, and the Lord of Sylvania could find no weakness.

Wailing spirits swirling around him, Mannfred slammed his fist against the barrier and watched, unable to intervene, as Eltharion closed with his prey. The blade of the elf's sword melted away as the enchantments set within the steel collapsed. The Fangsword had breached the barrier, but that had been its final act. Without pause, Eltharion cast down the smoking hilt and lunged, weaponless, at Arkhan.

The liche was standing at the edge of the cauldron, the skeletal fingers of one hand wound through Aliathra's hair, forcing her head and torso over the vessel's rim; his other held a bone dagger at her throat. In the centre of the cauldron, Volkmar hung limp against the chains that bound him.

Should he alert the liche? Mannfred wondered. He dismissed the thought. Let Arkhan fend for himself. His usefulness had passed.

Arkhan needed no warning. Without hesitation, the liche released his grip on both Aliathra and the dagger, and reached for Alakanash. Unprepared for her sudden freedom, the princess staggered, struck her head on the cauldron and dropped stunned to the ground. Alakanash flared briefly with light, but then fell inert as one gauntleted hand knocked the staff from his grasp, and another locked around his bony neck.

'Release me!' Arkhan demanded.

Eltharion did not reply, but brought a second hand up to join the first. The elf hoisted Arkhan off his feet and slammed him against the side of the cauldron. Mannfred could hear the scraping of steel against bone as the elf sought to snap the liche's neck.

'Very well,' Arkhan intoned, and wrapped his skeletal fingers around one of Eltharion's vambraces. Immediately, Mannfred saw flakes of rust rise from the metal. In a heartbeat, the entropic curse spread across the steel and into the flesh beneath. The gauntlets locked about Arkhan's throat warped and cracked; the elf's flesh grew parched and withered, his hair grey and brittle. Then, the witch-lights of the liche's eyes flashed once, and Eltharion the Grim, Warden of Tor Yvresse, exploded into a cloud of dust.

Good riddance, thought Mannfred, and again bent his will to breaching the barrier. He would not let the liche thwart him on the brink of victory!

The vampire saw that Aliathra had risen unsteadily to her feet to face Arkhan. 'My father will destroy you for this,' she said flatly.

There was no fear in her voice, Mannfred noted, just a weary acceptance, laced with steel. He would have thought that the slaughter of the princess' rescuer would have driven her to despair, but there was no sign of it in her manner. The vampire found himself approving of her defiance – anything to bedevil the liche.

'Your father is already dead,' Arkhan told her, reclaiming his dagger. 'My allies have seen to that.'

Aliathra's gaze did not falter. 'For all your power, you know nothing.'

'We shall see.'

Arkhan reached forward to seize Aliathra's tresses once again. The princess didn't resist, and instead stepped forward to press her bound hands against the liche's chest. There was a brief flare of white light and Arkhan recoiled as if burnt.

'What have you done?' Arkhan demanded, regathering his composure. With a twist of his arm, he forced Aliathra over the cauldron once more.

'You'll find out,' the Everchild spat.

With a dry rasp of anger, Arkhan drew the dagger across Aliathra's throat, and royal blood sprayed forth. Some ran down the liche's bony arms, or spattered against the skirts of Volkmar's robes, but most of it flowed into the cauldron, where it mingled with the blood of the Fay Enchantress. Abandoning the elf's still-twitching body, Arkhan reverently took the Claw of Nagash from a casket at the cauldron's base.

'Endrek, melis savar!' the liche shouted, and the blood in the cauldron began to boil. Arkhan turned to face Mannfred for the first time. 'Rejoice, last of the Von Carsteins, for our master will soon rise.'

'Let me in!' Mannfred demanded.

'So that you can subvert the ritual to your own purposes?' Arkhan's tone was contemptuous. 'I think not.'

Mannfred went berserk and assailed the barrier with every weapon at his disposal. He struck at it with sorcery, with his sword, and even with his talons, but could make no impression.

Almost as maddening was that the liche paid him no heed. Instead, Arkhan walked calmly to Volkmar's side. At his gesture, the web of chains binding the high priest shifted, raising the unconscious figure's forearm at right angles to his body.

'Azkal, mek Nagash,' chanted Arkhan, pressing his dagger against Volkmar's outstretched wrist. *'Azkal, Azkal.'* The blade glowed green, and Arkhan jerked it down. The chains went taut as the limb briefly resisted, but the liche's blade would not be denied.

Volkmar, roused by the sudden agony, bellowed in pain as his severed hand fell away into the cauldron. Wordlessly, Arkhan

abandoned the dagger and pressed the Claw of Nagash against Volkmar's gushing stump.

The moment the hand was brought into contact, its fingers began to move, clenching and unclenching as if testing their strength. Arkhan let go of the hand, and it remained in place, talons raking at the air.

'Ezkel mek endrekel!' Arkhan intoned, taking up Alakanash and raising it high. In response, tendrils of dark magic burst from the Claw of Nagash. For a moment, they swayed back and forth through the air, like serpents seeking prey. Then they twisted back around and burrowed into the flesh around Volkmar's bloody wrist.

The Sigmarite screamed and shook against his chains as Nagash's claw bound itself to his own ravaged arm. Blood spurted as the tendrils of magic burrowed their way back outward. Lashing and flailing, they wound themselves around Volkmar's upper arm, then darted across to where Morikhane hung loose on the priest's spare frame. From there, the tendrils grew in number and spread across the remainder of Volkmar's body, boring into his chest and limbs, and leaving a writhing mass of sinuous dark magic in their wake. Within moments, all Mannfred could see of the priest were bulging eyes and a mouth gaping in an agonised scream. Then the scream stopped as the tendrils wrapped themselves around Volkmar's head and forced their way down his throat.

There was no longer any sign of Volkmar, just a pulsing mass of dark magic, whose tendrils spread and expanded as they feasted on the cauldron's blood. Chains thrashed and snapped as the mass grew larger. Moving carefully, Arkhan removed the Fellblade from its cradle of bone, and held it, point outstretched towards the cauldron.

'Eznek malikal!'

The sword rose from Arkhan's grasp and hung in mid-air for a moment. Then, with a flat *crack*, the weapon burst into a thousand glimmering shards which flew forward and burrowed their way into the pulsating magic. The Fellblade had once slain Nagash; now it restored him to life.

Outside the circle, Mannfred felt the wind pick up and the screeching of the spirits rise to a deafening crescendo. He felt the ground buck and heave under his feet, as Arkhan's ritual clawed open the door between the worlds of the living and the dead. Before him, the eyes of the Nine Daemons glowed with hatred as the magics binding them to the stone weakened just enough to grant them a tantalising glimpse of freedom.

Thunder rolled across the skies above, the Nine Daemons grew still once more, the magical barrier at last collapsed and the mass of magic dispersed like smoke on a breeze. When it cleared, Mannfred could see no sign of Volkmar, nor the chains that had bound him. Now a much larger and grander skeletal figure stood at the cauldron's now-dry heart, orbs of magic floating about him like will-o'-the-wisps.

For a moment, the figure stood motionless and silent. Then, green witch-fires glimmered to life in his eyes. Arkhan prostrated himself, Alakanash outstretched in offering.

'Master...' he whispered.

Nagash stepped down from the cauldron and took Alakanash from Arkhan's grasp.

'YOU HAVE DONE WELL, MY SERVANT.' Mannfred did not merely hear Nagash's words – they echoed through his mind. *'THE GREAT WORK CAN BEGIN.'*

The vampire felt a pressure upon his thoughts as the Great Necromancer's gaze swept over him. At once, Mannfred realised that he had lost; he could no more control the creature before him than he could command the gods.

'DO YOU SERVE ME?'

'Yes,' said Mannfred, falling to his knees, and hoping that Nagash would not detect the bitterness in his heart. 'I serve you... master.'







Though Arkhan the Black had made no mention of it to Mannfred, Nagash's resurrection had been but the first step on a long and dangerous road. From beyond the veil of death, the Great Necromancer had foreseen the rising power of Chaos, had predicted the anarchy it would loose, and had fixed his mind to thwart its ascension. Nagash's entire existence had been a quest to impose dry, predictable order upon the world, and he would suffer no interference, not even from the gods themselves; he had not striven these long millennia only to see his rightful realm corrupted by their ever-changing whims. Thus had Nagash not only commanded Arkhan to bring about his resurrection many centuries earlier than he had first intended, but had also bidden the liche to gather artefacts that would allow a far greater work.

For thousands of years, the Great Vortex of Ulthuan had siphoned the winds of magic from the world, diminishing the power of Chaos, and the sorceries that relied on it. Now Nagash sought to free Shyish, the Wind of Death, from the Great Vortex's embrace, and bind it to himself. He would become magic given form, an avatar of death mighty enough to challenge the Chaos Gods and forever break their influence upon the world.

All around the circle, the Books of Nagash suddenly snapped open. Arkhan had barely drawn upon their power during the ritual of resurrection, but now the tomes sprung to activity. Pages of blood-inked skin riffled back and forth as Nagash reclaimed the magic he had set within the volumes long ago. Ancient spirits shrieked as they were torn free of their aeons-long prisons. They swirled around the Great Necromancer, ghostly comets orbiting a great darkness, ever seeking to escape, but unable to deny the implacable will that bound them. One by one, Nagash drew these desperate spirits to him, snuffing them out with a pinch of his fingers, and devouring their essence. Nagash cast his hands skywards and a pillar of darkness pierced the heavens. The last of the spirits were drawn behind and swept into the swirling thunderheads. As lightning cracked across the heavens, the Great Necromancer spoke the final words of power, reached his magics deep into the heart of the Great Vortex, and tore out his prize.

The world writhed in response. In Ulthuan, the Annulii Mountains trembled, light flared from the waystones and the seas about the Isle of the Dead turned black. In Naggaroth, purple flames swept through secret shrines to Ereth Khial, and a ghostly city screamed its way into existence atop the ruins of Har Kaldra. Swarms of khepra beetles overran Nehekhara's temples, and ancient monuments that had dominated the desert for millennia



sank beneath the sands. Settra the Imperishable railed at his priests, demanding an explanation that none could provide. In Altdorf, panic reigned as the Amethyst College crumbled away into dust, and the spectral remains of long-dead wizards stalked the streets. Deep below Karak Azul, ancient runes glowed briefly in warning, then faded into blackness. And in every kingdom beneath the sun and stars, in any place where the living had once breathed their last, the dead arose.

From ancient cairns, burial pits and shallow graves the dead came, clawing their way to the surface with worm-eaten fingers; mindless save for the compulsion that drove them to wakefulness. No will drove them, not yet, for all of Nagash's effort was bent to controlling the magic he had seized. The Great Necromancer had no attention for them, but they would soon form his armies. Or at least, that had been the plan.

Had Nagash's rebirth been flawless, his great work would have succeeded. However, unbeknownst to either, Arkhan and Mannfred had erred. The ritual of resurrection had called for divine blood, and such had Arkhan provided. Volkmar had been a scion of Sigmar Heldenhammer of the Unberogens; Morgiana le Fay, a daughter of Ladrielle, the Lady of the Lake. Most important of all, however, had been the blood of Aliathra, Everchild of Ulthuan. Born of the union between the Everqueen Alarielle and Finubar the Phoenix King, the legacy of both Isha and Asuryan had run in her veins – except Finubar was not her true father.

All in Ulthuan knew of the bond that had tied Alarielle and Prince Tyrion since the bloody battles of Finuval Plain. However, only a handful knew of their secret trysts many years earlier, in the days when the marriage of state between Everqueen and Phoenix King still held sway. Thus was Aliathra not what many – including Mannfred and Arkhan – thought her to be. She was not the Everchild, but a mere bastard of Aenarion's line. Her blood bore no trace of Asuryan's divine blessing; rather it hung heavy with Aenarion's curse. That curse now raced like poison through Nagash's body, sapping his strength and dimming his will.

Arkhan and Mannfred looked on, powerless, as the Great Necromancer staggered beneath the weight of the magics. Arkhan waited obediently for instructions that did not come. Mannfred, by contrast, would have taken malicious pleasure in Nagash's plight, were his own existence not imperilled by it. Yet neither could offer assistance, for the powers at play were too great for either to control.

'It has begun, has it not?' The sneering words echoed through Teclis' mind.

'It has,' Teclis replied quietly, speaking aloud though he knew his ally could pick the words from his thoughts. 'Aliathra has played her part, and Nagash has played his. The vortex is destabilised; your time will come soon.'

Teclis knew he would bear the guilt of Aliathra's death for whatever years remained to him. He could have rescued his niece had he chosen to do so, but Nagash's vassals would merely have sought another sacrifice in her stead, probably one in whom divine blood flowed true. Aliathra's impurity had bought them time.

The voice laughed. 'All these years, and I never suspected you capable of such ruthlessness.'

'We are all what circumstance requires of us, as well you know.'

'How pitiful. You cannot absolve yourself of the blood that stains your hands. You must taste of it, and relish the flavour; only then will it make you strong.'

'That manner of strength does not interest me.'

'Then it will be only a matter of time before you fail.'

'If that is so, why have you agreed to my plan?'

'Perhaps because it amuses me to see you discard your closest allies like pieces on a gaming board.'

'Winning the war to come will be as much about timing as strategy,' Teclis asserted, wondering which of them he was trying to convince. 'Had Nagash succeeded, he would have confronted the Dark Gods before the rest of us were prepared, and they would have destroyed him. Only fighting as one do we have a chance of success.'

'And your "heroic" brother?' the voice mocked. 'Is he not permitted to know your plan?'

'Tyrion most of all must play the part I have set for him. He has never understood the necessity of sacrifice. He believes that courage and steel can triumph over any threat. In trying to save everyone, he would doom us all.'

The voice grew darker, more threatening. 'Remember, nephew, that I am your ally in this only because it suits my purpose. If you attempt to manipulate me, I will flay the flesh from your bones.'

Teclis almost laughed at that. He was already manipulating his ally; only the other's arrogance prevented him from realising that this was so.

'If Tyrion discovers I sacrificed his daughter so that Nagash might live,' he replied bitterly, 'I doubt you will get the opportunity.'





In the skies above, the column of darkness began to dissipate, and wisps of death magic were snatched up by the winds and scattered across the surrounding lands. Nagash refused to give in at first – his monstrous pride would not allow it. Even as his strength declined, he wrestled with the roiling magic, tried to force it to his purpose. But it was not to be. Reluctantly, he realised that his body, mighty beyond mortal ken though it was, could not contain the power he had stolen. Another vessel would have to be found, one that could hoard the magic of death until his mortal form could be remade.

With a mighty thrust, Nagash drove Alakanash deep into the soil at his feet. Instantly, the magic found release, flowing along the staff and into the bedrock below.

The ground about the Nine Daemons cracked and fell away, leaving the stone circle isolated upon a towering pillar of rock. As the tremors spread, jagged ravines criss-crossed the withered layland, the freshly reanimated bodies of the elves of Tiranoc and Yvresse tumbling into the darkness below. For leagues around, the ground rumbled and split apart. Many miles distant, the walls of Castle Sternieste collapsed in an avalanche of stone as its foundations were torn apart. All across Sylvania, slabs of rock the size of townships vanished without a trace, swallowed by the hungry earth. With an ear-splitting boom and a chromatic flash, Gelt's wall of faith, the enchantment that had bound the whole of Sylvania, shattered into ten thousand sundered shards, never to recover.

Magic came rushing up through the cracks to fill the freshly opened canyons. At times it bubbled and flowed like water, at others it writhed and twitched like smoke on the breeze. Howling spirits, the dead of untold generations, were swept along in the arcane currents, and they clawed at the air as they strove to break free. Occasionally, one found a handhold upon the rocks, only to be pulled under again by the struggles of its desperate fellows. Soon the Nine Daemons were an island of stone amidst a sea of glowing magic. Sylvania was now, more than ever before, a land of the dead. Where once the magic of death had flowed to Ulthuan, and the Great Vortex, now it would flow to Sylvania.

Nagash looked out across the nightmarish landscape, his thoughts unreadable. For a moment, at the ritual's height, the Great Necromancer had tasted the godhood he sought, but the memory was ebbing away with the passing seconds. He could sense the hordes of undead stumbling mindlessly across the world, but he could not exert his will upon them. They were not an army waiting for his majestic command, but a leaderless rabble who would answer to any will strong enough to claim them.

There could be no war against the Chaos Gods, not yet. This was a setback, nothing more. The power of death was now one with the land of Sylvania, and the Great Necromancer had bound it with such enchantments that no other could claim it. Nagash would return to his ancestral home, to the Black Pyramid of Nehekhara. Within its walls he would purge the curse from his bones, and recuperate his weakened spirit as he had many times before. This would be no easy journey, for an ancient enmity lay between Nagash and Settra, the Great King of Nehekhara. War would be the only recourse, and the Great Necromancer knew that he was little match for the Khemrikhara. Furthermore, to pursue such a plan would take time, and the forces of Chaos already pressed close on the Old World's northern borders. To the god Nagash had so briefly been, such challenges were insignificant, but now he would need aid. Or more precisely, he would need servants. In ancient days, Nagash had been served by the Nine Dark Lords, the mightiest and most trustworthy of his minions. Now the time had come to forge that unholy fellowship anew and create the Mortarchs.

Only three of the original nine still dwelt within the realm of the living. Arkhan would serve as he always had – he knew no other way. Neferata, Mistress of the Silver Pinnacle, hated Nagash, but feared him even more; she too would obey without question. The wight lord Krell was the third survivor and he, like Arkhan, was unwavering in his loyalty, despite his ancient allegiance to the Chaos Gods.

Nagash's voice echoed on the winds of magic, whispering in the minds of those who had embraced his necromantic teachings. Some had worked knowingly in his cause for many centuries, others had been permitted the illusion of independence until this moment. Few heard Nagash's call as words, but all recognised his summons. Not all, however, paid heed. Zacharias the Ever-Living screamed his last as Nagash burnt out his brain for daring to think himself the Great Necromancer's equal.

Dietrich von Dohl, the Crimson Lord of Sylvania, and Mannfred's only true rival in that land, erred by presuming to make demands of Nagash in return, and withered to a pile of corpse-dust as the Great Necromancer sundered his sustaining magics. The Great Necromancer would suffer neither challenge nor rejection.

Those who accepted did so for their own reasons, and felt their power redoubled as Nagash bequeathed a portion of the magic he had grounded in Sylvania's bedrock. Mannfred von Carstein pledged himself because he saw no other way of reclaiming anything of value from the ashes of his own schemes, and received as reward a dread abyssal drawn from the depths of the Nehekharan underworld.

Luthor Harkon, Pirate King of the Vampire Coast, accepted out of boredom more than any other motivation. Dieter Helsnicht, the self-styled Doom Lord of Middenheim, joined with Nagash for the opportunity to learn of necromancy from he who was its creator. Walach Harkon, first of the Blood Dragons, saw the opportunity for glorious battle and seized it without hesitation. Deep in the Grey Mountains lurked the spirit of a once-great enchanter. This was a creature of raw power, its mind shattered by a recent defeat, and vowed its service on the condition that the Great Necromancer would see its memory restored, and that it would be Nameless no more.

Only one amongst the nine was recruited from beyond the veil of true death. Nagash knew that he would need a capable emissary in the north if he were to hold the forces of Chaos at bay. Mannfred could perhaps have performed this task, had he been entirely trustworthy, but Nagash sought another von Carstein to serve in his stead. Thus did the Great Necromancer restore Vlad von Carstein to existence. They knew each other of old, and Vlad neither trusted nor feared Nagash. Yet still he agreed to serve, for the Great Necromancer could return the one thing that Vlad could not restore – the life of his lost love, Isabella. Thus was the pact struck, and the nine Mortarchs were made whole. None of them were quite as they had been before, for they had been irrevocably altered by Nagash's power.

At Nagash's instruction, Vlad marched north. His mission was to oppose the Chaos hordes as they spilled over the border from ravaged Kislev. He travelled alone at first, but an army soon grew about him as the denizens of Sylvania recognised that their one, true master had returned. The task before Vlad was a weighty one, but he would not have to accomplish it alone. Walach Harkon and the Knights of Blood Keep were already on the march, and the Nameless would soon follow.

As three of the nine headed north, the others converged on Nehekhara. For the initial stage of the journey, only Arkhan and Mannfred were at the side of Nagash but, as they drew nearer to their destination, their forces would soon grow. Neferata and Krell were many days' march to the east but, if all went well, would reach their master before the conquest of Nehekhara began. Helsnicht was already journeying south atop a bat-winged steed, and Harkon's Lustrian fleets had slipped anchor.

Far to the south, Settra's priests brought word of a great darkness descending upon Khemri. The Great King listened to the tidings with a mixture of anticipation and fear. Settra had fought Nagash many times, and even when those battles had ended in the Khemrikhara's favour, the cost had been high. Summoning his generals, Settra the Imperishable, Great King of Khemri, ordered that the temple guardians be woken, and his legions be readied for battle.

The last war for Nehekhara was nigh.

It was intolerable! Mannfred von Carstein raged silently. Nagash had granted him power, true enough – Mannfred could feel raw magic crackling through his body, could see many things that had previously been hidden from his sight – but what use was power if he was no longer his own master?

That wasn't even the worst of it, Mannfred conceded. Bad enough that he had been so effortlessly outmanoeuvred by Arkhan the Black, but now, with Vlad restored to existence, even his rule over Sylvania was threatened. Nagash's campaign in Nehekhara could take years, decades even, to resolve. In that time, Vlad would be consolidating his hold on the land that was Mannfred's by right, frittering away a power base that had taken centuries to establish.

There was also the prospect of personal danger to consider. Vlad was no fool. He must have known of the part Mannfred had played in his death nearly five hundred years earlier, and was unlikely to have forgiven that betrayal.

There was only one thing to be done. Vlad von Carstein would have to be eliminated. Ambition demanded it; survival required it. Vengeance against Arkhan, and against Nagash, would have to wait.

The only question was how such a thing could be accomplished. Vlad had ever been the mightiest of the von Carstein lineage and, even if Nagash tolerated a direct challenge, Mannfred was far from confident of victory. No, guile and patience would serve him now as they had before, Mannfred decided. His enemies would rue the day they had chosen to lock wits with the rightful Lord of Sylvania!







CHAPTER 3

Death at the World's Edge

Spring 2524 – Winter 2524



Deep in her own thoughts, Neferata wandered the halls alone, gazing at her exquisite surroundings. Once, these chambers had been no more than dwarf mines, but through her endeavours she had turned them into an extravagant palace, an echo of the splendours of long-lost Lahmia. Shafts cut into the mountainside admitted a delicate play of silvered moonlight – for centuries Neferata had held power here, basking in the comforts due an immortal queen. Herein she had spent many delightful nights, holding court with her handmaidens attending to her every need as she sprawled about that opulent perch, a luxurious aerie set on top of the world.

The high peaks of the northern Worlds Edge Mountains were a harsh and savage wilderness, but enchantments and illusions had long protected her realm. From the Silver Pinnacle, Neferata's minions rode out to influence all corners of the Old World. There was only one cause that could have interrupted the comfortable situation that Neferata had created for herself. There was only one reason she would willingly abandon the palace she had worked so hard to furnish. Nagash, the first and greatest of the necromancers, was returning.

Neferata had pieced together enough of the signs to anticipate what was coming. She knew that Nagash, the one who had written the books from which she herself had learned the secret of eternal life, was once again nearing resurrection. From what her spies reported, Neferata believed that Arkhan's rituals – which would start any day now – would restore the Great Necromancer. Neferata could already sense a stirring in the spirit realm, an almighty presence solidifying. That the most powerful of necromantic sorcerers might once more stride the world was enough to quicken Neferata's pulse. Or would have done so if the first of the vampires had not left behind the path of mortality. There was blood in her veins, fluids she had consumed and tainted for her own use, but it did not flow. Only dark magics coursed through her body, and now they surged – Neferata felt herself swept up in some great purpose, a feeling she had not experienced since she last served as a captain of Nagashizzar long ago.

Neferata, the self-styled Queen of the Night, did not have all the answers, a fact which continually galled her. She knew much about what was going on around the world, and she guessed even more. From atop the Silver Pinnacle she was like a spider sitting on a web; news and rumours the subtle vibrations of the silken threads. Her handmaidens, each a beautiful vampiress created by Neferata herself, had infiltrated the kingdoms of men. There, amidst royal courts and upper societies, they spied upon the affairs of Bretonnia, the Empire, Tilea, Estalia and the Border Princes. Neferata had kept watch over her kind as well, keeping a close eye on their many nefarious schemes. While Neferata disdained Mannfred, a feeling he quite reciprocated, she had always known him as the most ambitious of the surviving vampires. Her spies within Sylvania had kept her well informed. The von Carsteins were no amateurs at intrigue and manipulation, but this was a medium that she herself had taught them, and she had ever been the true master.

With so much information reported back to the Silver Pinnacle it had not taken Neferata long to discern possible motives. After all, what other purpose could an alliance between Mannfred and Arkhan serve? It made her smile to think of Mannfred being so manipulated, sure that his pride had convinced him he could use the ancient liche to some advantage of his own. She guessed how that would end. And then there had been Gelt's barrier of faith. This was unforeseen, and Neferata found it unsettling, for

it had severed communications with many of her most trusted servants. But it must worry Mannfred far more. Only when Arkhan and Mannfred marched out from Sylvania's walls had Neferata regained her contacts. Yet none of Arkhan or Mannfred's forays had yet approached her, nor had either of them asked for her assistance. And thus her own situation was growing uncomfortable.

Neferata knew that Arkhan trusted her as little as he did Mannfred, perhaps less. The fact that he had not bothered to contact her, or involve her in Nagash's impending return, was in itself ominous. While vampires had proven useful to Nagash in the past, they had also failed the Great Necromancer enough times to warrant the fear that had steadily grown within her. When Arkhan finally called upon her, she was not entirely sure if it would be to enlist her aid or as a foe at the gates.



She knew what she needed to do, yet Neferata could not bring herself to leave her sanctum – it was the attack that convinced her to move. While she pondered her course of action, an arcane squall blew from the north and stalled directly over the Silver Pinnacle. While the misshapen and grotesque clouds swirled over the peak's tip, daemons appeared around the mountainside. All her magical defences of illusion were laid bare before such foes as these. The main gate was besieged, blasted time and again by blue-flamed enchantments while the lesser entrances were bombarded by hell-forged artillery. Not even gromril-plated gates could withstand such a battering for long. But the armoured portals were still standing when claw-limbed creatures materialised within the lower deeps and began fighting their way upwards. Neferata sent forth her Lahmian Guard against them, but the mummified skeletons could do little more than slow the daemons down.

Just as Neferata prepared to join the fray, the winds of magic shifted and the storm disappeared. Without the unnatural energies to support them, the daemons too faded from sight. While she knew such attacks had been happening increasingly across the lands, Neferata felt sure that this assault had not been happenstance. The Dark Gods had purposefully guided that storm and only good fortune, or her foe's capricious nature, had seen it dissipate before the Silver Pinnacle was overrun. Enemies were moving against her, while her erstwhile allies were either unsure of her allegiance, or, perhaps, were plotting against her.

Plots within plots wove through Neferata's agile mind. War was coming and it would not do to join the wrong side. With a wave of her fingers she beckoned her handmaidens, sending them off to summon her army and to break out her ancient treasures. She smiled to herself – a look that those who knew her recognised as far more dangerous than any bestial snarl. Neferata still held a bargaining chip, for she had observed something that Arkhan had clearly missed.

Neferata knew that the ritual would work, that Nagash would rise – but she also knew what the old fool had failed to note. Arkhan placed too much faith in the Everchild's heritage. Nagash would return to this realm nowhere near his full strength. Capable of wielding only a fraction of his eldritch might, the Great Necromancer would need incredible amounts of raw arcane power in order to regain his unnatural vitality. Until he could absorb those energies, Nagash would be vulnerable.

While she watched her minions make ready to march, Neferata weighed her choices carefully.

Imentet inspected the newly raised ranks, knowing she would be questioned soon.

'Forgive me if I speak out of line, Imentet,' Bellatash said, bowing low, 'but do you know why the queen has commanded me to raise the armies? Is it war?'

It was well done, thought Imentet. First off, Bellatash was demure. This did not fool Imentet, for she had seen the lithe form of Bellatash lift up and hurl fully armoured knights. Secondly, her graceful approach and supplicant posture had also shown proper deference. As first of Neferata's handmaidens, this was Imentet's due.

'I know not, Bellatash – but it would be wise to prepare as if it was,' replied Imentet as she finished her inspection.

Bellatash was the last of the two dozen handmaidens that Imentet had been commanded to check upon. Later, Neferata would want to know all the details – who was most reluctant to march, who was eager, and so forth.

Like all of Neferata's get, Imentet was a master of perception, picking out agitation by listening for leaps in heart rates, distinguishing the slightest nostril flare or the narrowing of eyes. Of course Neferata's court was infinitely harder to read than mere human aristocracy. Each vampiress had been taught the Lahmian arts of manipulation, deception and the subtle magics of courtly seductions. Yet Imentet had noted more than she was told. Based on her reports, it was Imentet's guess that not all the handmaidens would be deemed fit to join the march tomorrow evening. In that fierce hierarchy, only the most loyal stayed in Neferata's court for long.

Neferata took a last look upon the majestic peak of the Silver Pinnacle, the towering spire framed by the unnaturally full Morrslieb. After that lingering view, she did not again glance backward, but instead turned to the task at hand. The great host of the Silver Pinnacle issued forth.

As time was of the essence, Neferata and her army travelled non-stop, day as well as night. During the few instances that the weak sun broke through the lowering clouds, Neferata summoned an arcane cloud of blackness that shielded those averse to its rays. The first of the vampires was borne upon a fearsome beast of bone and magic at the fore of the mighty host. The sounds of cold, trilling laughter marked the presence of her court. Immediately behind came the Lahmian Guard, their bronze scale armour and ceremonial helmets relics from the golden age of a distant desert land. Behind them, in stark contrast, came the remaining skeletal legions; nameless regiments without honour, raised for duty alone, their frayed black banners snapping in the high winds. Further back creaked a miles-long caravan, for Neferata had many possessions with which she could not bear to part.

Neferata had made her decision. She had long known that Nagash would return, for how could the Master of Death ever truly die? She had pledged herself to his cause at Nagashizzar, when they waged war against the armies of Nehekhara, the land that had exiled them both. She had fled his wrath over the vampires' failure. Now, thousands of years later, she was presented with a choice: betray Nagash to his foes, or seek to gain redemption, once more earning a place at his side.

In the end, Neferata knew she must side with Nagash, for she was all too aware what he would do upon his return. It had been three thousand years since she had last stepped upon the sands of Nehekhara, but that land was never far from her thoughts. Although she had travelled far since her exile by the cursed King Alcadizaar, it had ever been her homeland. She longed for the lost splendour of ancient Lahmia, its well-ordered and statue-lined streets; the magnificent golden tombs, and above all, the glory of the Temple of Blood. While she had tried to recreate its wanton grace, in her inert heart she knew how pale her best efforts were when compared to that matchless opulence. Now little more than sand-strewn ruins, it was still her wish to return to Nehekhara, to stand once more upon Lahmia's foundations – and to wreak vengeance upon those who dared drive her out. This was her most burning desire.

Over the long ages Neferata had many times used her subtle manipulations to persuade her chosen champions to sow the seeds of her revenge. It was she who fanned the flames of the crusades across Bretonnia and lured foolhardy Border Princelings to set off on so many treasure quests. She had sent many armies to the desert to die. But Settra and his minions were not so easily bested. Neferata shuddered when she thought of the magnitude of his rage, and for the boundless hatred he must feel towards Nagash. Sooner or later, the Lord of Undeath would march upon Nehekhara, and she would do anything to ensure that she was by Nagash's side when he did so.

Before she could bring her armies to aid any re-conquest of Nehekhara, Neferata realised she must first gain Nagash's trust. Her instinct had been to warn Arkhan that his ritual would not work as completely as he imagined, but the ancient liche was not apt to believe her and, worse still, was likely to blame *her* for his own shortcomings. He was, as ever, concerned with remaining Nagash's first and most loyal lieutenant. It would be better for her own cause, Neferata reasoned, to arrive with help than to point out where Arkhan had gone wrong. And she had long marked where she could obtain just such a power source as Nagash would need.

Thousands of years ago, before founding her dwellings at the Silver Pinnacle, Neferata had wandered. At first she sought refuge in the Dark Lands, for there she need never feel the curse of the sun upon her undying flesh. Yet the towering peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains called to her, as they had done since she was but a mortal. Ancient Lahmia had always stood apart from the rest of Nehekhara; the capital city of an isolated province, cut off from the rest of the nation by the southern extension of the Worlds Edge Mountains. In her youth she had oft travelled to the temples carved into those formidable peaks, their breathtaking vistas overlooking the desert and distant Lahmia. During her searches for a suitable mountaintop palace, she had stumbled across the Lost Pass of the dwarfs, an ancient highway through the peaks that had been wrought by the Ancestor Gods themselves. There lay hidden treasure hoards and artefacts, safeguarded until, according to the legends of the dwarfs, the day those deities would return out of the stone once more to aid their children.

Long did Neferata wander those paths, marvelling at the master craftsmanship, standing in awe at the pure arcane power that was bound into the very stone itself. But sorceress though she was, she had not the skill to unlock such might – only Nagash might be capable of usurping such energies to his own fell purpose. At that time, she was still fleeing from his wrath. In the end, she determined that the site would not serve as her nest: the runic barriers were too formidable for her minions to penetrate. So, after plundering two choice artefacts – a master key that would open the secret gates wrought by the dwarfs, and a gromril and gold tiara – she resealed the hidden gates and added her own illusions to those most potent of runes. But as she left

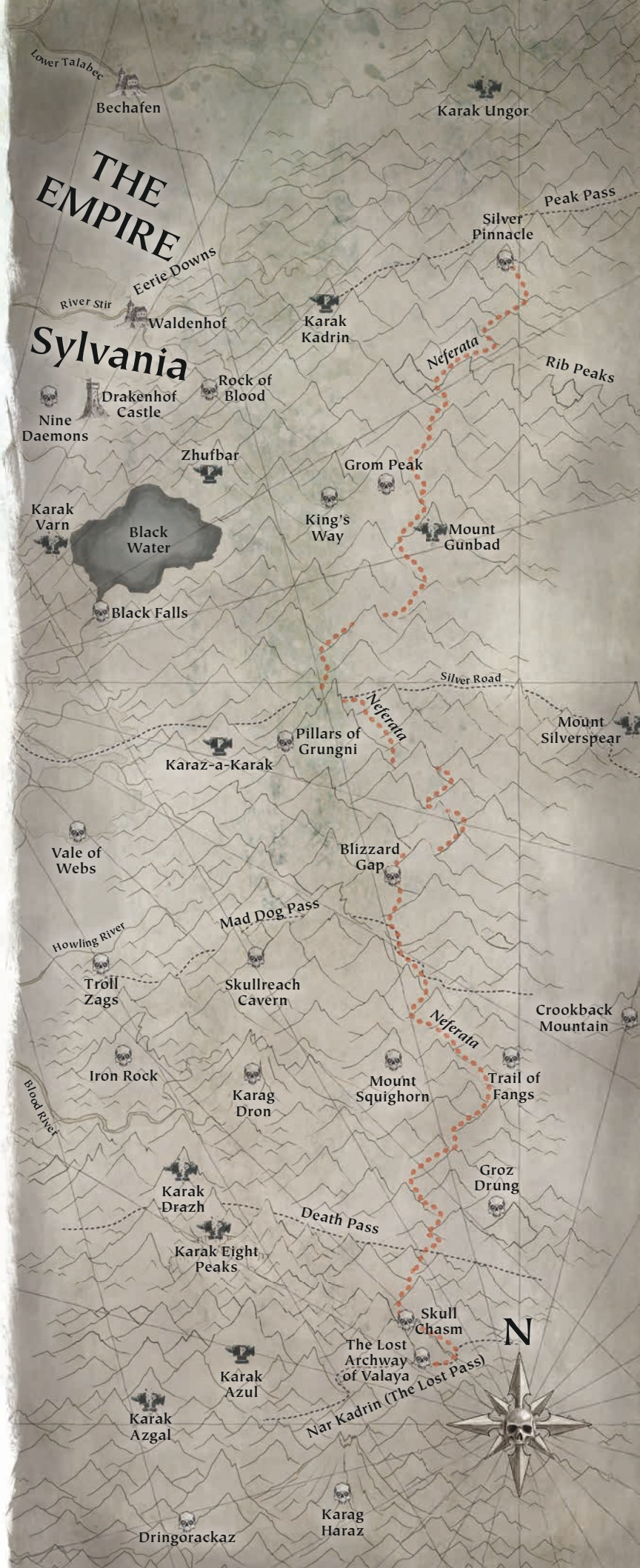
to try her luck further to the north, she knew that her discovery would reap benefits in the years to come and so she hid the knowledge with an avarice akin to the gold-lust of the mountain folk.

Now, thousands of years later, Neferata led her army southwards, searching again for the Lost Pass. Even now she could feel in her corrupt veins that Arkhan's ritual was nearing completion. She must make speed to obtain the dwarf artefact she sought in time to present it to her newly risen master, at once appeasing his wrath and securing her own position in the future hierarchy.

Travel through the Worlds Edge Mountains was never easy, yet what were snowstorms or bitter cold to the undead? Steadily they plodded on, but the way south was fraught with more peril than just deadly weather. They crossed the Silver Road, avoiding its western reaches, which lay too close to the roused might of Karaz-a-Karak. Yet they veered too near to the Dark Lands, and on the Trail of Fangs packs of wolf riders began to track the undead host. Imentet, favoured of all handmaidens, directed a contingent of spirits and dire wolves to serve as a rearguard. This resulted in a series of running battles where a cacophony of lupine howls, living and undead, resounded off the mountainside.

In several places the undead host expected to have to force their way through, but no foes were seen, save a few hunting beasts. They found the pass of Blizzard Gap clear, and the dwarf watchtowers that lined its steep cliffsides recently cast down. Neferata was wary of trouble from the skaven of Crookback Mountain, for although it lay to the east of her path, she felt sure that its keen-eyed sentries would have marked their travel. Yet the word of her own spies proved true: they claimed that the infernal race was deep underground, either recovering from battles in Tilea and Estalia, or gathering their strength for some new devilry. Not until just north of Death Pass did their column come upon serious opposition. There, they found the night goblins amassing, issuing out of the caves that riddled that region and marching southwards for some devious purpose of their own. They were not, however, expecting to be beset by an undead host unbowed by the cold and advancing at speed. One greenskin army after another was routed in quick succession, their vast numbers scattered in turn across the mountainsides.

And so Neferata's host crossed Death Pass, driving numerous cowardly goblin tribes before them and raising the corpses of those too dim-witted to make way. It seemed that the army might reach its destination without a costly, delaying battle. Though as fate would have it, when the peaks she sought were visible in the distance, her outriders returned with word of a formidable greenskin army, formed up and awaiting them in Skull Chasm.



Skull Chasm was a notorious site where, game trails and old mining tracks funnelled down from the steep slopes and descended into an enormous fissure. Sheer cliffs rose up on either side of the pathway and the chasm floor was littered with tumbledown boulders and scattered bones. Without entering one of the many caves that opened at the base of the cliffs, there was no way out of the mountainous ravine until the trail passed the gap's centre, where several time-worn paths wound out of the cleft while the main roadway continued southwards. Skull Chasm was an important crossroads in that region, and was aptly named, as it was an ambush site of ill repute, as the many bones attested.

It was at Skull Chasm that great numbers of greenskins had gathered. Swept before the unexpected undead advance, many tribes had sought refuge in the caves that lined that pass – a mix of natural cavities and abandoned dwarf mineworks. Choosing which underground passage to enter was a huge risk, as no few now served as lairs for hungry beasts and nameless horrors. However, despite their losses, vast numbers of goblins cowered in the subterranean darkness, where they would have stayed had not one amongst their number rose up to rally them.

Grulsik was everything a night goblin warboss needed to be: devious, bold and full up to the tip of his pointy hood with wicked plans. He had used his considerable cunning, and sharp blades, to seize control of the Moonclaw tribe. Like others of their kind, the Moonclaws had been swept up in the recent surge, leaving their hunting grounds to join the growing flood of greenskins that was pouring out of mountain lairs all across the Worlds Edge Mountains. Some tribes flowed north to follow Grimgor, but many more, including the Moonclaws, were making their way towards Skarsnik, Warlord of the Eight Peaks. Rumours abounded that he had major plans in the offing and many night goblins rushed to join the most legendary of their kind. It was said that Skarsnik's Waaagh! would start any day now, and that he had vowed it would not stop until he fed the High King of the dwarfs to his pet squig.

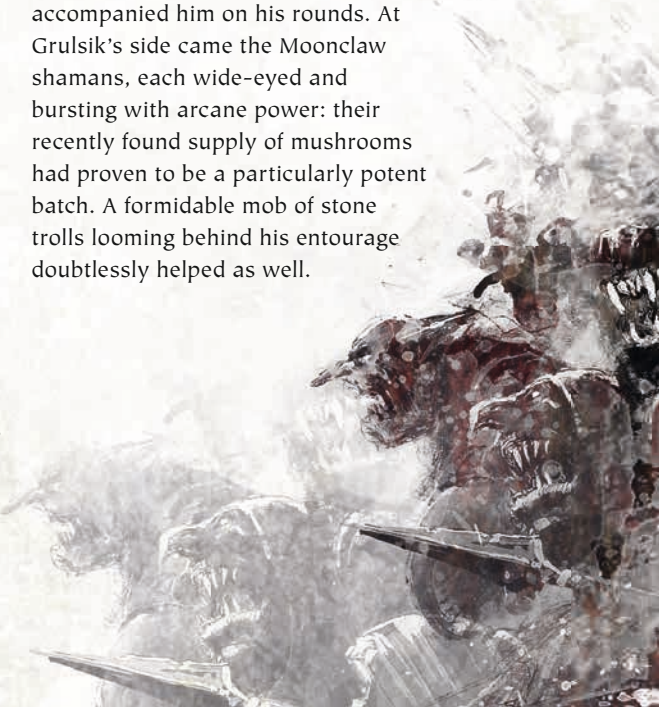
At the time, Grulsik had been directing his followers, his mind busy with concerns over the crossing of Death Pass, as well as devising schemes to allow his tribe to stay ahead of their many rivals travelling in their wake. It was Grulsik's intention to be among the first to offer his banners to Skarsnik, warning the great warboss of the shortcomings of those tribes that were following. But all such thoughts were driven from him as calamity struck the rear guard of his marching force. When Grulsik first heard the shrill cries, he assumed that the Moonclaws were under attack, but it turned out that they were simply overtaken. Panic stricken members of the Bloodpeaks and Webskullz tribes came hurtling down the pass, their desperate scramble to flee sending his own lads into flight. In no time at all, the mountain paths and surrounding slopes were covered with scattering greenskins. And then he saw the attackers.

Here and there, hacking down fleeing greenskins, rode skeletal horsemen. On the northern ridge, seemingly emerging out of its own dark shadow, an undead processional could be seen winding down the broken pathway.

That had begun a three-day flight southward. It had been a hard journey, as Grulsik and the core of his tribe had been forced to fight several times. Once, fell warriors on skeletal steeds overtook them, and Grulsik, through sheer force of will, turned several mobs to drive them back. Perhaps the fiercest clash, however, had come when the fleeing Moonclaws reached the narrow crossings of the Trail of Fangs at the same time as a rival mob, the Crookblades.

Only when they reached the depths of one of Skull Chasm's many caves did the greenskins' flight end. There, in a long disused mine shaft, Grulsik had taken stock of the situation. After some reconnoitering, his runners counted the better part of his own following scattered across nearby caverns, and they also reported a disorderly mix, including mobs from dozens of different tribes crowded into those subterranean labyrinths. It was at this point that Grulsik realised exactly how many greenskins had been on the march.

Shrewd as he was, it did not take Grulsik long to work out a plan. If he could round up and beat into line the hordes that now cowered in the dark, Grulsik and his Moonclaws could still win favourable attention from Skarsnik. He would simply march them all back up Death Pass and follow it to the east gate of Karak Eight Peaks. And, Grulsik reckoned, if the undead stayed on the same trail, they would pass by within the hour. If all the tribes attacked together, such a force could be easily overcome. With these thoughts in mind, he began rounds through the underground, doing his best 'rekrootin'. He went into many dozens of different caves, avoiding only those where his keen nose picked up the scent of something best left alone. This went spectacularly well, thanks in large part to the forces that accompanied him on his rounds. At Grulsik's side came the Moonclaw shamans, each wide-eyed and bursting with arcane power: their recently found supply of mushrooms had proven to be a particularly potent batch. A formidable mob of stone trolls looming behind his entourage doubtlessly helped as well.



Some of the scattered mobs, like the Moonhowlaz and the Bloodpeaks, had become separated from their tribal warbosses. These were the easiest for Grulsik to bully into joining his plan. He immediately sent out their wolf rider mobs to scout out Death Pass. Other recruits, like the Madmoonz tribe, were more reluctant. However, as the majority of mobs began following Grulsik's orders, and streamed out of the caves to assemble, it became harder and harder for all others to resist joining in. Even the Moonclaws' longtime rival, Mabbla Crooknose, could not keep his Crookblades tribe from throwing its lot in.

Even as the greenskins poured forth and filled up the southern end of Skull Chasm, the wolf riders returned to bring Grulsik news. They had ridden at such speed that their mounts were left panting and their black tongues lolling. The undead were just about to enter the northern end of the great crevice – moving from marching column into battle formations. If he squinted his eyes, Grulsik could just make out the roiling cloud of darkness at the far end.

This was the same army that had sent each tribe shrieking, yet now the greenskins' fear was lessened. Perhaps this was due to Grulsik and his leadership, although more likely it was because they drew confidence from their own formidable numbers. Also, the foe was not arriving suddenly from an unexpected angle, but was advancing to their fore with a methodical trudge.

Grulsik was amazed. It was as if his enemies had no idea that they were marching into the perfect ambush site. With the zeal of a born leader and a bellowing voice pitched only a little higher than that of an orc, Grulsik began issuing orders. He commanded various mobs to form a rough battle line and, more importantly, sent a great many more off into the caverns on either side.

They were instructed to attack the enemy flanks and rear when the undead had advanced far enough down into Skull Chasm. Soon, their foes would be beset on all sides.

Squigs growled as they were herded to the front lines and night goblin archers notched arrows while the darkness loomed overhead, filling the canyon before them. With the blaring of horns and the howling of wolves, the Battle of Skull Chasm was begun.



ARMY OF THE SILVER PINNACLE

This is the force that Neferata led when she left the Silver Pinnacle and marched south in search of the lost dwarf relic known as the Archway of Valaya.



NEFERATA

Neferata was the queen of ancient Lahmia, first of the vampires, and ruler of the Silver Pinnacle. She was a master of all forms of charm, seduction and manipulation – arts she used to spread her influence in a web across the human nations. While she saw herself as above warfare, preferring to leave it to her minions or handmaidens, she was a powerful vampire, fast as quicksilver and well-versed in magical lore.



IMENTET

Imentet was one of the first vampires created by Neferata in ancient Lahmia and served as high mistress of Neferata's handmaidens. She was entrusted with the most difficult missions and was offered the choicest of mortal morsels as reward, but only after Neferata had made her own selections. When not in a guise to fool mortals, Imentet travelled in the opulent luxury of a coven throne, where she was surrounded by her own vampire thrall attendants.

THE HANDMAIDENS

Neferata's handmaidens were like a harem of exquisite beauties from every human kingdom. In their courtly disguises they were ravishing ladies – porcelain-skinned nobles and exotic princesses from afar. This was a masquerade: each was a vampiress, a member of Neferata's get, and their beauty lasted only so long as they had fresh blood. They were cruel and sadistic, and though their true skills resided in courtside infiltration and the politics of subversion, they were still deadly foes upon the battlefield. Many of Neferata's handmaidens were spread across the realms of mankind, but the following were present at the Battle of Skull Chasm: the Pallid Sisters, twins from icy Kislev; Lycindia the Cruel; the Duchess Malstonia; Naaima, a concubine out of far Cathay; and the Red Coven, a hellish trio atop a coven throne, made up of Heterneb of ancient Lahmia, Giselle of Marienberg, and Bellatash of Tilea.





LAHMIAN GUARD

These were Tomb Guard of ancient Nehekhara. In life they were the royal guard of Neferata and they continued to serve her after death. As the vampires gained in strength and confidence, it was only natural for Neferata to use necromantic magic to ensure that even upon their deaths they would not leave her service. They bore gold and turquoise livery, and their banner was the crested jackal of the long-lost city of Lahmia – an ancient heirloom of potent magical properties.

GUARD OF THE HIGH MISTRESS

Only Imentet, as Neferata's favoured, had been granted a permanent bodyguard. These were fearsome wights bound to service at the Silver Pinnacle. Although they had never set foot in the sand-swept lands of Nehekhara, their bat-winged helms and shields bore the royal gold and turquoise of ancient Lahmia. It was said that many of the valiant princes and courtly knights who doted upon Neferata and her handmaidens filled the ranks of these undead warriors.





LEGION OF NO NAME

On Neferata's orders there were always four standing regiments of skeletal warriors animated and on duty in the lower halls of the Silver Pinnacle. This motley assortment of skeletons was composed of whatever dead bodies were to hand. The majority were lesser warriors lured to the Silver Pinnacle by undead temptresses, and cast aside once their husks had been drained of warm blood. Their assorted armour and sigils ranged from those of noble knights to sturdy men-at-arms and even northern barbarians. Spellbound, they were led to their doom. It was easy to pick out those that had been long in service, for their colours and symbols had been perverted by necromantic magic – transfigured into ghastly images of morbidity and death.

THE GREEN SKULLS

In life these warriors were the noble followers of Duke Lavaillier of Parravon, but when their noble lord failed to please Neferata she ruined the duke, drained him of life and enslaved his entire guard. Each was tortured and died in agony. Their skulls remained marred by witch-fire, the green flames of which could still be seen burning within their empty eye sockets.





THE WRETCHES

The bottommost layers of the Silver Pinnacle were home to several crypt ghoul packs. When she had noticed them in the past, Neferata had these foul flesh-eaters rooted out and destroyed, but always more arrived to fill the lower levels. They worshipped the cold allure of the Silver Queen and were drawn to her presence, gnawing on scraps of bone and awaiting her orders. Although well beneath her attention, on occasions in war Neferata stooped to employing these creatures to fill out the ranks of her armies, although she preferred not to look upon them and communicated to them via her handmaidens, referring to them as 'the wretches' – a name which the other vampires took to using as well.

ARMY OF GRULSIK DA GREAT

The greenskin force that fought at the Battle of Skull Chasm – the Army of Grulsik da Great – was a ragtag assortment made up of survivors from earlier routs that had fled the undead. The force was a mismatch of different tribes that rallied to make a stand under the strong presence of Night Goblin Warlord Grulsik Moonclaw.



GRULSIK MOONCLAW

Grulsik Moonclaw was the epitome of a night goblin warlord: ambitious, cut-throat, aggressive – and fast to flee should he suddenly find himself losing. A loud and boisterous leader of the Moonclaw tribe, Grulsik used his bellowing voice and bold commands to rally a disordered mass of tribes into a single great horde. In doing so he became the self-proclaimed King of Skull Chasm. That his reign lasted only hours in no way diminished the fearful respect he earned from not just his own tribe, but also his rivals. Aided by his gathered trio of power-mad shamans and his own disregard for danger, Grulsik was close to becoming a living legend amongst his kind.



BRAK BATWING

Deranged and addicted to mushrooms, Brak Batwing was nonetheless a mighty shaman who wielded arcane powers to deadly effect. Before the undead descended upon the Black Peaks, Brak had stumbled upon a particularly potent batch of fungi. Although these left him incapable of uttering a coherent sentence, they made his spells terrifyingly effective during the first half of the battle. During the last stages of the fighting, however, Brak's stomach cramps and natural cowardice got the better of him.

STABBA'S STIKPOKERS

Led by Stabba Crookfang, the Stikpokers were a mainstay of the Moonclaws. They were considered uncommonly vicious and spiteful, even by a race noted for its wicked ways. Like all goblinkind, they were at their best when they could attack foes from the side or rear. They long ago perfected their ambush methods in the underground tunnels and hidden passes of the Worlds Edge Mountains, so they rarely had to suffer through the bothersome business of fighting a foe that was directly facing them.





BROKKO'S BOUNCERS

There was a great rivalry between the night goblin squig hoppers known as Brokko's Bouncers and the Toofy Legion. In many previous battles, Grulsik had learned to keep the units far apart; a lesson he sadly forgot in the pell-mell action of the Battle of Skull Chasm. Those not destroyed by the undead eventually ate each other in an orgy of destruction.



GNASHA 'N' BASHA

These were lucky giant squigs that the Moonclaws considered to be especially favoured by Mork, for not only did they reap hideous damage upon the tribe's foes, but the ferocious pair survived dozens of battles. Best of all, only rarely did their careening path of death take them into troops of their own side.

DA BEADYEYES AND DA BLACKBOWZ

To any outside the Moonclaws, these two rival mobs of night goblin archers were interchangeable. Da Beadyeyes were notorious for their ability to pincushion their targets, even in the darkest conditions. Squinting red eyes adorn their banner, a symbol often mocked by their rivals, the Blackbowz. The Blackbowz were led by Frik, a notorious skulking liar much admired for his ability to shirk duty and stretch the truth to preposterous levels. Following the Battle of the Mushroom Fields the mob began to use distinct black and red feathers to fletch their arrows. They hoped that this would prevent them from being accused of shooting the wrong target in the future – for they insist it was Da Beadyeyes who fired repeatedly into mobs fighting for their own side.





MOONHOWLAZ

This wolf rider tribe joined the Moonclaws, acting as the eyes and ears of Grulsik. They were led by Grak Mankfur, the goblin wolflord, who rode beside the prophet of Mork, Shekka Fangtoof – a flea-bitten but powerful goblin shaman. The bulk of the troops were divided amongst the Blacktailz mob and Grak's Dogboyz.

ROK EATAZ

Although originally attached to the Crookhoodz tribe, the formidable troll mob known as the Rok Eataz was lured away to the Moonclaws through the genius of Grulsik. It was Grulsik's idea to tempt the hungry trolls using long trails of food. Following the line of tied up stunties, the trolls ambled over to the Moonclaws camp and stayed there.



THE BATTLE OF SKULL CHASM

Neferata looked down the dismal gulley and frowned at the milling mass of foes. With dismissive flicks of her hand, she motioned her column to form for battle and proceed. Haste was essential, so they would have to sweep the foe away as they had done so many times over the last few days. After all, they were but greenskins, and mostly goblins at that.

Although she had commanded armies for thousands of years, Neferata had done so primarily from her exquisite perch atop the Silver Pinnacle, not from the battlefield. A more experienced commander in the field would have recognised that what lay before her was not a scattered and panic-stricken mass, but an army deployed in fighting formation. The ranks of black-robed figures were spread across the entire southern end of the chasm, here and there punctuated by groups of hulking trolls. They might also have observed the steady streams of night goblins funnelling into the caverns on either side of the greenskin army. A wary commander would also have noted with growing trepidation the many black maws of caves that lined the cliff walls on either side of Neferata's advancing forces.

Such details were beneath Neferata's concern, however. The bulk of her force was composed of mindless automatons or bound spirits – creatures without the wit to notice the telltale signs that they were advancing into a perfect ambush. And so onwards they marched.

When the monotonous pace of the skeletal legions brought them within range, the night goblin archers let loose a cloud of arrows. With a whistling hiss, the first volleys landed, metallic plinks echoing from the chasm walls as ancient helms and armour turned the shots aside, or solid thunks as missiles struck shields and penetrated bones. Unfeeling and uncaring, the skeletons advanced. Holes appeared in their ranks as arrows that found their mark unknitted the magical energies that held the skeletons together, their bones collapsing to join the detritus scattered across the rocky ground.

The undead had almost reached the greenskin lines when the night goblins unleashed their secret weapons. With shrill cheers of delight, the ranks of black-robed greenskins swiftly parted so that bound members in the back could be jettisoned forward. Even as the mobs closed ranks behind them, these individuals staggered forward and immediately began to whirl and spin. Each dragged a huge metal ball and chain that they began to swing in erratic arcs. Such was the momentum and heft of those cast iron balls that they yanked, led and sent airborne the very goblin that spun them. For their part, the goblin mobs shrieked with malicious glee and hurled crude encouragements, in the hope of steering their whirling comrades in the right direction.

Some of these fanatics ploughed into the skeletal formations, the tremendous impacts sending up broken shields and bones in waves, so that even when the small goblin was lost to sight within, his progress through the undead ranks might still be seen. Some spiralled off haphazardly; others crashed into boulders, shards of rock and splashes of blood exploding outwards. No few goblins spun themselves into the ground, so that their chains wrapped around them before the heavy ball delivered the final splat. Despite their losses, the undead relentlessly moved forward, filling in the ranks and lurching towards their foe.

The sound of the two battle lines clashing resounded throughout the chasm. From behind ramshackle shields, the night goblins stabbed out with spears or swung clubs with cruel spikes driven through them. Without hesitation, the skeletons waded straight into the onslaught, their own rusty blades stabbing and chopping. There was no space or room in that press of combat for feints or finesse – it was a place for brutal hacking and jabbing thrusts.

Many fell on both sides. On the greenskins' left flank, the undead made the most headway, for there fought the Lahmian Guard, the most deadly of Neferata's warriors. That regiment alone in Neferata's army had served the undying queen since she lived in ancient Nehekhara. The magic and ceremony that had brought back this mummified regiment had gifted them with a strength and martial prowess beyond the ragtag legions Neferata and her handmaidens raised to build the rest of the army. The Lahmian Guard quickly carved their way through several mobs of archers opposing them. It did not take long for the remaining night goblins to grow fearful of that regiment, often running away before the undead in the tarnished gold and turquoise livery could reach them.

In the centre, where stood Grulsik and the majority of the Moonclaws, the greenskins fared much better. There, the night goblin mobs were not made up of archers, who were ready to flee at the onset of a good scrum, but were instead shield-bearing fighters, some of whom bore nets. This was a commonplace bit of night goblin trickery, an ingenuity born of hunting squigs far underground. As the foe closed, the weighted nets were cast out, entangling limbs and hampering the foe's movements.

The trio of Moonclaw shamans had also proven useful. Not only did their gibbering chants instill confidence in their kin, but their curses befuddled

nearby skeletons; their jerky movements slowing further still, and their ancient swords shearing in two after a single stroke. Still, there was such a endless press of undead, that even though the night goblins in the centre were winning the battle of attrition, it had thus far earned them little advantage.

Only on its right flank did Grulsik's battle line appear to be on the verge of victory. Elsewhere, the trolls seemed content to stare at their own feet, almost absent-mindedly wandering or scooping up piles of bones to crunch upon. On the right flank, however, a formation of rock-skinned stone trolls had smashed their way far forward, clearing a path behind them. Bounding through this gap came the Moonclaw cavalry: Brokko, riding atop an enormous cave squig, led his squig hoppers to crash into the flanks of the melee in the centre. Goaded into a fine rage, the squigs hurtled into the foe, biting skeletons in half while smashing others with their descending bulk.

With the unexpected charge of the goblin cavalry, the stalemate in the centre threatened to turn into an undead collapse. It was Imentet that led the second wave into Skull Chasm, and she, sensing disaster, moved to enter the fray. Her coven throne – an ornate bone chariot piled with lush cushions and pulled by spectral mares – slammed into the stone trolls. At her flanks marched spirit hosts and behind them shrieked the unmistakable chill howls of the tomb banshees. At the top of the pass, Neferata and the remaining handmaidens used their necromantic magic to raise regiments of skeletons, ensuring new waves of undead joined Imentet's assault.

The collapse began where once the greenskins had pushed through and hoped to achieve victory. Those trolls not smashed by the impetus of Imentet's charge turned upon each other in a fit of hypnotic rage. Unnerved by the spirit warriors, who took no wound from neither spear nor club, the night goblins wavered before the banshees' screams, causing dozens of them to drop dead on the spot, their hearts bursting from fear. Despite Grulsik's presence, the night goblins, even those from the Moonclaw tribe, turned shrieking and fled – whole mobs melting away towards the caves. The battle would have been over, but at the last moment, Grulsik sprung his ambush.





In an erratic order, night goblins emerged from the caves that lined Skull Chasm. Some mobs drove cave squigs before them, goading them on with jabs of their spears, flaming torches or the loud discordant clangs produced by cymbals and gongs. Other mobs of spear or club wielding warriors had barely cleared the yawning cave mouths when they flung forward more ball and chain goblins. Some devious greenskins had even captured and lashed together two gigantic cave squigs from the underground depths. Two of these subterranean beasts bound together were akin to a chained cyclone – they battered off the cave walls, smashing aside boulders and sending stalagmites flying before ricocheting out into the open vale of Skull Chasm.

All of these greenskins burst forth to hit the tightly packed undead. The situation was pure anarchy, with squigs and fanatics careening wildly, and night goblin mobs charging from unexpected angles. While skeletal formations attempted to turn to face a newly emerged threat, from the opposite side a night goblin tethered to an enormous whirling ball of metal would suddenly careen forward, smashing a path through the undead.

In one instance, a taut chain mowed down half a dozen ranks at the same time, severing the dead men at the torso so that, for a brief moment, a formation of boney legs advanced a few more paces before they too collapsed into mouldering piles.

At the front of the undead attack column, where Imentet's counter-charges had all but destroyed the greenskins blocking the exit from Skull Chasm, the vampiress halted her pursuit of fleeing mobs. Looking back behind her, the vale was utter mayhem. It was exactly what Grulsik had hoped for – the undead were penned in and assailed from both sides. This was just the kind of fight that the night goblin tribes favoured, an unopposed chance to hack at a foe from the flank or rear. They wreaked incredible damage. Neferata's host was losing far more undead than the handmaidens could reanimate, even if they were to concentrate solely on raising reinforcements for the army. However, all of them save Imentet were now locked in combat in the midst of the goblin ambush.

Presiding over her forces, Neferata looked down from astride her necrotic mount. Her plans and her army were in ruin. In her rage she was shorn of her beautiful facade, her face contorted in anger and her eyes blazing red. The sheer indignity was the worst of it, for she was not some lackey or self-made commoner raised to prominence. She was royalty, the firstborn of her kind. Others, she thought, might readily wade into the

front to lend aid to the fighting. She ought to be above such things; she was not Krell, or some lowly von Carstein. But, as her army was being dismantled before her eyes, it seemed there was left no other choice. With a hiss she urged her mount forward.

At first, Neferata's entrance was just another drop in the maelstrom of conflict. However, the cold, indignant fury with which she went about the slaughter of any greenskin within arm's reach was terrible to behold, and a grim sense of order began to return to the battle. Despite their many losses, the skeletons did not waver, uncaring as they were. The same could not be said of the goblins on the receiving end of Neferata's deadly wrath.

Even as the tide of battle shifted, an enormous chimera bulled its way out of a cave mouth at the northern end of Skull Chasm, crushing dozens of goblins beneath its tread. Drawn by the sound of battle, the beast emerged, its multiple heads darting out to savage nearby troops of both armies. Whether it possessed hidden intelligence beneath its bestial rage, or perhaps, as a creature of Chaos its eyes could perceive which of its prey radiated the most power, the chimera lunged into the battle, its blood-strewn path leading it straight towards Neferata.

The night goblins parted before the rampaging monster, fighting one another in their haste to flee. As it carved a trail of devastation through the remaining foe, the chimera stopped only once, pausing to bat aside a pair of chained giant squigs. Such was the force of that blow that the globular creatures struck the cliff face with a wet splat, the remnants sliding down the rock wall. The great beast stalked Neferata, who was still concentrating upon carving her way through the goblins.

With a clear route to Neferata at last, the chimera reared up on its hind legs and issued its tri-throated challenge before beginning a loping charge. Here was a foe that could not be enticed by subtle charms or a beguiling gaze, nor could it be flung aside like the greenskin scum that lay broken at her feet. Snarling, Neferata turned to meet the beast's assault. Her mount reared up, claws raking the chimera, which it smashed into with bone-breaking fury. Although wounded by the dread abyssal's sharp talons, the chimera had borne down and broken its foe. Moving faster than any creature of the natural order ought to, Neferata fluidly sidestepped the ruin of her riding beast whilst simultaneously dodging one of the chimera's darting heads. In return, her own blade flashed out to draw the blood of the monster. Thus began the duel that pitted the brute strength and ferocity of the enraged beast of Chaos against the quicksilver savagery of the Queen of Vampires.

Despite the chimera towering over Neferata, the battle was evenly matched. The monster sought to land a decisive strike upon the fleet vampiress, but time and again she wove away from the snapping maws. For her part, Neferata stabbed repeatedly into its thick skin, but had thus far only caused a score of wounds that hardly gave the creature pause. Eventually, however, the odds shifted against the vampiress: nothing could evade the three powerful sets of jaws, raking claws and whipstrike tail with its own set of snapping fangs forever. Bleeding from a dozen flesh wounds, the chimera at last succeeded in landing a telling blow. After ducking a strike from a talon the size of a scythe blade, Neferata was unprepared as the leonine head lunged. Her quick twist avoided its bite, but one of its tusks skewered her.

Neferata was pinned in place, the chimera's foetid breath washing over her as its other heads moved in to tear the impaled vampiress to pieces. Before the chimera could rip her apart, however, a great cloud of bats converged upon them both in a fluttering, blinding mass. While the beast roared its anger and snapped out to bite holes in the waves of flittering attackers, Neferata pried herself off the tusk, attempting to crawl further away from the chimera's crushing feet.

For a long moment, neither Neferata nor the chimera could see: the swarming bats descended in such numbers that the whole northern slope of Skull Chasm was enshrouded in a living, flapping pall. They could not know that the bats were but the vanguard of a new host marching into Skull Chasm.

At the fore of this new undead army, marching to the top of the pass, was Krell, Lord of Undeath, another of Nagash's Dark Lords of old. His distraction had served well, and while the chimera stomped, whirled and lunged at the screeching cloud around it, Krell advanced alone out of the battle line. Slowly, methodically, he strode forward until, bracing his feet at the base of the monster, he buried his black axe deep into the trunk of its body. His blow, a two-handed heft, split the creature's chest wide open, ripping through its multiple hearts. Only after the lumbering chimera toppled over did the wight king pry his blade from its still-twitching corpse. And only then did he turn to move towards the fallen queen.

Further down the ravine from where Krell's host stood arrayed, there was utter mayhem. All sense of ordered battle had been lost during the ambush, and the ground was strewn with broken wargear, fallen undead and dead greenskins. Here and there, in scattered groups, skeleton regiments were still locked in combat with goblin mobs. A few fanatics still spun recklessly about, their rotations now slower and wobblier than earlier gyrations. Grulsik had rallied to the southernmost end of Skull Chasm and there the goblins were strongest, surrounding Imentet and her guard.



With a motion, Krell signalled his second in command forward. Down the ravine rode the wight king known as Ulffik the Blackhanded, accompanied by howling dire wolves and his undead knights, the Death Riders. For good measure, the hunched ghoul packs of Druthor the Strigoi King loped after them. And then Krell advanced to where Neferata had fallen.

With her servants scattered and her favoured handmaiden trapped far to the south of Skull Chasm, Neferata was vulnerable. Yet the Eternal Queen would never discover whether Arkhan the Black had ordered Krell into the Worlds Edge Mountains to aid her or to execute her. For at that moment, as the enormous chimera twitched in its final convulsions, the skies were shrouded in dark shadow and a howl issued forth on the winds of magic.

In Sylvania, the ritual was complete. Once again, Nagash was reborn into the world of the living.

The impact of Nagash's return, and his ensuing ritual, tore apart the arcane spectrum; the energies that were released shook the whole continent, with many landslides tumbling down the Worlds Edge Mountains. However, the eldritch ramifications were more significant still, as a tidal wave of magical energy deluged the world, a wind of death that swept outwards from Sylvania; a keening mortis-wail that foretold of doom. In its wake was left a fell residue, one with dire consequences for the living.

The chimera's tusk had gouged an enormous hole in Neferata's midriff – a wound exposing an open cavity from ribcage to hipbone. Undead though she was, the first of the vampires felt her unnatural vitality leaving her body and blackness closed in upon her. As the first surge of necromantic energies washed over her, all anguish was gone. In one instant Neferata went from

being near the end of her millennia-long existence to watching herself heal completely, her undying body filling with a new intensity. As the unrestrained pulse of eldritch force passed across Skull Chasm, its arcane power saturated all it touched, and everywhere the dead rose. Whether fallen greenskin, one of Neferata's legion, or bones long crumbled upon the chasm's floor, all shambled upwards once again, reinvigorated by the dark forces so that the infernal vale was filled with seemingly endless ranks of the undead.

Despite the arrival of more undead at the head of Skull Chasm, Grulsik still liked his chances. His mobs fully surrounded the blood-drinker atop her cushioned throne and had plenty of time to reform, even setting up their tunnel ambush anew. As for the trapped vampire, her face was a mix of wild fury and desperation, for Imentet saw no escape from the bristling wall of spears that was closing upon her. She had only her coven throne and a handful of skeletal guard left to her. But that was before the wind of death gusted through the valley, and the fallen rose. Although they had not been summoned by her, it was child's play for Imentet, and all the vampire handmaidens, to bind the newly risen.

Within the space of a few heartbeats, the tables had turned, and it was Grulsik who now stood surrounded.

Krell's legions, led by Ulffik the Blackhanded, were halted in their attempt to reach Imentet – there were simply too many undead obstructing their path. The greenskins, seizing upon the shuffling disorder of so many lurching undead, fled. They pushed, hacked and scrambled their way clear to sprint into the tunnels. Those too wounded, mushroom-addled or thick-skulled to flee were left to fend for themselves. Here and there, roaring trolls and spinning fanatics alike were pulled down by the swarming cadavers.

Back on higher ground Neferata was shaking, partly due to the continuing shockwaves of necromantic power, but mostly through fear, as she felt the dominance of an almighty will press upon her. Neferata's mind was laid bare before the great power of Nagash. In an instant, all her schemes, plans, ambitions and desires were unmasked. If there were to be judgement, it would come now.

Krell too felt Nagash's voice echoing in his mind, and he did not question nor hesitate. His master called and he would serve. His was a military mind, and Krell would need to organise the march for the combined armies, no matter their direction. As he stalked off to form the recently risen into formations, Neferata gathered her handmaidens about her once more.

It had been a close-run affair, but it had, at last, gone as Neferata had predicted. The Great Necromancer had returned, and nothing would ever be the same again. Even from afar Neferata could sense Nagash's annoyance – feeling something of his frustrations over returning shy of full strength. There were many ways of restoring such power. As of old, the Great Necromancer could transmute warpstone, converting its energy to his own ends. However, Neferata guessed that Nagash would have neither time nor patience for such lengthy measures.

Neferata knew all of the Mortarchs would be striving to gain Nagash's favour – seeking to put themselves ahead of each other in their service to the Great Necromancer. She smiled, an expression that in no way increased her loveliness. She was a master at such games. Neferata alone knew how to unlock the secret passageways that led to the Lost Pass of the dwarfs; she alone knew the pathways that led down to the power source Nagash so desperately needed. For the time being, Krell would serve her. And, if she had her way, that time might never end.

Neferata stood, her hands subconsciously running themselves over her midriff, feeling where the tremendous wound had been.

She looked upon the skeletons that had risen from the chasm floor and laughed. With unnatural vigour she sprang atop the hulking chimera carcass. 'Hearken to me, my handmaidens,' she called, her voice cold and clear across the battlefield.

'A new era is begun,' Neferata shouted, her words echoing off the chasm walls. 'The Great Nagash walks amongst us once again, and look at the crop of bountiful death his coming has produced,' she said, her lithe arms sweeping over the chasm filled with skeletal warriors.

'Bind them, my handmaidens, bind them to your will. We shall join with Krell's army and march south together.'

Neferata had no idea if Krell had any necromancers in his force or not, but she wanted the newly risen warriors to be under her control and not the wight lord's.

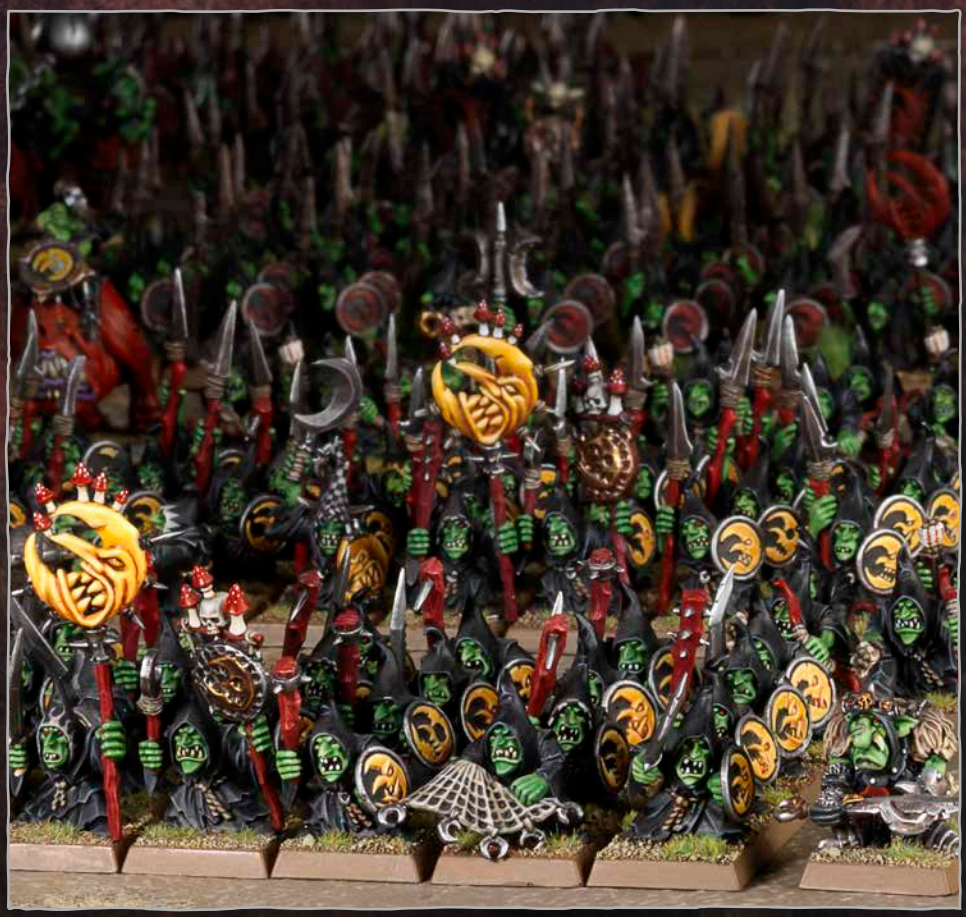
Closing her eyes, Neferata concentrated her thoughts upon the most favoured of her handmaidens. She had a connection with all of those who had shared her tainted blood, all who had been rewarded with her bloodkiss, but she had a special rapport with Imentet.

Without speaking a word, Neferata's mind flashed 'Hear me, oh faithful one – from this moment on I want you to shadow Krell – tell me his every move. His hand has been stayed against us – at least for now.'

From far across the chasm Imentet looked Neferata's way, her lips silent as she replied, 'Your will be done, my queen.'









So close, by Grungni's Beard, so close! Thorek Ironbrow could feel in his stony heart that an ancestral heirloom of great power was near to hand. After many centuries of forging runic items and searching for lost runes, he had developed a curious intuition as to their approximate whereabouts. Thorek was renowned for delving into the ruins of plundered dwarf holds and excavating rare and wondrous objects. Runes called to him, and now he could tell that something truly potent was near, for not even the master runes of power made his beard bristle the way it was doing now. Yet something also told Thorek that he was fast running out of time.

By following the pointing runes on the carven lodestone he had found, Thorek Ironbrow had been able to discover secret paths in the Underway. He led his expedition, a great throng out of Karak Azul, through those unfamiliar spurs of that ancient underground highway. With each step, he felt a mounting sense of awe. He often travelled through branches of the Underway but had never seen a stretch in such fine condition. Typically, the best sections were dilapidated but serviceable, with vast tracts closed due to cave-ins or floods. Worse still, many of those tunnels had been turned into lairs by monsters or had been infested with the dwarfs' age-old adversaries, the night goblins or the skaven.

Whether by fortune or by the exceptional craft of their makers, these tunnels had remained undiscovered and uncompromised. The main arteries were vast, wide enough for three units to walk abreast, with vaulted ceilings so high they left enough room for a gyrocopter to fly and manoeuvre. A few places had suffered minor collapses, but considering the long ages of earthquakes and invasion that the dwarf realm had suffered in the many thousands of years since the Underway's creation, this was nothing short of a marvel. In many places the glowgems still faintly lit the long halls.

None but Thorek Ironbrow could have deciphered the subtle directions of the lodestone, nor detected the faded rune markings that allowed him to correctly choose which of the many branching paths their expedition should follow. It was there, deep underground, that Thorek first began to sense the growing disquiet in the world. He felt a trembling in the ground, greater than the rumblings of a giant's tread. Even the clan warriors felt the change in atmosphere, as if a fell wind – a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature – swept through the underground. As a runelord, Thorek better understood the winds of magic, and although he could not put a name to his growing fear, it was with renewed speed that Thorek led the dwarfs, their eyes wide with wonder at the glories of their forefathers.

There had been legends from the depths of their history, a secret section of the Underway hewn by Grungni himself – a hidden highway that wound far beneath the peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains and up to the Lost Pass. Its entrances were contrived by the master artificer to appear as solid walls, and their runes of opening were invisible save to those with a keen sense that could detect bound magic. Supposedly only Grungni's direct kin knew the secrets of entering that section of the under tunnels, but somewhere in the depths of time, that chain of knowledge had been broken. No clues of the hidden paths had been found until Thorek's runic lodestone revealed the way.

What hoarded treasures or relics from the Ancestor Gods might have been deposited behind those nigh undetectable stone doors? Was the Hammer and Forge of Grungni there, awaiting the master artisan's return? Or had Thorek at last found the concealed location of the Dolmen of the Gods? All these questions and more raced through the runelord's mind while they followed the underground road.

The lodestone led the dwarfs into a massive cavern – a natural fissure that opened up to a hall of vast proportions. At the far end of this opening, the Underway continued; however, the runic device had steered Thorek to the centre of one of the long walls. There, the army had been encamped for three days while Thorek Ironbrow set up his mighty anvil. He used its formidable powers to aid him in seeking the correct runes or rituals that might open the door he reckoned was there, but as of yet could not even see. Because he could not shake his feelings of trepidation, Thorek kept the expedition in battle formation – stationed on either end of the great cavern, facing outward to guard where the Underway entered the cavern.

Each hour increased Thorek's anxiety. Dwarfs were unrivalled in their ability to craft hidden entrances to their holds and mines. The work on this rock face was superior to anything the aged runelord had ever seen. Given enough time, Thorek felt confident he could decipher the runes correctly and open what he was sure was a hidden gate into some valuable trove. But there was something else that troubled him. He had detected unfamiliar magic in addition to the master runes of his own people. This was not the bold, chiselled magic of dwarfs, but rather scrawlings layered over the top of the original devices. Although he had not much experience with that particular type of writing, Thorek swore that he was looking at pictographs as were used in the human kingdoms of Nehekhara – what was now the Land of the Dead.

Sure that he was onto something of great import, Thorek ordered the expedition's lone gyrocopter to fly back to Karak Azul to deliver a message to King Kazador. Turning



back to the task at hand, the runelord began the arduous task of breaking what he deemed to be foreign enchantments. With a mighty blow upon his anvil of doom that echoed around the cavern, the runelord cracked the spell. Shorn of the masking glamour, dwarf runes could now be seen etched across a vast set of gates. Thorek trembled to see that they bore the master rune of Valaya. What he had not expected to see was that the main gate was flanked on the far sides of the cavern by the outline of two arched entrances set into the wall. These, Thorek felt sure, were entrances down into this hidden section of the Underway. There would be time enough to study them after he had managed to open up the gates.

Now, thought Thorek, his task would be easier, for the remaining runes were of dwarf ancestry. Although their function was not familiar to him, there hadn't been a rune yet that Thorek could not fathom. His gruff voice barking orders that sent his assistants and apprentices hurrying off to consult ancient tomes, the runelord began to run his fingers over the finely chiselled front gate and marvelled at the craftsmanship. Soon it would be opened, and the secrets of that hidden chamber revealed.

Just as he began to chant over the first runes, the carven symbols on both of the flanking doors glowed bright. Runes had obviously been activated, and the dwarfs who were nearby stepped back in awe. At first, the shape of a hidden door was revealed in the rock and then ancient pulleys and gears began to work. It had been thousands of years since they were last opened, but with a deep rumbling of rock sliding across rock, the stone portals slid open smoothly.

Dwarf curses and the sound of heavy feet scattering away quickly followed. On either side of the still unopened gateways stood two broad tunnels running deep into the bowels of the mountain. At the mouth of each stood ghastly and spectral figures, the sudden draft whipping up ancient grave dust and tattered cloaks alike.

The armies of the dead had arrived.

THE ARMY OF KRELL

Herein lies the composition of the undead force that Krell assembled to complete his mission in the Worlds Edge Mountains. It grew so much in size from the scattered dead risen from the bone-strewn floor of Skull Chasm that, by the time the army fought at the Battle at Valaya's Gate, it was a truly terrible host.

KRELL

It was Arkhan the Black who became aware of Neferata leaving the Silver Pinnacle. Unsure whether she was leaving to join some foe, or had some conniving plan of her own, he ordered Krell to gather an army and hunt her down. His orders, originally, were to halt Neferata and bring her back to Arkhan in Sylvania. If she resisted, Krell was to use all the force at his disposal. Arkhan wanted no unknowns – if the first of the vampires would not join them, she would meet her end beneath Krell's Black Axe. However, all of that changed when Nagash returned. Krell joined forces with Neferata, leading their combined armies in search of a legendary dwarf artefact so that Nagash could use its power for himself.





ULFFIK THE BLACKHANDED

None know from whence Ulffik originated, but he and the packs of undead beasts that followed in his wake left a savage trail of destruction across Ostermark before entering Sylvania. Ulffik answered Krell's summons and led the cavalry for the Mortarch. Ulffik rode to battle on a skeletal steed and none stood before his lowered lance and lived to tell the tale.

DRUTHOR

While Strigoi are loathed by vampire nobility such as Neferata and Mannfred von Carstein, Krell cared not who joined his army, so long as they could fight, and Druthor was a deadly addition. The King of Grimbarrow, Druthor was lord of a foetid field of bones, his kingdom a dismal graveyard of a populace that died in infamy in a forgotten age of the world.





THE DOOMED LEGION

This was the latest incarnation of the Doomed Legion – grave guard raised once more to fight as Krell's bodyguard. Their banner was the very same which was carried at the Battle of the Reik, when Krell fought against Sigmar. Through the long ages their fell blades had cut down innumerable foes and the pale steel glowed with an eerie green light. When the Doomed Legion marched, it did so to the dirge-like blasts of a horn – a distinctive and gloomy sound that foretold of death and doom to all who heard it.



THE HANGED MEN

These were zombies created from corpses hung in Stirland. As Krell and his army marched by the judicial gallowtrees of Elector Count Graf Alberich Haupt-Anderssen, they were plucked like rotting fruit to build this regiment. They carried a hanging tree as their banner and, despite their undead status, seemed to exhibit vengeful behaviour towards all soldiers fighting in Stirland colours.



BLOODBEASTS

In their quest for fresh blood, a trio of varghulfs – the Bloodbeasts – followed Druthor, for where he led, slaughter followed. They were wild, feral things; Druthor had been known to keep them heavily manacled and chained, so that only when the time was right would they be unbound and sent forth to unleash their infinite rage against the foe.

GRAVECLAWS

These degenerate ghouls hailed from the bonefields of Grimbarrow, their claws filthy from digging up the shallow graves from whence they harvested dried bones to gnaw upon. They followed in the wake of the Bloodbeasts and worshipped Druthor as a god.



THE GRAND THRONG OF KARAK AZUL

This was the expedition that Thorek Ironbrow led northwest through the Underway out of Karak Azul.



THOREK IRONBROW

Like all runesmiths, Thorek coveted the lost treasures and missing relics of his people, and had journeyed far in search of such artefacts. Following the directions of his runic lodestone, Thorek hoped to discover and exhume some mighty heirloom of his forefathers, perhaps finding the Hammer of Grungni, or even the Lost Archways: the stone portals through which their Ancestor Gods themselves would one day return. Thorek brought with him his anvil of doom. He was attended by Kraggi and his faithful anvil guards, the Grimmsborn brothers Dalrek and Unson, and three runesmith apprentices – Frimlok, Grudsson and Borri.

BROTHERHOOD OF THE ANVIL

These warriors hailed from Karak Azul and were tasked with carrying and protecting the treasured anvil of doom used by Thorek Ironbrow. They bore the anvil symbol on shield and banner.





THE IRON GUARD

Led by the Thane Kragsson, the Iron Guard were Ironbreakers out of Karak Azul. This unit gained much fame for its bold action during the Battle of Deep Mine, where they defeated the skaven, following them back to their nest-lair, which they destroyed with cinderblast charges. For their unit symbol they bore the anvil above the mountain – the symbol of Karak Azul itself.

GURDOK GRANITEHELM

Gurdok Granitehelm was the honourary Bombardier Captain of the Thunder Battery. The battery consisted of two cannons (Grudgesolver and Roar of Grungni) and an organ gun (Helga's Curses), and their attendant crew and mule-drawn black powder carts carried the artillery for the expedition.



KING KAZADOR'S WAR-THRONG

The subjects of King Kazador were fiercely loyal to their liege, even for dwarfs, and the following regiments were present at Valaya's Gate.



KING KAZADOR

Old and well-respected, King Kazador was never the same after Gorfang Rotgut, leader of the Red Fangs tribe, raided Karak Azul. Not even when High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer presented him with the severed head of Gorfang did the king regain his former vigour. Some say King Kazador had seen his own death approaching, but if so, it did not stop him from marching out of Karak Azul to aid Thorek's expedition. After four days of forced marching King Kazador announced his presence with his Thunderhorn. Kazador had brought along his nephew Kazril. Although but a beardling, Kazril was entrusted with the battle standard of Karak Azul – the glory of Iron Peak.

THE STERNBEARD CLAN

Bearing shields marked with the crossed hammers of their clan, the warriors of the Sternbeards had a long and proud history. They had fought to defend Karak Azul on many occasion, and were accompanied by the hold's Keeper of the Gate, Flint Fraybeard.





THE BOULDERGOATS

These well-seasoned dwarf rangers had a wide-ranging and varied reputation amongst those of Karak Azul. They were mountain-scalers extraordinaire. Some say this was where their unit name originated, for they could all climb cliffs and tumbled rock like bouldergoats – the famed hairy beasts that roamed the shear-sided peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains. Others intended that moniker in a less savoury manner. But tales aside, it was they who led King Kazador's army, unerringly trailing Thorek's expedition although the route was strange to them.

MOUNTAIN BOLT SQUADRON

Originally out of Zhufbar, Orikk joined Karak Azul as part of their gyrocopter fighter wing. Still considered 'new-fangled' by the conservative rulers of Karak Azul, the offensive capabilities of the gyrocopter were often overlooked; instead, the flying machines were typically assigned messenger duties. Orikk, a hot-blooded young pilot, however, was eager to prove the worth of his machine. It was Orikk that delivered word and directions to King Kazador. Later, he returned with King Kazador and three additional gyrocopters.



THE BATTLE OF VALAYA'S GATE

Since Neferata first left the Silver Pinnacle, the undead army that accompanied her had grown vast. In addition to her own column came Krell, marching at the fore of his Doomed Legion, with many fell regiments and undead creatures in tow. Some of these followers were too loathsome for Neferata to bear – honourless Strigoi and devolved creatures – however, given recent events, she reined in her contempt. Further swelling the numbers came the nameless host that had risen from the many layered dead of Skull Chasm, their ravaged figures animated by Nagash's mighty spell and bound to service by Neferata's handmaidens. Haste drove the combined force relentlessly southwards, for even at this distance Neferata and Krell could feel Nagash's unease at his unexpected vulnerability.

Several ages of the world had passed since Neferata last travelled this part of the Worlds Edge Mountains, but she was able to use blood scryings to aid her in finding the secret tunnel entrance she had marked so many years ago. It was Krell who directed the advance – treating every narrowing or turn as a potential ambush site. When they found and entered the hidden gate to the underground, Krell prepared the troops as if about to storm a castle breach, assembling the most fearsome creatures to the fore. The underground journey proved uneventful, until they stood before the last doors between them and their destination. Neferata described the great cavern that lay behind the doors and bristled at what she considered to be Krell's unnecessary delays. The wight lord insisted upon coordinating an attack plan, bursting into the great chamber beyond from both of the passageways simultaneously.

Vast panels of stone rumbled aside, the underground tunnels giving way to an unwelcome sight. There, spread out before them across the massive cavern, was an army of dwarfs. Although the bearded ones were formed up for battle, their regiments had been guarding against potential attack from further down the Underway. From their reaction, they did not know these doorways existed and they were obviously not expecting a foe to emerge from out of the long cavern wall on their flank. Yet, unlike the goblins that had recently fled upon the sudden appearance of an undead army, the dwarfs were resolute, their regiments forming a battle line to face their foes.



Without hesitation, Krell ordered the undead forth, as aggressive in death as he had been in life. Krell had fought dwarfs many times and he knew that he must avoid his army getting bottled up at the entranceways. Against such a stout foe, his superior numbers might prove their only advantage. In the confines of a tunnel fight, the kind of battle that dwarfs favoured, the undead wouldn't stand a chance.

As Krell commanded regiment after regiment to form up into the great cavern, Neferata was instead gazing at a different group of foes. A cluster of dwarfs was caught between the emerging undead forces, attempting to open the very door she needed to enter. While Krell was more concerned with the army arrayed before him, she knew the dwarfs must not be allowed to open those enchanted gates. Although she only guessed at the nature of that rune-inscribed arch of stone and the hoarded treasures that lay within, she instinctively knew it held great power. If the dwarfs could unleash that power then their undead army, vast as it was, would be utterly swept away. Neferata stepped to the side of the entranceway with her handmaidens, allowing the troops behind to flow out as per Krell's direction. Yet on her own, she ordered Imentet and her regimental guard to destroy the dwarfs working at the hidden gate.

The dwarf throng closed, hoping to plug the tunnel entrances, but they were too slow. Krell's forces had rapidly formed beachheads, two thrusts that advanced out into the cavern to meet their oncoming foes.

At the forefront of the right spearhead stood Krell, the black banner of his Doomed Legion flapping in the draught of the open tunnels. He had first fought against dwarfs in a different epoch, when he was a living Champion of Chaos. That was over four thousand years ago, and since then Krell had slain dwarf kings, wiped out entire clans and ransacked some of the greatest dwarfholds ever built. Indeed, he had been influential in the sacking of Karak Ungor, the first of the great dwarf holds to fall. Whether above ground or below, few had slain more dwarfs than he.

For their part, the dwarfs could not help but mark the wight king in the battered red armour of a lord of Chaos. They saw him and knew who they faced, for grudges are passed down amongst dwarfs like treasured heirlooms. Seven times in his mortal life had Krell been charged in the Great Book of Grudges, the ultimate record of all grievances kept by the dwarfs at Karaz-a-Karak. These lines had been struck out, however, for those vengeance debts were settled when Krell was slain during his failed assault upon Karak Kadrin. Some thousand years after his death, Krell had returned; the fell-handed warrior was raised from his cold grave by the Great Necromancer, whom he had fought for ever since, earning him a further twelve more entries in the Dammaz Kron.

The clash of battle lines was fierce indeed, for the dwarfs were fighting against a hated enemy that had dared to invade this legendary site of their forefathers. Dwarfs hacked down skeletal ranks and their superior armour ensured that few of their own fell. Any other foe would have broken and fled from such relentless hewing but, unfeeling and uncaring, the skeletal soldiers continued, filling in the ranks unflinchingly as their comrades were hacked apart. Slowly, the undead formations were pressed backward towards the tunnels from which their reinforcements still streamed.

Not everything was going the dwarfs' way, however. None could stand before Krell. While the skeleton warriors of the Doomed Legion fell like wheat before the scythe, the wight lord wielded his dread axe, its sable blades cleaving terrible ruin through the oncoming dwarfs. Krell slew Borrak Boldstone and his brother Bodrik, before cutting down the Boldstone Clan's standard. Krell's onslaught aside, a dozen undead were chopped apart for every dwarf pierced by a rusty speartip or slashed by ancient blade. Those dwarfs that did fall, however, did not rise.



As soon as he had seen the undead legions, Thorek thought he understood the recent disturbance in the winds of magic. Arcane storms and daemons walking the world were bad enough. That these times might coincide with a surge in necromantic magic boded worse still, and Thorek wondered if perhaps a being long thought banished from the world of the living had returned? The powerful fell magic on the wind foretold of calamity heaped upon disaster. Surely a new Time of Woes was coming.

Thorek had deciphered two of the three runes of opening when his work was interrupted. While most of their army had ignored his small band of assistants, several skeletal regiments were advancing towards them. In their midst was a coven throne, its unnatural glow lighting the cavern walls as it advanced. Bright red were the eyes of the vampiress that sat upon it, her mouth chanting some infernal spell. Thorek hefted his rune hammer and struck a resounding blow upon the anvil of doom.



After hours of fighting, the battle stood evenly matched.

In the beginning, the dwarfs claimed every advantage, but as the battle wore on, the fire in their hearts was gradually smothered, ground out by the relentless, unstoppable undead. The initial fury of the dwarfs was now replaced with grim determination – a duty to stand by their kinsmen, to defend their ancient realm. The dwarfs were strongest on their right flank, led by Thane Kraggson and his Iron Guard – a regiment of ironbreakers; each dwarf clad in heavy and nigh impervious runic armour. They pushed the skeletal legions all the way back and into the tunnel of the Underway. There, in the narrower confines, the Iron Guard were truly in their element – able to form an impenetrable wall of shields and gromril armour that blocked the tunnel, a mightier barrier than any gate. Against such supreme tunnel fighters the undead could not pass, and were slain in droves.

The left flank of the undead was forced backward, only Krell preventing them from being driven back into the tunnel from which they came. Despite his mighty axestrokes, even Krell could not have stood much longer had not reinforcements emerged from the nearest Underway tunnel. Out of the Underway hunched a bat-winged monstrosity, and atop the beast perched Druthor, the Strigoi King of Grimbarrow. Behind their fell leader came howling varghulfs and packs of ghouls. With a crash, they hit the dwarf lines, stabilising Krell's front and helping the wight lord to push them back.

In the centre, Thorek Ironbrow was in great peril. With only his assistants and one regiment, the Brotherhood of the Anvil, to support him, the runelord was cut off from the rest of the dwarf throng. Yet he remained by the gates, for Thorek hoped to activate the runes of opening. If he could only get inside and unleash whatever power lay within, he might annihilate the undead altogether. Such thoughts were soon driven from Thorek, as he and the Brotherhood were overwhelmed by the undead, too hard-pressed to ruminate on ancient runes. Again and again Thorek smote the anvil of doom, unleashing arcs of lightning to decimate the oncoming skeletons. The whole cavern echoed with powerful clanging and the sound had a profound effect upon the dwarfs, for it put steel into their hearts, reminding them of hearth and hold, filling them with the power and resolve of their ancestors.

Despite the plentiful, flowing tides of death magic, Neferata and her coven of handmaidens struggled to answer the dwarf runesmith. They hissed in rage as their enchantments were countered, nearly every eldritch spell blocked so that the very air crackled with dissipating energies. Only in raising the dead were they successful, thanks in part to the entire coven chanting the foul litanies. Yet even in this, fully half of their attempts were thwarted,

shattering against a powerful wall of resolve. On the battlefield some dead rose again, but others, only half-animated, lurched forward a few steps before they fell, twitching, back into nothingness. Thorek, mighty in the arts of nullifying the foul sorcery of the foe, realised that he was not alone in guarding the dwarfs against the arcane assault. The runes upon the hidden door glowed brightly – shining through the subterranean gloom.

Neferata realised that their forces were losing, and that her coven's magics were unlikely to turn the tide of battle. She knew she must find a way for her handmaidens to bring their necromantic powers to bear, but first they must find some way to weaken the cursed dwarf resistance. Gutting Thorek, who glowed with a nimbus of arcane power every time he struck that thrice-damned anvil, was probably the best place to start. It was time, she thought, for that disgusting creature to pay for his insolence.

Neferata sent Imentet towards the runelord, but the most favoured of the coven had shied from combat herself – instead driving forward her skeletal guard into the dwarfs guarding the anvil. While this assault had prevented any further attempts to open the gate, the attack was proving too feeble to do the heavily armoured dwarfs much harm. Imentet herself attempted to magically boost her minions' efforts, but she too found her every spell shattered by the indomitable willpower of the old runelord and the potent protective shell that surrounded the rune of Valaya upon the gate. Meanwhile, from behind their shieldwall, the dwarfs sent bones flying with every axeblow. It was too much for Neferata – who, in a shrieking fury, ordered all her handmaidens forward. It seemed they would have to rip apart the dwarfs themselves.

Her handmaidens, who had clustered near their mistress at the side of the tunnel entrance, obeyed. Forward went the Red Coven: Lycindia the Cruel spurred her winged nightmare and the Pallid Sisters drew forth their ice blades. Behind them came Neferata upon her dread abyssal, her eyes blazing. While the skeletons alone could not make headway into the dwarf lines, the coven of handmaidens was another matter. They moved too quickly for the eye to follow, a blur that ended in red streaks as their blades, claws and fangs tore into their foes. Even a shieldwall and nigh-impenetrable armour was for naught when clawed hands raked across open-faced helms or ripped out a throat. The Brotherhood of the Anvil was ended that day. Only Thorek, along with his apprentices and assistants remained, fighting for their lives as more dead were raised – their bodies jerking upright as they listed into the combat once more. Kraggi, the last of Thorek's assistants, fell, his head wrenched from his body.



As the tide of bloodthirsty vampires reached out for him, Thorek struck a desperate blow upon the anvil. High he lifted Klad Brakak, his runic hammer, and it glowed like a beacon in that darkened cavern. The tremendous impact rang like thunder – a clout that shook the Underway and the very mountains above, staving off his imminent death. A great wreath of chained lightning momentarily illuminated the whole of the cavern. His hammerwork blasted back the foe, while behind him, new regiments arrived to take the place of his fallen guards and assistants. Never in all the runelord's many years had he put so much strain upon that ancient anvil, and never had it glowed white hot, nor burst forth such a wave of power, blasting all foes backward or obliterating them outright.

Elsewhere, Thane Kraggson and his Iron Guard had so effectively blocked up the rightmost passage that the wise old tunnel fighter had sent his remaining formations back into the main cavern to Thorek's aid. The greataxe-wielding Longplaits and the expedition's only slayers reached Thorek's side. There, they formed a new battle line before the embattled runelord, giving Thorek his first moment's reprieve. His armour rent, and bleeding from a score of wounds, Thorek sang the runic hymn – a deep-throated solemn chant that set the anvil of doom and the great gate of Valaya glowing. At last, he had activated the runes and the gate's doors swung inward.

With a mindless resolve, the skeletons continued their advance, stepping over the blackened stone where their lightning-blasted comrades still smouldered. Half of Neferata's handmaidens, smoke rising from their alabaster skin where it was burnt from the anvil's bolts, rose up again. Sensing it was her last chance to stop the dwarfs from gaining access to the treasure troves beyond, Neferata ordered a final assault.

Thorek Ironbrow was suffused with ancestral power the like of which he had never felt before. He deemed his hammerblow could smash mountaintops. Something inside the hidden chamber was calling him – pleading for him to hurry. And then, in that moment, the craggy old runelord at last knew.

The calm, smoothing voice of Valaya spoke to Thorek, not in words, but as a deep understanding. Thought-whispers came to him of ancient knowledge, of master runes long forgotten, of secrets at last revealed. He realised now what relic must lie in the hidden vault beyond. He could feel that an Ancestor God, the great mother of his people, was near to hand. In that moment he chanted the last of the rune song, and with a crack, the gates that held the Lost Archway of Valaya opened.

The dwarfs of Thorek's expedition were growing desperate. Since Druthor, the Strigoi King of Grimbarrow, had emerged out of the tunnel, he and his terrorgheist had wrought havoc. The dwarf artillery set up on the far edge of the cavern had ardently tried to put a cannonball through the hulking undead beast. Despite firing and reloading their war machines with great skill and fervour, they only succeeded in filling the cavern with black powder smoke and putting several holes through the monster's leathery wings. Their last shot caught the beast's attention, and with a few bounding leaps it crossed the great hallway. Opening its fanged jaws, the terrorgheist unleashed an otherworldly screech that sent the cannon crew to their knees, blood trickling from their ears. Massive, skeletal claws swept across the cannons, sending broken wheels, body parts and an unseated barrel tumbling across the stone floor. While his ghastly mount spread its wings wide, Druthor let loose a chilling shriek of victory.

The remaining dwarfs were pushed steadily back, their line wheeling to stand firm around Thorek outside the now-opened gates. The reprieve brought about by his massive strike upon the anvil of doom was just enough for the runelord to open the portal. Now, skeletal legions as well as Neferata and her infuriated coven of vampires once again beset them. Alone in the northernmost tunnel, Thane Kraggson and his Iron Guard still held. Krell did not expect to break through the Iron Guard, and merely left enough minions attacking in the tunnel to keep that formidable regiment pinned in place. Meanwhile, the rest of his entire force now stood arrayed in the cavern. Krell raised his Black Axe, and closed in for the kill.

And then, not one, but two new armies joined the fray.

From out of the empty tunnel on the dwarfs' left flank came the booming blasts of a horn. No ordinary sound was this: it was the Thunderhorn of King Kazador, which every bearded warrior of Karak Azul knew and loved. Again and again came those mighty notes, and the dwarfs' hearts filled with the renewed joy of battle.



Out came King Kazador, clad for battle and flanked by his royal guard of hammerers. The old king had received Thorek's message – that the runelord had found a powerful artefact and needed reinforcements.

In haste King Kazador had marched, selecting a dozen handpicked regiments to accompany him through the lost underground passageways. He had not expected to find Thorek beset by the undead, but King Kazador did not halt. Indeed, he sounded his fabled warhorn not like an aged king worn by tragedy, but like a warrior lord in his prime. Droning over the heads of their comrades, out flew a squadron of gyrocopters, the pilots eager to get their flying machines into the great cavern, where the high ceiling gave them room to manoeuvre. Regiment after regiment of grim-faced dwarfs advanced from out of the tunnels behind them.

So battle was rejoined, more fiercely than ever. Even with the arrival of King Kazador and the throng from Karak Azul, the dwarfs were outnumbered. Yet they were more skilled in battle and, since Thorek had opened that vast gate to the hidden chamber, they fought with renewed purpose. Indeed, Valaya's blessing was upon them, and no fell magics could harm them.

The second army came unannounced.

Grulsik, warlord of the Moonclaw tribe, had sulked after the disaster of Skull Chasm. His chance of greatness had fled alongside the tribes he had briefly united. After fleeing deep into the caves, once again, the goblins rallied. Grulsik found more of his kind had survived than he thought. Fully half of his previous gathering was gone – dead or scattered. The core of his own tribe still remained, however, as did remnants of other tribes and many of the trolls. They were not a despondent, beaten rabble but a large assembly of greenskins anxious for loot, and still spoiling for a fight – albeit one weighed in their favour.

The trail of the undead had been easy for the wolf riders to pick up, and sure enough, Grak's Dogboyz soon picked up a scent. Grulsik reasoned that he could profit most by skulking behind the undead force, probably by picking through the wreckage of whatever they had destroyed. The dead, he reckoned, had no interest in loot.

When the undead trail led underground via a door in the cliffside that had clearly been disguised, the promise of wealth grew. Grulsik was a night goblin, and like all his kind, recognised dwarfwork. He and most of his army had walked through dwarf-built mines and undertunnels before, but they had always shown signs of long neglect. These examples were unspoilt, and Grulsik did not doubt that such hidden underground paths would lead to treasures such as the stunties were known to hoard.

Once they heard the sounds of an underground clash, the greenskins advanced cautiously. It was Grulsik's intention to avoid fighting, descending upon the battlefield afterwards to loot.

That had been the plan. However, when they approached the twin tunnels leading towards where the battle surely was, Grulsik lost all control. The Moonclaw squig herds – the Toof Mob, Red 'Unz, and the Krimson Killaz caught the scent of dwarf blood and bounded forth. While the enraged creatures hurtled down the passageway there was a brief moment where Grulsik considered following his instinct and pulling back, lurking until a true advantage presented itself. But the position of warlord had gone to his head. With foolish pride, Grulsik ignored his tendencies for self-preservation and attempted to save face by ordering his already advancing mobs to charge. After a few bellows, he personally joined the scrum and attempted to push into the cavern.

In the northernmost tunnel, the Iron Guard had long stood firm against the skeleton assault. Judging by the commotion further down the tunnel, Thane Kraggson knew something more ominous was approaching. He was not prepared for the tide of squigs that burst through the remaining undead, and their savage onslaught buckled the shieldwall.

Such was the resolve of the Iron Guard they might have held firm, had Grulsik not arrived shortly after. The night goblin warlord's own mob, the Madmoonz, piled into the fight, stabbing spears into anything that either had a beard or wasn't green. They too were expert tunnel fighters, accustomed to battling in confined spaces underground. Members in the mobs' back ranks pressed forward to cast entangling nets, and thus was Thane Kraggson bound and stabbed a hundred times, the final blow delivered through the eyepiece of his helm by Grulsik himself.

So the greenskins burst into the cavern, largely through the northernmost entrance, but some mobs entering via the south. What they saw when they arrived in that vast underground hall was pure pandemonium, for battle raged everywhere. Skeletal legions battled hammer-wielding dwarfs clad in gleaming gromril plate, arcs of lightning blasted out from the anvil of doom and gyrocopters hovered overhead, unleashing hissing blasts of steam and clattering lead shot.

Into this maelstrom of combat plunged the greenskins. Cackling fanatics whirled through the tight press of bodies, breaking apart skeletons as often as they crumpled dwarf armour. Trolls, their small brains unable to absorb the complexity of the swirling battle, dropped their crude clubs and instead resorted to feasting on the plentiful casualties. Throughout the whole of the cavern, nowhere was safe – for as one foe was laid low, another came creeping up from behind. Night goblins sprang out from the shadows, and skeletons pulled themselves upright, rising to attack yet again.

In the centre, Neferata and her handmaidens pressed upon the dwarfs that stood before Thorek Ironbrow. While Imentet felled the last of the Longplaits, Neferata herself dispatched the remaining orange-crested slayers. Thorek, seeing his doom close in upon him, struck a mighty two-handed blow upon the white-hot anvil, and the potent magics contained therein thundered forth once more. Arcs of arcane power tore clean through Imentet, smashing apart her coven throne like so much kindling, and leaving the vampiress suspended in an orb of living lightning. She hung, wracked by streaks of lightning that scorched her undead body so that not even dust was left to fall.

Neferata's shrill cry of rage was horrifying to hear.





Such was the force of Thorek Ironbrow's hammerblow upon the anvil of doom that the ground began to splinter. Cracks tore outwards from the anvil, spreading across the cavern floor, widening into deep fissures. The runic anvil, heirloom of the revered past, was splitting too. His thick eyebrows furrowing in concern, Thorek dropped his hammer and ran his hands over the relic, more precious than gold or even sons. As he feared, an irreparable split was spreading through the solid metal. The next striking of the anvil would be its last. An anguished moan escaped the runelord. There was no craft in the world that could fix such a fault. In his momentary despair, Thorek did not see the rapid approach of Neferata.

At the last moment, Thorek heard the hissing rage that was the charging vampiress, but too late. Even as he reached for his hammer, he was pierced by the Dagger of Jet, lifted high into the air and hurled into one of the crevasses his own magics had created. Terrible in her fury, Neferata then led her remaining handmaidens to sweep away the night goblins that were even then emerging from the northernmost tunnel.

Elsewhere in the cavern, the newly arrived throng from Karak Azul had quickly dispatched the undead before them when something foul rose to answer the challenge of King Kazador's horn blasts. Druthor, the Strigoi King, sought to snuff out the dwarfs' burgeoning hope. The twisted vampire stabbed his dewclaws into the rotted flanks of his terrorgheist, urging the beast upwards. With a few flaps of its great bat-like wings, it soared into the cavern's heights before Druthor steered the creature into a hurtling descent towards the dwarf king and his banner.

King Kazador saw the oncoming monstrosity and was not afraid. He sounded his horn one last time before hefting up the great Hammer of Karak Azul. Forged from the finest gromril, this weapon had been borne by his royal predecessors since the time of Grungni. Its runes glowed in the darksome underground, for it was made for battles such as this. Standing proudly beside the king was his nephew Kazril, a beardling thane who carried the banner of Karak Azul. Around these two were the Blackhammers, burly dwarfs who formed the king's bodyguard.

Its blackness like some nightmarish thundercloud, the terrorgheist swooped low, shrieking as it came. King Kazador swung a windmill hammerblow, timing its hefty delivery perfectly so that it landed full force upon the screeching maw of the attacking undead creature. Broken fangs and fragments of skull were battered a great distance, and with that single blow the vast terrorgheist crumpled, the fell power animating its long dead carcass shattered. From out of the ruin of bone and bent wings stepped Druthor, his claws fully extended. Before the ancient horror could unleash his feral savagery, he was

beaten down and broken by the Blackhammers. Druthor had intended to quell the hope of the dwarfs, but his spectacular destruction accomplished the very opposite: the cavern rang to the hearty cheers and rude oaths of the dwarfs.

The ghoul packs that followed in Druthor's wake were the next victims of King Kazador's Blackhammers. Indeed, the fire of battle was upon the dwarfs, and they might have battered their way through the entire undead army if not for the night goblins. While neither the filth-encrusted ghoul claws nor the rusty blades of the skeletons could penetrate the well-armoured kingsguard, the pair of ball and chain wielding fanatics that whirled through their midst crushed gromril plate as easily as bones.

Before the Blackhammers could recover, they were attacked from behind as two mobs of night goblins collided into each other in their haste to murder dwarfs. Enraged by the backstabbing and the mere sight of greenskins, the Blackhammers turned to demolish their foes. As the dwarfs vented their ancestral hatred, they were unaware that Krell had redirected the full might of his skeletal legions, surrounding the rear of the dwarfs with his own Doomed Legion.

Surrounded and vastly outnumbered, the Blackhammers fought like the heroes of old, their finely crafted warhammers bludgeoning multiple foes with every heaving swing. Around their king they gathered, the banner of Karak Azul shining proudly and glowing in the dim light of the cavern. For every one dwarf of the regiment that was pulled down, a dozen of the foe fell. Those night goblins whose bodies were not broken by the hammers turned and fled, not daring to stand before the dwarfs' fury. Once more the Thunderhorn of Karak Azul sounded, but its deep-voiced blasts summoned no aid to King Kazador, only more of the undead.

The full weight of the undead now engulfed the dwarf throng, and King Kazador's Blackhammers bore the brunt of the onslaught. Again and again the grim dwarfs pounded the waves of skeletal warriors, sweeping away ranks at a time until even those sturdy dwarfs felt their arms grow weary, their warhammers growing heavier with each swing. They fought like true sons of Grungni, and would have weathered that storm of swords and spears had it not been for Krell.

With his legions quickly being pulverized, Krell had no choice but to join the fray. So the Doomed Legion pressed forward, stepping over the piled and broken bones of their predecessors. In a trice, King Kazador himself smashed down the Doomed Legion banner, snapping the standard and its bearer with the same powerful hammerstrike. Although the aged king was flagging, when he saw the red armour of Krell ahead of him, he battered a path through in order to face the towering wight lord. Those implacable enemies traded blows, with each warrior landing strikes that would fell a thick tree. Neither would give ground, but instead each put forth all of their energies into a single titanic blow. The Hammer of Karak Azul pounded Krell's armour, dropping the wight lord to his knees, but Krell's last blow fell true. His axe, dark power writhing along its blades, severed not just King Kazador's long beard, but hewed off his head as well.

It is likely that all the remaining dwarfs would have been slaughtered save for Thorek Ironbrow. Battered, bleeding, though he was, the old runelord was as tough as the roots of the mountain. Although his body was broken, Thorek had caught himself on the edge of the crevasse. He had crawled across the stone floor, his lifeblood leaving a trail behind him, until at last he reached his beloved anvil. One last time he raised his hammer, Klad Brakak, and with his unbroken arm he smote the anvil.

With a crack like the splitting of the heavens themselves, the deed was done, and the anvil of doom was split. Arcs of power, bolts of pure vengeance and a seismic blast of concussive force exploded outwards all at once. And so ended the Battle of Valaya's Gate.

Neferata pulled herself out of the rubble in time to see the last few remaining dwarfs fighting a rearguard action as they carried their slain king into the Underway. 'Stubborn fools, mulish imps!' she shrieked before regaining control of her anger.

Brushing dust off her ruined dress she knew the fault was her own – she should have ripped off Thorek's head. Somehow, despite gutting him, that damned runelord had dragged himself back to his cursed anvil and tried to bring the whole cavern down. Just like a dwarf, she thought – spiteful to his dying breath. Anger still twisted her insides.

Neferata surveyed the damage that spread out from the blackened crater where the anvil once stood. The undead army was shattered, but no matter – it could be raised again. Krell, she noticed with no satisfaction, had survived.

As Krell rose from the debris she noted his movements were slowed. Whatever had hit the wight lord must have been potent. How could she use this weakness to her own advantage? It would have been easier had the wight lord been destroyed, she thought. Then the credit for securing the power for Nagash would be hers and hers alone. There was still time, she mused.















CHAPTER 4

Dark Tides

Summer 2524 – Summer 2525



Far to the north of Sylvania, the Empire was besieged. To the barbarians of the wastes, this was a time of destiny, the promised hour in which the civilised realms of men would fall before the axes of the North. The End Times were nigh, and glory would go to those with the strength to claim it.

In the preceding weeks, Kislev had been obliterated, its lancers and landsmen swept aside. Of the once-great nation's cities, only Erengrad remained, and that endured chiefly thanks to Valmir von Raukov, Elector Count of Ostland, who had marched an army north to its defence at the first sign of trouble. All along the border there were rumours that the Ice Queen Katarin yet lived, and, at the head of an army of vengeful survivors, fought on to free her ancestral lands. Alas, it seemed that these were rumours only. To all intents and purposes, Kislev as a nation was gone; the only survivors were those whose pulks had fled south to the Empire.

As the northmen swept further south, they found the Empire prepared for their coming; not with armies of halberd, handgun and cannon, but with a wall the likes of which had never been seen before. This was the Auric Bastion, a fortress of stone and faith raised by the hand of Balthasar Gelt, the Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic.

Even as the first Norscan tribes had marched on Kislev, Gelt had set about crafting this miracle. He had drawn partly from his experiences creating the wall of faith around Sylvania, and partly upon knowledge from a source he would not disclose, even to his closest assistants. This closed-mouthedness was looked upon unkindly by many of Gelt's rivals, who suggested that the wizard had strayed from the paths laid down at the founding of the college, but none could argue with the results.

The bedrock of the Empire had provided the stone. The wizards of the Light College had raised the border hills high and reshaped them to forge an unyielding wall whose ramparts were lost within the clouds. Faith provided the mortar. Priests of Sigmar had laboured alongside their wizardly rivals, focusing the prayers of a desperate nation into a strength that bound the bulwark together. Such a union should have been impossible, for the powers of faith and magic seldom aligned seamlessly. However, the alchemists of the Gold College had worked their own magic into the mix, changing the nature of mortar and stone just enough to seal them tight.

Thus was the Auric Bastion created. It was the perfect barricade against the barbarians of the North. It required no garrison, for neither claw nor grapple could find purchase on its sheer slopes. It needed neither engineers nor labourers to repair it, for the living rock swiftly healed any inflicted harms. Men could not climb or destroy the Auric Bastion and, thanks to the blessings laid into its very substance, daemons could not even approach. It was a miracle during days of desperate need, and mean was the heart that did not rejoice. Indeed, upon the wall's completion, mere days before the first warbands reached the border, almost all had forgotten their suspicions concerning Gelt's sudden knowledge. It helped, of course, that Thyrus Gormann – ever Gelt's chief rival – had vanished in mysterious circumstances. Some already proclaimed the Auric Bastion as Gelt's legacy. Even his fellow Heads of College insisted that no future deed could eclipse it in scope or scale. In this, in time, they would be proved wrong, but none could have foreseen the days to come, or the part Balthasar Gelt had yet to play in them.

As mighty as the Auric Bastion was, it required a constant stream of magic to maintain it. A great chain of ritual circles ran from Erengrad in the north to Rackspire in the Worlds

Edge Mountains. Within these circles, wizards and priests laboured, the air sizzling with stray magic as they channelled faith and magic into the wall. Such was exhausting work and, too often, ritualists collapsed under the strain, or perished as their minds gave way beneath the forces they sought to channel. Replacements for the fallen were swiftly found, but each interruption in the ritual created a momentary weakness in the wall, a vulnerability that the barbarians of the North were all too swift to seize upon. Even a momentary lapse could allow an incursion across the border, and there were many such lapses to exploit. Each day, dozens of warbands and armies slipped south through brief breaches.

Here then, was the work for fighting men, who had come from all four corners of the Empire in its time of need. The Elector Counts had been as generous with their forces as they could, but the beastmen rampaging across the ten states had made a full mobilisation impossible. Even so, the land behind the Auric Bastion was a riot of heraldic colour, with the white wolf of Middenland raised alongside the deadman of Stirland, the sun of Averland, the maiden of Talabheim and many others.

The Elector Counts of the besieged lands led the defence, as they had done many times before. The eastern span was commanded by Wolfram Hertwig of Ostermark, a fussy man renowned for his methodical approach to warfare. The western defences were held by Valmir von Raukov, Elector of Ostland. Together with Syrgei Tannarov, the boyar in command of Erengrad's defences, Raukov held the tiny corner of Kislev that remained, and thus spared the war-torn provinces of Ostland from fresh horror. Defence of the Auric Bastion's central stretch fell to Aldebrand Ludenhof, Elector Count of Hochland. Unlike Hertwig and von Raukov, he seldom took a direct role in the fighting, preferring instead to see the patterns of war unfold from afar. It would have been all too easy to consider Ludenhof a coward, were it not for the almost supernatural skill with which he manoeuvred his forces. The Hochlanders knew all this, of course, and regaled soldiers of other states with tales of how their lord was the seventh son of a seventh son, blessed by Taal and Myrmidia with foresight and wisdom. It was all untrue, of course. Ludenhof was simply a man who was clever enough to see a pattern where all others saw anarchy, and who was bold enough to act upon what he perceived.

As the weeks and months ground on, thousands of northlanders and Imperials perished. Soon, it became apparent that the situation was, at best, a stalemate. Scouts mounted on swift pegasi soared daily above the Auric Bastion, and those who returned – for many did not – reported that the horde never shrank nor lost heart, no matter how many of its warriors were slain in those moments when the magic failed.

Even when the artillerymen of Nuln at last arrived, and directed barrages of rocket and mortar fire across the wall, their gunnery did nothing to diminish the horde. Worse, no sooner had the first batteries opened fire, than the Chaos horde responded in kind with a barrage from the hellcannons brought forward amongst their ranks. Both sides were firing blind, but such was the concentration of forces on either side of the Auric Bastion that it was an unlucky shot that missed entirely. Fur-clad marauders were torn apart by rocket and shell. Bivouacking militiamen were set alight by daemonfire, the lucky ones perishing from the flames, the survivors hacked apart by comrades aghast at the mutations the fires provoked. To the south, men of the Empire kissed hammer pendants or prayed to Ulric for courage. On the other side of the wall, chieftains and shamans proclaimed the deadlock to be a test of worthiness, and thus instilled greater savagery in those tribesmen fortunate enough to exploit one of the intermittent breaches.

It was but a month to Geheimnisnacht when it became clear that artillery fire was not the only thing that might pass over the Auric Bastion. The wind had shifted north, and with it had come a new stench. The air along the border had been sour for many months, heavy as it was with the myriad flavours of foulness that accompanied two vast encamped armies, but this was something different. It was both rancid and sweet at the same time, abhorrent and intoxicating in equal measure; and wherever the wind carried it, plague followed. Overnight, the central span of the Auric Bastion became a charnel house of the dead and dying, as men weakened by thin rations and constant battle fell victim to contagion. Hundreds perished, choking on their own pus-laden vomit, or suffocated as their lungs filled with dead, black blood. The plague knew no favourites, and beset northlanders as readily as it did men of the Empire, but where the former embraced the sickness as a sign of Nurgle's favour and endured through the dark god's largesse, the latter saw it as an omen of doom.

At Ludenhof's command, priests and Sisters of Shallya did what they could to bring the contagion under control, but their goddess was but a shadow of the dark power who had loosed their plague. Remedies were sought and prayers made, but nothing could slow the sickness. Perhaps a quarter of those infected survived the rampant disease, but most of those bore madness or amputation as a reminder of how close they had come to meeting Morr, and few were fit to fight any longer. Only isolation seemed a barrier to the plague; isolation and vigilance for the first signs of infection. The dead were burnt on sanctified pyres, and the infected living separated from their fellows by palisades of sharpened stakes and the threat of loaded guns.

Horrific as it was, the plague's onset provoked some of the greatest acts of heroism yet seen in that war. One of these concerned the Swords of Ulric, a warrior-band from unassailable Middenheim. Despite being infected early on, the Swords of Ulric held the breach at Kraghof without support for the better part of a day. When reinforcements finally arrived, they found the Auric Bastion whole once more, and the Swords' plague-ridden corpses clustered around their fallen banner. Even on the brink of death, the Middenheimers had fought on.

As Geheimnisnacht drew nigh and the contagion gave no sign of abating, Ludenhof – who had lost two of his sons to the plague – settled upon drastic measures. Overruling all counsel, he ordered that the dead and the afflicted alike be taken to the pyres; piety and medicine had done nothing to halt the plague, he reasoned, so flame would have to serve. Few went willingly to the fire, and many skirmishes broke out as the count's greatswords sought to enact his will. In the end, thousands of dying souls met their end amongst the flames in the hope that it would spare their comrades. Ludenhof hardened his heart, knowing that it was necessary, yet still damning himself for a butcher. Deep within the Realm of Chaos, Nurgle bellowed with anger as his newest creation perished alongside those it had beset.

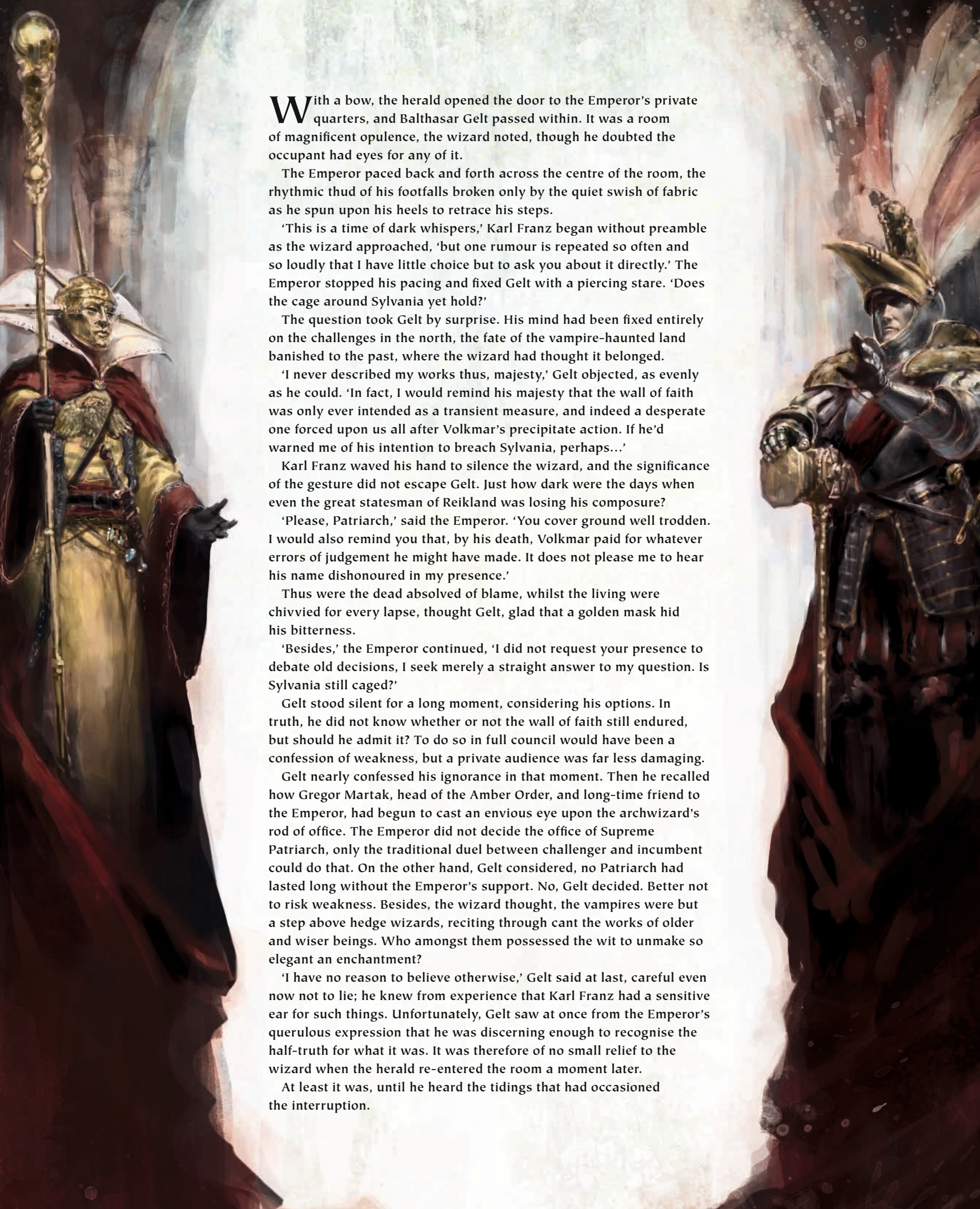
As the funeral pyres flickered and died, Ludenhof rode north to Castle von Rauken. There, he sought audience with the Emperor Karl Franz, who had recently taken command of the defences. Upon admission to the Emperor's war council Ludenhof fell to his knees and confessed the slaughter he had been forced to inflict. Ludenhof had expected – and perhaps needed – to face censure for his acts, but he received none. Instead, the Emperor raised the count to his feet and commended him for his actions. At times such as these, he counselled, dark deeds were sometimes necessary to keep a deeper darkness at bay. It was a lesson delivered not only to Ludenhof, but to all present in the war council, though perhaps none dwelt upon the words so deeply as did Balthasar Gelt. Thus did Ludenhof return to his command, absolved of guilt but haunted by his deeds. It was of some consolation to him that the plague had abated, but he slept fitfully for the rest of his life, convinced that the ghosts of those he had murdered would claim his soul if they could.

Geheimnisnacht at last arrived, Morrslieb and Mannslieb looming ominously low in the skies. With that night came the usual host of terrors, though it said much for those dire times that the loosing of ghosts and daemons upon the land seemed almost unremarkable. As midnight approached, however, it became clear that this was a Geheimnisnacht unlike any that had come before. All along the Auric Bastion, priests, wizards and shamans felt the world shudder as Nagash strove to bend Shyish, the Wind of Death, to his will. As midnight struck, a pulse of lurid energy swept across the border. Priests of Morr fell into madness, wizards of the Amethyst College wailed as their mortal bodies collapsed into dust, northlander shamans and sorcerers felt their power swell, then perished as the magic receded again, taking their souls alongside. And all along the Auric Bastion, the dead rose.

No greater purpose directed the skeletons and zombies that clawed their way to the surface. Though none yet knew it, Nagash had tried and failed to harness death magic to his will, and the newly risen had naught to guide them but the most fleeting of instincts. If the living were nearby, the undead swarmed against them. Otherwise, they milled around, bereft of direction. All about the Auric Bastion, northlanders and Imperials alike battled against resurrected allies and foes. Here and there, fighting even broke out amongst the undead, as some recognised in death the foes they had known in life. Some of the dead were drawn to Gelt's ritual circles, and fighting erupted as the circle guardians strove to keep the ritualists safe. Yet nowhere were the dead thicker than where Ludenhof's pyres had blazed: entire legions of flame-gnarled bone sprang to life from those ashes. The Hochlanders were sorely beset that night, and Ludenhof's forces were spared from rout only by the timely intervention of the Knights of the Blazing Sun, who had ridden hard from Castle von Rauken to join his command.

Three days after Geheimnisnacht, the Emperor Karl Franz summoned Gelt to his presence, and demanded to know if Sylvania was still caged. He would have sought the wizard sooner, but Castle von Rauken's tale was a bloody one, and it had taken those three days to break the siege of rotted flesh that had encompassed its walls. Upon arrival, the Supreme Patriarch gave every assurance, but the truth was that the cage around Sylvania had failed, and Gelt did not know. Gelt doubtless thought his ignorance hidden beneath a cloak of cautious language, but Karl Franz was not convinced; he had many times treated with elves, and thus learned how to read the spaces in between words.

Ultimately, Gelt was spared indignity only by the arrival of dire news. Just as the Emperor was about to press his Supreme Patriarch on the Sylvanian matter, a herald burst into the chamber with tidings that would not wait. One of the ritual circles – based at the Ostermark village of Alderfen – had been silenced, and its section of the Auric Bastion had collapsed. Even now, or so the herald said, the northlander horde was spilling through the breach. At once, Sylvania was forgotten. As Karl Franz sought the Reiksmarshal, Gelt made his way to the stables and flew south atop his faithful pegasus. The Auric Bastion was his finest work, his legacy. He would not let it fall!



With a bow, the herald opened the door to the Emperor's private quarters, and Balthasar Gelt passed within. It was a room of magnificent opulence, the wizard noted, though he doubted the occupant had eyes for any of it.

The Emperor paced back and forth across the centre of the room, the rhythmic thud of his footfalls broken only by the quiet swish of fabric as he spun upon his heels to retrace his steps.

'This is a time of dark whispers,' Karl Franz began without preamble as the wizard approached, 'but one rumour is repeated so often and so loudly that I have little choice but to ask you about it directly.' The Emperor stopped his pacing and fixed Gelt with a piercing stare. 'Does the cage around Sylvania yet hold?'

The question took Gelt by surprise. His mind had been fixed entirely on the challenges in the north, the fate of the vampire-haunted land banished to the past, where the wizard had thought it belonged.

'I never described my works thus, majesty,' Gelt objected, as evenly as he could. 'In fact, I would remind his majesty that the wall of faith was only ever intended as a transient measure, and indeed a desperate one forced upon us all after Volkmar's precipitate action. If he'd warned me of his intention to breach Sylvania, perhaps…'

Karl Franz waved his hand to silence the wizard, and the significance of the gesture did not escape Gelt. Just how dark were the days when even the great statesman of Reikland was losing his composure?

'Please, Patriarch,' said the Emperor. 'You cover ground well trodden. I would also remind you that, by his death, Volkmar paid for whatever errors of judgement he might have made. It does not please me to hear his name dishonoured in my presence.'

Thus were the dead absolved of blame, whilst the living were chivvied for every lapse, thought Gelt, glad that a golden mask hid his bitterness.

'Besides,' the Emperor continued, 'I did not request your presence to debate old decisions, I seek merely a straight answer to my question. Is Sylvania still caged?'

Gelt stood silent for a long moment, considering his options. In truth, he did not know whether or not the wall of faith still endured, but should he admit it? To do so in full council would have been a confession of weakness, but a private audience was far less damaging.

Gelt nearly confessed his ignorance in that moment. Then he recalled how Gregor Martak, head of the Amber Order, and long-time friend to the Emperor, had begun to cast an envious eye upon the archwizard's rod of office. The Emperor did not decide the office of Supreme Patriarch, only the traditional duel between challenger and incumbent could do that. On the other hand, Gelt considered, no Patriarch had lasted long without the Emperor's support. No, Gelt decided. Better not to risk weakness. Besides, the wizard thought, the vampires were but a step above hedge wizards, reciting through cant the works of older and wiser beings. Who amongst them possessed the wit to unmake so elegant an enchantment?

'I have no reason to believe otherwise,' Gelt said at last, careful even now not to lie; he knew from experience that Karl Franz had a sensitive ear for such things. Unfortunately, Gelt saw at once from the Emperor's querulous expression that he was discerning enough to recognise the half-truth for what it was. It was therefore of no small relief to the wizard when the herald re-entered the room a moment later.

At least it was, until he heard the tidings that had occasioned the interruption.

THE ALDERFEN GARRISON

No one had expected a serious assault at Alderfen, and the garrison was little more than a mismatched conglomeration of units on the march elsewhere. Had not Wolfram Hertwig's Ostermarkers been one such force, Alderfen would surely have become a slaughter.



WOLFRAM HERTWIG, ELECTOR COUNT OF OSTERMARK

Though not technically part of the Alderfen garrison, Count Hertwig was on a tour of inspection when the breach occurred. He thus took command of the battle, until his death at the hands of Festak Krann. Ordinarily Count Hertwig would have fought from the saddle of his war griffon, Bloodfeather, but the beast had succumbed to plague two days earlier.

CAPTAIN HARALD DREIST

A serial womaniser, Harald Dreist took a commission in the Nordland Seahawks to avoid reprisals from cuckolded nobles of that state – amongst whom the Elector of Nordland could be counted. Despite his chequered background, Dreist proved an effective disciplinarian and a valiant warrior. Sadly, Dreist's sanity crumbled in later years, and he spent much of the End Times confined to Druchoft Sanatorium.





VALTEN

Until Alderfen, no one thought anything special about this man. When the Reikland XIII marched to war, Valten followed them – he had twice attempted to join their ranks, and twice been refused, for reasons that were never sufficiently explained. For weeks before Alderfen, Valten had been the butt of many a joke: he spoke seldom, and was thought a simpleton. The truth of the matter was, of course, that Valten rarely spoke because he had nothing to say. At that time he understood little of his purpose.

THE NORDLAND SEAHAWKS

One of Nordland's more celebrated regiments, the Seahawks comprised over two dozen companies at arms. The Seahawks were often the first regiment assigned to other states, and therefore received better weaponry than other troops, and drew higher pay. This was not an act of altruism on their Elector's part, but pride. The count loathed sending forces to other lands, and was determined that his forces should outshine those of his rivals.





THE BROTHERS FLEISSMAN

Few along the Kislev border had many kind words to say about the Fleissman brothers. Accomplished Bright Wizards, they chiefly used their talents for blackmail, rather than more honourable pursuits. More than one merchant's warehouse 'inexplicably' burnt down after its owner refused to make a gift of gold crowns to the brothers. Nevertheless, the Fleissmans were nothing if not staunch patriots and stood the line at Alderfen.

THE WOLF BROTHERS

The reputation of this regiment varied depending on whom was asked. In their home state of Middenland, the Wolf Brothers were grizzled heroes, examples that all aspirant warriors should follow. Elsewhere, however, especially in neighbouring Reikland, where soldiers were more decorous and disciplined, the boisterous Wolf Brothers were considered little better than the brigands and barbarians who they fought with such fervour.





THE REIKLAND XIII

Few regiments could boast the discipline and hardiness of the Reikland XIII. It was a point of regimental pride that its soldiers were silent until an officer commanded them to speak, and that they would pass into death without so much as a whimper. As a result, the Reikland XIII were incredibly selective in their recruits, and turned away even the most able-bodied of candidates. Most such rejects ended up in one of the lower-numbered Reiklander regiments, whom the men of the XIII disdained as dilettantes unused to real soldiery.

THE LION'S ROAR

Like all of Nuln's grand batteries, the Lion's Roar was composed of six artillery pieces, one for each arch of the city's northern bridge. Though the crewmen were veteran gunners, the guns themselves were freshly forged for the northern campaigns – all save the cannon 'Sea Hammer', which was originally cast to be a chaser gun on a now-sunk wolfship.



THE ROTTING HORDE

The Rotting Horde had come to Alderfen in the hope of winning early glories, and thus elevating themselves in Archaon's sight. For long weeks they railed in fury beyond the Auric Bastion, their wind-blown curses the only things to pass into the Empire. All that changed, of course, when the wall began to crumble.



FESTAK KRANN

Krann was one of the first warlords to lead his followers south into Kislev, and the slaughter he wrought amongst the steppes served only to elevate him in Nurgle's sight. When the Auric Bastion crumbled before him, Krann was certain that his hour had at last come, unhesitatingly leading his warband through the fallen stones and on to glory.



GURUG'ATH OF THE ENDLESS ROT

Gurug'ath was the Baron of the 6th Pestilential Circle, a power to be reckoned with amongst the interminably squabbling vassals of the Dark Gods. It was he who fashioned the plague that had brought such recent misery to Bretonnia. For that work, his most fecund father granted him the honour of leading no fewer than three of the Census Legions into battle. Upon arrival in the mortal world, Gurug'ath soon came to bask in the worship of those northlanders who saw his presence as a sign of Nurgle's favour. This idolatry, combined with an already overweening ego, quickly propelled Gurug'ath to overconfidence.



THE CROWHUNGER BRETHREN

Like their namesake, the Crowhunger Brethren feasted upon the battlefield's dead, for they believed that they could make the strength of the fallen their own by glutting themselves upon still-warm flesh. Even other northlanders gave the Crowhunger Brethren a wide berth, ever wondering whether it was they that would form the ragged warriors' next meal.



DAAKON HAR'S BLACKSHIELDS

These tattooed marauders fought not for the glory of the gods, nor for the joy of battle, but for the pillaging and looting that came with triumph. Daakon Har led his warband to victory after victory in the battles for dominance of the Northern Wastes, often changing allegiances in the dying moments to be certain of being on the winning side.

THE HOUNDS OF KHOROS

Once, these riders praised Ulric as a father, before forsaking the God of Winter for a darker and bloodier master. They believed themselves to be Khorne's huntsmen, and roamed the frontier lands with hearts no less savage than the war dogs they drove into battle.





THE CENSUS LEGIONS

No one knows for sure how many Census Legions shambled forth at Grandfather Nurgle's command. Indeed, as the plaguebearers of the Census Legions were thought to be the immortal remains of pestilence-slain mortals, it was entirely possible that more souls marched in Nurgle's service than in all the other armies of the gods combined. Three Census Legions fought at Alderfen – the Hallowshrive, the Rotfallow and the Ensepsis Brotherhood.

AESON THE FALLEN

Once King of the Baersonlings, now a mutated leviathan of tentacles and creeping insanity, Aeson remembered only enough of his former life to follow his former minions into battle. As Aeson lumbered forward, the swirling portal upon his back ushered madness and death upon his friends and foes. Aeson cared not. He smelt the blood of the slain, dimly remembering the frenzies to which it drove him. Aeson would have wept for what he had lost, were he any longer capable of comprehending how far he had fallen.



THE DEFENCE OF ALDERFEN

Gelt's pegasus was a loyal beast who had served his master well for more than a decade. His name was Quicksilver, and on that day the winged steed proved his worthiness for such a name. At Gelt's command, the pegasus headed southeast like a spear cast from the hand of Myrmidia herself, carrying his master across the many leagues to Alderfen. As they travelled, Gelt saw firsthand the prevalence of the undead, and knew, despite his protestations, that the fiends of Sylvania were free to act once more. This horrified the wizard, both for the loss of life and for the damage to his reputation, but as soon as Quicksilver bore him within sight of Alderfen, more important matters seized his attention.

Even from several leagues' distance, Gelt could see the breach in the Auric Bastion, a great wound that split the wall from its roots to its ramparts. Through it spilled all manner of plague-infested northmen, who hurled themselves towards a worryingly thin Empire line. The skies above the breach were black with beating wings as furies circled and squawled, impatient for carrion but unwilling to risk themselves against a healthy foe. The air was full of the boom of drums, the raucous clamour of horns and the chanting of forbidden prayers.

With a twitch of his reins, Gelt guided Quicksilver lower, to the hilltops where the banner of Wolfram Hertwig defiantly flew. About the banner were gathered a motley array of Imperial troops. There were Middenlanders and Wissenlanders, soldiers from Talabheim and gunners from Nuln. Precious few banners of Ostermark were visible upon the hills, and Gelt's keen eye quickly perceived the reason. A tidemark of yellow and purple, scarcely a half mile back from the wall and barely visible through the banners and shields of the advancing horde, showed where the Ostermarkers had made their stand; made it, and been punished for their bravery.

Now the thunder of cannons and mortars sounded, the rippling coughs of handgun fire filling the gaps in between. Gelt saw smoke gout forth from brass barrels, and bloody smears open up deep within the Chaos ranks. He saw wizards of the Bright College conjure conflagrations that swept through the ranks of pallid and disease-ridden flesh, leaving only ash and twisted metal in their wake, but still the northmen came. The drums beat louder, the chanting grew more determined, and fresh warriors came forth to fill the holes left by the dead.

Gelt paid the battle little heed; his attention was on the ring of stones that lay within the hollow of the hills, and the still, unmoving forms within it. No wonder the ritual had failed, for all within the circle were now dead, slain by some unseen hand. With a backward look at Hertwig's embattled line, Gelt came to a decision and urged his steed groundwards. One more wizard – even one of his capability – would make little difference to the ongoing battle, but he could perhaps repair the damage to the Auric Bastion, and stem the horde's reinforcements. Alighting from an exhausted Quicksilver in the very centre of the circle, Gelt reached into the winds of magic and began the long and dangerous process of restoring the sundered ritual.

Though Gelt couldn't know it, Count Hertwig had fought as valiantly as any man during that first assault, and had been dragged away by his bodyguard when defeat had loomed. Now the Elector Count had seized command of the first reinforcements to reach him and, with tears of sorrow and rage still staining his cheeks, sought vengeance for the slain. Hertwig knew that his line of swordsmen and halberdiers was too thin to hold, he knew that they would be overwhelmed, but he didn't care. If the End Times were truly upon the world, as the doomsayers told, then Hertwig was determined to pass into history spitting defiance and with a sword in his hand. Thus, as the horde reached the base of the hill, Wolfram Hertwig raised his runefang high and his men responded. *SIGMAR!* A thousand voices bellowed the god's name with such force that for a moment even the drums of the horde were drowned out. *ULRIC!* the Middenlanders roared in reply, the ferocity of their voices more than compensating for their slim numbers. Then, Hertwig lowered his runefang, and the men of the Empire swept from the hilltop, into the maelstrom of death.

Even though his concentration was bent upon the ritual, Gelt saw Hertwig's charge, and cursed the count for a fool. Did the man not see that restoring the Auric Bastion was their only hope? Gelt could not defend himself and complete the ritual; he'd been relying on Hertwig to keep the horde at bay. The wizard's eyes drifted to the corpses of the former ritualists. He could feel the death magic hanging heavy in the air, and the slain of centuries past slumbering fitfully beneath his feet. It would have been so simple to give them fresh life, to provide the guard he so badly needed, but no! That was forbidden, and for good reason. He would find another way.

The Chaos horde had expected the defenders to cower upon their hillsides, waiting for death. Few were prepared for a last show of courage, and so Hertwig's reckless charge gained much benefit from surprise. The clamour of steel upon steel rang out all along the lower slopes. Scores of Hertwig's troops perished in that first clash of blades, their skulls stove in, their limbs severed or their throats

torn out by venom-flecked teeth. Yet the impetus of the attack would not be denied. Halberds hacked down through armour plate and came away bloody, spears skewered the bristled hides of snarling hounds, and then the Elector's mad charge was over the line of Imperial dead and deep amongst the foe's ranks.

Hertwig's momentum had carried him deep into the enemy ranks, so deep that only one band of Middenlanders had been able to keep pace. Dead and dying northmen lay thick about the Elector Count, for even their hell-forged plate could not resist the runefang's enchanted blade. The Middenlanders took strength from Hertwig's example, and howled like blood-hungry wolves as they fought, determined that Ulric too would have his due that day.

A short way from where Hertwig fought, a brutish and lumpen figure marked the Elector's progress with interest. This was Festak Krann, and through Nurgle's favour and his own martial prowess, he commanded this portion of the northlander horde. In Hertwig he saw a worthy foe, one whose death would bring glory to the slayer. Shouldering a path through the close-packed ranks of plate-clad warriors, Krann bore down on the Elector Count.

Surrounded as he was by the din of battle, the first Hertwig knew of Krann's approach was when the warlord's rust-pitted axe swept aside the two Middenlanders fighting to his front. Krann's axe came about again, too fast to parry, and Hertwig screamed in agony as the heavy blade hacked through his armour and deep into his shoulder. Ignoring the pain from his crippled arm, Hertwig cut at his assailant, but his vision was blurring, and the blow did nothing more than slice a splinter of wood from the axe's haft. As Krann's axe came down once more, Hertwig gathered the last of his strength and threw his weight behind one final thrust. The last sound the Elector heard was Krann's bellow of surprise as the runefang's blade slid deep into the brute's belly. Hertwig's lips had time to twitch into a brief smile before Krann's rusted axe split his skull. Krann roared with laughter as Hertwig's body fell to the ground, its lifeless hands leaving the sword buried in the warlord's gut. Krann was pleased. The wound had been unexpected more than it had been harmful; Nurgle would heal this harm as he had others before. The Middenlanders, their courage broken by the Elector's fall, scrambled to escape, but Krann's warriors tore mercilessly after them.

Krann let the pursuit continue without him. One foe had fallen, but there was still much to do. The Empire guns continued to fire from the summit, and the warlord could see a dozen bright colours flying on the breeze. The battle was not over. Reaching down, Krann grasped the runefang's hilt, and tore the weapon free of his body. A spill of foetid blood poured from the wound. Instantly, Krann knew that something was wrong; his flesh should have healed within moments, but the black blood continued to flow forth, taking the warlord's strength





with it. He could not have known that this runefang, heirloom of Ostermark these many centuries, was known as Troll Cleaver, and its enchantments thwarted his body's attempts to heal as easily as it did those gnarled brutes. Krann collapsed to his knees, his plight ignored by the northmen charging past, his life gushing away. Finally the warlord keeled over, sprawled next to Wolfram Hertwig who stared sightlessly skyward, his lips still hooked in a knowing smile.

Few amongst the Empire lines marked Hertwig's death, for they were too busy fighting for their own survival. Many heroes were forged in that clash of bellowing brutes and snarling beasts, but few survived long enough for their names to pass into legend. Yet still the men of the Empire held. On the right flank, Captain Harald Dreist was regretting the adulteries that had forced him to seek commission in the Nordland Seahawks – a regiment stationed far from the angry husbands of Salzenmund. Thus far, Dreist's tutelage in bladework had served him well, but the halberdiers of his regiment were being hacked to offal by the northern brutes. On the left, Ar-Ulric Emil Valgeir, too old to have followed the Middenlanders and Hertwig into death and glory, was nonetheless hale enough to hew at the emissaries of Chaos with his runic axe. Those who fought nearby marked the determination with which Valgeir struck down Nurgle's chosen warriors, and sought to match the old priest's vigour.

Yet it was in the centre of the line that the fortunes of war finally began to shift against the invaders. There, amidst the bloodied corpses that had once been a proud regiment of Talabheimers, the survivors rallied around a flaxen-haired youth whose hammers glinted with holy light. No soldier was this lad, nor even a priest; he was a blacksmith by trade, and his weapons were but common tools of the forge. He had not come to the border to escape the consequence of past sins, nor because duty had brought him hence. He was there because something had drawn him north from his Reikland home, some urge he could not deny. The youth's name was Valten, but those who looked upon him saw the light of Sigmar mantled upon his shoulders, and drew fresh strength and courage from his presence.

Where Valten's hammers struck, northlander shields were shattered and skulls were pulped. With each foe vanquished, the aura of power about the lad grew ever brighter, until even his foes began to recoil in awe. A vast armoured beast reared up amongst the invaders' ranks, slime-flecked tentacles dragging Talabheimers into its cavernous maw. Valten showed no fear, but threw himself directly into the monster's path, hammers arcing out to pummel its bones to dust. The beast keeled over, its bulk crushing those who did not scatter before it, and the fight went out of the northlanders. Without a word of command, they retreated from the fell warrior before them, and the Talabheimers came forward into the gap to avenge their dead.

In that moment, it seemed as if the tide of battle had turned. Somewhere, a voice shouted Valten's name, and other men soon took up the cry. Most did not even know why they did so, but wielded the word as a talisman against the horde. On the right, Captain Dreist felt renewed strength fill his weary arms as he led his Seahawks against the wavering barbarians. On the left, Valgeir frowned but said nothing as he saw Valten's golden light infuse all who fought along the hillside. Then the cannons on the crest roared once more, and the Empire line surged forward, driving the northlanders before them.

Valten! Valten! Valten! cried the men of the Empire, and the banner of Festak Krann fell into the mud scant paces from the warlord's lifeless corpse.



Valten! Valten! Valten! The Crowhunger Brethren, pox-faced knights who had ravaged Ostermark for a generation and more, perished to the last damned soul as Valten's hammers shattered their skulls.

Valten! Valten! Valten! The surviving Middenlanders, eager to erase all memory of their earlier cowardice, fell like wolves upon the fleeing barbarians. They had none of Valgeir's reserve; they craved victory, and if it were granted at Sigmar's hand, then so be it.

Valten! Valten! Valten! The northlanders had been driven back almost to the breach in the bastion now, and the men of the Empire could taste victory.

Valten! Valten! Valten! In the centre of the ritual circle, Gelt heard the chant and wondered briefly what it meant, before focusing his attention on his own task once more.

Valten! Valten! Valten! The last of the invaders' standards toppled into the mud, and the fleeing horde spilled back through the breach into Kislev. Though it had cost many hundreds of lives, the line had been held – or so it was thought.

Dreist saw it first: a misshapen mountain of disease-ridden flesh, crowned by a scowling face. It approached the breach from the Kislev side, heaving its massive bulk through the fleeing northmen, a battered longsword in its right hand, a flail of iron chains and leering skulls in its left. Behind the creature came a legion of scabrous and droning warriors. Pus wept from open sores and distended bellies; cackling mites swarmed forward to sup from the foetid pools. The mortals had failed, so now Nurgle had sent his daemons to finish the job.

It said much for the confidence lent by Valten's presence that even this new horror, this shambling plague pit given life, did not cause the men of the Empire to baulk. Sergeants and captains issued orders, and a ragged line formed across the breach. It was a thin bulwark, as few as three or four men deep in places, but valour served where numbers lacked. As the plaguebearers shuffled into reach, not a single man contemplated retreat. They shut out the screeching of the circling furies. They ignored the otherworldly stench of the daemonic host, and the flies that swarmed thick to clog noses and mouths. They endured the stabbing pains as nurglings clawed at their calves and ankles. Men vomited as disease coursed through their blood, but fought on until their hands dissolved into mucus, or their eyes liquefied. All instinctively knew that Valten would bring them victory, and were determined not to fail him.



Valten did not hesitate, but sprang forward to smite the Great Unclean One full in its chest. The daemon, who delighted in the name Gurug'ath of the Endless Rot, made no attempt to defend himself, and indeed looked slightly affronted to be so assailed. His leathery skin smoked and hissed where the hammer blow had landed, but Gurug'ath did not so much as slow his advance. Again Valten struck. There was a flash of golden light; the daemon roared in pain, but he did not fall. Instead, Gurug'ath brought his sword around in a downward arc, his obvious intent to split Valten from stem to stern.

Seeing the danger, the youth thrust his hammers together to block the blow, but he was not strong enough to deny a Greater Daemon of Nurgle. The sword struck the locked hammers with a dull crack, and split them apart. At the same moment, the daemon's skull-headed flail swept out at chest height, and knocked Valten to the ground bloodied. All at once, the chanting faded as the men of the Empire saw their champion felled. The golden light dimmed, and hope faded with it. Soldiers who moments before had been convinced of victory, now recoiled from the daemons that stood before them. The entire easternmost end of the line broke and fled. Captain Dreist ran with them, his honour as ragged as his tunic.

Gurug'ath's pestilent frame shook with sonorous laughter, and the nurglings clustered around his feet chuckled and giggled to see Valten humbled so. Running his wormlike tongue across cracked and blistered lips, the Great Unclean One heaved himself forward, and raised his sword to end the impudent mortal's life. Two Talabheimers came forward to drag Valten clear, but another sweep of the flail sent their shattered bodies spiralling aside. With a ghastly chuckle, the daemon took one more lurching step forward and raised his sword high. Valten, now on his knees but still dazed, stared uncomprehendingly as Gurug'ath's blow descended.

The darkness arrived unheralded. It was not the fall of night, for that lay some hours in the future. It came from the south, travelling against the wind, a creeping shadow that advanced with incredible speed to choke all light from the sky. In one moment, it loomed on the southern horizon; in the next, it spread north until the sun was all but a memory.

For a heartbeat the fighting paused, as daemon and man alike tried to guess what this change foreboded. Gurug'ath checked his deathblow and

peered myopically at the skies. He could taste the magic on the air, and wondered if this was the work of some untrustworthy Tzeentchian daemon, come to rob him of his triumph. Then the laughter sounded, and Gurug'ath knew that his suspicions were misplaced.

The laughter echoed around the battlefield, seeming to spring at once from everywhere and nowhere. It was not an unpleasant sound, so far as such things could be reckoned. Its rich tones were deep and laden with confidence, rendered harsher by an unmistakeable touch of malice. It was the voice of one who deemed himself superior to all who heard the sound, and took the greatest of pleasures in that knowledge.

In the ritual circle, Balthasar Gelt felt the winds of magic shudder as another bent them to his will, and scrambled desperately not to lose control of his own incantations. Golden light flared across the ancient stones as the gold wizard lost and regained his grip several times over. Perspiration flowed in runnels down the inside of Gelt's mask as he fought to stabilise his ritual. So focused was he on the fluctuating stream of magic that he scarcely noticed the cold and howling wind that gusted out of the south, over the hills and through the breach in the Auric Bastion.

Captain Dreist felt the chill on his face as he fled the horrors of the breach, and all of a sudden felt fresh terror sweep over him. All thoughts of flight forgotten, he half-tripped, half-fell and clasped his hands tight about his head, dimly aware that all around him other Nordlanders were doing the same. As he did so, he realised that new sounds had joined the laughter. There was a shrieking of steeds, a tremor of invisible hooves and, clamouring above all, guttural voices bellowing a war cry in archaic Reikspiel. Louder and louder the tumult grew, drowning the sounds in Dreist's mind, driving him near to madness. There was a blur of crimson and steel at the captain's shoulder, and a legion of gaunt-faced knights spurred north. A moment later, he felt the downdraft from a massive pair of wings, and clamped his eyes shut for fear of what he might otherwise see.

First to lay eyes upon the newcomers were the plaguebearers at the Auric Bastion's breach, though few endured long enough to fully appreciate what they saw. The howling wind blew across the field of plague-slain dead, and then it was a mere wind no longer, but a column of thundering hooves, lowered lances and raging battle-lust. Lances speared home into horned skulls and swollen bellies, spilling slippery guts and noxious vapours into the air. The knights noticed not the stench, and spurred forward again, driving deep into the daemonic legion that yet lay beyond the wall. The plaguebearers fought back, but the riders effortlessly parried their clumsy blows, or hacked limbs bearing weapons off with a swipe of chill steel.

Valten momentarily forgotten, Gurug'ath moved his massive bulk to join the unforeseen battle on his eastern flank. The daemon had taken but a single waddling step when something huge shot out of the darkness above, raking its skeletal talons across his back and shoulder. Gurug'ath staggered but did not fall, and his attacker swept on overhead. With a choked gurgle of frustration, the daemon saw that the knights were far out of his reach, and rounded once more on Valten. Again the great battered sword rose high, but the youth had already recovered his wits and rolled clear of the blow intended to cleave him in two.

Before Gurug'ath could ready another blow, new attackers lurched out of the darkness and threw themselves at the plague daemon. They came with no thought for themselves, and few carried weapons – these were not living warriors, but the recently slain dead of Alderfen. They swarmed over Gurug'ath, heedless of their casualties, thrashing at the daemon with bloodied stumps and ripping at his skin with shredded fingers. Again and again, the zombies came, driven on by the laughter that echoed upon the wind.

This now was too much for the men of the Empire. Surrounded by daemons and the undead, most threw down their arms and fled. Most, but not all. Two pockets of the living fought on. One centred around Emil Valgeir, whose rigid composure had not wavered an inch, and the other about Valten who, though weaponless, was now on his feet once more and striving to reach Gurug'ath. At first, the soldiers struck out at daemon and undead in equal measure, but they soon realised that the unliving were making no attempt to fight them. Disbelievingly at first, but with increasing confidence, the Imperial soldiers shrank away from their own zombified dead, and struck home against the daemons.



From the hilltop, Vlad von Carstein watched as warriors of the Empire, living and dead, battled to hold the breach. Of Walach Harkon and the Blood Dragons there was no sign, the impetus of their charge having carried them far beyond the Auric Bastion.

Harkon is reckless. **The speaker stood a short distance to Vlad's left. He was little more than a masked and grotesque shadow in the dark.**

'He is a warrior, not a manipulator,' Vlad rejoined. 'You would not understand.'

The Nameless seemed to seethe at the rebuke, his form billowing like smoke in the wind. ***You know my name, then? You know who I was? Tell me.***

Vlad smiled sharply and shook his head. 'Our master would not be pleased, and I need his favour, at least for now. You are not the only one who has lost pieces of his past.'

I could make you tell me, **the Nameless hissed.**

'You would pit your will against mine?' Vlad snapped, his unblinking gaze falling upon the Nameless' mask. 'Then do so, and let us be done with the matter. Otherwise, the stage before us awaits the arrival of its puppeteer.'

The Nameless hissed in outrage, then flew eastward.

Alone at last, Vlad shook his head in disgust. ***Isabella,*** **he thought,** ***the things I do for you.***

Captain Dreist staggered to his feet. He made no conscious effort to do so, for his thoughts were still frozen with terror, but he rose all the same, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. He heard whispers in his mind, the commands of a sonorous voice whose will would not be denied. All around, he could see other men rising, and through his haze of panic noted that their confused expressions matched his own. Unbidden, Dreist's legs stumbled forward, carrying him back towards the breach in the Auric Bastion. Others came with him, their movements as clumsy as his own, their actions guided by a creature no longer used to the limitations of physical form.

Gurug'ath tore himself free of the remaining zombies just as Dreist's unwilling charge struck home against the plaguebearers. The Great Unclean One could see that the newcomers' movements were unnaturally mechanical, but his daemon sight perceived what the human eye could not: a vast and billowing spirit was silhouetted against dark skies, its ethereal tendrils dancing as it spurred its puppets to action. To either side of Gurug'ath, the jagged edges of the Auric Bastion were glowing with golden light as Gelt's ritual began to take effect. Battering aside a knot of the spirit-thralls, Gurug'ath barrelled forward, his only thought to make the open ground beyond the breach. As the daemon heaved his way over the corpse-laden stones, there was an inrush of wind, and Vlad von Carstein stepped out of the darkness to confront him.

Vlad had encountered such creatures as the plague lord before, and deemed Gurug'ath a challenging foe. But it had been centuries since the vampire had trod the mortal world, and his own battle-skill had decayed far more than he had realised. As Vlad ducked low under a sweep of Gurug'ath's sword, the daemon released his flail and, closing a meaty hand around Vlad's weapon arm, hoisted the vampire off his feet. Pus-flecked spittle sprayed across the vampire's face as the Great Unclean One mocked him for his failure, each booming syllable echoed by the impish mouth in the plague lord's tongue.

Valten saw all this as he fought his way through the horde of plaguebearers. He knew not the vampire's identity, but recognised that they shared a common foe. His hammers were lost, shattered during his own battle with the plague lord, and while his fist fared well enough against the bilesome lesser daemons, Valten doubted that they would serve against so monstrous a foe. Even as he punched and raked at Gurug'ath's arm, Vlad saw the youth approach, and perceived the opportunity at hand. Closing his eyes, the vampire sought one zombie in particular amongst his reanimated horde, and called it forth.

As Valten closed with Gurug'ath, the bloodied corpse of Wolfram Hertwig shambled to intercept him. The zombie's lips still bore a frozen smile, as its hands gripped the Elector's runefang, which it now held out for Valten to take. The youth seized the sword without hesitation and rejoined the fray. Down the runefang cut, and Gurug'ath recoiled in pain as the blade sliced deep into his arm, releasing his grip on the vampire.

They fought together on that breach, the youth and the immortal, not as allies in the truest sense, but as warriors who in that moment shared a common foe. Gurug'ath's hide was tough, his diseased flesh all but impervious to pain, but it nonetheless yielded under the twin assaults of the runefang and Vlad's cold blade. The daemon's opponents exchanged no words, shared no plan, but reacted instinctively to the other's actions. As Vlad parried the balesword's strike, Valten went forward to slit Gurug'ath's guts. When the daemon heaved his bulk forward to slam Valten to the ground, Vlad's opportunist blow took one of the plague lord's eyes. An observer might have thought the two fought as brothers, unless he noted that neither Valten nor Vlad expended any effort to preserve the other from harm. Had they worked together – truly trusted one another in that moment – perhaps the daemon could have been vanquished. As it was, their blows served only to enrage Gurug'ath, who slowly drove his foes

before him. Yet more plaguebearers came forward in the plague lord's foetid wake, ready to spill across the breach and into the lands beyond.

Then, in the ritual circle to the south, Gelt let out a cry of triumph and the stones flared with light. As the unleashed magic swept north, the air across the breach crackled and sparked as the Auric Bastion flowed together once again. Toppled stones sprang up from beneath the corpses and golden light bound them together once more. Plaguebearers were crushed by tumbling blocks, or sealed in Kislev, and the Auric Bastion rebuilt itself. As the wall healed, Valten abandoned his fight with Gurug'ath and threw himself clear. Vlad also escaped, but without sacrifice of dignity. Instead, he offered Gurug'ath a sneering smile, swept his sword in mocking salute, then strode briskly from the sealing breach.

The Great Unclean One snarled and lumbered forward in pursuit, but too late. Golden light flowed across the daemon's body, trapping his rotting form like a great fly in amber. Gurug'ath snarled and struggled, but he could not break free. He was still bellowing as the stones slammed shut around him.

Thus ended the Battle of Alderfen. Valten and Valgeir were left as beneficiaries of a strange triumph. Vlad and his allies had slipped away in the hour of victory, the dead they had raised collapsing lifeless once more, the bodies of Dreist and his men loosed from the spirit's grasp.

As they buried their dead, the survivors took heart from Valten's deeds, and wondered at how dark the times had become when the cursed creatures of Sylvania took arms in the Empire's defence. As darkness fell, and the denuded army lay encamped, Valgeir shuffled through the shadows, sprinkling salt and blessed water about the perimeter. Few slept easily that night...











Gelt's efforts to repair the Auric Bastion, valiant though they were, could not sustain the necessary magics forever. Though the wizard was a master of the alchemic craft, he had only the most rudimentary grasp of the light magics that had created the wall in the first place, and none at all of the priestly devotions that had lent the Auric Bastion its power. Nevertheless, after the Battle of Alderfen, Gelt laboured for a full night and day and, through sheer pig-headedness, managed to bind the disparate components of the Auric Bastion together long enough for other wizards and priests to shoulder the burden.

When he finally ceded control, Gelt was exhausted, but found that sleep would not come. Part of this he blamed on his unease at the unexpected allies. Though Gelt had not laid eyes on the undead, he had felt their arrival distort the winds of magic. Their arrival was not his only concern, however. Tradition and elven tutelage dictated that the human mind lacked the capacity to control more than a single magical wind, yet in his attempt to rebuild the Auric Bastion, Gelt's mind had touched not only Chamon, the Wind of Metal, but also Hysh, the light-wind, as well as the bizarre eddies that melded with the Sigmarite faith. That contact had greatly expanded Gelt's perceptions of magic, and of the world influenced by that magic. He could hear voices where others heard only silence, could see secrets hidden from his brother wizards. This discovery was both terrifying and exhilarating to Gelt. Terrifying, because of the many cautionary tales concerning wizards who had overreached themselves, and paid a tithe of sanity; exhilarating, because of the possibilities for prestige and understanding it brought.

As dusk fell on the second day after the Battle of Alderfen, Gelt put his expanded perceptions to work. No one had yet been able to offer any believable explanation for how the original ritualists had come to be slain. Captain Dreist, whose own memory of recent days seemed patchy, had suggested it to be the work of beastmen, but Gelt was not convinced. Though the injuries varied, these were efficient and comparatively civilised wounds – slit throats, cracked skulls and the like. Had the beastmen been responsible, they would have likely left no bodies at all, and those that did remain would have been savagely marked by tooth, fang and horn. Moreover, the Children of Chaos were hardly noteworthy for attacking in silence, as the perpetrator must have done to avoid notice of the sentries, or even the ritualists themselves. No, thought Gelt, another hand was at work, one that the victims had not noticed until it was too late.

Taking position on the hillside above the stone circle, Gelt closed his eyes and let his mind drift upon the winds of magic. When he opened his eyes again, the hues of the physical world had faded away, replaced by muted greys. Looking down, he saw that his body was gold, and to the north, the Auric Bastion shimmered like silver. Below him, the magics of the ritual circle flared yellow and white in accordance with the labours performed within. But there was something else too, a lurid purplish-green smear that hung heavy on the air – daemon-spoor, for a certainty.

Seeking a second opinion on the matter, Gelt carefully ended his witch sight and went to awaken Emil Valgeir. Or rather, he would have done had the old priest been slumbering – seemingly, Ar-Ulric was finding sleep as elusive as was the wizard. Valgeir reacted with spluttering consternation at first, but grudgingly accompanied the wizard to the ritual circle. There, he cast the sacred bones and reluctantly confirmed Gelt's suspicions: the slaughter in the circle was a daemon's work. Worse, Valgeir suggested, the daemon was most probably a shapeshifter, given that no alarm had been raised. Gelt disliked this suggestion, as it meant that the creature could still be loose in the Imperial camp, but could find no fault with the logic, and resolved to begin the search. If the daemon was still amongst them, he would find it.

The next morning Gelt's plans changed, however. A herald came riding from Castle von Rauken, demanding the wizard's presence at the Emperor's war council. Though Gelt expected little good to come of his attendance, such a summons could not be disobeyed, and so he travelled northward soon after dawn. Before Gelt left, he spoke again with Emil Valgeir, who gave firm assurance that he would not rest until he had found the shapeshifter, should it prove to exist.

The war council was held in one of Castle von Rauken's banquet halls but, even so, the room was full almost to capacity. The Emperor was present, as were his bodyguard, Ludwig Schwarzhelm, and the Reiksmarshal, Kurt Helborg. Of the seven surviving Elector Counts, only Boris Todbringer was absent. Grand Theogonist Kaslain and Luthor Huss represented the Cult of Sigmar, and there were grand masters, wizards and generals of militia from across the Empire. Each man was accompanied by a small army of scribes and advisors, drastically increasing the attendance. All told, there were perhaps five hundred men present, of whom Gelt judged that perhaps two dozen were politically significant.

When Gelt was called upon to speak, the council listened intently to his recollections of the Battle of Alderfen, paying particular attention to the wizard's admittedly second-hand account of the youth Valten. Aldebrand Ludenhof voiced some concern about the temporary collapse of the Auric Bastion, but was also the most vocal in his congratulation of how Gelt had single-handedly

restored the breach. They learnt all Gelt could tell them of the undead, of how the infamous Walach Harkon and his Blood Dragon knights had been sealed north beyond the wall – to the satisfaction of all present – and how the remainder had vanished into the darkness. Gelt said nothing of the shapeshifter he believed to be loose along the Ostermark border; that would wait until he had proof, or until the creature was slain.

Had the council ended there, Gelt would have left a hero. Instead, after Alderfen had been thoroughly discussed, he faced a rancorous onslaught from the Reiksmarshal concerning the failure of the wall of faith around Sylvania. Helborg did not shout, but his voice was tight with anger as he gave a tally of the slaughter inflicted on Averland, Stirland and Ostermark by a reinvigorated Sylvania, events the Reiksmarshal was certain heralded a renewed onslaught from that benighted land; a land that Gelt had claimed to have caged.

It was a mark of Gelt's preoccupation with the war in the north that he had given little thought to Sylvania. Even with the sudden arrival of the undead at Alderfen, he had failed to make the connection – after all, there were more vampires in the Empire than the fiends of Sylvania. Gelt was a clever and perceptive man, but he was also prone to obsession, and so had been blinded to the collapse of his cage. As Helborg's tirade at last came to a close, Gelt realised his folly, and addressed the war council, but he had gone several days without sleep, and his judgement was clouded. As the Supreme Patriarch began speaking, it was his intention to make apology for his failure, but remind all there present that he had never claimed to cage Sylvania – that feat had been attributed to him as rumour had spread. Alas, Gelt was too weary to keep his pride in check, and as a result, his apology was grudging, his outrage at being blamed for others' assumptions all too plain. He had done everything he had promised, the wizard told the council at length. He had blunted the threat from Mannfred von Carstein's return, and bought time for a lasting solution to be found. Gelt did not even realise he had been shouting until he finally fell silent.

Soon after, the council moved onto other business, but it was too late; the damage had been done. Between Gelt's perceived failure in Sylvania and his conduct, the respect he commanded in the eyes of the war council had been heavily eroded. Karl Franz, ever the diplomat, had claimed that the strain of the last few days must lay heavy on Gelt's mind, and suggested that the wizard retire from the council and seek rest. When Gelt refused, the suggestion became an order. In that moment, the Supreme Patriarch was convinced he had lost the Emperor's trust.

Absenting himself at last, Gelt wandered for hours through the torch-lit passages of the castle. He knew that it wouldn't take long for word to reach Altdorf, and that when it did, one of the other college heads would likely challenge him for the patriarchy. He would have journeyed back to the capital then and there, were it not for the unfinished business of the shapeshifter. He bade the castle's pages saddle Quicksilver, and was about to depart east, when Ludwig Schwarzhelm arrived; the council had ended, and the Emperor had requested a private meeting.

So it was that Gelt and Karl Franz met for a second time that day, not in a banquet hall but in the private suite set aside for the Emperor's use. Schwarzhelm was the only other man present. After offering wine, the Emperor apologised for the reception Gelt had received that day. He had, he said, been about to intercede on the wizard's behalf, but Gelt's disintegration of composure had made that impossible. The Emperor assured the Supreme Patriarch that he



still had need of him, now more than ever; indeed, he asked that Gelt take overall command of the late Wolfram Hertwig's portion of the border for the time being. Gelt, overwhelmed by Karl Franz's generosity of sentiment, offered the full apology he should have made earlier that day, and did not dwell on the fact that the Emperor had chosen to deliver that sentiment in private, where others would not hear. Trusted though Gelt might yet be, Karl Franz still clearly considered him something of a liability.

Gelt left the following morning, not alone, as had been his plan, but in the company of a relief column. Count Ludenhof and Luthor Huss rode with him, but Gelt found neither especially good company. Ludenhof was friendly enough, but watched the wizard as a hawk watches its prey. Huss kept his own council. Widespread rumour of Valten had sufficiently piqued the priest's interest, and he secretly wondered if the lad was the one he had sought all these years.

Though it would doubtless have been of little consolation to Balthasar Gelt, Vlad von Carstein was no happier about his situation than was the wizard. The vampire loathed being bound to Nagash's service, and would gladly have remained dead, but for the opportunity to restore his beloved Isabella to existence. As it was, Nagash had promised to restore the only thing that mattered to him, and Vlad would obey, at least for now...

Vlad found no consolation in his enforced allies. As far as he was concerned, Walach Harkon was a hypocritical brute, using honour and glory to justify a barbarian's bloodthirsty whims. At least circumstances separated them. Vlad was quite content to let the other flail around in the remains of Kislev. The Blood Dragon would doubtless find ways to bedevil the Chaos worshippers, where he would otherwise have wasted much of his efforts challenging Vlad's leadership.

The Nameless was even worse, a parasitic creature who had no existence outside of cruel indulgences. Vlad would gladly have been rid of the creature, for he knew that its power greatly eclipsed his own, but such was not his choice to make.

The irony of Vlad's opinions did not escape him. There were plenty who would think him no better than his fellow Dark Lords, but the vampire knew there were many evils in the world, and had always counted himself a necessary one. He had been a tyrant, true enough, but never one who was needlessly cruel. For him, brutality was a means to an end, nothing more; a wellspring of order whose bloody waters nurtured strength and discipline. He had realised long ago that humanity cried out for leadership, and needed a firm hand to guide it. In his former life, Vlad had sought to provide that hand, to recreate the Nehekhara of old in the tumultuous lands of the Old World. His only folly had been trusting too much in his own kind.

Vlad was aware that Mannfred, always the most ambitious of his get, feared that his sire would seek to reclaim Sylvania. In truth, Vlad had no such intentions; for him, Sylvania had always been the first step upon a greater path, a weakness in the Empire's underbelly to be exploited. In the days to come, however they unfolded, the entire Empire would cry out for the order that only he could provide. Let Mannfred keep Sylvania – Vlad had no love for its backward peasants and fawning inbred nobles. That was not to say that Vlad had forgiven Mannfred's involvement in his own death, so many centuries ago, but there was no hurry to settle that debt – immortality brought inexhaustible opportunities.

For now, Vlad's task was to help the Empire defend its northern border. The Battle of Alderfen had tipped the vampire's hand, and he was forced to move quickly. The army he had gathered in Sylvania had been too slow to reach Alderfen in time, so he had sent it eastward to conquer Rackspire, where the Auric Bastion met the Worlds Edge Mountains. Vlad had need of a fortress, and had chosen Rackspire for that honour.

The fortress' northern defences were formidable, but those that faced into the Empire were rather less so. Nevertheless, Commandant Roch kept his garrison fighting against the undead for three days, ever optimistic that a relief force would arrive from further west along the Auric Bastion.

No such reinforcements came. Immediately after the Battle of Alderfen, Vlad and the Nameless had headed further east. While Vlad took command of the assault on Rackspire and slaughtered its defenders, the Nameless asserted his will across several leagues of the Auric Bastion, a span of the wall that had become known as the Helreach by the Ostermarkers. Though Vlad was loathe to admit it, he could never have achieved the same surety of control as the Nameless achieved. Where the vampire could have enthralled the Helreach garrison's commanders, the Nameless effortlessly dominated the minds of every soldier and ritualist for a twenty-league span of the wall. Like the unfortunate Captain Dreist and his men at Alderfen, the puppets of the Nameless knew their actions were not their own, but were powerless to do anything about it. Rackspire became Vlad's new stronghold, and Commandant Roch's reanimated garrison swelled the vampire's ranks. Vlad regretted the necessity of their deaths, but was determined that they would serve in another form.

Thus did Vlad seize command of the Empire's eastern defences. Those travelling along the Helreach or to Rackspire quickly fell under the control of the Nameless, whose presence was as pervasive as it was loathsome. Messengers, couriers, peasants, relief troops – all who

entered the Nameless' domain became his puppets, unable to think or act for themselves. The fortunate ones were permitted to leave, their minds emptied of anything they had seen, but most of those who fell into the spirit's clutches could expect only a torment-filled servitude.

The arrangement was not perfect, for the Nameless could not precisely replicate Gelt's ritual, not in near a hundred minds spread across twenty locations, and nowhere was the Auric Bastion breached with such prevalence as it was along the Helreach. It hardly mattered, for the Nameless' puppets and Vlad's undead managed a far more disciplined and determined defence than fractious humanity could ever have achieved. With each victory, the northlander dead swelled Vlad's ranks further, until the Ostermark border was the soundest in the entire Empire. After a fortnight, Vlad felt so secure in his position that he began to venture further afield. Travelling deep into Ostermark and Stirland, he ransacked shrines and temples, all the while searching for Isabella's remains so that he might escape the need to serve Nagash.

As Vlad consolidated his hold on the Helreach, Gelt continued his stewardship further west. Like the vampire, Gelt found his attention divided between the military role he had been commanded to play, and a growing obsession – in this case, the shapeshifter of Alderfen. According to Valgeir, the daemon had struck again in Gelt's absence, never with so great effect as at that battle, but had nonetheless left an impressive trail of dead in its wake.

A few nights previously, the officers of the Nordland Seahawks had been briefly trapped in their command tent when its metal stakes were removed. The event would have been entirely comical had it not transpired that those same stakes had been hammered into the touchholes of a grand battery of cannon, rendering the guns unusable. The engineers had lamented their loss, but not so much as they did the following night, when the creature had taken the guise of Master Engineer Rudi Volmart and set light to the artillery wagons. The resulting explosion had been heard many leagues hence, and left a blackened crater where the artillery train had been corralled. Of the artillery wagons' sentries, no trace was ever found.

Supply convoys were lured away from their official routes by seemingly legitimate heralds, and onto 'safe' roads where beastmen waited in ambush. Couriers had been slain, or had gone missing entirely. The surviving Nordlanders had barricaded themselves into the ruins of an inn, and for three days teetered on the edge of mutiny. The matter was only settled when Captain Dreist had ordered a company of the late Count Hertwig's greatswords to storm the stockade and restore order. The ringleaders were never found. Duels of honour between officers became commonplace, sparked by the most unlikely chains of events. Old rivals found themselves billeted nearby to one another, the personal effects inexplicably stolen from one and senselessly paraded by the other. For several days, the Hochlanders and Talabeclanders were on the brink of open battle, as an otherwise unremarked voice dredged up the perennially sore topic of the disputed Svelden border territories. Brawls quickly broke out, and the Nordlanders, who had recently suffered more than a few cracked skulls for their own disorder, now found themselves helping the Ostermark greatswords keep the two squabbling parties separate.

At the height of the disturbances, the daemon had even attacked Valgeir, though the priest had possessed the presence of mind to call upon Ulric for aid, and so drove the creature away. Unfortunately, Valgeir had not so much caught a glimpse of his attacker, but reckoned his sore head a lucky escape, and was quick to reaffirm his intention of rooting out the shapeshifter.

Though none of the deeds the daemon performed in Gelt's absence had consequences on the same scale as the murders that had led to the Battle of Alderfen, the wizard found them troubling nonetheless. It irked him that the creature could act with impunity, and it was of little consolation that many of its more recent feats were little more than low level mischief and brigandage. Gelt was sure that the creature was only amusing itself whilst it sought the opportunity to do something darkly spectacular, and he was determined to seek it out and end its unnatural existence before such an hour came to pass.

Gelt and Valgeir sought the shapeshifter, but met with no success, only increasing irritation. Neither spells nor prayers could detect what form the daemon had currently assumed. They could only point to where the creature had been and, as such locations were normally marked by bodies or some act of sabotage, this wasn't as enlightening as Gelt could have wished it to be.

Soon after Gelt's return, Luthor Huss took Valten north. Since arriving at Alderfen, Huss had spent almost every waking hour with the lad, in and out of battle, and had become convinced that Valten had a part to play in the days to come. In a moment of gruff enthusiasm, he even suggested to Gelt and Valgeir that the youth might have been sent by Sigmar himself, as a herald to his return. Valgeir, in particular, was unimpressed by this claim. The churches of Sigmar and Ulric had ever enjoyed a frosty relationship, and it was obvious to Gelt that the wolf-priest feared that Valten's existence might see the Sigmarite church eclipse the Ulrican sects even further.



In the weeks that followed, it seemed that the shapeshifter had abandoned his mischief, and the trail went completely cold. Gelt wasn't sure whether to be suspicious or relieved, and in either event could do nothing. With the daemon's quiescence, things slowly turned back to normal. There were no more mutinies or waylaid patrols, and even the quarrelling between the Hochlanders and Talabeclanders grew becalmed.

In many ways, the respite was a blessing, as it left Gelt with little option but to focus on repelling the incursions through the Auric Bastion. It was of no small concern to the wizard that the breaches occurred more and more frequently. Aware that neither he nor the Empire could afford this wall to fail as the one around Sylvania had, Gelt's sleeplessness now became a boon, for it allowed him to labour deep into night in his attempt to divine the cause.

Finally, Gelt discovered that the source of the instability lay somewhere to the east, along the Helreach. The Supreme Patriarch had thought it unlikely that there was a problem in that area, as messengers travelled that stretch of the wall every day, and reported only a stalwart and vigorous defence against the forces of Chaos. Yet, again and again, Gelt's divinations told the same story. Placing command of the Alderfen circle in the hands of Captain Dreist, Gelt followed the arc of the Auric Bastion eastward.

The Nameless knew at once that Gelt had entered his territory, for every eye along the Helreach was his to command. The spirit would have dearly loved to seize control of the Supreme Patriarch as he had so many others, but the Nameless quickly sensed that Gelt's will, whilst in no way equal to his own, would be something of a challenge to overcome. The Nameless did not care for challenges; he preferred quick and visceral satisfaction.

Since the Nameless had asserted control over the Helreach, many of its defenders had perished in service to his whims. Some had fought their fellows to the death in makeshift arenas, spurred to the bloodsport by the cruel whispers in their minds. Others had gnawed at their own flesh, for no other reason than because the Nameless wished to sample the experience through his borrowed senses. One day, the spectre had decided that his unwilling armies should march into battle beneath banners of flayed skin, and so had ordered scores of his puppets to fashion such standards from the hides of their friends. Next, the Nameless decided that bone totems would be more appropriate; the flayed banners were abandoned, and his puppets tore each other's flesh away, strip by strip, unable to disobey their master. Ironically, had the Nameless been less easily distracted, then he would have made a better job of maintaining the Auric Bastion, and thus never given the wizard a reason to enter his domain. As it was, the wizard had to die before he saw too much, and spoilt the spirit's games.

Gelt could have perished easily then, struck from the skies by a bolt of dark magic, and torn limb from limb by the Nameless' puppets, but he did not. Vlad von Carstein too had become aware of the wizard's presence on the Helreach, and sent minions of his own to intercept the Supreme Patriarch before the Nameless' blow could land.

They met in secret that night, the wizard and the vampire. Vlad sought to make the other a willing ally, rather than a dupe or slave, and strove to convince the Supreme Patriarch through honesty, rather than trickery. In this, the vampire failed, at least initially; even after their impromptu alliance at the Battle of Alderfen, Gelt was disinclined to trust that he and the vampire truly had the same cause. Nevertheless, the seeds Vlad planted in the wizard's mind that evening would soon bear fruit.

Gelt opened his eyes with a start. Even in the darkness, he could make out the bowed timbers overhead, and the barrels stacked against the far wall. The last Gelt knew, he'd been flying over the village of Harkar. Now he was in a cellar of some kind, though how he'd come to be there – or how long he'd been held there – he had no idea.

His weapons were gone, and his hands bound. The former presented a problem, but the latter was little obstacle. Gelt closed his eyes, and sought the proper transmutation cantrip that would turn the rope to dust.

'Good evening, your eminence.' The voice was rich, and delivered each syllable with languorous precision.

Abandoning his attempt at freedom, Gelt turned his attention to the predatory figure who loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

'I really must apologise for inconveniencing you like this,' the vampire said mockingly. 'It is a squalid venue for a meeting between men such as Vlad von Carstein and the great Balthasar Gelt, Cager of Sylvania.'

Gelt's heart was gripped by sudden fear, so much so that he quite forgot his annoyance at the title that had caused him so much grief of late. With an effort, he suppressed his horror and stared at his captor with more defiance than he felt. 'If you're going to kill me, I'll thank you to be about the matter. Otherwise, I have many demands on my time.'

Vlad laughed. It was a strangely warm sound, Gelt thought, for so cold-hearted a fiend. 'Be not so hasty, my good man. You labour under a misunderstanding; we need not be enemies. In fact, I very much hope that we can be allies.'

With a flourish, the vampire seated himself on a cask opposite Gelt, reached forward and slit the wizard's bonds with a swipe of a talon. Gelt didn't move, not wanting to concede anything.

'Allies,' Gelt said flatly, scarcely able to contain his disbelief. 'Vlad von Carstein wishes an alliance with the Empire?'

'Is that so very hard to believe?' asked Vlad, with a wave of his hand. The vampire was smiling, Gelt noted, enjoying his performance for an audience of one. 'Surely you must know by now that the End Times are upon us? In so bleak an hour, old enmities must be put aside. In any case, I don't propose to ally myself to the Empire as a whole – not yet. I don't believe your people are ready to accept my aid. Though they will in time, whether they wish it or not.'

Gelt snorted. 'And you esteem me to be more easily manipulated?'

Vlad wagged an admonishing finger. 'Oh, I know that you are.'

'Explain yourself,' Gelt bristled.

'The wall around Sylvania? You don't seriously expect me to believe that was entirely your idea, do you? As for this grand work in the north, I know all about your meeting with Neferata's little ingenue, and the scroll she gave you.'

Gelt started at these revelations. 'The courtesan was a vampire?'

Vlad continued as if the wizard had not spoken. 'There has been war between the forces of Chaos and undeath for many years now, and you, my friend, have unwittingly served both sides. I offer you the opportunity to choose a side, and take control of your fate.'

'And if I choose not to accept your generosity?' Gelt asked. Despite everything, the wizard found the vampire's words compelling, and had to remind himself that the creature before him was not to be trusted.



Vlad stood up sharply and, with a sweeping bow, gestured to the cellar door. 'Then leave. You will find your steed and belongings waiting in the stable. No one will stop you. In any case, you need not make a decision now. The offer will remain open indefinitely.'

Gelt rose to his feet, ignoring the painful protests from joints too long unused, and walked to the exit as imperiously as he could manage. He still felt that the vampire was toying with him but, if he were, there was nothing for it but to walk into the jaws of the trap. He was a pace from the door when Vlad spoke again.

'Before you depart, allow me to present you with a gift. A gesture of good faith.'

Despite himself, Gelt turned to face the vampire once more, and made a clumsy catch of the hide-bound tome thrown towards him.

'The *Revelations Necris*,' Vlad explained as Gelt turned the book over in his hands. 'A copy, naturally. Small-minded fools consider it a... heretical work, but I think you will find its contents of interest.'

'Really?' Gelt asked. The tome was warm to the touch, he noted. The sensation filled him with revulsion, but also sparked a feeling of something he could not quite identify. 'How do you know I won't simply burn it?'

Vlad took a step forward, his eyes intense. 'Because you've already taken your first steps beyond the foolish confines of your own order. Do not try to deny it; the signs are plain upon you.' He shrugged. 'In any case, I no longer need the knowledge contained within. Burn the book if you wish, and remain forever ignorant of your potential. Or use it to protect your realm; I leave the choice in your hands. As I told you before, I am not your enemy.'

Gelt returned to Alderfen a thoughtful man. Vlad's words had lingered with the wizard more than he had expected, and Gelt found his mind ever returning to the possibility of an alliance. Of course, had the wizard witnessed the horrors that the Nameless revelled in inflicting upon his 'allies', or had he known that Vlad had slaughtered the garrison of Rackspire out of expedience, then perhaps he would have developed a different opinion. As it was, Gelt was left to focus on the fact that, for once, the men of the Empire and the notorious vampire might actually have common cause.

Gelt told not a soul of his meeting with Vlad. He knew that such a conversation would be treated as treachery at best, and heresy at worst. What was more, he couldn't find it within himself to entirely disagree with that assessment, not under the normal scope of events. But that was the thing; these dark days were far from normal. The world was changing, the old certainties slipping and blurring away. None of the Empire's friendships had been entirely bloodless. The elves, the horselords of Kislev, and the Bretonnians had all spilt blood in Sigmar's realm, often on the flimsiest of excuses. Even the dwarfs, stalwart allies though they had been on many occasions, had been ready enough to carry their axes against the Empire over what men perceived as the pettiest of matters. If friendship were so inconstant, thought Gelt, then why not enmity?

The Supreme Patriarch knew that such thoughts were dangerous, and for days after his return sought to lose himself in the struggle to hold the border. Much work was there in this regard, for the northlander hordes were growing ever larger and more ferocious. Now, each passing failure of the Auric Bastion invited disaster for the lands beyond, and Gelt increasingly found that his own magics were the only buffer against defeat. Even so, victory was often won by the narrowest of margins. At Kragvost, the wizard transformed the steel of the attackers' weapons to lead, and set a plague of rust upon their armour. At Snaldren Keep, where he arrived too late to save the garrison, Gelt used the weapons of the slain to forge iron golems in the defenders' likenesses, and with them held the bridge over the Upper Talabec for twelve hours. Thousands of northlanders perished along Gelt's section of the Auric Bastion, but the wizard knew that hundreds of thousands remained, ready to spill south whenever the opportunity arose. It was obvious to Gelt that there were simply not enough men to hold the border, but he knew that the story was the same all the way to Erengrad. He would have to make do with what scant reinforcements came his way, and hope that the Dark Gods returned to their slumbers once again, as they had so many times before.



As the weeks ground on, Gelt became increasingly weary. Each battle took a toll of his strength, and where other men could seek solace in sleep's embrace, Gelt had been denied that luxury ever since the Battle of Alderfen. Oh, he could rest for perhaps an hour each night, but his dreams were ever haunted by secrets half glimpsed when he had sought to wrestle the Wind of Light alongside that of Metal. On occasion, Gelt feared he was going mad, but if that were so it was a strange madness, full of wonder and potential, like a flavour the tongue could not quite taste, or a precious jewel lying just beyond the reach of a thief's straining fingers. Had Valgeir been there, perhaps Gelt would have spoken of his weariness, but Ar-Ulric was still further west, keeping close eye on Huss and Valten, and so Gelt was alone. Dreist and the other captains were mundane folk, possessed of earthy desires and simple thoughts; they would not have understood, or at least so Gelt assured himself. The wizard could not bring himself to display weakness before men who were so obviously his inferiors, and moreover feared that one of them would see that word of his fragility reached the Emperor. Karl Franz had given Gelt a sacred trust, and the Supreme Patriarch was determined not to fail his liege. Paranoia this certainly was, but weeks of near-sleeplessness had robbed Gelt of sound reason.

Valgeir was not entirely absent, for he was often in Gelt's thoughts. Missives from Ar-Ulric sporadically arrived in Alderfen, detailing Valten's progress through the northern Empire. Huss' theory that the lad was Sigmar's herald was gaining credence across the land, much to Valgeir's poorly concealed disgust. In his letters, Ar-Ulric asked if Gelt had made any progress in finding the shapeshifter, but so tired and disconsolate had the wizard become that he seldom replied. Indeed, Gelt became gradually more withdrawn and reclusive. Claiming he needed to focus on the struggle in the north, he delegated almost all of his responsibilities as Supreme Patriarch to his deputies.

More battles came and went, each bloodier than the last. The walls of Moorholt were torn apart by daemon-fire, and the fortress-town's central keep would have fallen too, had it not been for the almost inhuman bravery of Captain Pieter Hanseld, who led a charge to reclaim the gatehouse. Hanseld perished in the moment of victory, and his fellow Wissenlanders buried him in the shadow of the keep

he had saved. The village of Eska was assaulted once by rampaging northmen, and a second time by beastmen lured by the carnage. Each time, Gelt's men fought and died in its defence, though it would have perhaps been quicker and kinder to let the village burn.

All the while, Vlad's offer returned repeatedly to the Supreme Patriarch's thoughts. Although Gelt had threatened to burn Vlad's gift of the *Revelations Necris,* some instinct had prevented him from doing so. Instead, he had sealed the tome away from prying eyes, but its temptation was ever close at hand. After the second Battle of Eska, his mind's eye still fixed on the fields of bloodied and mangled dead, Gelt broke open the hasps of the *Revelations Necris*, and surrendered to the secrets therein.

It quickly became obvious to others that something was wrong. Upon arriving on the border all those long weeks ago, Gelt had requisitioned a mansion owned by a local nobleman who had fled south to Heffengen at the first sign of trouble. Such was the wizard's reputation that few folk had since approached the building. Servants occasionally made the journey up the winding slope to tend to the wizard's spartan needs, whilst Dreist and his follow captains were sometimes summoned to councils of war held within. Soldiers billeted in Alderfen talked of strange lights dancing on the mansion's spires by night, and of ghostly figures treading the woods nearby. The wind changed direction when it touched that hill, or so it was said, and always blew cold. To begin with, Captain Dreist discounted such tales as rumour, but tellingly could not bring himself to make the journey to Gelt's iron door.

It was only a week later, during the Battle of Akkerheim, that Gelt's descent into forbidden magics became obvious. Akkerheim was by far the largest conflict since the Supreme Patriarch's arrival in those parts.

When a section of the Auric Bastion collapsed, the northlanders urged two mutated giants into the breach, who, through feats of monstrous strength, kept the stones from re-sealing. Though the giants were at last felled by keen-eyed Stirland archers, and the wall healed soon after, the behemoths had bought enough time for many hundreds of fur-clad marauders to spill into Akkerheim's fields. Without Balthasar Gelt, the resulting battle would have been a slaughter, but the salvation he brought to Akkerheim was not to everyone's tastes. At the wizard's gesture, cloying black fog streamed across the battlefield, and where it touched the slain, they rose to carry arms against the invaders.



This first summoning was clumsy, as could have been expected of a man newly come to the path of necromancy, and many of the awakened cadavers collapsed within minutes of their raising. Yet what Gelt lacked for in finesse, he compensated for through sheer quantity. Soon a horde of twitching corpses surged forward onto the northlanders who, with the Auric Bastion sealed behind them, had no line of retreat. Some Imperial soldiers watched with approval as their foes vanished under a tide of bone and rotting flesh – these were the veterans of Alderfen, who had already seen the undead come to their aid once, and were cautiously content for them to do so again. Others looked on aghast as one nightmare fought another, and only truly relaxed when the battle had ended, and Gelt allowed the dead to crumple to the ground.

Once the initial shock had passed, few in Gelt's army realised it had been he who had spurred the dead to rise, and fewer still questioned what he had done. To the common soldiers, all wizards commanded powers that bordered on the unholy, and the slim distinction between what the Supreme Patriarch had done and, say, transforming the foe into living but immobile golden statues, was hardly worth dwelling upon. For centuries, it had been rumoured that wizards of the Amethyst College called upon similar feats in times of need, and the events of Akkerheim seemed only to confirm these tales.

Not all were so indifferent, however. Captain Dreist still had nightmares about the Battle of Alderfen, of the gruesome presence that had taken control of his body, and feared something similar was now at work with Gelt. In the days following Akkerheim, he found his concerns mirrored by Hans Kreiner, a priest of Sigmar recently come to the borderlands. Kreiner had no doubt that Gelt had fallen into corruption. He disappeared a week later, last seen walking the lonely road to Gelt's mansion. No explanation was forthcoming, and it seemed to Dreist that no one save he had even noticed. At that point, Dreist did the only thing he could – he fled west along the Auric Bastion until he reached Castle Skarlan, the fortress from which Aldebrand Ludenhof oversaw a section of the border.

When the captain was brought before him, Ludenhof tried to ignore Dreist's restless eyes and squirming hands, and listened to the jumbled account of recent days. The Elector Count didn't want to believe that Gelt could have fallen from grace, but knew that he could not ignore the possibility. The next day, Ludenhof rode to Alderfen under an outrider escort. He had wanted to take Dreist also, but the captain had reacted with such violent fear that Ludenhof eventually relented and left him in the care of the Sisters of Shallya.

After three days on the road, Ludenhof's doubts concerning Gelt

were swiftly and brutally dispelled upon reaching the outskirts of Alderfen. Seeking to strengthen the Auric Bastion, the Supreme Patriarch had reinforced the wall with great bone buttresses. Skeletal gargoyles perched upon the buttress summits or in nearby trees, the unblinking witch fires in their eyes scouring the approaches. What appalled Ludenhof more, however, was the fact that the soldiers and villagers toiling in the shadow of the wall seemed completely unconcerned by the horrors that surrounded them. Had Gelt's corruption claimed them also? Ludenhof wasn't sure.

As Ludenhof and his escort made their way warily into the centre of Alderfen, they were greeted by Gelt himself. The wizard certainly seemed little different to when Ludenhof had seen him last. If anything, the Elector Count had the sense that a great weight had been lifted from the wizard's mind. Hospitality was offered, and carefully refused, but this didn't prevent Gelt from waxing lyrical about the discoveries he had made, and the steps he had taken to preserve the lives of the Empire's citizens. Why should the living perish in the realm's defence, the wizard argued, when the dead would serve just as well?

For a time, Ludenhof listened with mounting horror, then extracted himself from Gelt's excited soliloquy as politely as he could manage. Truth be told, the Elector Count made a poor job of hiding his disgust, but Gelt was so engrossed in his explanations that he hardly noticed. As Ludenhof rode hastily back towards Castle Skarlan, his mind was already awhirl with the work to be done. Whatever madness had seized Gelt, it would have to be ended, and soon. Had the Elector Count turned to cast his gaze upon Alderfen one last time, he might have seen Vlad von Carstein watching dispassionately from a shadowed window. But he did not, and thus had no forewarning of what was to come.

His mind bubbling with contempt and annoyance, Vlad watched Ludenhof's escort ride away. 'Ludenhof is blind to your achievements,' the vampire cautioned Gelt. 'Even now, he plots to destroy you.'

'You're wrong,' the wizard replied. 'He'll see the necessity of it, they all will.'

Vlad laughed. 'Wise men are always the most foolish. Did you not see the look in his eyes; hear the tremor in his voice? He fears what you have done, and will see you destroyed for it.'

'What would you have me do?' Gelt demanded quietly.

Vlad arched an eyebrow. He said nothing, but Gelt took his meaning all the same.

'No!' the wizard said angrily. 'What I have done, I have done to save lives, not end them.'

'Then when next you lay eyes on Ludenhof, it will be at your burning, everything we have worked for will have been for nothing, and the Dark Gods will laugh at your stupidity.'

'No,' Gelt said again, but his voice was tired, pleading against an inescapable truth.

'If your allegiance is to mankind's survival, you cannot afford loyalty to individual men,' Vlad pointed out. 'Is Ludenhof's life worth more to you than the hundreds upon thousands who will die if he denounces you?'

Gelt was silent for a time, but when he spoke again, his voice was firm. 'No, no it isn't.'

Good, thought Vlad, the lesson had been learned. 'I appreciate the difficulty this must present – I will attend to it if you wish,' the vampire offered, careful that mockery was absent from his tone.

Gelt shook his head. 'No,' he replied resolutely. 'The burden is mine to bear.'

'Good,' Vlad replied, grasping the wizard's shoulder. 'Then there is yet hope for us all.'

At dusk on the second day after leaving Alderfen, Ludenhof's party retraced their journey through Fang Wood. The outriders travelled with weapons primed, for the northlander threat was ever-present, and the wood was notoriously goblin-infested. But that eve's danger was not to come from greenskins. When the travellers reached the crossroads known as Deadman's Pike, their path was blocked. Gelt had arrived before them, for Quicksilver was swifter than any ground-bound steed, and now the wizard begged Ludenhof to hark at his counsel.

Ludenhof had little choice in the matter. He could see the monstrous shapes of Gelt's skeletal watchers lurking in the trees, and feared they would attack if he refused. Besides, unlikely as it was fast becoming, the Elector Count still hoped that the wizard could be turned from the path he had chosen. In this, he was soon dismayed, for Gelt repeated the ideals he had spoken of in Alderfen. Worse, the wizard talked of a necessary alliance with the von Carsteins of Sylvania, and of how ultimate salvation lay at the gift of none other than dread Nagash. So saying, Gelt spread his hands imploringly, but one of Ludenhof's outriders misread the gesture as the start of some enchantment. Bringing his repeater pistol up, he pulled the trigger. The gun roared, and the bullet struck Gelt high in his shoulder, throwing him back in the saddle.

Anarchy reigned as Gelt's skeletal guards burst from the trees and fell upon their master's assailant. The other outriders, their nerves already frayed, opened fire. Heavy bullets whined as the soldiers defended themselves, but though many a bone was shattered, the creatures came on. Ludenhof's sword came out as he tried to organise his escort, but the outriders scattered in panic, and so became easy prey. Soon the air was full of terrified cries, and Ludenhof's orders were drowned out.

Blinking past the pain of his ruined shoulder, Gelt became aware of the unfolding slaughter and commanded his minions to cease the attack. These were not mere mindless dead, but constructs crafted from much older and more difficult magic, and with his thoughts disrupted by the agony of his wound, Gelt could not marshal the necessary control. All the creatures knew was that their master was imperilled, and they ruthlessly and efficiently crushed the threat.

By the time Gelt regained control, only Ludenhof still lived. The Elector had been unhorsed, his clothes were bloody and torn, but he fought on despite his wounds. Ludenhof was tiring fast, and his last swing had left his guard open for the stroke that even now came to sever his head. Ludenhof saw the blow come about, and knew at once he could do nothing to prevent it, so instead whispered a last farewell to his wife, though she would never hear it. A heartbeat later, Gelt's word of command rang out across the clearing, and the blade halted in mid-strike. Ludenhof flinched away from the stalled blow then, recovering his composure, stared contemptuously across at the Supreme Patriarch.

Gelt returned the Elector's gaze, searching for an explanation to undo the damage of the preceding moments, and convince Ludenhof how necessary his actions had been. But no matter how much the wizard tried, he could find no words. As he sat in a silence that felt altogether too much like cowardice, Gelt saw the other constructs cluster unbidden around the bloodied Elector Count. There could be no reasoning, the wizard realised sorrowfully, no words to bridge the chasm that now lay between them. As the blades came down for Ludenhof one last time, he spat defiantly at Gelt, who turned away in shame. Though the wizard saw it not, the Elector Count died unbowed, his sword still gripped in his hand.

When Gelt returned to Alderfen, he did everything he could to put Ludenhof's fate from his mind. He wasn't concerned that the murder would be uncovered; though the Elector Count would quickly be missed, it was inevitable that the work would be blamed on the goblins of Fang Wood, if the body was even discovered. No, Gelt's attempt to bury the matter was due entirely to guilt. In killing Ludenhof, the wizard had crossed a line; as violent as the reprisals would be if the deed were discovered, Gelt feared the changes in his own personality far more.



Thus did the Supreme Patriarch throw himself into other matters, chiefly the unheeded pile of correspondence from Emil Valgeir, which Gelt had neglected as his studies into the *Revelations Necris* proceeded apace. There was little solace to be found in those letters, for they painted an increasingly grim picture of events further west. Under Huss' guidance, Valten had travelled far and wide across the northern Empire, faith and hope blooming wherever he took to the battlefield. Even Karl Franz was convinced of the lad's divine patronage, or was at least canny enough to feign such recognition. Valgeir had many unkind words to say about Huss' shameless exploitation of the situation, but this was not what seized Gelt's attention. Rather, this dubious honour went to Valgeir's increasingly fervent suspicions that the Alderfen shapeshifter was trailing Valten's path. Valgeir was himself following the youth around the Empire, and at every town, village and fortress there were tales of inexplicable mischief and disaster, much as those the priest had witnessed at Alderfen. Ar-Ulric had no proof, or he would have laid it before the Emperor, but he was increasingly convinced that Valten was not who he claimed to be, and Valgeir's penultimate letter begged the Supreme Patriarch to come north.

Despite Valgeir's desperate tone, Gelt had no intention of leaving Alderfen until he read the final letter. This one, dated just a week prior, had been composed in a much more rushed hand, and spoke of how the Emperor, in a moment of madness, at least as far as Valgeir saw it, had decreed that he would grant Valten use of the hammer Ghal Maraz, thinking it only fit that Sigmar's herald wield the weapon of his divine master.

Gelt did not need Valgeir to explain the danger. As Gelt read on, he realised that the situation was worse even than he had first thought; Karl Franz intended to make the presentation in person, at a ceremony in Castle von Rauken. Gelt was struck by the fear that the shapeshifter could have crafted the Valten persona precisely to create the opportunity to assassinate the Emperor.

Checking the date of Valgeir's final letter, the Supreme Patriarch realised he could reach Castle von Rauken in time, but just barely. Summoning his pegasus, Quicksilver, to his side, Gelt sped north.

DEATH OF A TRAITOR

The Changeling watched with glee as Castle von Rauken's defenders filed onto the muster field. Hundreds of soldiers stood waiting beneath gaudy banners, and more were arriving every minute.

The daemon had possessed no real plan when he had first arrived in the Empire long months ago. Tzeentch had bade him manipulate Gelt into sealing the vampires into Sylvania, which the Changeling had done through imitation of the golden wizard's apprentice, Dieter. After that, the daemon had been content to indulge his mischief wherever opportunity presented itself.

The ritual circle at Alderfen had perhaps been a mistake, the Changeling conceded, as a troop of Reiksguard knights came smartly to a halt over to his left, but then how had he been to know that Nurgle was better positioned to attack the breach than were the cat's paws of his own glorious master? After that near-catastrophe, one which had driven the Changeling to aid the humans to ensure that bloated Nurgle wouldn't prosper from the error, the daemon had amused himself with petty acts, letting instinct guide his misrule.

Thus had the Changeling played many roles in the preceding weeks, but always he had returned to his current form. He had not known why at first, but now it was all he could do suppress his mirth at the opportunity before him. The Emperor Karl Franz, so nearly within his grasp! The Changeling was saddened that he would have to murder the man, for it had been centuries since he had last impersonated a monarch, but the daemon could sense an edge of the divine about the Emperor, and this prevented flawless mimicry. For a moment, the reminder of his limitations saw the Changeling downcast, but his cheer was never absent for long – he was too easily amused for that. In this case, the daemon's spirits returned when he remembered that the Emperor's death would surely be accompanied by another's disgrace.

A clarion of trumpets split the air, and the Changeling looked up as the mighty griffon Deathclaw bore Karl Franz out of the skies. It wouldn't be long now...

Quicksilver brought Gelt to Castle von Rauken moments after the Emperor's arrival. The wizard saw the scaffold that had been erected on the muster field, its rough planks adorned with pennants in the colours of Altdorf, and blazons bearing the icons of the House of Luitpold. Dignitaries of all ranks sat upon the makeshift stage; amongst them four of the surviving Elector Counts, the Grand Theogonist and Ar-Ulric Emil Valgeir. In front of the stage, the Emperor brandished Ghal Maraz high in salute to the cheering crowd. Deathclaw screeched his own greeting, a sound that provoked an even louder response – the majestic griffon was scarcely less beloved by the common soldiery than his regal master. At the Emperor's side, Ludwig Schwarzhelm viewed the proceedings with what was presumably his usual dour expression. His eyes would be watchful, Gelt knew, but would they be watchful enough? Would the Reiksguard, arrayed in their full splendour around the Emperor, be able to reach their master in time if the shapeshifter launched an attack?

As Quicksilver carried Gelt nearer, the wizard saw the broad corridor that ran between the centremost parade squares, at the far end of which Valten and Huss waited. The former was on foot, the latter on a restless horse. As the pegasus carried Gelt lower, an Imperial herald urged the waiting pair to begin their advance towards the Emperor. A moment later, there was uproar as Quicksilver alighted a dozen feet in front of Deathclaw. Schwarzhelm's sword was out in a heartbeat, a challenge springing from his lips soon after. The worthies upon the stage rose to their feet in outrage, though Gelt thought he detected an approving smile flicker beneath Valgeir's fulsome beard.

Outraged, the Emperor demanded an explanation, and Gelt hurriedly explained his suspicions about Valten. He spoke of the peculiar happenings at Alderfen, and how those acts had followed the youth as he had journeyed around the Empire. While Gelt spoke, Huss and Valten hastened forward; they could hear Gelt's voice, but could not make out his words. For his part, Karl Franz believed little of what the wizard said. Luthor Huss had been a rock of certainty since the dark days had begun, and the Emperor trusted the warrior priest's judgement in this matter far more than Gelt's. He was saddened to see a man who had once been a trusted councillor so obviously deranged, but refused to let the wizard's delusions upset a day crafted to inspire hope. When Gelt would neither be quietened nor dismissed, Karl Franz sadly bade a troop of Reiksguard escort the Supreme Patriarch away.

As the knights closed in, Gelt felt panic rise. Reacting instinctively, he reached out for a spell that would delay the Reiksguard long enough for him to convince the Emperor. Unfortunately, in his haste, the wizard drew not upon the alchemic lore to which he had dedicated his entire life, but the darker sorceries that had haunted him in recent weeks. Too late, Gelt realised his mistake: skeletal hands burst forth from the damp sod of the muster field, grasping at fetlock and barding as worm-eaten warriors

hauled their way of out the soil. For a heartbeat, silence reigned as every man present wrestled with his astonishment that such an hour could come to pass. Then the Reiksguard drew their swords, and Schwarzhelm gave voice to that most damning of words: *Treachery*! Before the echo had faded, others in the crowd took up the cry and surged forward.

With that word, Gelt felt the life he had known shatter, but that loss brought sudden clarity. Though he be damned for a traitor, the wizard knew he could still accomplish his goal. Valten – or the thing claiming to be such – could still be slain. But this could not be achieved if the Emperor's ingrates ended his life. Stabbing his staff into the ground, Gelt gave himself over to the magics of undeath, and the entire muster field shook and heaved as the wizard granted new life to those buried beneath.

Many leagues away to the east, Vlad von Carstein felt a flicker in the Wind of Death, and knew at once the tale it told. The vampire gave a brief smile then, returning to the matter at hand, buried his sword to the hilt in the throat of the northlander chieftain with whom he fought.

Back at Castle von Rauken, the finely ordered discipline of the muster field collapsed as the dead rose. At once, the men closing on Gelt checked their advance, their efforts redirected to their own survival. None could reach the wizard, for a ring of dead had formed around him, and wailing spirits spiralled through the air above. As the bloody minutes ticked by, knights were dragged from their horses and valiant warriors torn limb from limb. The mustered troops had been arrayed for celebration, not battle, and their disorder cost many lives. Little by little, sergeants and officers brought discipline to the ranks, but the dead were in amongst them by now, their numbers growing all the time as Gelt raised the fallen to do his bidding.

Once perhaps, Gelt would have striven to spare the duty-bound soldiers who fought against him, but now the wizard cared only that the Emperor lived, and Valten died. These were perhaps not the actions of a rational man, but then Gelt was no longer entirely sane. Gnawed at by the guilt of Ludenhof's death, shamed by the Emperor's rejection and his perceptions subtly twisted by the sorceries he now employed, the Supreme Patriarch teetered on the brink of abiding madness. Then, without knowing it, Gelt lost his grip on the precipice, and fell. The wizard did not truly see the slaughter that unfolded before him, as terrified men gave their all in battle against the worm-eaten dead. He felt no remorse as rusted blades split skulls and hacked through flesh. Like a drowning man reaching for driftwood, Gelt was focussed entirely on the one thing he was sure would be his exoneration – the death of the daemon that called itself Valten.

Yet even this small goal lay beyond Gelt's grasp, it seemed, as Valten ran towards the Emperor, his reforged hammers ready in his hands. Huss too had spurred his horse forward, but by an accident of fate the Prophet of Sigmar was quickly pulled from his steed and overwhelmed by a heaving mass of corpses. With a bellow, Huss regained his feet and sent holy fire coursing through the dead, but he could make no headway through the horde. Valten spared Huss not so much as a backwards glance, for he knew where his priorities lay. On he ran, to where the Reiksguard sheltered their Emperor. The youth knew his purpose, clearer than he ever had, and he would not be stopped. Zombies grasped at Valten's



legs, but he tore free. Skeletons clattered unthinkingly into his path, but the youth scattered the vengeful bones with a sweep of his hammers. Spectral figures swirled before him, singing siren songs to numb his mind and scatter his senses, but a golden light burned upon Valten's brow, and the ghosts fell back before it.

Kurt Helborg fought his way forward, the runefang, Grudge Settler, glowing as it sliced through mouldering flesh. Kill the wizard, end the battle. Those words were the Reiksmarshal's mantra as he urged his destrier forward. He had fought many campaigns against vampires and their ilk, and always those words had served him well. *Kill the wizard, end the battle.* It mattered not to Helborg that Gelt had once been his ally – Helborg had no friends – the Supreme Patriarch was a target, another foe to be slain so that the Empire would endure. *Kill the wizard, end the battle.* Helborg swore as Grudge Settler's blade stuck fast in a bloated zombie, then he kicked the corpse clear and rode on. The Reiksmarshal gave a ragged war cry as his steed vaulted a line of undead, the momentum delivering him to Gelt's side. Down came Grudge Settler, and the blade would have taken Gelt's head had the wizard not raised his staff to parry it. Sparks flew as the enchantment of the runefang fought that of the Staff of Volans, but the blow was checked.

As the battle continued to rage, Emil Valgeir jumped down from the scaffold with an ease that belied his old bones. Some of his fellow worthies were calling for steeds that could not reach them; others were cowering from the undead. Valgeir ignored them all and ran on to the Emperor's side, using the butt of his axe to knock aside rotting cadaver and Imperial soldier alike. If the priest felt fear for the Emperor's safety, or even for his own, there was no trace of it written upon his brow. A hulking northlander skeleton lurched into Valgeir's path, but Ar-Ulric's axe dashed the brute to the ground. Valgeir vaulted over the body and reached the outer ring of Reiksguard knights. The priest wasn't even breathing hard. Valten was but a few paces to his right and closing fast, the Emperor and his griffon, Deathclaw, as far again to Valgeir's front. It would be close, Valgeir reckoned, but it could yet be done.



Thus far, Karl Franz had hung back from the battle. While it was clear to him that Gelt had gone mad, he was wise enough to know that there was more to the matter than he saw. Thus Karl Franz had reluctantly sheltered behind the shields of the Reiksguard; it irked him to do so, but knew that sometimes the duty of the Emperor was to live whilst others fought so that he could remain so. That all changed when Valgeir reached the Reiksguard. Astounded, the Emperor watched as pink fire billowed from the priest's outstretched hands, incinerating a dozen of the stalwart knights. Before the screaming had ceased, Valgeir launched himself skyward, slamming into Karl Franz and knocking him sprawling from Deathclaw's saddle. Ghal Maraz jarred from the Emperor's fingers as he struck the ground. Schwarzhelm and a handful of knights saw their master fall, and spurred forward to reach him, but they were engulfed in another cloud of pink flame. Valgeir – or something very like him – was on the Emperor before the other could stand, the Ulrican axe loosed to a final, decapitating blow. Whatever else Gelt may have been, Karl Franz realised, he had been correct about the assassin's existence – not that the information was of much comfort.

In that fateful moment before the axe struck home, Valten slammed into the Changeling from behind and the blow went astray. Over and over in the mud they rolled, the daemon's form flickering and shifting as he sought advantage. Karl Franz was quickly on his feet, Ghal Maraz in his hands once more, and he went to his rescuer's aid. Though, where once Valten and the ersatz Valgeir had fought, now there were two Valtens, identical down to their wounds. The Ulrican axe lay discarded close by, as did Valten's hammers, and now the two combatants hammered at each other with fist, knee and forehead. Karl Franz checked his blow, not wanting to pulp his saviour along with the assassin, but could see no way to tell the two apart.

Perhaps the Changeling would have succeeded – or at least escaped – but for Deathclaw. As it was, the griffon sensed what man could not, and with an ear-splitting roar, swept the nearer of the two Valtens aside. As the Changeling tumbled away, his features collapsed into a hooded mass of fire and tentacles. With a cry of indignation, the daemon writhed upright, determined not to be thwarted so close to his prey. Then he screeched in pain as Schwarzhelm, his burnt skin livid and his armour blackened, charged forward to thrust the staff of the Emperor's standard deep into the daemon's threshing mass. Before the Changeling could pry his way clear, Schwarzhelm's sword hacked deep into the creature's cowl. With a final shriek, the daemon collapsed, his body deliquescing into vile fluid as he fell.

None were stricken so profoundly by that sight as Balthasar Gelt. Even as he strove to survive beneath Helborg's blows, the wizard saw the proof of how he had been used; the Valgeir who had been his friend was not Valgeir at all, but the very shapeshifter they had sought. In his desperation to save the Emperor from murder, Gelt had provided a

distraction for the daemon. Giving voice to a gut-wrenching cry of despair, the wizard drove Helborg back with a desperate sweep of his staff, and urged Quicksilver into the skies. As Gelt fled, the winds of magic shifted once more, and the power he had used to bind the dead scattered upon the breeze. All across the muster field, corpses fell lifeless once more, and the survivors were left to piece together the puzzle of what they had just witnessed.

Though not so costly in lives as the conflicts that preceded and followed it, the battle later known as Gelt's Folly would have far-reaching ramifications for the Empire. First of these was the ascension of Gregor Martak, head of the Amber College, to the office of Supreme Patriarch, Balthasar Gelt having revealed himself to be irrevocably corrupted. This was only the first indignity heaped upon the Gold College, for in the wake of Gelt's Folly, Heldebrandt Grimm, Lord Protector of the Templars of Sigmar – the Witch Hunters – began an exhaustive and meticulous examination of the Arch-Alchemist's order. Grimm, ever a pious and ruthless man, put many alchemists to the fire. Few of the accused were truly guilty, but so deep were the wounds caused by Gelt's betrayal that no one sought to rein in the Lord Templar's excesses, and many encouraged him. Thus began the collapse of the Gold College, and the persecution of those who had studied within its halls. Only those alchemists who laboured to maintain the Auric Bastion were considered above suspicion.

Gelt himself knew none of this. At the battle's end, he had fled to join Vlad von Carstein at Rackspire, and it spoke much for his broken frame of mind that nothing he witnessed in the vampire's halls appalled him. With his loyalties no longer torn, Gelt eagerly learned everything that Vlad could teach him, and willingly aided the vampire in his search for Isabella's long-lost resting place.

Traumatic as these consequences may have been for those who suffered them, they would pale into insignificance as the year ground on and the Sigmarite priesthood took a fateful decision. Some months after the Battle of Gelt's Folly, Grand Theogonist Kaslain informed the Emperor that the Church of Sigmar would no longer contribute to the Auric Bastion. They had no desire, so Kaslain said, to support the tainted works of a proven heretic. Karl Franz had never missed Volkmar so much as he did at that moment. Stubborn and gruff though the previous Theogonist had been, he would never have acted as Kaslain did now. Gelt had proven to be flawed, but Karl Franz knew that this did not wash away the good works the wizard had performed up until that point. Sadly, Kaslain did not agree, and nothing the Emperor said could change his mind.

Losing patience with Kaslain, the Emperor sought to have the Grand Theogonist replaced, but the Sigmarite Church closed ranks behind their leader, and no matter what pressure Karl Franz brought to bear, he was unable to divest Kaslain of his position. Thus was Gelt's foolishness compounded by the stubbornness of priests.

Though it would take another fortnight for the effects to be truly felt, that was the day the Auric Bastion began to fail. Though wizards of the Light and Gold Colleges laboured on in their ritual circles, without the faith of the priesthood to serve as its mortar, the wall was no longer proof against daemons. All along the border, the scions of the Dark Gods tore and hammered at the Auric Bastion, and little by little, it began to collapse.

Ultimately, the dominance of the Auric Bastion ended at the place where so many things had been set in motion – in the Ostermark village of Alderfen. As faith bled out of the wall, Gurug'ath, the Greater Daemon imprisoned there by Gelt long months ago, began to move. The northlanders saw the wall crack and shudder as Gurug'ath strove against it, and they gathered in their thousands, chanting and drumming their praises to the Chaos Gods as the hated wall shook apart. When at last Gurug'ath tore himself free in a shower of dust and stone, a league-long section of the Auric Bastion tumbled into ruin. As the wall fell, Gurug'ath roared in triumph; the gathered northlanders exulted, and spilled through the widening breach.

Alderfen was overrun in hours; the northern reaches of Ostermark in days. Knowing he had little time to defeat this incursion before the pattern was repeated elsewhere along the border, Karl Franz mobilised every soldier he could, and marched from Castle von Rauken to confront the invaders. Neither the Emperor nor any of his generals could fathom why the invaders had plunged deeper into Ostermark, instead of veering west to the great cities of Middenheim, Talabheim and Wolfenburg; they knew only that the invaders from the north had to be crushed.

Meanwhile, from his chambers in Rackspire, Vlad von Carstein received word of the incursion, and saw greater purpose to it than any of the Emperor's strategists. He knew why the Chaos horde was heading through Ostermark. Sylvania lay south of that land; Sylvania, and the wellspring of death magic Nagash had sealed within its soil. That, Vlad felt sure, was what the horde sought, and he knew they could not be allowed to reach it. Leaving the Nameless to protect what remained of the Empire–Kislev border, Vlad gathered his minions and headed south. His spies had kept him well informed of the Emperor's movements, and now the vampire converged his forces on the city where he was sure Karl Franz would make his stand. Like it or not, the men of the Empire would not fight alone at Heffengen.





THE DEFENDERS OF HEFFENGEN

Heffengen marked the first major battle in the newly-unleashed Chaos invasion. The Empire army was not a desperate garrison, but a fully-armed and ordered army, commanded by the Emperor himself. If confidence could have won battles, Heffengen would have been ended before the first trumpet was sounded.

THE EMPEROR KARL FRANZ

The Emperor could have left the Battle of Heffengen to another's command, but he decided from the first that the responsibility was his. Already too many folk looked to Valten for leadership, and not to the House of Luitpold. Karl Franz knew that such a case of affairs threatened division at a time when the Empire needed unity more than ever, and there was no better way to reaffirm his rank than to win triumph in battle.





THE REIKSMARSHAL, KURT HELBORG

Kurt Helborg expected to die at Heffengen. For weeks, the Reiksmarshal had been bedevilled by dreams in which a vast plague daemon came forth to snuff out his soul, and he knew that such a creature marched in the enemy ranks. No one would have known this fear from the Reiksmarshal's bearing, for he was as intolerant of cowards and glory-hounds as ever. As dawn rose on Heffengen, Helborg made a silent oath to Sigmar, pledged himself anew the Emperor's service, and rode to meet his destiny in battle.

THE ARMY OF SIGMAR

The crazed flagellants of the Army of Sigmar were an unpredictable force at best. They neither slept nor ate on the eve of the battle, their fervent prayers continuing through the dark hours. The next morning, the prayers stopped, though it wasn't until much later that anyone realised this was only because the flagellants had cut out their own tongues.



THE REIKSGUARD INNER CIRCLE

Even amongst the uttermost elite of the Empire's soldiery, there were those who outshone their fellows as heroes born. Nowhere was this truer than amongst those Reiksguard entrusted with the Reiksmarshal's safety. Though they numbered a mere twenty warriors, their presence on the battlefield was oft likened to that of a full regiment of state troops.



STEIL'S SWORDS

Officially this was the 1st Company, 3rd Regiment of the Altdorf City Guard, but no one referred to it as such. When Maximillian Steil took command of the company, it was a downtrodden and ill-disciplined rabble a whisker away from mutiny. In the decades that followed, Steil transformed the Altdorf 3rd into a fighting force as steady as any to be found in the Empire, and whose soldiers were celebrated as heroes amongst the other Altdorfers.





VLAD VON CARSTEIN

Vlad's motives for aiding the Empire at Heffengen were murky at best. Nagash had commanded the vampire to hold the north, but even then, he was seeking a way of escaping Nagash's yoke. Between the slaughter of the Rackspire garrison, and the countless shrines razed in his search for Isabella's ashes, it was clear that Vlad had little love for the people of the Empire, and none at all for the Emperor himself. Most likely, Vlad was playing the game of survival as best he could, waiting for opportunity to present itself.

ESTROTH THE SILENT

More than five hundred years earlier, Estroth had borne Vlad's battle standard during the vampire's attempts to seize the Empire. With Vlad's death at the Siege of Altdorf, Estroth did not disintegrate, as many of his kind had, but returned to Sylvania and waited patiently for his master's return. When Nagash resurrected Vlad, Estroth knew immediately, and emerged at last from beneath the blanket of dusty cobwebs that had cloaked his unmoving form in the intervening centuries.





THE RACKSPIRE DEAD

Hundreds perished in Vlad's conquest of the Rackspire fortress, but their war did not end with their lives. Reanimated by the vampire's sorceries and still wearing the rags of their Ostermark uniforms, the benighted garrison shuffled south, ready to fight alongside their former comrades at Heffengen. One zombie still carried the fortress' banner, though it is doubtful he remembered why.

THE DESPOILERS OF OSTERMARK

The Chaos horde that struck Heffengen was in fact an amalgam of many lesser incursions, all of them drawn together by the promise of glory and plunder. There was no true leader, but an array of warlords, each hungry to outdo the others. There was little strategy, just an instinctive desire to win glory in the Dark Gods' name.

CROM THE CONQUEROR

Vardek Crom had quickly hacked his way to supremacy of the Kurgan, only to bend his knee to Archaon. Crom, more than any, had recognised the dark power at play on the Everchosen's brow, and knew that no other could replace Archaon as Lord of the End Times. Where another would have chafed at that knowledge, and quickly perished in an unwinnable challenge, Crom the Conqueror saw only opportunity and godly favour to be won.





AKKORAK THE CROW, REAVER OF THE NINE WASTES

Prior to the Battle of Heffengen, Akkorak was but one of a dozen warlords who sought dominance over his tribesmen. The others were his sworn companions, knights pledged to one another in their service to the Dark Gods. Knowing the renown of the imminent battle could go to only one man, Akkorak challenged his brothers to a contest of swords, and slew them all one by one. The Chaos Gods were pleased by the knight's sacrifice, and when Akkorak took to the field the next day, his blood burned with unholy fire.

THE SONS OF NIFFLECHT

Where most northlanders are raucous braggarts, the warriors of icy Nifflecht are ever unspeaking. They praise not great deeds, and utter no oaths; whatever devotions they make to the Chaos Gods are silent, or else performed far from eavesdroppers. Moreover, it was rumoured that the Sons of Nifflecht are no longer truly human, that no physical bodies exist beneath their ice-cold armour. If this is true, then no one has yet proven it, for even the wild Kurgan do not anger the Sons of Nifflecht lightly.





THE CLAWS OF SKAEL

The Skaelings boasted that they were not truly men at all, but the human descendants of a great drake that once roamed the lands north of Kislev. It was in honour of this supposed ancestor that the Skaelings branded their skins with tattoos of fire and swirling dragon shapes. The Claws of Skael were considered particularly blessed by their fellows, for the Dark Gods had seen fit to grant thick, serpent-like skin to many of these warriors.



THE WILDKIN OF HRALDAR

Even in the relatively quiet days that preceded the End Times, no Kislevite hetman would willingly patrol the upper reaches of the River Lynsk, fearful of the savage-tongued riders that made sport in that region. With Kislev's near-destruction the bored Wildkin came south, searching for fresh prey.

THE UNCLEAN

On the edge of Skaeling territory was a cave-riddled hollow where the tribe discarded its failures. Most were warriors overcome by blessings, reduced to bestial madness by the afflictions of godly attentions; a few were cowards and traitors, soon devoured by their fellow exiles. When the Skaelings marched to war, the Unclean were dragged from their lairs and bound with chains, unleashed from bondage only when the scents of foes were heavy upon the air.





THE STORMBORN LEGION

The months following Archaon's coronation saw a resurgence of the deathless dragon ogre race. For centuries, they had been thought to be in decline, but now the great stone gates of the underkeeps were flung open, and the ancient legions marched forth. The Stormborn Legion were the heralds of Krakanrok the Black, and their presence at Heffengen was the first warning that the sire of the dragon ogres would soon awaken from his slumbers.

KRULD'S RAMPAGERS

Vaslo Kruld was once a lancer in the Kislevite Griffon Legions, but fell from honour and grace when bloodlust eclipsed his soul. He soon rode as one of Khorne's fabled skullcrushers, free to sate his gory appetites in the company of men as lost and savage as he.



THE BATTLE OF HEFFENGEN

The Battle of Heffengen began at dawn, scarcely a day after the Emperor's arrival. Karl Franz had briefly considered withdrawing to the city walls, but had swiftly rejected the idea as unworkable. Heffengen's defences had been neglected, and the Emperor had no faith that they would hold. Instead, he arrayed his army on the plains to the north, trusting to the deep-flowing Revesnecht River to strengthen his eastern flank.

General Godfrei Talb had petitioned the Emperor for command of the eastern defences, and this had been granted. Talb would command over a dozen regiments drawn from across Ostermark, but Karl Franz elected to thicken that portion of the defences further. Gold was paid to Grub Kineater's Bloodfist Mercenaries, with promise of more to follow in victory. More notably, Valten and Luthor Huss chose to make their stand on the eastern flank, which meant that so too did the Army of Sigmar. This was a grandiose name, given in jest to the hordes of flagellants who had been drawn to Valten in the preceding weeks. Karl Franz was uncertain what to expect from the Army of Sigmar, and sought to minimise the disruption of the madmen by stationing them on his extreme flank.

The western end of the Empire line hailed almost exclusively from Talabheim. Garrat Mecke, Lord General of Talabheim, was the only sane man in the army who actually seemed to be looking forward to the battle at hand – save for the ever-bloodthirsty Reiksmarshal, of course. Since the disappearance of Helmut Feuerbach, Elector Count of Talabecland, Mecke had made no secret of his desire to rise to that high office and, even on the brink of disaster, hoped to improve his candidacy through valour that day. Though Karl Franz distrusted Mecke's motivations, the general had placed an impressive array of Talabheimers at his command, and so the Emperor overlooked the lesser evil of ambition that day.

In the centre of the line, the Emperor had gathered his finest forces. Most of these were soldiers from Altdorf, three whole regiments of the Emperor's palace guard and many more of the city's soldiery, formed in a double line a mile beyond Heffengen's gates. Also mustered there were the Reiksguard, the intemperate Kurt Helborg waiting restlessly at their head.

Every man assembled in the battle line knew what to expect. The horde had been heralded for days by a steady trickle of raiders, reavers and glory-seekers. Villages and outposts had fallen along the way, some defended by acts of heroism that would never be known, others overwhelmed in gruelling clashes in which the carrion birds were the only winners. Many of the assembled soldiers had fought in such battles, or had heard them rage beyond the horizon. All had heard tell that the End Times were at last upon the world. Some had been driven mad by that news, flocking to join the flea-infested and scabrous flagellants. Most whispered prayers to Sigmar, Ulric or Taal, sharpened their weapons, and prayed for a quick death if victory was denied them.

The horde advanced beneath the beating wings of innumerable crows, hungry for the great corpse-feast to come. The air was wracked by a deep and booming dirge, the rumble of the drums melding with rough voices raised in song. The sonorous counting of Nurgle's tallymen merged with the oppressive drone of a million daemon-flies and the roaring of countless mutated beasts. It was a sound that promised death and damnation, and the men of the Empire prayed all the harder for hearing it.

As the horde came into range, the cannons along the Empire line fired with one voice. For a moment, the clamour of the northmen was drowned out, but rose to pre-eminence once more before the smoke had cleared. Blood-mad marauders, spurs set to the flanks of wild steeds, rode ahead of the main advance. As they closed, whooping and cheering, the sharp *cracks* of Hochland rifles sounded, pitching the barbarians bloody onto the churned plain. Occasionally, a brave warrior would survive to reach the disciplined lines, raking axe or flail against the wall of spears, until a determined thrust or well-aimed pistol-shot sent him to the embrace of his gods.

Through it all, the main body of the horde advanced, straight as an arrow to Heffengen. They cared not for their losses, or for the forces arrayed against them. Too long had they abided beyond the Auric Bastion, and that wait had awoken a hunger for slaughter that was as yet unfulfilled. In the centre of the horde waddled corpulent Gurug'ath. He, more than any, had reason to hate the weaklings gathered before him, for the indignity of imprisonment within the enchanted wall still hung heavy upon his rotten soul. Worse, where before the Great Unclean One had commanded a horde, now he was but one warlord amongst many, diminished for his failure at Alderfen.

In truth, there was no single mind guiding the horde. What common purpose it had was granted by instinct, not leadership and, as the leading warbands closed in to handgun-range, the northlanders paid for their lack of direction. There was no battle plan, no tactical poise crafted to win victory. If there had been, perhaps the Chaos horde would have struck the Empire line as a single unstoppable force. As it was, the northlanders' charge was uneven

and, as the first axes bit home against the centre of Karl Franz's line, the northmen left the flanks unembattled.

The Altdorfers bore the brunt of that first charge, and paid dearly for it. Spears and halberds were knocked aside, their wielders hewn by axes or trampled beneath spittle-flecked steeds. Hulking northlander brutes forced their way into the tight-packed formations, hacking and bellowing. Determined to prove themselves before their Emperor, the Altdorfers fought on, but that bravery cost them greatly. Five whole regiments vanished in the opening minutes of that brutal melee, but not one man took a backward step, not one man cast down his weapon and begged for mercy. The men of the Empire's heartland fought to the last, and so made their Emperor proud.

Now, other forces joined the battle. First came the Reiksguard; Kurt Helborg had not waited for the Emperor's order, but had sounded the charge as soon as the Chaos horde had crashed home. Just behind the Reiksguard, the second line of Altdorfers, loosed to the fray at Karl Franz's order, lowered their weapons and charged. They knew that death awaited them, but went to it all the same, screaming to drown their desperate fears. The counter-attack hit like a hammerblow, scattering the leading warbands, and reclaiming the ground so valiantly defended by the now-vanished regiments. Kurt Helborg's runefang hacked down the skull-helmed warlord who had led the charge, and the Reiksmarshal's triumphant cheer was soon taken up by those around him – strict disciplinarian though the Reiksmarshal may have been, his men loved him well, and revelled in his achievements as freely as they did their own. Alas, the horde was a dark and fulsome sea, and these were but the first breakers upon the shore.

Gurug'ath led the next attack, a flood of daemons and Skaeling tribesmen at his back. The surviving Altdorfers were exhausted from their frantic charge, but now they defiantly braced themselves for the battle to come. This time they would not fight alone. The Empire's flanks had still to suffer anything but the most inconsequential of assaults, and now lent their aid to the embattled centre. To the west, Garrat Mecke's artillery batteries and handgunners lent their fire, and the northlander ranks shuddered as the hail of shells and shot slammed home. To the east, the Army of Sigmar, unable to restrain their fervour any longer, came frothing and chanting to the fight. Valten rode at their head, the light of Sigmar playing upon his brow, and for the first time the northlanders knew doubt. With a final howl, the flagellants crashed into the Skaelings, the madmen of one land come to vie with those of another.

Kurt Helborg's normally grim countenance twisted into a savage smile. His runefang hacked down, splitting the leering skull-helm of a northlander chief. Gods, he thought, there was no greater joy than this; a sea of foes, a righteous cause and good men at his back. What more could a warrior desire?

The Reiksmarshal urged his warhorse deeper into the horde, scarcely aware of the cheering around him. Helborg's sword felt like a thing alive in his hand, hungry as he for the blood of the foe. Let the northlanders think themselves the better men, Helborg thought. He would prove them wrong this day.

A colossal plague daemon loomed out of the armoured ranks, barrelling aside its own followers in his haste to join the battle. All at once, the cheers of the Reiksguard faded away, the sound's absence penetrating Helborg's mind in a way that its recent presence never had.

The Reiksmarshal did not so much as hesitate. 'Come on, you scum!' he roared at his men, standing tall in his saddle. 'I'll not have it said that the Reiksguard ran from that sagging sack of flesh! For Karl Franz! For the Empire!'

Again the Reiksguard charged into the press of battle, spilling blood and daemonic ichor as they rode. Helborg wielded his men like a lance, thrusting true for the heart of the horde – he had marked the presence of Gurug'ath amidst the fray, and thought to carry his runefang against the foul creature. Deep the stalwart knights drove into the horde, the vile ranks closing around them. The Reiksguard knew no fear, not while Helborg led them, and they pressed on through writhing tentacles, bloated daemon-flies and rot-limbed horrors until they reached their quarry. Lances lowered and thrust deep into the Great Unclean One's hide, but he felt not the blows. Repellent laughter rumbled from the creature's ruined throat, and a single swipe of his battered sword scattered the knights. Then came Helborg's runefang. The daemon's laughter became a roar of outraged pain as the dwarf-wrought blade sliced deep into his flesh. Again the Reiksmarshal struck, laying Gurug'ath's massive arm open to the bone. The daemon bellowed and flailed madly, and Helborg was cast from his saddle to land stunned amongst the dead and dying knights.

Some distance away, Karl Franz saw the Reiksmarshal fall, and knew the time had come for him to enter the battle. Both Helborg and loyal Schwarzhelm had advised against the Emperor risking himself directly, but Karl Franz beheld a battle in the balance. Thus far, the Altdorfers fought on, but only at terrible cost, and the Emperor could see the Chaos horde shifting as its warlord smelled opportunity elsewhere. Now was the time to act, Karl Franz decided, and, ignoring Schwarzhelm's cautions, the



Emperor urged Deathclaw forward. With a deafening screech, the griffon took to the skies, and bore his master to Helborg's salvation.

Even as Karl Franz entered the fray, the embattled Skaelings lost their will to fight. The Army of Sigmar fought with no formation, no discipline, just a bloodthirsty and implacable zeal. The Skaelings had grown soft in the weeks of pillage, and they found that the flagellants were a foe beyond them. On swept the Army of Sigmar, scattering northlanders before them. Holy light shone upon Valten's brow, and its brilliance spread through all who followed him, rousing them to greater efforts.

Flails swung in maddening arcs, then slammed home to splinter shields and pulp skulls. Skaelings screamed their harsh war cries, only for their voices to be drowned by exultations to Sigmar. Men on both sides fell wounded, and were crushed as the fervid horde trampled on. A tribal chief emerged out of the crowd, roaring a crude challenge. Valten brought Ghal Maraz crashing down in reply, smashing through the chieftain's shield and splitting apart his skull. Huss laid about him like a man possessed, scattering foes with each sweep of his hammer. Larger and stronger the northlanders may have been, but their gods were distant and uncaring at that moment, while every man who followed Valten struck with a portion of Sigmar's might. Beneath that onslaught, the Skaelings broke. Weapons abandoned, they fled, the favour of the gods forgotten.

Seeing their enemies scatter, the flagellants let out a raucous cheer. The sound carried back to the Empire lines, where the Ostermarkers and Grub Kineater's ogres yet held position. Blood set afire by the sound, the Empire's east flank started forward. The men of Ostermark came for vengeance, for the chance to make the invaders pay for lost kith and kin. The ogres came to claim the dead as feast-tithe, to fill bellies rumbling from the thin rations of preceding weeks. Their thunderous voices too were raised in celebration, rowdy and jocular at the prospect of a feast. Then, a booming war song erupted from beyond the milling barbarians, and the cheer died.

The flagellants' fervour had served them well against the fur-clad Skaeling marauders, but it availed them little against the grim warriors who now fell upon them. These plate-clad brutes were the favoured warriors of the Kurgan, and Vardek Crom was their lord. Crom had sworn allegiance to Archaon Everchosen and now served as his herald. Loosed from the Inevitable City by Archaon's will, Crom had come south to seek the favour of the gods. He did not know that Archaon had despatched him thus in the hope that death would find him and, even if he had, would have cared not one whit. Vardek Crom had ever believed himself a conqueror; now, with Archaon's blessing, he sought to prove it.

Into the sackclothed rabble the Kurgan came, and death came with them. Lost to holy madness, the flagellants made little attempt to defend themselves; axes cut deep into scarred flesh, and the Sigmarite zealots fell as wheat before the scythe. Still the flagellants did not give up. They fought on through the most terrible of wounds, clawing at the foe with bleeding fingers and biting at them with rotten teeth. But though they died unbowed, and without a backward step, they died still.

Only where Valten and Huss fought did the holy army hold its ground, and this only because any northlander who carried a blade against the pair perished soon after. Yet even these heroes could only hold ground; their efforts alone could not repulse the Kurgan horde. Soon the holy army had been all but swept away; Valten and Huss battled amidst a surging sea of hate, fighting from islands

whose shores were the corpses of their fellows. The mightiest of the Kurgan hurled themselves against these shores, certain that the gods would reward those who overcame the pair whose hammers shone with holy light, but most swept on over the dead and dying, and crashed onto the waiting blades of the Ostermarkers.

Urgent shouts rang out across the Ostermark line as captains tried to form their men against the Kurgan charge. The Ostermarkers hadn't lost their discipline, and the rattle and whistle of crossbow fire cut through the air. Here and there a northlander fell, but most of the bolts were wasted against blood-spattered plate. Even so, the volley served to stagger the Kurgan advance, and an assault that should have smashed home as a line of unbroken shields instead came piecemeal onto the levelled spears of the men of Ostermark.

Many Kurgan perished in that clash, their impetus driving them onto the blades of their foes. Seeing their foes falter, the captains of Ostermark ordered their detachments against the enemy flanks, seeking to overwhelm the fierce northlanders before they could reorder their ranks. Alas, the Ostermarkers had advanced too quickly in the flagellants' wake, and had not seen the second wave of northlanders flooding past the charnel fortress where Valten and Huss yet fought. As the men of the Empire went forward in counter-attack, this new attack crashed against the Ostermarkers' flanks.

One minute, the colours of Heffengen, Essen and Bechafen rippled proudly in the breeze, their yellows and purples bold against the coming dark. The next, the Ostermark line collapsed like rotten wood under a hammer blow. It was not cowardice that brought this about, for the men of Ostermark fought as bravely as did any that day. Alas, the men of the Empire had ever relied on discipline to win their battles, on many blades striking together in order to bring down a mightier foe. In the brutal one-on-one battles that now erupted, they had no chance. The ranks of yellow and purple were torn to red ruin, captains were hacked down by heavy axes and proud banners fell into the mud.

Grub Kineater watched the Ostermarkers' collapse, saw Godfrei Talb's skull split under an axe-blow, and knew at once what was to come. With a bellow that carried clearly over the screams of the dead and dying, he bellowed at his boys to hold firm. There was no point trying to escape; the northlanders were already in pursuit of the fleeing soldiers and would reach the ogres in moments. Better, Kineater decided, to face the onslaught head on. With a toothy grin, he hefted his maul and prepared to fight.

Vlad von Carstein saw the Kurgan charge crash home against the ogres, and reckoned it was past time for him to strike. The horde's east flank was a strung out and ill-ordered mess, and the vampire knew that a counter-attack by a sufficiently disciplined force could tear it apart.

Fortunately, Vlad had such an army nearby. Needing neither sleep nor rest, it had been in position for three full days before either the forces of the Empire or the Chaos horde had arrived at Heffengen. The vampire knew that Karl Franz would not willingly accept his help; the history of the von Carsteins and Gelt's recent actions had seen to that. Thus, Vlad hadn't wasted time in futile attempts at forging a formal alliance. Instead, the vampire had trusted to the inevitability of battle on the Revesnecht plain, and concealed his army in the one place no sentry or outrider would ever have thought to look for it. Only Vlad, Balthasar Gelt and a small guard of Drakenhof Templars ran the risk of discovery, but that chance was a small one. They were concealed within an abandoned watchpost on the banks of

From the summit of the ruined watchtower, Balthasar Gelt watched silently as the Kurgan counter-attack tore the Ostermark line apart. As little as a month ago, he would have felt that his place was amongst his fellow countrymen. Now he watched their deaths without a flicker of emotion. Sometimes the wizard worried at how quickly the echoes of his previous life were fading, but the feeling never lasted for longer than a heartbeat.

'They are children squabbling in imitation of their elders. Neither side truly understands the stakes at play.' Vlad observed, moving to the wizard's side. The vampire's tone was almost sad, thought Gelt. It was somehow out of place.

'And you do, I suppose?' Gelt asked wearily. He had meant for his words to carry a sardonic tone, but somehow he could not muster the defiance. It was as if the more time he spent with Vlad, the less vibrant his own thoughts and wishes became.

'I am here, and stand ready to help defend a throne I once sought to claim,' the vampire replied mildly. 'That should be answer enough.'

Gelt gave no reply, and simply watched as his ally – his master – peered out across the Revesnecht plain. *What have you become?* a voice screamed inside the wizard's head, then fell silent as the von Carstein turned to face him once more.

'I think, at last, it is time for us to make our presence felt,' Vlad announced. 'Are you prepared?'

Gelt inclined his head. 'Yes, master.'

'Good. Then we shall begin.'

the Revesnecht, and Vlad's spies had informed him that the locals lived in such fear of the ruin being haunted that no one went near.

Vlad did not need to give a verbal command. His will crowded close on all of his minions and, in any event, they would not have heard him. Nevertheless, the vampire believed that certain formalities had to be obeyed. Thus did he order his personal standard set upon the remains of the watchtower rampart, raised his sword to the sky, and gave voice to the command that roused his army from concealment and hurled them into battle. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the waters of the Revesnecht heaved, and suddenly the west bank of the river was covered with black banners and skeletal warriors.

Vlad's army advanced without breaking step, the soft mud of the riverbank clinging tight about its warriors' feet, water and slime cascading from weapons and through ribcages. For three days they had waited beneath the waters of the Revesnecht. They could not have been said to have waited patiently, for that would have implied that they had possessed a desire to be elsewhere, and they had no thoughts or feelings save for those that Vlad placed within them. Now those skeletons, wights and winged reavers advanced into the fray with the same implacability, caring nothing for their losses, if they even noticed them at all.

Though they were caught between Grub Kineater's slab-sided ogres and the undead onslaught, the Kurgan did not despair. Instead, they came to the fray with fresh fury. Behemoths of the northern wastes were loosed from their chains and rampaged through the undead. Rot-crowned shamans called upon Nurgle for aid, and blackrot plague spread through the ogres like wildfire. None of this availed the Kurgan however, and the slaughter they had inflicted to that point now became their greatest foe. As the battle raged, Gelt put his newly-gained necromantic prowess to good use. As the wizard bent the winds of magic to his will, the Ostermarkers and flagellants so recently slain rose to fight again. By the time Vlad and his bodyguard joined the fight, the tide of battle had turned, the Kurgan stalled at the height of what should have been a glorious triumph.

Further north, Huss and Valten, the Prophet and the Herald, yet fought on. Of the Army of Sigmar, perhaps a few score remained, penned in on all sides by the black-armoured warriors of the northlands. Here, the dead did not rise, for Gelt's concentration was bent on the fighting further south. Still the Kurgan could not overwhelm the grim priest and the flaxen-haired youth, but from amongst the northmen's lines came Vardek Crom, unbeaten champion of the Everchosen. Smelling the prospect of glory, Crom pushed through the melee, seeking to restore his followers' flagging morale with the blood of the enemy's champions.

Seeing Crom approach, Huss spurred forward. The great hammer swung down to split the warlord's skull, but Crom was too fast, and swept the strike aside with his shield. Crom's return blow was not loosed against Huss, but rather against the priest's horse. The beast screamed in pain as the axe all but severed its foreleg and, rearing up, flung Huss from the saddle. Crom was on the priest before he could regain his footing, and the point of his sword plunged deep into Huss' shoulder. As his hammer fell from nerveless hands, Huss called holy fire down upon his tormentor. Though Crom staggered, he did not fall, and his next blow sliced deep into the priest's scalp to crack his skull. Laughing at his victory, Crom battered aside Huss' desperate punch, and readied his sword for the final blow.

That blow never fell. As Crom's sword thrust home, Valten urged his steed through the press of battle and assailed Crom from behind. Ghal Maraz came hammering down, and the Conqueror's hastily raised shield crumpled under the blow. Huss forgotten, Crom spun to face Valten, his axe flashing out to cripple the youth's horse as it had the priest's. This time, however, the gambit failed. Valten's steed had been a personal gift from Karl Franz, and was well-trained. Swift as Crom's axe strike was, the warhorse stepped smartly aside, leaving the Conqueror's blade hacking at empty air. Ghal Maraz came down again, and this time it was Crom's sword that shattered. Now the warlord had only his axe at hand, but still he did not yield the fight.

Crom had his opponent's measure now, and kept his weapon ever in motion, whirling the axe in dizzying arcs so that Valten could not be sure where the next blow would come from. Again and again the axe bit at Valten's armour, and all the while Crom evaded the youth's return blows – the Conqueror had tasted the might of Ghal Maraz twice now, and resolved to let it strike him no more. Once, twice, three times Valten struck out at his foe, and each time Ghal Maraz passed within hair's breath of Crom's helm. On the third strike, the warlord leaned inside the blow's arc and, with his free hand, hauled Valten from saddle.

Valten hit the ground, all breath driven from his body, and Crom closed for the kill. Roaring his victory, Crom brought his axe down, but now it was Huss' turn to save Valten. Though slowed by his wounds, the warrior priest threw himself forward, and locked both of his gauntleted hands around Crom's weapon arm. Such was the warlord's strength that Huss could check the blow for only a moment, but a moment was all that Valten needed. The youth's fingers tightened around Ghal Maraz's grips and the hammer came around, smashing into Crom's armoured chest, crumpling the steel and pulping the

flesh behind. A second strike stove in the warlord's horned helm, and Crom the Conqueror, herald of Archaon, passed from the mortal world.

Crom's death sealed the fate of the Kurgan that day. Had he lived, the Conqueror could perhaps have led a counter-attack against the undead; as it was, the northlanders had been disordered by Vlad's attack, and dismayed by the loss of their warlord. Vlad tasted the despair, and smiled as he led the Drakenhof Templars to the aid of Grub Kineater's Bloodfists. As he advanced, the vampire saw the ogre's weighty mace slam into a knot of great-axe wielding northlanders, scattering broken bodies with every strike. Without missing a step, Vlad altered the direction of his approach ever so slightly – he had no idea if the ogre realised that the undead fought on his side, and had no intention being ignominiously splattered because of a misunderstanding.

As the east flank of the Chaos horde collapsed, the west prepared itself for glory. Here were massed the horsemen and knights of many tribes, but it was a Kul who commanded them, by right of challenge on the battle's eve. Akkorak the Crow they called him, Reaver of the Nine Wastes. Long had he ridden in the service of the Dark Gods, honing his sword against the northern tribes and the soft-skinned men of the Empire alike. When Akkorak looked upon the standards arrayed against him, he did not feel fear, merely a glorious destiny waiting to be claimed. In the booming of the cannons he heard the roar of the gods; in the ranks of the foe he saw only skulls waiting to be claimed. Now was the hour in which the Crow would take his due. Drawing his sword, Akkorak bellowed with joy and urged his steed to the gallop. Behind him, a thousand harsh voices took up the cry of exultation, and the ground shook to the thunder of iron-shod hooves as the massed marauders and knights followed in their champion's wake.

The stalwart men of Talabheim saw Akkorak's charge begin, though they did not know who led it, for the chieftain was but one man amongst hundreds. Sergeants and officers began barking orders, letting their confidence fill the men under their command. Along the line, restless hands tightened on the grips of sword, shield and spear. Gun crews sweated and swore as they served their insatiable mistresses, sending roundshot and mortar shells screaming across the battlefield to crash into the onrushing horde. Here and there, gaps tore open in Akkorak's charge, but they were soon filled as other horsemen spurred forward into the spaces.

Handgun fire rippled up and down the line. The men of Talabheim had fired too soon; a captain had panicked, the range was too great and the shots were wasted. Brilliant oranges and reds flared as wizards of the Bright College loosed fireballs and flaming meteors; linstocks flashed and the first helblasters roared, but still Akkorak's charge came on. The ground trembled to pounding hooves, and the men of Talabheim, who had no wish to die in the defence of a rival state, began to shrink away from the foe. It started slowly, with men taking a half step back before reloading, or a captain reforming his troops along more favourable ground that just happened to be more distant from the enemy. Only the gun crews were immune. Deaf from the roar of their war engines and blind from the smoke, they scarcely noticed as lines of spears and halberds drew towards them, and focussed on feeding that one last shot that would perhaps break the charge.

Amongst the Talabheimers was the Amethyst wizard Albrecht Morrstan. Like many wizards of his college, Morrstan had been irrevocably transformed when Nagash had grounded death magic in Sylvania. Not long ago, he had been a creature of flesh and blood; now he trod



uneasily on the border between life and death. Ever a recluse, Morrstan had spent the last few weeks completely apart from the other citizens of Heffengen, deliberately concealing his affliction. Yet, though he was little more than a ghostly echo of his former self, Morrstan was still a faithful son of the Empire. He had joined the battle line at dawn, trusting his robes to conceal the ghastly truth from his countrymen, constantly fearful of discovery.

Now, in the moment before Akkorak's charge crashed home against the wavering men of Talabheim, Morrstan proved his loyalty. The wizard threw back his cloak and began to chant. Nearby soldiers recoiled at the sight of his translucent form, but Morrstan paid it no heed. The ground before him cracked and warped as a swirling purple globe thrust its way through the topsoil. With a flick of his hands, the wizard sent the globe into the oncoming horde. All at once, the discipline of the charge felt apart. The leading ranks hauled on reins and bellowed at their steeds in their attempts to evade the incoming spell, and many succeeded. The rearward ranks, however, were nowhere near so fortunate. With no warning save the desperate panic of their fellows, few that came behind saw the purple sun before it was too late; they were swallowed by the globe and instantly transmuted to lifeless statues of crimson-veined crystal.

Morrstan saw none of this. When the wizard had revealed his ghostly form, Garrat Mecke had recovered his wits quicker than any of his men. Alas, he saw not what Morrstan had done, only what he was. Pausing only to kiss the silver-chased barrel of his pistol, the general sent a blessed bullet hammering into the wizard's ghostly skull. Morrstan wailed once as the shot ripped through him; a heartbeat later, his empty robes collapsed to the ground. Without the wizard's guiding hand, the swirling purple globe dissipated immediately, but his last act had not been in vain. Where once had loomed an unstoppable host of knights, now stood a field of crystal simulacra.

Robbed of scores of warriors, and all of its momentum, Akkorak's attack should have had no hope of breaking the Talabheim lines. Yet still the Kurgan champion pressed home his charge, for was he not Akkorak, Butcher of Teska, Reaver of the Nine Wastes? He knew the gaze of the gods was upon the battlefield, and he would be damned if he failed. As the northlander closed on the line of spears, he raised his sword high so that the eye-watering runes upon its length might catch the gods' attention. Then Akkorak's steed slammed bodily into the spear wall, and the killing began.

In the centre, Gurug'ath bellowed in agony as Deathclaw's talons raked across his back, and again as Karl Franz's runefang sliced a splinter of bone from his skull. In the shadow of the daemon, his life bought by the Emperor's intervention, Kurt Helborg hauled himself to weary feet. Beset from above, the Great Unclean One had momentarily forgotten the Reiksmarshal, but others amongst his host had not. A pair of plaguebearers lumbered toward Helborg, swollen innards bulging against distended bellies, and collapsed into a shower of foul-smelling pus as the Reiksmarshal's runefang cut them down. A moment later, Helborg had seized his warhorse's reins and was in the saddle once more. Calling the surviving Reiksguard to his side, Helborg rode to aid his Emperor, but more plaguebearers moved to block his path.

Deathclaw wheeled and dove back towards Gurug'ath, claws outstretched to gouge a bloody furrow through the milling daemons. As the griffon closed with the Great Unclean One, Karl Franz hefted his sword. It had been many years since he had wielded the Reikland runefang in battle, and he had forgotten how light and lithe the blade felt in his hand. Where Ghal Maraz was a bludgeon fit to crush any barrier before it, Dragon Tooth was a weapon of finesse, as well-honed as only a dwarfish blade could be.

Deathclaw landed square on the daemon's back, claws ripping at its skin. With a sudden jerk, the griffon buried his beak into Gurug'ath's back, and tore away a great gobbet of rancid and maggot laden flesh. Dropping his sword, the Great Unclean One reached up to rip the griffon from his back, but Deathclaw dug his talons all the deeper. Again the beast snapped at the daemon's flesh, and this time, leaning low across the griffon's neck, Karl Franz took a two-handed grip on his runefang, and thrust the weapon down into Gurug'ath's skull. Helborg saw the greater daemon perish, and his manner was torn between admiration at the Emperor's feat, and disappointment that the killing blow had belonged to another.

As Gurug'ath gave a last mournful burble, Deathclaw took to the skies once again, giving Karl Franz a commanding view of the battlefield. All about him, the lesser daemons were growing weaker, their grasp on the mortal world slackening in the face of mortal valour. As the daemons faded, so too did the northlanders' will to fight, and the men of the Empire at last sensed victory within their grasp. To the west, the Emperor saw Akkorak's knights wreak red ruin in Garrat Mecke's ranks, only to be torn apart by the Talabheimers' vengeful blades. Beneath Karl Franz, Kurt Helborg and Ludwig Schwarzhelm rallied the Reiksguard and the Altdorfers, the bloodied soldiers of the Imperial heartlands drawing fresh strength from the Emperor's colours, and to the east…

To the east, the Emperor beheld the ruin of the Ostermarkers, and the unlooked-for legions of undead that strove against the surviving Kurgan. He saw the ancient banner of Vlad von Carstein flying above the black-armoured knights, and marked the vampire who fought with a strange and savage grace. In that moment, Karl Franz understood a great deal about the fate that had befallen Gelt, and resolved to take vengeance for the wizard's sundered honour, whether the vampire truly fought in common cause or no. For now, it was enough that the battle was almost won, the latest incursion from the dread north all but blunted. Then a new trumpet sounded.

Vlad von Carstein heard that clarion and cast his gaze to the north, his attention momentarily distracted from the plate-clad warrior dangling from his taloned grip. He knew that trumpet, and the warriors whose arrival it heralded, and allowed himself a slender smile. The battle might be won, but a greater margin of victory was always to be welcomed. Vlad could see them now, the scarlet-armoured knights of Blood Keep, freed to come south once again now the Auric Bastion had fallen. The great silhouette of Harkon's skeletal dragon was a dark smear across the sky, and Vlad was forced to concede that even a brute like Harkon had his uses.

Closer the Blood Dragons thundered, past the trailing elements of the northlander horde, spurring through clusters of fleeing Kurgan and Skaelings, and Vlad knew that something was wrong. Too late, he saw that the rearmost of the newcomers were clad not in archaic plate, but the crude steel of the north, and that many of the knights rode steeds not of reanimated flesh, but of bronze and cinder. With a curse, Vlad realised that Harkon had turned, had abandoned the service of Nagash for the promises of the Chaos Gods. But it was too late; even as the Chaos horde stood on the brink of defeat, the traitorous Blood Dragons lowered their lances, and unmade the Empire's hard-won victory.

The Blood Dragons divided as they approached the battle, half crashing into Gelt's army of skeletons, the rest riding hard for where the Reiksguard strove to claim the centre ground. Harkon went with this second group, his dragon dipping out of the skies to pluck knights from their steeds. Leaving Gelt to fend for himself, Vlad led the Drakenhof Templars west – the treacherous Walach Harkon would be stopped.

Vlad was not the only one who sought to vanquish Harkon that day. As the Blood Dragons closed on the Reiksguard, Karl Franz turned to face the grand master. They met in the skies, the Emperor and the vampire, the Reikland runefang clashing with the ancient templar blade. Harkon was the greatest of his order, ranked amongst the foremost warriors of that or any age, and by rights Karl Franz should have swiftly perished. As it was, Sigmar was with the Emperor that day, and for a time Karl Franz held his own against the Blood Dragon. The sky rang to the sound of

From the very start, Karl Franz had known that he was overmatched. Harkon was too swift. The vampire had parried every blow with ridiculous ease, but no longer was there any chance to choose another path. The duel had begun; now there was only victory or death.

Again Deathclaw dived towards the dragon, and again the Emperor struck at his crimson-armoured foe. This time the parry was followed by a lightning-swift riposte. Karl Franz had just enough time to realise that the vampire had been toying with him before the sword pierced his breastplate and ripped deep into his chest. In the same moment, the dragon twisted in midair, seizing Deathclaw in its talons, and preventing the griffon from flying its injured master to safety.

'You're a fool!' Harkon spat at his bloodied foe. 'This is no time for mortal men. This is the hour of the gods, and of those who would become gods!'

'Even gods can fall,' Karl Franz breathed, the words ragged as his strength fled his body.

Lost in visions of glory, the raving vampire didn't hear the Emperor speak; nor did he see the runefang until its point lanced upward, carving a wicked furrow across his gaunt cheek and taking out his left eye. With a howl of pain, the vampire clapped a hand over his ruined face, and wrenched his sword from the Emperor's flesh.

Karl Franz saw the bloody blade come free, but knew no pain, only a desperate tiredness. Falling free of his mount, the Emperor closed his eyes, and felt the world spin around him.

steel on steel as the two swooped and dove away northward, ever seeking weakness in the other's guard.

Beneath them, the northlanders regained their courage and joined the Blood Dragon counter-attack. Yard by yard, the men of the Reik were driven back. They had achieved so much that day, held a line that only madmen would have dared defend, and at last their courage broke. In ones and twos, then like a flood suddenly breaching a dam, the Altdorfers fled. With a cruel challenge, the Blood Dragons rode into the rout, lances and sword aimed at fleeing backs. Seeing the flight become a massacre, Helborg formed the Reiksguard as a wall of blood and steel between the fleeing men and their pursuers. Even then, the Reiksmarshal would not admit that the battle was lost.

Then, Karl Franz, Emperor of the House of Luitpold, fell from the skies, chest torn open by Harkon's sword.

No soldier of the Empire saw the blood gush free, nor heard the cry of pain that tore free from his lips, but many saw their Emperor plunge groundward, a tiny figure against the noon-day sky, soon swallowed up by the advancing ranks of the foe. Some bore witness as Deathclaw sought vengeance for his master, and all heard the griffon's deafening screech as Harkon's next blow shattered the loyal beast's wing to send him spiralling out of the sky.

With Karl Franz's fall, his army collapsed. The Talabheimers, though they had borne the lightest burden of the battle, threw down their weapons and fled. Garrat Mecke bawled orders and threats as he tried to stop the rout, but gained naught but a mutineer's sword blade in his guts for his trouble. The Altdorfers were already running, and now the Reiksguard joined them. Only Helborg's inner circle held their order, the Reiksmarshal himself bodily hauling Ludwig Schwarzhelm from the battle. The Emperor's Champion sought to ride into the thick of the foe to recover Karl Franz's body, and only by knocking the other cold had Helborg won the argument. To the east, Grub Kineater, still of good cheer despite the loss of half the Bloodfists and his own left ear, reluctantly decided that there was no profit to be made in a glorious death, and led his ogres away towards the comparative safety of Heffengen. With him went Valten and Huss, the latter walking only with younger man's support. Of the Army of Sigmar, no other remained. Even Gelt permitted himself a moment of sorrow at the Emperor's fall, then he spurred Quicksilver away, abandoning his army of thralls to the victorious horde.

Though none yet knew it, the panic of the Emperor's loss would quickly spread, and Heffengen's garrison would join the rout. By nightfall, the city would be a daemon-haunted ruin, its population dead, or worse. But that was not quite the end of the battle…

Walach Harkon's thirst for combat had not been slaked by the defeat of Karl Franz and, as the Empire army melted away beneath him, the Blood Dragon sought another foe worthy of his attention. It was then that he saw the banner of Vlad von Carstein, and urged his bone dragon to descend. Harkon's onset was the doom of the Drakenhof Templars. The Blood Dragon's skeletal steed crashed into the column of knights with punishing force, and those not crushed under the creature's bulk soon fell beneath the vampire's flashing blade. Vlad sought to dive clear, but Harkon had judged his descent perfectly, and the Sylvanian found himself pinned beneath the dragon's massive talons, unable to move, unable even to speak.

Harkon, however, was not thus afflicted. He had always hated the arrogance of the von Carsteins and now, as the pursuit unfolded, he ensured that the other understood the full depth of that loathing. Harkon boasted too of how Khorne had sought his service, and how readily he had accepted, for what use to the Blood Dragons was the world that Nagash would create – a sterile land where obedience was all, and glory was forsaken? Enjoying his moment of triumph, Harkon ranted and railed of honour, but Vlad heard little of those words, for his mind was elsewhere. Harkon might have been the more accomplished warrior, but a vampire's arts were broader and subtler by far than mere bladesmanship. As the Blood Dragon's diatribe went on, Vlad let his will drift upon the winds of magic, searching for a particular mote of dark magic. A moment later, he found it, and bent it to his will.

Harkon's soliloquy was suddenly cut off as his dragon bucked suddenly, throwing the Blood Dragon over its neck and onto the ground below. Before Harkon could react, it was he who was pinned beneath the dragon's foot, whilst Vlad stood alongside, regarding the traitor with contempt. After a heartbeat's contemplation, Vlad gave a parody of the Blood Dragon's own salute and patted the bone dragon's outstretched wing. Obedient to its new master, the undead beast lunged forward, settled its jaws around Harkon's torso, and tore the vampire in half.

Only then did Vlad heave himself up onto the bone dragon's back and depart the field. The battle had been a disaster, and Vlad took little consolation from the fact that the fault was not his. The Emperor had been lost, the army routed and Ostermark would soon fall to the Chaos hordes. As he winged his way southwards to Sylvania, Vlad did something he had not done in many hundreds of years: he prayed. Not to a god, for in truth he could no longer remember what deities had once commanded his belief. Rather, Vlad von Carstein, Count of Sylvania, a creature who admitted no master save for himself, prayed that Nagash was indeed the salvation he claimed to be.

The tattooed sentry was slumped by his watchfire, drunk on ale and memories of slaughter. He made no sound save a whimper as the point of the sword slid into his heart. The killer caught the northlander's body with his good arm, and lowered the corpse to the ground. The man felt a sharp flash of pain as he did so, the exertion tugging at the deep gash in his breast.

The man winced. He knew he was fortunate to be alive, that the magic of his amulet was the only thing that kept his heart beating. Even so, he could feel bones grating in his chest, and the ragged motion of an ailing lung. His left arm was broken in at least two places, and throbbed against the makeshift splint.

Yet the intruder's greatest stroke of fortune was to have gone undiscovered amongst the carnage. He should have been found, but the northlanders loved plunder as much as any race, and had seen a greater prize in Heffengen than in the battlefield dead. The town still blazed in the distance, bestial howls dancing amongst the flames as yet another bastion of civilisation fell into darkness. The man felt his anger rise and shook his head to clear it. Dawn was coming, and with it the first northmen would stir from beneath their furs. He had to be gone by then.

The man picked his way through the slumbering horde, taking shelter in the lee of tents and the festering piles of dead awaiting the bonfire. Monstrous hounds lay sleeping alongside their masters, spines and quills twitching with each somnolent breath. These, the man gave a wide berth, for he knew such beasts seldom slept deeply. His only hope was that his own scent would be lost amongst the encampment's reeking odour. At last, amidst the ruin of a copse felled for firewood, the intruder found what he was looking for.

The griffon was bound by chains and tethered by great wooden stakes hammered into the ground. It was motionless save for the rhythmic rise and fall of its mighty chest. The creature slept, or seemed to do so. Even in the dark, the killer could see that the griffon's plumage was crusted with blood, from the injuries that had caused its capture, and from more recent gashes where northlanders had taunted it with blades, or set their hounds on it for sport.

Skirting the ashes of a campfire and the fur-draped brutes slumped around it, the intruder moved quickly to the griffon's side and ran his hand across the beast's flank. A yellow eye flickered open, the gleaming pupil twitching in obvious recognition.

'Wake up, old friend,' Karl Franz whispered. 'You and I still have work to do, if you yet have the strength for it?'

The griffon gave an indignant hiss and ruffled its feathers, causing the Emperor to smile for the first time in many long hours. Then, gripped by sudden purpose, Karl Franz brought his runefang down on the nearest of the chains. Behind him, one of the hounds stirred to wakefulness and began to howl...









CHAPTER 5

The Land of the Dead

Winter 2524 – Autumn 2525



Nothing but arid wind and shifting sands moved across the deserts of Nehekhara, the Land of the Dead. A watchful stillness covered all, a feeling every bit as oppressive as the searing sun. Worn statues – monuments to past kings and angry gods – stood guard upon the vast sand seas; mute sentinels whose stone eyes never blinked. Watchtowers looked over the rolling dunes and high over barren stone plateaus loomed monolithic pyramids, enormous in their scale. Mightiest of all were the necropolises – sprawling tomb-cities that towered like mountains over the cracked plains. From their bleak battlements could be seen sweeping vistas, views of endless sands and salt flats that stretched to the horizon.

And then came the blackness.

An ominous wall of clouds, dark and ragged, was closing around the realm of Nehekhara. From all sides the black veil came, encircling and enshrouding the Land of the Dead. The contrast was total. For thousands upon thousands of years Nehekhara had known only the blazing sun of day or stark nights, where clear skies allowed bright stars to illuminate the baked landscape.

One of the first to stand beneath the encroaching storm was King Kalhazzar, a one-time ruler of Zandri and now High Commander of the greatest war fleet of Nehekhara. From aboard his golden battle barge, the *Crowned Sphinx*, the king watched blackness blot out the sun over the Mortis Delta. As per Settra's orders, Kalhazzar was ready. The river-mouth was fortified; the fleet had already slipped anchorage. Like a strong wall across the estuary, warships, galleys, barges and light craft stood ready to repel invaders. The transport ships sat heavy in the poisonous waters, for they were fully loaded with skeletal legions. They stood ready to aid in boarding actions at sea, or, should no enemy navy appear, ferry reinforcements back to Zandri, or further down the Great Mortis River.

King Behedesh commanded the ground armies of Zandri. Upon receiving his message from Settra's herald, the loyal tomb king had left his beloved necropolis, marching to position his army in the deep desert. It was his duty to safeguard the westernmost approaches from the Badlands. Since taking up their new stations, King Behedesh's warriors had been covered over by sandstorms. For a period of time, only their golden standards and speartips were visible, gleaming beneath the brutal sun, before they too disappeared beneath the sands.

At the extreme eastern edge of Nehekhara, High Queen Khalida, ruler of Lybaras, watched the lowering clouds draw a curtain of shadow over the Gulf of Fear. Soon her city too would be cut off from the sun. Sensing the rising threat, Khalida had awoken from her tomb long before Settra's messenger arrived. It was Settra's desire that she gather her legions and march to Mahrak, where she could aid, and keep an eye on, King Tharruk in guarding the western entrance to the Charnel Valley. Her famed archer legions were already assembled from out of their tomb pits, ready to march. Yet Khalida did not give the order.

Although Khalida recognised the Great King of Khemri as the ultimate leader of Nehekhara, Lybaras and its armies were hers to command. She was a warrior-queen, martial and proud, and it was not her wish to stand guard. If, as Settra had foretold, Nagash had returned, then Queen Khalida had no doubts that the Great Necromancer would be reunited with his nine Dark Lords of old. Amongst their number would be one whom she hated above all others – the first of the vampires, Neferata. It had been Neferata, the former Queen of Lahmia, who had ended Khalida's mortal life. The very thought of her cousin, and ancient nemesis, returning to Nehekhara made Khalida's mind stir with thoughts of revenge. In a silent rage Queen Khalida watched the storm roll over. Even when her realm had long passed into storm-rumbled blackness, still she sat in troubled thought, issuing no orders.

In Quatar the royal court was assembled. Its collection of kings and princes from many dynasties obeyed Settra's commands without question, abandoning their internal feuds in their haste to comply. Upon the Great King's dictate, every necrotect not already summoned to aid in building the great wall of Khemri was sent out from the White Palace. These arcane architects journeyed deep into the Charnel Valley. There, in what used to be the Valley of Kings, they began their great task of restoring carven hieroglyphs and awakening the mighty war statues. Soon the monumental structures were once more animate, pulling themselves out of the mountainside, the valley shaking with their heavy footfalls.

Even as the stone statues began their march from the Charnel Valley towards Khemri, the skies to the north were overtaken by blackness. In Numas, King Phar did not wait for the heavy squall line to meet him. He had already emptied the tombs of his great necropolis, and now he marched his legions deep into the Salt Plain. Only when he came within sight of the foetid river of Blight Water did King Phar call a halt. Upon that cracked expanse he sent out pickets and set his legions for battle. This was just as Settra's messenger had commanded. Wise in the ways of desert battles, King Phar had commanded his massed chariots, their numbers buoyed by contingents from Bhagar, to be held in reserve. It was to be King Phar's honour to give battle to any foe travelling downwards from the Badlands, the most likely route of invasion from the north. Any army that managed to push through the Marshes of Madness and ford the

Blight Water would find King Phar waiting. The assembled legions stood in silence as the clouds overtook them and their world turned from blinding glare to darkest black.

It was neither wind nor any natural force that pushed the encircling storm onwards; the impenetrably thick clouds were being drawn inwards by a mighty will. The wall of murk was swirling, scudding lower and lower until it became apparent that it was forming a vortex, albeit on a scale never before seen. Like the drawing of a noose, the swirling funnel drew ever tighter and tighter until there could be no doubt as to where the epicentre of the storm would finally settle: the Black Pyramid of Nagash.

With his priests, royal court and Nekaph, his herald and personal champion, trailing him, Settra the Imperishable strode to the ramparts atop the tallest column in Khemri. From there, the King of Kings gazed out upon the encroaching dark. So it begins, thought Settra. Nagash the Usurper had indeed returned, and was setting his sights upon the land he had always coveted.

The great wall, a newly created bulwark of stone block that surrounded the whole of the largest city of Nehekhara, looked insignificant before the immense black wall of cloud that was quickly closing in.

Already, three-quarters of the Land of the Dead was covered beneath the shroud of darkness. Settra knew that beneath the cover of that darksome murk would be Nagash's armies, probing their way into his realm. The King of Kings knew, too, that soon the final battle for Nehekhara would begin.



Nagash finished his incantation and opened his jaws impossibly wide, his body straining under contortions of utmost exertion. From out of that gaping maw streamed coils of cloud so dark that it was as if they poured forth from the blackness of his very soul. Upwards to the heavens they bloomed, forming a plume of smoke that hung above Nagashizzar before it began to move, snake-like, to encircle the whole of Nehekhara.

For eleven days and eleven nights Nagash spewed forth the prodigious effects of his mighty spell, although it was no longer possible to distinguish day from night beneath that dark shroud. At last, when the fell enchantment was complete, the Great Necromancer collapsed. In his weakened state, Nagash would never have been able to attempt such a feat. Only by entering the Dolmen of Valaya and consuming the magic stored within the sleeping Ancestor Goddess herself had Nagash found the strength. That alone had allowed him to attempt a spell of such magnitude. However, the energy required to conjure his slow, spiralling clouds of death magic had sapped Nagash, leaving him utterly drained.

Sensing the completion of Nagash's spell, Arkhan strode out upon the battlement as Nagash rose slowly from his blood-scrawled casting triangle. The ancient liche priest had ever been Nagash's most loyal and trusted vassal, and he alone of all the Dark Lords was allowed to see the Great Necromancer in this most vulnerable state. Nagash allowed himself to be escorted by Arkhan's summoned bodyguards, who half-carried his exhausted frame back into the fortress of Nagashizzar.

Nagash was conveyed to his throne, an ancient construct made of warped bone. It was there, upon that very seat of power, that the Great Necromancer had been assassinated so long ago. After completing his Great Ritual, a terrifying spell that washed over the lands of Nehekhara, stealing the life from every living thing, Nagash had been slain by a cowardly ambush. Thus were his plans dashed at the cusp of his greatest triumph, well over three thousand years ago.

The throne had long been broken, falling apart during the ages when the fortress was derelict, or in the control of enemies. It had been easy enough for Arkhan to reform the seat of power with his magic. But while his incantations could reconstruct the greater part of the hulking throne, they could not heal the savage cuts left by the Fellblade. It was that cursed, skaven-made weapon that had cut through Nagash, its hack-marks permanently seared into the throne. Yet once more it bore Nagash, who sat slumped forward, recovering energies expended by the great spell.

At Arkhan's signal, skeletal minions dragged forth a procession of captives from out of Nagashizzar's depths. The army's southerly journey down from Sylvania had afforded many chances to collect fodder. Townsfolk from the Empire, sellswords from the Border Princes, dwarf miners from the routes along the foothills of the Worlds Edge Mountains and finally whole tribes of greenskins were shackled together, dragged along by merciless and unfeeling undead. Beaten and bedraggled, these ragged beings were hauled into the throne room and manacled to the floor. Only the dwarfs still bore any fight within them, but their resistance would prove futile before the dominating will of Nagash. Arkhan closed the chamber doors as the screaming began, opening them only when silence had again fallen.

The consumption of thousands of souls began to once again infuse Nagash with fell power. More would be required before the Great Necromancer could travel. Now, while Nagash reposed after feeding, Arkhan delivered his observations and reports since Nagash began his spell.

As they had been ordered, each of the Dark Lords that had journeyed southwards with him began to march upon Nehekhara the moment the ominous clouds passed overhead.

The most obvious invasion route, and therefore the most dangerous, was the one that led through the Marshes of Madness and straight across the Salt Plains. This central spearhead was entrusted to Krell. At the forefront of the largest of the undead armies, Krell commanded skeletal legions beyond count. His was the sledgehammer blow that would bear down upon Khemri, veering aside only to destroy Numas if the opportunity presented itself. The ancient Dieter Helsnicht was to accompany Krell, for it was deemed that the wight lord's generalship and fighting ability, when coupled with powerful necromantic magic of the Doomlord, would prove nigh unstoppable.

The vampire Mannfred von Carstein and his minions from Sylvania would advance out of the Badlands as well,



but they would form a more westerly pincer. The arrogant vampire lord passed between the southern end of the Dragonback Mountains and the northern edge of the Marshes of Madness. His army followed a path that lay between the foothills and the Great Ocean. If they followed this line southwards, skirting the edge of the Salt Plain, Mannfred's forces would eventually reach the Great Mortis River, which they could follow straight to Khemri.

In its long history, both in times of mortal and undead rule, it was this invasion route that had proven the most successful way for armies from the Badlands to enter the great Kingdom of Nehekhara. The deep desert was always dangerous, but had never been as heavily guarded as the Salt Plain. There were fewer watchtowers and fortresses along that route, and the rolling sand dunes and cracked wadis offered more concealment than did the barren flats.

Eager to keep his distance from the other Dark Lords, and also enamoured with what could be the easiest path, Mannfred had advocated strenuously to lead the army taking this route. Brazenly sure of himself, if Mannfred remembered the ancient land's histories, he chose to ignore them. For his course was indeed the one most successfully taken for invasions to enter Nehekhara. Few of those armed intrusions ever reached their destinations, however, and fewer still ever returned from whence they came. Many times in its proud martial past, the legions of the city of Zandri had destroyed invaders who dared enter their realm. The armies of Zandri used their naval power to ferry troops along the coastline or down the Great Mortis River. Once their legions were so transported, they could launch sudden flanking or rear assaults upon invaders. Well did Nagash and Arkhan remember many such battles of yore, and it was their intention to meet this threat headlong, to counter it with a surprise attack of their own.

From the distant coast of Lustria came a seaborne armada captained by Luthor Harkon. Although tinged with the lunacy that had afflicted him for centuries, Harkon had risen to become the self-proclaimed Pirate King of the Vampire Coast. He was not yet so mad that upon Nagash's return he had not willingly bowed before the great master of death. Harkon's ships had answered the summons, sailing away with holds full of zombies. Now, he rounded Araby, stopping only to unload his many transports. Led by his right hand, Captain Drekla, the Silver Hook of Sartosa, this overland force would march along the coast, aiming to assail Zandri from the west, while Luthor and his armada fought their way through the treacherous waters of the Mortis Delta.

Neferata's orders came last, for of all his Dark Lords, she was the most anxious to enter Nehekhara, yet Nagash trusted the vampire queen the least. She was a powerful and corrupting force, but hers was the way of deception and intrigue, not of battering invasion. In a battle to force passage into the Land of the Dead, Neferata's arts of seduction were useless. But if she were to return to ancient Lahmia, as had long been her wish, Nagash knew that she would serve as the perfect bait. If she and her army were to draw the hated Nehekharan troops away from the defence of Khemri, then she could be of use.

All of Nagash's Dark Lords, save Arkhan, believed they were conquering Nehekhara. They imagined the Great Necromancer was consumed with vengeance, eager to at last claim the throne of Khemri. Nagash, however, had set his sights much higher, but before his grand plans could be enacted, he had to entomb himself within his Black Pyramid. Only then would he be able to restore the full extent of his power. And then he would claim that which was his by right.

Nagash was growing stronger again, thought Arkhan. After devouring so many souls, a nimbus of balefire once more surrounded the Great Necromancer. Breaking the long silence, Arkhan willed himself to speak aloud what had overtaken his thoughts.

'My master, I fear not all of your Dark Lords will do as you command.'

From his throne, Nagash turned, fixing his empty eye sockets upon Arkhan. The liche priest knew that, like himself, the Great Necromancer could still 'see', in a sense. He would not be able to discern Arkhan's scorched and blackened bones, or the headpiece worn by the Mortuary Cult for great ceremonies. With witch sight, however, it was possible to see into the spirit realm. In that spectrum, Nagash's true being was revealed – for he was a great power, wreathed in dark energies. Death magic was bound to his very soul. Although his master had only recently returned, Arkhan guessed that he rarely looked upon the banal, mundane world of the physical. He grew less and less concerned with the material realm, despising its transitory nature.

At last, Nagash spoke.

'I AM SURE THAT YOUR DOUBTS ARE ENTIRELY JUSTIFIED, FAITHFUL ARKHAN. AND I SEE YOU STILL HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY PLAN. BE PATIENT. ALL SHALL BE LAID PLAIN, IN TIME. NOW I MUST HAVE MORE SUSTENANCE. BRING THE REMAINING SLAVES.'

Soon the wailing cries of absolute terror began anew.



Krell's army advanced through the Badlands at a relentless pace. They did not halt, for they needed neither sustenance, nor sleep, but tirelessly advanced southwards. As the wight lord expected, the lands proved rife with greenskins. Many of their kind had left, seeking battle to the distant north, yet despite this exodus, dozens of orc and goblin tribes were encountered.

Most greenskins fled before the undead host, and the unsettling blackness above. Those tribes that stood were swiftly demolished. Krell gave such battles little heed, wasting no time or tactics upon them. Each time an orc warboss tested his mettle, the undead simply overwhelmed the greenskin forces, willingly absorbing thousands of casualties to achieve swift victory. There was no need for caution, for Krell now commanded the most numerous undead force assembled since Nagash and his vampire-led armies had first invaded the mighty land of Nehekhara.

This was a force unlike those that had, in times past, marched proudly out of Sylvania – banners bearing the devices of a once-noble house, and its lordly vampire commander steeped in long-standing tradition. This was a mongrel army, a dishevelled horde that mixed newly raised townsfolk with warriors summoned from their ancient cairns. Some regiments bore the regalia of Empire provinces; others, from nations long forgotten. In this unholy union, corpses of the savage northmen fought alongside their former victims. The necromantic magic animated bodies dead no more than a week, or the reconstituted bonedust of barbarians that fought alongside Sigmar at the Battle of Black Fire Pass. All were the same now – a heaving, shambolic mass that marched at Krell's bidding.

Krell himself commanded from the centre of his army, beneath the banner of the Doomed Legion, for his warriors of old had been reanimated once more. His second in command remained Ulffik the Blackhanded, and it was this wight king who headed the long column of cavalry that rode alongside the hordes on foot.

As the rocky lands grew more sodden, Krell's army faced a last barrier before it could leave the Badlands: the Marshes of Madness. In his haste, Krell did not attempt to negotiate the shifting paths of that morass, but instead ploughed straight ahead. Thousands of undead were lost as quicksand and mud pits took their toll, but such hazards eventually filled with so many bodies that the regiments who followed could easily navigate over them. Those warriors trampled underneath were like insects trapped in cloying sap – suspended within their prisons for eternity.

As the army waded through waist-deep mud, more undead were lost to swamp beasts or marsh goblin ambushers. Such matters were trifling to Krell, who pushed his force onwards, deeper into the marshland. The heavy cavalry, including Ulffik's own Death Riders and the Black Lancers, fared poorly in the soggy swamps, burdened as they were with plate and barding. But not all the cavalry were of the material realm. The spirit hosts of ancient Averland knights galloped atop fens as if they traversed firm meadows, and the Witchfire Reapers – hexwraiths out of cursed hills of Stirland – rode straight through the gnarled trees and stunted hedges as if they were but smoke.

Dieter Helsnicht encountered no difficulties within the swamp, for he was mounted atop a bat-winged monstrosity of his own construction. He roamed above the marching columns, observing Krell's methods with disdain. By human standards, the decrepit necromancer was impossibly old. His life was sustained beyond mortal years by dark magic. Such foul deeds take their own toll; his body was a shrivelled shell.

Despite this, the twisted sorcerer was full of unnatural vitality. He could feel the Wind of Shyish – raw death magic – in the black clouds above, and it gave him greater strength still.

Before the varied armies parted, Arkhan issued orders to the Mortarchs. There were few who walked the world before whom Dieter Helsnicht would bow. Arkhan, however, was one of them. He was a dark legend, the right hand of the master of necromancy, a scion of distant Nehekhara. Helsnicht had spent his whole life, an unnaturally long one at that, seeking forbidden knowledge. Before him stood a being who was far more ancient than he, one who had been privy to dark arts' secrets from the beginning. In awe, Helsnicht bent his knee before the liche. He had spoken vows of servitude in the language of ancient Nehekhara, eager to demonstrate his own knowledge plucked from forbidden tomes. If this made any impression, Arkhan did not reveal it, merely nodding and dismissing him.

Arkhan had been clear: it was Krell's army to lead, his duty to manoeuvre tens of thousands of undead. Lesser necromancers had been bound to the wight lord, commanded to serve. It was they who would relay Krell's orders or replenish fallen troops. Arkhan had assigned Dieter Helsnicht to accompany the force because the liche was convinced that his skill in the arcane would help force the passage to the city of Khemri.

Arkhan suspected the undead kings of Nehekhara would amass many armies on the Salt Plains and that a long, grinding war would need to be fought. Arkhan confided to Helsnicht, saying the fate of the battle was as likely to be decided by arcane powers as it was by warriors and blades. Arkhan also felt that the necromancers in thrall to Krell would ultimately prove too weak to win the battle.

By their very nature, necromancers are outcasts. Dieter Helsnicht was this and more. He had spent long centuries without contact with the living, surrounding himself with undead who had neither the mind nor will to question him. His every command had been obeyed without hesitation for longer than he could remember. His reverence for Arkhan and Nagash focussed what remained of his mind, but the ancient necromancer was already slipping, reverting back to the madman who had spent many hundreds of years poring over the same ancient tomes, greedily seeking further secrets to prolong his unlife. As the centuries crept on, Helsnicht resorted to ever more appalling and base methods of obtaining necromantic knowledge.

Even before Krell's army advanced out of the Marshes of Madness, the Doomlord, Dieter Helsnicht, had already consumed the brains of three of his fellow necromancers.

Volsh bounced around badly, nearly falling into the corpses piled in the back as the zombies pulling his cart churned through the mud. Krell's commands pressed inside his mind, demanding Volsh to push his charges, to drive them. He was mid-way through the incantation when he noticed the Master Necromancer Dieter Helsnicht overhead again. He was beginning a long, circling glide, coming lower and lower.

Volsh cursed in his native Kislev – he had lost concentration on his spell, but that was not why he muttered. Despite Volsh's fervent wishes, Helsnicht was landing nearby.

Even before the winged beast had set down, the Doomlord was addressing him.

'Lagging, always lagging. Your flank is too slow. Tell me again what incantations you are using and the order in which you invoke them,' said Helsnicht, raising his voice to a shriek so that he could be heard over the sloshing, churning march of the zombie legions through the knee-deep sludge.

Panic rising, Volsh tried to keep the fear out of his voice, willing his stumbling tongue to form the right words.

'I was using the incantation from V... Vanhel, Master Helsnicht,' blurted Volsh, hating himself for cowering before those penetrating eyes bearing down upon him.

Dieter Helsnicht repeated the elemental laws of undeath, as he began to dismount. At that moment, the necromancer Pieter Duphrie and another zombie formation emerged out of the marsh thickets. Catching sight of the newcomers, Helsnicht kicked his beast and took to skies once more, mumbling something derogatory about 'peasant-filled Kislev'.

Volsh watched the Doomlord depart into the gloom. He was pleased to see him go, and he couldn't help but think there was something – hunger or greed? – that had gleamed madly in the master necromancer's eyes.

Volsh thought again of his comrade Mortemer, the necromancer out of Mousillon. Somehow, he had been slain, and his skull had been hollowed out. Now Mortemer trudged along as part of the nearby zombie regiment that he himself had once controlled. Volsh did not know what exactly had happened to his fellow necromancer, but he was beginning to have his suspicions.



THE GREAT ARMY OF NUMAS

The gruelling campaign in the northern deserts of Nehekhara was fought by the skeletal legions of Numas, led by King Phar. During the course of the long and almost continual fighting, many of the legions were destroyed and reformed multiple times.

KING PHAR

King Phar was an angry and wrathful ruler. He typically fought from atop a chariot, as befitted his royal status, although he was known to take to the field on foot when he wanted to confront a particularly hated foe face-to-face, adding his own might to the rank and file.





PRINCE DRAMKHIR

The fifth son of King Phar, and bearer of the Golden Hawk Banner. It was claimed that those who stood beneath its golden wings gained the long sight of its namesake, and that their sword blows would strike with the speed and surety of that fabled raptor of the desert.

AMONKHAF, HIGH PRIEST OF NUMAS

Steeped in ceremonial lore, Amonkhaf led the Council of Seven – half of the sacred priests of the Mortuary Cult of Numas. The remainder were left to prepare the temple and sarcophagi to accept the expected casualties upon the Great Army of Numas' victorious return. It was Amonkhaf who first suspected that the storm that rode above the armies of Nagash was something far more than just dark cover for vampires.





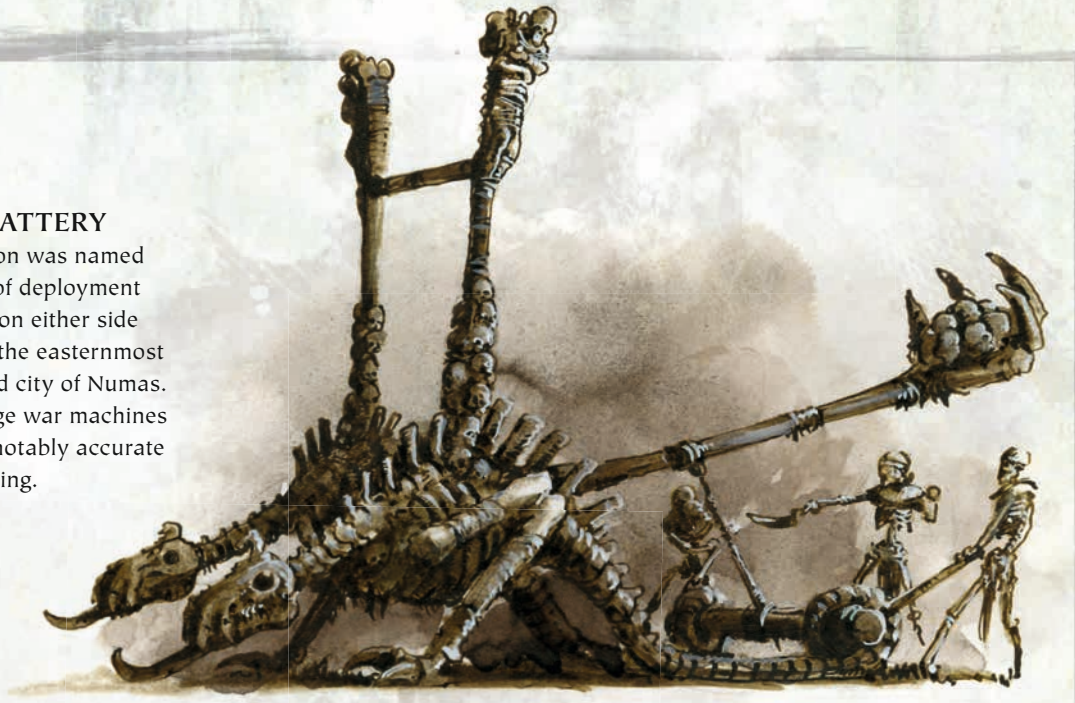
THE SPHINX LEGION OF NUMAS

The legendary Sphinx Legion had guarded the king of Numas since the 2nd Dynasty. It numbered exactly one hundred warriors and was always accompanied by the Sphinx Priest – a dedicated liche priest who was well versed in re-animating any of the legion that fell. Their banner colours were black upon yellow.



CRIMSON GUARD

Marked by their distinctive red shields and spear shafts, these warriors were named in honour of the most famous of kings out of Numas – Imrathepis, the Crimson King. There were five full regiments of Crimson Guard at the Battle of the Blight Water, and they were proud to form the front centre of King Phar's forces. This may not truly have been intended as an honour, for King Phar had loathed the Crimson King.



BRONZE GATE BATTERY

This artillery formation was named after their usual site of deployment atop the battlements on either side of the Bronze Gate – the easternmost entrance to the walled city of Numas. This pair of long-range war machines and their crew were notably accurate during the river crossing.



KING RAMSSUS

One of Bhagar's most famous kings, Ramssus went to war upon a lavish, golden chariot, and led the Chariot Legions of Bhagar. At the forefront rode the heavy chariots of the Golden Legion, followed by the Desert Shrikes and Al-Dru'dhafarr, the Wind that Bites.



THE BONE GIANTS OF BHAGAR

Only a dozen of the fabled Bone Giants of Bhagar remained intact, and five of these were sent north at the behest of Settra. In fact, Settra had ordered them all, but two possessed faulty hieroglyphics that required extra necrotect work and Ahnosh, a tomb king of Bhagar, along with his attendant Mortuary Priests, felt safer with at least half of their guardian statuary near their own necropolis.

THE BATTLE OF BLIGHT WATER

At last, the cloying swamp gave way to reed beds as the highlands drained downwards into the Blight Water. In ancient days, the sluggish river meandered through fertile fields. That had been before Nagash's Great Ritual had scoured all the life from the realm of Nehekhara.

The Blight Water was now little more than liquid death, a grim gateway guarding the Land of the Dead. Living flesh withered at the water's touch. The greenskins knew it as the Badwater, and only a few tribes dared cross it, doing so via rafts of bone. This was the next obstacle for Krell and his army to overcome.

As he slowed the advance, Krell surveyed the landscape that opened up before him. Beyond the deadly river was the flat basin known as the Salt Plain. After the scrubby swamplands, this was a land of broad horizons, with nothing to block the sweeping vista save the shimmering heat. Krell, however, was now observing a land whose sun had been quenched by black clouds. Visibility was limited; although the supernatural sight of the undead was less affected, shapes became discernable at no more distance than a catapult could fire. The air was arid, but without the sun, Nehekhara was swiftly cooling, losing its heat as rapidly as did a body that had drawn its last breath.

Krell's army had already crossed several rivers, for these did not pose the same dangers they did to living armies. Not needing air, it mattered little how long Krell's warriors stayed submerged. While swift-flowing rivers could wash troops far afield, or batter them upon stone-ridden rapids, the Blight Water was too slow to dislodge a crossing. Krell had no fear that the cursed waters would harm his unliving troops. He had, however, expected this river crossing to be contested. It was what he himself would have done if tasked with defending a flat, barren land. Yet there was no sign of the enemy.

From the brutal, hard lands of the north, Krell was a warrior born. His long unlife had burned away any trace of humanity or the passions of man. He was a killing machine. His mind worked in tactics, and his every thought was streamlined to those required by his army; he commanded and controlled it in the same manner and as he wielded his own great double-bladed axe. He sensed the foe was near, but the sooner the enemy was engaged, the more quickly they could be destroyed. Knowing that his army would be most vulnerable while it emerged to scrabble up the far bank, Krell gathered all the flying creatures in his force: living clouds of chiropterans, the man-sized fell bats, and a pair of terrorgheists. These he commanded to fly along the river while the legions crossed. Should the foe attempt to move up before his forces could emerge again on the far side, his swift flyers could interpose themselves, giving the river-logged forces time to ascend the bank. Once a beachhead was formed, Krell was sure he had the numbers to expand it.

At a single gesture from Krell, his army advanced along a frontage several miles wide. Mechanically, the animated dead strode forward, and the front ranks gradually disappeared beneath the water. Soon, only bannertops could be seen protruding above, cutting across the surface like some aquatic menace. The grey waters turned brown as many hundreds of undead churned the riverbed. By increments, the undead began to rise on the far side: spear tips emerging first, then helms or bare skulls breaking water. With wheels creaking in protest, corpse carts issued forth. They left behind them a trail of innards and still-twitching limbs, flotsam that slowly dissolved as it drifted downstream.

At the first sign of his troops cresting the waters near the far bank, Krell sent forth a second wave of skeletal infantry, and then a third.

Despite the gloom, none of this escaped the attention of his regal omnipotence, King Phar, ruler of Numas during its triumphal reign in the age of the Second Dynasty. Atop a slight rise, Phar stood beneath the Golden Hawk Banner carried by Dramkhir, his herald. From this vantage, he could see with all the clarity of the totem's namesake. As he watched the ragtag skeletal horde advance into the Blight Water, King Phar felt he already knew the outcome. Spread before him as if on parade stood the uniform columns of his legions. Many invaders had advanced along this route, and the army of Numas had defeated them all.

Upon King Phar's command, the Great Army of Numas lurched into motion. Batteries of catapults released shots, their flight easily marked by the eerie trail of green fire they left behind. As one, the Bone Giants of Bhagar drew and fired volley after volley from their enormous bows, each arrow longer and thicker than a banner pole. With a ceremonial spear-clash against their tall, bronze-rimmed shields, the foot soldiers advanced in perfect unison. Regiments of archers followed in their stead. Flights of black-winged carrion, the scavengers of the desert realm, ceased their circles over the rearguard and flapped towards the riverbank.

The timing was perfect. Just as the first skeletal warriors from Krell's army pulled themselves to level ground, arcs of trailing flame illuminated the black sky. The cursed ammunition screamed on its way down, before bursting into livid balefire explosions. Shrapnel of bone,

teeth and green fire tore through Krell's regiments. Other shots fell into the Blight Water itself, sending up geysers as the magical payload sank to the riverbed and erupted underwater. Great arrows fired by the Giants of Bhagar struck fell bats and one of the terrorgheists from the sky.

While Krell's regiments on the far bank were decimated by long-ranged weaponry, King Phar's legions closed steadily. Already the many legions of archers had halted and were nocking arrows to their bows while the heavier infantry advanced in line. The undead from Numas issued no war cry, but thousands of warriors crunching through the salt-crust along with the distinctive clack of rattling bones made a sound that would have unnerved any foe that breathed.

Although the situation was desperate, Krell's mindless automatons did not know fear. At the moment, Krell's regiments across the river formed a pitifully thin line compared to the deep ranks that would soon beset them. Worsening their odds still further, a steady rain of arrows from King Phar's archers began to fall, inflicting a mounting toll.

Krell was at a tactical juncture. His only hope of crossing the Blight Water in force was to press the battle as far from the riverbank as he could. If he could secure enough space on the far bank to deploy, the superior numbers of his army would ultimately win the day. If his forces could not hold back the battle line and the fight took place at the river's edge, then he would surely watch his army destroyed as they attempted to fight their way out of the water. The safe option was to call a halt now; to admit a stalemate and watch his forces on the far bank be annihilated piecemeal.

Cleaving the air with a downward-chopping motion of his black axe, Krell signalled his flying troops to attack and for the rest of the army to move forward at maximum pace.





Sweeping out of the jet-black clouds scudding above, the bats were the first to assail the oncoming line of King Phar's army. Like thousands of tiny, winged darts, the bats descended. In their midst flapped larger creatures, fell bats, whose sabre-like fangs could rend a man in two. Such a sudden and unexpected strike from the skies might have wrought havoc in a mortal battleline, but nothing could unnerve the undead. So deep were the ranks of the army of Numas that the end result was inevitable. King Phar's forces struck down the foe, flattening their broken remains into the cracked ground of the Salt Plains.

Just as the opposing regiments were about to meet, the lone terrorgheist flew into King Phar's centre, the Crimson Guard. The great beast unleashed its bone-shattering shriek before swiping with its formidable talons. Its raking claws splintered shields and sent waves of skulls, ribs and spines flying. This aerial assault slowed down the army of Numas' advance, forcing them to halt and fight the mighty beast. Although only a brief delay, it was vital time that allowed Krell's ground forces to press on further past the river. Already a second wave of troops was shuffling up the riverbank, with a third line of regiments following behind. Although the terrogheist slew many, the Crimson Guard were too numerous and too unrelenting. Pierced by dozens of speartips, the bat-winged monstrosity gave a last ear-splitting screech before collapsing.

At that moment, Krell's infantry met the battle line of Numas. It was the beginning of a gruelling, grinding combat. From behind their tall shields, the Crimson Guard jabbed, while beneath tattered black banners, the opposing undead sought to drive their own weapons home. There were neither war cries nor groans from the wounded. Save for the clash of blades, breaking bones and the sound of shields turning hard-driven blows, the combat was fought in an eerie silence.

Standing on the northern bank, Krell could not see the swordplay, nor had he any sense of how his army progressed. He knew the troops he had sent over, however, and was realistic about what they could achieve. These were regiments of no lineage, bones scraped out of Gardens of Morr and reassembled to fight once more. Krell's forces still outnumbered his foe, but on the battlefront the numbers were against his vanguard, and the bulk of his army remained blockaded on the wrong side of the river. He knew they would not hold long against the superior numbers of the foe, and would collapse swiftly if the enemy sent elite formations into that battle. In the gloom, Krell sensed a glint of golden armour working its way towards the line of battle, and he was certain something large loomed on the horizon, heading in the direction of his troops.

With little time to act, Krell gave quick counsel to Dieter Helsnicht, who had landed his mount nearby, ordering him to gather his fellow necromancers and concentrate all their efforts on aiding the troops on the distant bank.

As Dieter's winged beast beat its leathery wings and lifted jerkily off the ground, Krell methodically turned to reorganise the next battle line to enter the river. Momentarily halting his skeletal forces, he instead motioned forward a trio of varghulfs, slavering, mad creatures that had been straining to join the fight. Alongside them loped the Flesh-eaters, crypt ghouls whose pale skin stood out starkly in the darkness. Next, Krell commanded the cavalry forward. On the extreme flanks, steeds plunged into the water at full gallop. Some, like the Witchfire Reapers, did not sink, but rode straight across the river, each hoofprint leaving a trail of emerald fire that glowed like drifting phosphorus upon the water. Finally, Krell himself stepped into the front rank of the Doomed Legion and led them wading into the congested river. What the wight lord could see of the battle soon disappeared as he himself submerged into the depths of the flowing waters and began the relentless trek across the murky riverbed.

On the Salt Plains, the battle raged. The warriors at the king's command were loyal vassals, souls of long-lost soldiers summoned forth by liche priests of the ancient Mortuary Cult and bound once more to corporeal forms. They fought out of duty for King Phar, serving in death as they had in life. Against them, the skeletons and zombies of Krell's army were mindless automatons, their lifeless bodies raised by necromancers; their actions, save for the rudiments of attack or defence, entirely directed by their commanders. Here or there, some champion of antiquity might display a flash of long-forgotten martial skill, momentarily separating himself from the horde before he too was cut down.

No matter upon which side they fought, when a skeleton fell – stabbed or broken – the warrior behind stepped forward to take his place. At first, the combat seemed evenly matched. Slowly, inevitably, the deeper ranks of King Phar's regiments began to tell. By weight of numbers alone, the Nehekharan undead began pushing their foemen back at a steady rate. Then came the golden-armoured Sphinx Legion of Numas. These were the mummified elite of King Phar's army, the most gifted of his warriors. Blows rebounded harmlessly off their heavier armour, while they themselves fought with a skill unmatched by the lesser undead. None of the troops Krell had sent across the river could stand for long before their tall, heavy-bladed halberds.

And then, Prince Lamhirakh made his presence known.

Mounted upon a warsphinx, the son of King Phar fought alongside the Sphinx Legion. Immune to the feeble blows of its enemies, the giant leonine statue reared up on its hind legs before slamming downwards, its clawed limbs spread wide to crush whole ranks of its foes at a time. From its back, Prince Lamhirakh stabbed down with his long hunting spear. Its tip glowing in the gloom, the spear skewered several foes with each of the prince's powerful thrusts. Step by step, the towering stone construct drove onwards.

It seemed as if Krell had been too late in sending forth his own shock troops. Already the king's forces had collapsed the bulk of Krell's beachhead, pushing it more than halfway back to the river. Surely they would drive their foes into the waters before the wight lord could gain the far bank, thwarting Krell's invasion before his armies had advanced more than a hundred paces into the Land of the Dead.

From his vantage point atop the ruin-topped rise, King Phar looked out proudly at his army and his son. They would bring glory to Numas. Seeing the sheer size of the force that opposed them, he could almost forgive the fact that they had penetrated so far into his beloved realm. Curse their feet for befouling his land! Their defeat, although inevitable, was being achieved so swiftly that it was proving unusually satisfying. The ancient king was about to descend the steps down from the ruins, for he did not need to watch in order to see what would happen next. It was a given that his son would drive the foe into the river and slaughter them as they attempted futilely to mount the steep bank. But then, King Phar saw something that caused him to stop, motionless. Perhaps this would be a battle after all.

With a single motion, he signalled for King Ramssus and the Chariot Legions of Bhagar to ready their positions: they would be needed after all. Then King Phar summoned Amonkhaf, the High Priest of Numas, to his side for war council.

Amonkhaf, the High Priest of Numas, had been wrong. He had thought the black and lowering skies were mere cover for his foes, a way to keep the light of the sun off those who had learned to loathe its touch – foul vampires or unnatural wights. But it was more than that, much more. Clearly the foe's necromancers were tapping into those darksome clouds, drawing forth unprecedented power.

Despite their best efforts to unweave their foe's spells, the Council of Seven – the priests of the Mortuary Cult that served Amonkhaf – had thus far failed. This was what Amonkhaf told King Phar, when he was summoned to explain the sudden change in momentum at the river crossing. Since his own curt dismissal from the king's presence, the liche priests of Numas had continued their attempts to counter the powerful sorceries, but their foes in the arcane were simply too powerful to stop.

Krell's forces had been pushed to within a stone's throw of the river's edge but, buoyed by necromantic magic, they had been able to hold firm. With their own skeletal regiments glowing with some hellish vigour, Krell's army began to turn the tide, grinding forward. With each hard-won step, the mongrel hordes of the dead gained momentum. As they advanced, crushing beneath them the fallen, Krell's regiments grew in size. From the skies, tendrils of death magic raced across the front lines, and then the dead lurched upright once more. With the destruction of their skeletal forms, the souls of the loyal Numasi soldiers were cast once more into the Realm of Souls, leaving behind only shattered bone. These remains were bound by foul necromancy, raised to fight anew, battling against the very formation from which they came.

When Krell's pack of varghulfs bulled their way into the midst of the fighting, the dismantling of the Grand Army of Numas began in earnest. The last of the Crimson Guard were smashed down, as was the regiment behind them, as the beasts unleashed their fury. The varghulfs themselves were cut and stabbed many times over, but without fail their wounds knitted back together. The battle had moved far from the river, and Krell, no longer needed in the front lines, dropped back to ensure his forces crossed in good order.

The Battle of Blight Water was over, but the Battle of the Salt Plains had just begun.

King Phar's plan to drive the invaders into the river had failed, but the ancient King of Numas had other plans. The Salt Plains were a vast flat expanse, dotted with flat-topped rises upon which sat broken ruins from a forgotten age. In terrain such as this, speed and manoeuvrability could be more deadly than sheer numbers or brute strength.

The salty crust of the dry land splintered and chipped under the clatter of skeletal hooves and the rumble of wheels. Not one, but two great chariot legions sped towards the fray, approaching the foe from either flank. King Ramsuss of Bhagar led one legion, and the other was fronted by King Phar himself. Hundreds of chariots skimmed over the packed desert floor. Like the pincers of some enormous beast, they closed upon the flanks of Krell's forces.

At the last moment, by prearranged signal, some chariots veered off, kicking up clouds of dust. They raced around Krell's army, launching flights of arrows into their vulnerable flanks and rear. Other charioteers steered straight into combat, their metal-rimmed wheels carving paths through the foe, like reapers scything fields of wheat. Small units of skeletal cavalry wove in between the chariots, peppering Krell's regiments with arrows, searching out more vital targets. King Phar intended the shock attack of so many charging chariots to punish his overstretched foe and to relieve the pressure that was driving his beleaguered centre backwards. But the calculating king had another mission in mind as well.

King Phar commanded his chariots to seek out the enemy necromancers and to slay them at all costs. This was the thought that High Priest Amonkhaf pushed outwards. Those returned from the Realm of Spirits were loyal warriors, but their minds were clouded. Over and over he repeated the order, impelling the legions to fulfil his liege's wish.

Flushed with power, Dieter Helsnicht and Krell's necromancers had pressed forward, in many cases right behind their front-line fighters. The necromancer Al'Grahib was the first to be drawn out, and the first to fall. He had been using his incantations to further invigorate the Death Riders, but they had penetrated so deeply into their foe that Al'Grahib was left far behind, vulnerable to the fast-moving bands of chariots and horse archers. Before the necromancer could attempt further spells, he was shot, the leather-like husk that was his skin pierced many times by the arrows of skeletal archers.

The clash raged for hours. In some places on the battlefield a grinding stalemate was reached, as formations tirelessly battered one another, making no headway against the necromancers' or liche priests' ability to raise their forces up once again. In other cases, the impetus of the charge or the presence of a powerful captain turned the tide, and entire regiments were battered into the cracked ground. Always the orders filled the legionnaires with an unshakeable sense of duty: *Seek out the enemy necromancers. Slay them at all costs*. Some half dozen of the practitioners of the black arts were dragged down, shot or stabbed.

Two of the Bone Giants of Bhagar – those not drawn into the melee

in the centre – loosed arrows from their enormous bows, targeting Dieter Helsnicht. He had swooped low to raise more undead when a shaft transfixed his flying steed. Downwards spiralled the necromancer, howling as he went. The slain beast's wings slowed the descent, but the crash left Dieter's limbs twisted unnaturally. Black luck ensured he was fortunate enough to land not far from Krell and his Doomed Legion, and so did not fall prey to the roving formations of skeletal horse archers, or encircling chariots. With the grinding of split bone and the madness of death magic gleaming in his eyes, Helsnicht pulled himself together, rising once more.

Shorn of their overwhelming magical support, and with both flanks heavily assaulted, Krell's horde came to a standstill. The tide of the battle had shifted once again, the initiative once again with King Phar. This time, the king was determined to keep his foot on his opponent's throat. By slaying so many necromancers, and forcing Helsnicht temporarily out of the battle, Amonkhaf, the High Priest of Numas, and his Council of Seven now matched the rate at which the enemy army could raise back their fallen. The liche priests could not tap into the swirling black clouds, but as there were simply more of them reading dusty scrolls and uttering monotonous rituals, the war of attrition too became a stalemate.

Once more, the Golden Legion replenished its numbers. Fallen warriors reclaimed their places in the ranks, although it was now a rare warrior that was not missing some part of himself: a rib, lower jaw, or an entire limb. Prince Lamhirakh was healed of the wounds he had suffered, although there were no necrotects to hand to reform the cracked stone that marred the hide of his warsphinx – a sign of how fierce had been the fighting, for those constructs were notoriously difficult to damage.

So began a new stage of battle, a match of wits and tactics, with Krell and King Phar attacking and counter-attacking each other across the vast Salt Plains. Of pawns – the utterly replaceable skeleton warriors – both sides had plenty. Krell, with his nameless hordes, had the greater numbers, but this advantage came to naught upon the flat expanse, the fleet chariots and skeletal horsemen easily avoiding entrapment. Thus began a prolonged period of feints and ruses, broken occasionally by clashes of violent intensity. Gradually, Krell's army worked its way southwards.







THE ARMY OF SYLVANIA

The army Mannfred led into Nehekhara was a much smaller force than Krell's shambolic horde, however, it contained a greater number of elite regiments and predatory vampires.



MANNFRED VON CARSTEIN

When it came time to assemble his invasion army, Mannfred was especially discerning when gathering the forces he would personally lead into Nehekhara. He was suspicious of spies, distrusting both Arkhan and Neferata. As a proud von Carstein, Mannfred wanted nothing to do with the unhinged Dieter Helsnicht, nor any Strigoi, whom he considered abominable. As needs must, Mannfred summoned skeletons to do his bidding, but he preferred to keep his army centred upon those who marched under his own coat of arms and the creatures of the night that he himself summoned.

VAMPIRE ACOLYTES

Mannfred selected three vampire thralls to join his Sylvanian army as lieutenants. Helmut von Carstein fought on foot with the grave guard, and to him was given the honour of carrying the von Carstein banner. Gorgivich Krakvald, a distant Harkon relation, was a warrior with little arcane talent; as a vassal he was indifferent towards Mannfred, a mere opportunist. Finally, there was Gunther von Grecht – a devious and treacherous vampire like unto the von Carsteins of old.





THE KNIGHTS SEPULCHRAL

The Knights Sepulchral were the single most powerful regiment of skeletal knights in Mannfred's army. Their proud history of serving the von Carsteins dated back to the Vampire Wars with the Empire, and they had reaped terror on countless battlefields since those days. Dark magic flowed strongly about these unearthly knights and an aura of doom and death surrounded them. When the Knights Sepulchral lowered their long lances, a fell light emanated from out of their empty sockets, a sinister glow that was typically the last thing their foes ever saw.

KNIGHTS OF THE RED DEATH

None were more bloodthirsty or more merciless than the Knights of the Red Death. These were the butchers behind the Massacre of Modruin and the slaughter of every living soul in the siege of the walled town of Ostwald. The vampire Gorgivich Krakvald rode at the fore of this unit, and its standard was emblazoned with a representation of Krakvald Castle.





HELMUT'S OWN

The largest of Mannfred's grave guard regiments was instructed to protect Helmut von Carstein. Wearing the traditional von Carstein colours of red and black, the regiment bore cursed blades, which glowed a venomous shade beneath the gloom that overshadowed all lands. Tirelessly they marched, in perfect uniformity – eternal warriors ever ready to do their martial duty.

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

The creatures of the night had always answered Mannfred von Carstein's call. Included in their number were many packs of dire wolves – the Hounds of Sylvania. All five packs followed Mannfred's telepathic commands, loping far afield from the main undead host and acting as advance scouts, their baleful baying a signal that they had spotted prey. From the roosts and steeples of Drakenhof came innumerable bat swarms – loathsome, bloodthirsty beasts that fluttered like a dark cloud. At their master's bidding they would plummet from the sky, ready to sink their claws and fangs into any foe.





DRAKENHOF GUARD

When Mannfred left Sylvania he took with him a full half of the infamous Drakenhof Guard, including their deadliest seneschal, Krang Crimsonhelm. A resilient and formidable formation, they had served the von Carsteins for hundreds of years. For their long march into the desert, the Drakenhof Guard bore with them an artefact from out of their keep – the Banner of Screaming Death. What dark magic was bound to that hateful item is unknown, but the wailing shrieks of horror that screamed from its tattered folds made even the bravest quail in fear.

THE ARMY OF ZANDRI

King Behedesh led his army out of Zandri and into the deep desert. There, buried beneath the dunes, they lay in wait for any invaders that dared to enter Nehekhara.



KING BEHEDESH II

He who commanded the ground armies of Zandri, it was Behedesh's duty to safeguard the city of Khemri from any army that might approach from that direction. A master tactician of desert warfare, King Behedesh and his army lay in wait, coiled to strike like some monstrous creature of the sands.



ALDRHAMAR

A master necrotect from the far city of Quatar, it was Aldrhamar's duty to ensure that the ushabti were kept in good fighting order. To him were entrusted the Statuary of the Temple of Usirian and the ushabti unit, the Lions of the Sand.

HAPUSNEB

Hapusneb was a liche priest of Zandri who bore the title Master of the Swarm. He controlled tides of undead scarabs – the flesh-eating and skull-marked Khepra beetles that were the messengers of Usirian, God of the Underworld. At his bidding, black-clawed scorpions – the favoured of Sokth, god of treachery and murderers – rose from the sands to do his bidding. To aid his mystical chanting, three lesser liche priests, his personal attendants, accompanied Hapusneb.





ZANDRI ETERNALS

These soldiers were the royal bodyguard of King Behedesh II, as they were for his father before him. They bore a magical banner that was a relic of their ancient city – the Standard of the Undying Legion. Within the icon were warrior spirits of those long fallen, ready to fulfil an undying pledge to aid the great kings of Zandri.



ZANDRI BLACKSHIELDS

Ten full regiments of Zandri Blackshields were awakened upon Settra's orders. They joined King Behedesh II in the deep desert. One of the most famous of all skeletal legions, the Blackshields had fought in many of Nehekhara's greatest battles – from the defeat of Lahmia, to the subsequent defeat of Nagash.



CROCOGAR LEGION

There were three regiments of archers in Zandri's Crocogar Legion, who historically had served on patrols along the Mortis River. They earned their name when their concentrated bowfire slew one of the great reptilian beasts that was raging up and down the riverways.

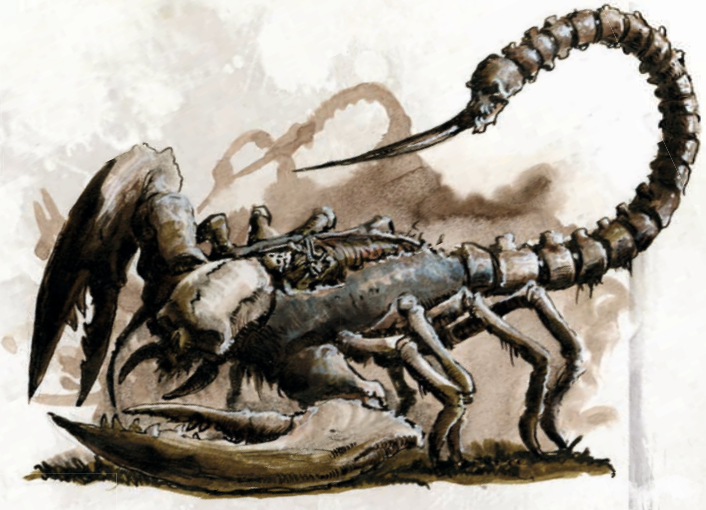


LIONS OF THE SAND

From out of Zandri's Temple District strode the Lions of the Sand. These towering ushabti bore great ceremonial weapons with blades at each end. Their old filigree shone even in the darkness, for these guardian monuments had long stood duty over the Temples of Zandri. Most numerous of all their kind were the jackal-headed warriors of Djaf, and fell hieroglyphs had been carven into their stony forms. The Lions of the Sand had only ever been awoken in times of great need, and they had always marched out to victory.

UNDERWORLD DEATHWATCH

Through ancient ceremonies and precisely worded incantations, no fewer than five tomb scorpions were awakened by the liche priests to accompany King Behedesh II. Their ability to move quickly through the deep sands of the open desert made them an ideal asset for an ambush attack. Like their living counterparts, the tomb scorpions' favoured mode of attack was to burst forth from beneath the sand, using their stinging tails to incapacitate any foes that avoided their deadly snipping claws.





THOSE THAT STALK BENEATH THE SAND

There were two formations of sepulchral stalkers that were integral to King Behedesh's army – the Sand Snakes and the Sable Vipers. The Sand Snakes were split into three separate units in order to better seek out and eliminate any enemy scouts that attempted to pass southwards towards the city of Khemri. The Sable Vipers were held close to King Behedesh's centre, to be released as a shock attack on any foe's most formidable-looking formation, for any foe that caught even a glimpse of these creatures would crumble to dust.

AMBUSH IN THE DEEP DESERT

Whilst Krell and his hordes were slogging through the Marshes of Madness, another army stood poised to enter the Land of the Dead. The force had skirted the befouling swamps by marching westward after passing the last of the Dragonback Mountains. From there, their journey took them between the Cairn Hills and the Great Ocean. This was not a shambolic army, assembled from troops summoned on the march, but a proud Sylvanian force that advanced beneath the infamous banner of the von Carsteins. Indeed, this was an army befitting the prestige of its leader, Mannfred von Carstein.

At the western edge of the vast Salt Plains there stood only a few scattered watchtowers to monitor the border of Nehekhara. Each was cast down in turn, their garrisons destroyed with contemptuous ease. But, despite these early successes, Mannfred was brooding. His ambitions had thus far taken him from his domain, where he was master, into servitude under Nagash as one of his Dark Lords. He had no real choice but to play his part, awaiting an opportunity as he had done so many times in the past. Since his days as a retainer of Vlad, Mannfred knew how to bide his time. Yet being a master of guileful patience did nothing to lessen the degree to which it rankled the proud vampire to bow before another's authority.

There were none save himself that the vampire lord placed his trust in. However, since Nagash's return, Mannfred had been especially suspicious of those from outside Sylvania. He was wary of spies – particularly distrusting Arkhan, the most favoured of Nagash's captains. Neferata, whose harem of sycophants were all conspirators like their mistress, was another who sought to inveigle her own agents within the contingents of the other Dark Lords. Mannfred knew that if he had an opportunity for personal gain, or to move against any of his erstwhile allies, he wanted such dealings to go unnoticed. Certainly he did not want word of his deeds being reported to Nagash by any save himself. Despite his seething resentment, Mannfred was awed by the power it had taken to create the dark canopy above. It would not do to earn the Great Necromancer's ire. If this was Nagash's weakened state, there was no knowing what such a force could do when fully restored.

As the Army of Sylvania left the rim of the cracked salt basin, it entered the open desert, and rolling dunes gave way to endless sand. This was not Mannfred's first expedition into that ancient kingdom, for he had journeyed there in the years after Vlad's fall. Then, he had sought the knowledge of the fabled Mortuary Cult. Now, he led an army to depose them and place Nagash on their throne.

Arkhan had set the sprawling desert city of Khemri as their goal: all the Dark Lords would converge to retake the epicentre of Nehekharan might. This was all Mannfred knew of the plan, and although he suspected there was more that Arkhan would not say, he would be patient. After all, Mannfred's own black-hearted schemes had revolved around claiming a rightful throne long denied him, and it was easy to imagine Nagash being consumed by the idea of retaking the realm whence he had been cast out.

Mannfred intended to play a leading role in Nagash's vengeance, to claim a lion's share of glory in the conquering of Nehekhara. He cared not for such honours, but it was a game. With his allegiance proven, and with the Great Necromancer placed upon his throne in the hated desert, Mannfred could then indulge in his plans further to the north. Sylvania was his by right of conquest and Vlad would need to be dealt with. Only too well did Mannfred remember the iron grip that the elder vampire had held over those bleak lands.

With his mind so firmly fixed upon his own schemes, and what Vlad might be plotting in the north, Mannfred did not realise that his scouts were missing. The vampire lord had sent forth packs of dire wolves, some loping ahead, others prowling along his force's perimeter. It was all barren sand, save for a few sloping dunes, but they were invading an enemy realm and such precautions were a matter of course. The Sylvanian hounds were commanded to bay at the sign of foes, their mournful howling was traceable even when the lupine beasts were far afield, as it carried as much on the Wind of Shyish as it did the material currents. The dire wolves had proven excellent scouts, for as creatures of the night, they saw as well or better than any others in the all-pervading darkness about them. But they were not of the desert, and their vestigial instincts were for hunting in lands far different to these.

Not a single creature in Mannfred's army detected anything untoward. Only one that had survived for a long time in that harsh desert environment would have observed the telltale signs. The drifts that lay ahead were not the natural contours of the wind-blown sand, but foreign objects covered over. Surrounding the marching columns were subtle movements from below that sent up ripples through the sand. Only those with the keenest hearing combined with an intricate understanding of the desert could have distinguished between wind-shifting grains and the sinuous glide of something far more ominous. All of the Sylvanian force missed the brief sight of a flashing tail-point, as its owner burrowed

once more, leaving in its wake only piles of sand that had once been dire wolves. Without warning, the desert came alive underneath the feet of Mannfred's army.

Rising with sudden geysers of displaced sand, tomb scorpions burst forth, their serrated claws clamping down upon ranks of skeletal warriors. Made of stone, metal and petrified wood, those multi-legged monstrosities snipped off skulls or drove their spiked, poison-dripping stings into anything that moved. Sepulchral stalkers struck next, emerging out of the dunes with less violence than the scorpions, but with even greater effect. With a predatory hiss, the enormous snake-like bodies darted forth. Any who met the horrific gaze of the constructs were instantaneously transformed to sand, motionless statues that soon scattered upon the winds. Whole regiments of skeletons collapsed into the desert, but Helmut, one of Mannfred's most talented acolytes, was too quick. Averting his eyes, the vampire struck out with his blade and was rewarded – his blow sliced through the snake-being's armour and clove it in two, the halves falling, then twitching a few times before they too became sand.

Before the Army of Sylvania, the desert was threshing as if alive. For many months King Behedesh's army had stood immobile, awaiting a foe. Now, with much flailing, sinuous bodies and clacking appendages, pushed their way out of the sand. Grains still draining from eye sockets or shaking out of decorative headbands, the legions assembled, forming themselves into perfect rows. From out of the largest dunes came the ushabti, monuments in the likeness of the ancient gods of Nehekhara, animated for battle.

With a single motion from his ceremonial blade, King Behedesh II commanded his army forward. As one, the legions closed in upon the beleaguered army from the north.

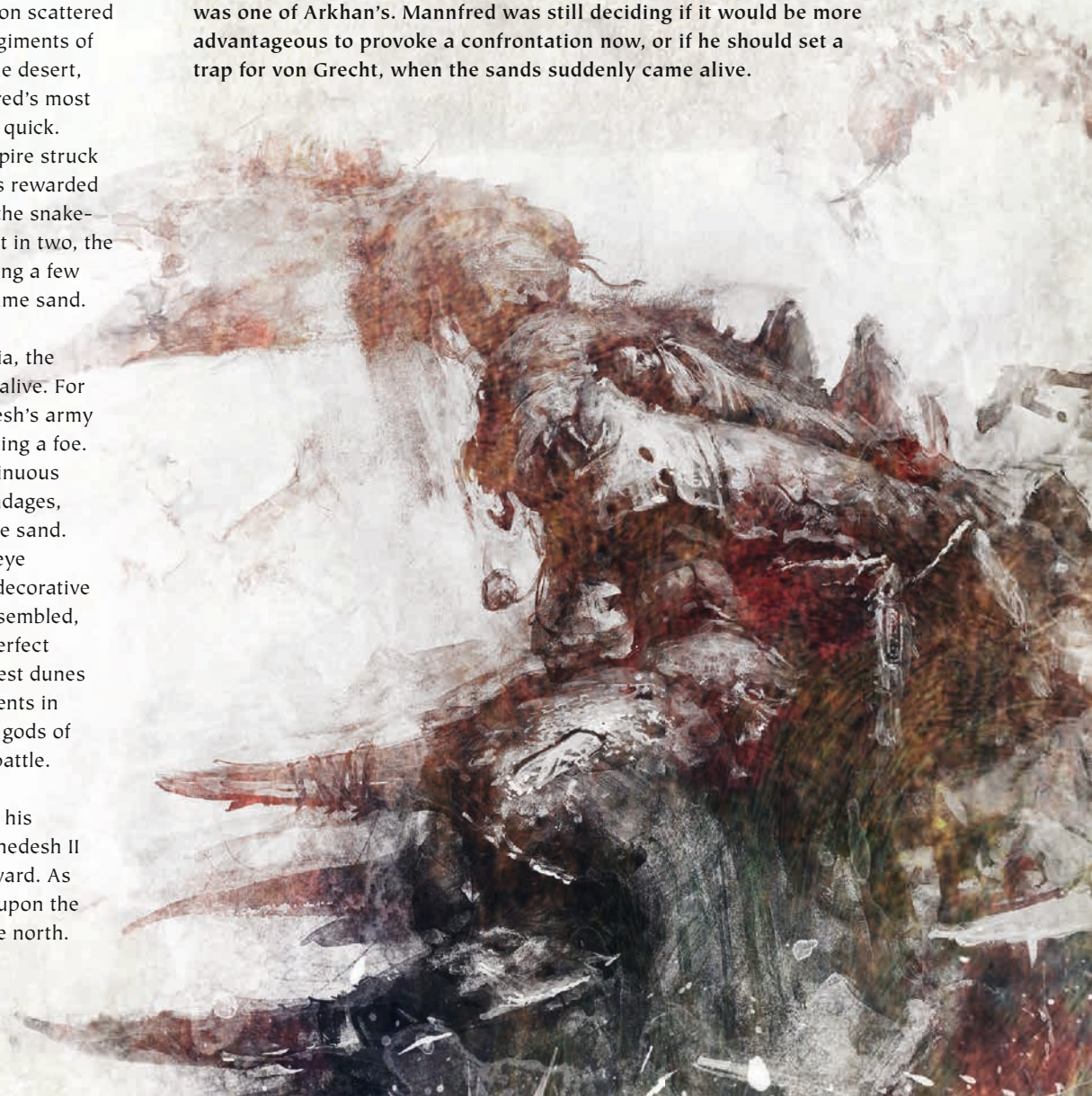
When he mustered his army to war, Mannfred had chosen his lieutenants carefully. He had called upon three vampires to join him, for he well knew his own kind had the most to offer an army. Yet he was fully aware that they were the most headstrong and thus the least trustworthy.

Mannfred chose none of his direct get, knowing them too well. Instead he recruited Helmut, a von Carstein; Krakvald, a distant scion of Abhorash; and a von Grecht. The long journey had given Mannfred more opportunity to study his charges, and, to his chagrin, he found the more he spoke with them, the more he suspected that perhaps Arkhan or Neferata had infiltrated an agent into his army.

'Tell me again how you came by that scarab?' asked Mannfred, who had seen Gunther von Grecht caressing the strange amulet that hung around his neck. 'It is from these lands, is it not?'

'Aye,' said von Grecht, and he went on to recount a long story of how he had taken it from a baron in Averland. Mannfred did not pay that much attention to the words. He had seen enough to give him the answer he was really seeking. Upon hearing the question, Gunther's nostrils had flared and his hands had started away from the scarab as if it burned.

This would not be one of Neferata's spies, Mannfred calculated. Hers were far more shrewd, and had been trained enough to avoid such obvious signs of guilt. It must be Arkhan, he thought – surely this was one of Arkhan's. Mannfred was still deciding if it would be more advantageous to provoke a confrontation now, or if he should set a trap for von Grecht, when the sands suddenly came alive.



Mannfred von Carstein looked on, his calm expression transforming into a snarl of rage. Even as he reacted, the vampire's agile mind was seeking answers as to how this could have happened. At once, Mannfred saw how his hounds had fallen prey to these desert monsters. Without scouts, he had led his army straight into a trap. As the sands thrashed and skeletons emerged from the dunes, Mannfred quickly tried to estimate the size of the enemy army he would soon be facing.

All around Mannfred, his heavy cavalry – including the fabled knights from Drakenhof – were being destroyed. Their thick plate was no protection against the gaze of the cursed sand snakes. One black-helmed knight, who had fought for the von Carsteins since the first of Sylvania's wars with the Empire, was turned to a statue of sand before Mannfred's eyes. The army struggled to reform out of marching columns, and it was impossible for the tangled troops to provide support to those formations being mauled by the tomb scorpions. All the while, the Nehekharan army rose to the surface and moved closer.



Mannfred could bear it no longer. Drawing his blade and spurring his mount, he rode straight at the nearest foe. In his wrath, the vampire lord was once more revealed as one of the mightiest of his kind. He dispatched a serpent contruct before drawing upon the abundant winds of magic to raise back scores of skeletons. By his swift commands, Mannfred hastily reorganised half of his force, spreading them out into formations, ready to face the army emerging from the desert.

None too soon had Mannfred set the defensive line, for King Behedesh and his tomb guard closed quickly. Their ordered echelons of troops were still covered with a layer of grit when they struck the army of Sylvania. Had Mannfred delayed but a moment, the initial charge would have swept through his army's marching column, scattering every regiment to end the battle before it had even started.

Mannfred's wrong-footed army was still in desperate straits. To its flanks and rear, a disjointed battle still raged against the last of the tomb scorpions. To their front, Mannfred's hasty lines were holding, but only just. And then the ushabti struck.

They came from Zandri's Temple of Usirian and none could stand before them. The animated monuments clove through bone, shield and armour, wading into the thickest of the melee. The jackal-headed statues shrugged off sword blows and spear thrusts to deliver wide arcing swings, destroying many foes at a time. In their wake followed Necrotect Aldrhamar, his rhythmic chants instilling the war statues with an arcane resilience, regrowing stone anew.

Two of Mannfred's lieutenants sought to preserve the army of Sylvania. Helmut von Carstein destroyed the last of the pincer creatures that had caused so much disruption, while von Grecht used his necromantic skills to raise back entire regiments, their broken bones reforming to continue the battle. Again and again he magically reconstructed skeletons only to have them battered down by the towering ushabti. The third of Mannfred's vampiric minions was overcome with the red fury.

Gorgivich Krakvald might have better served his master by helping to restore order to the battle lines, or by countering the unstoppable ushabti. Instead, blind to everything else around him, Krakvald led his Knights of the Red Death straight forward. These were Blood Knights, the pinnacle of heavy cavalry. Their plate armour was impervious to their foes' weapons, and with their own tall lances lowered, the Blood Knights crashed through rank after rank of enemy regiments.

With the ease of a blade drawing a line in the sand, Krakvald and his Blood Knights clove a path straight through King Behedesh's army. As the vampire wheeled his unit about to begin the slaughter anew, they saw a lone figure awaiting them in the dunes. It was Hapusneb, most ancient of Behedesh's liche priests, Hierophant of Zandri. From a dusty scroll he chanted, and his curse was answered. The sand beneath the

Blood Knights boiled, coming alive with the crawling creatures of the desert: gnawing Khepra beetles and stinging Numak scorpions scuttled upwards in a black wave. Tiny enough to force their carapaces between joints or chinks in their armour, the swarms covered the Blood Knights. It was soon over, an ignominious end for the peak of martial prowess from the north.

For hours the fighting raged, a non-stop onslaught with victory or defeat hanging in the balance. King Behedesh maintained the advantage, but his army could not deliver a decisive blow. By this point, the fighting had formed into an enormous, sweeping curve, with the king's regiments on the far side of the arc, enveloping the army of Sylvania. It was the magic of the vampires that kept their own tenuous line from breaking, for they were able to raise back casualties more quickly than their foes, constantly replenishing their losses.

In such a battle, however, there could be only one ultimate outcome. The strain upon the vampires was too great, their every spell staved off collapse for moments at best. For every part of the battered battle line that reformed, another crumbled. Stretched to the brink of his considerable abilities, Mannfred himself forestalled defeat for hours. With a speed and fury unmatched upon the battlefield, he seemed to be everywhere at once. It was he who finally felled the ushabti, he who smote back each potential breakthrough and he who sent jets of death magic to wither the oncoming assaults. Despite this, King Behedesh and his army slowly crushed the unlife from the vampire's army.

Mannfred was nothing if not cunning. Although it galled him to do so, he admitted defeat and formulated a plan of escape. It was better, he reasoned, to do so now before his line failed entirely. With a last spell that sent howling winds of death sweeping across the legionnaires, he extracted himself, Helmut, and the few units he held in his meagre reserve. His last manoeuvres had left his remaining force isolated, and his least-trusted lieutenant, von Grecht, deep within the collapsing pocket of fighting.

It was Mannfred's plan for those he left behind to tie up his foe for some time, allowing his remaining army to escape. This worked in part; for they had force-marched for several hours before Helmut noticed ripples trailing in the sand trailing behind them. Thus began a deadly hunt.

With the rich flow of death magic above them, it was easy for the vampires to keep their force invigorated and moving at maximum pace. Several times they stopped to fight rearguard actions against the forces that picked up their trail. Twice Mannfred shook loose of his trackers, at one time taking shelter from a sandstorm in a cluster of ruins, and then by doubling back in a different direction. Yet always some scavenger bird, mounted patrol, or undersand stalker found them. Mannfred kept on the move, for his troops were tireless and each time they were located, he knew King Behedesh and his army would not be long in following.

Harried, Mannfred at last came to the flood plain of the Great Mortis River. Thinking to follow this northward out of the Land of the Dead, Mannfred knew that he could risk crossing it should the pursuit close too quickly. These were his thoughts as he drew close enough to look upon that mighty water course. He was not expecting to see what was arrayed before him.

Beneath the heavy black clouds, Mannfred could not see the other side of the river – but he could see the fleet of wooden warbarges. The flat-bottomed Nehekharan warships were already grounding themselves on the nearby shore, disgorging their troops in a rising clatter of bone and bronze.

'I don't think von Grecht made it,' said Helmut.

Mannfred did not detect any hint of sarcasm or accusation in the statement and so replied accordingly. 'No, I tried to reach him in the melee, but he was too surrounded to withdraw. There is still hope he will win free, although I admit it does not seem likely.'

They were riding ahead of the main column of rank and file, looking for something – anything – in the barren Nehekharan desert.

'My lord,' broached Helmut, 'I assume von Grecht was positioned so deeply within our lines because you believed he was informing on you?'

Despite their less than favourable circumstances and his ongoing bad temper, Mannfred smiled. It was not a friendly gesture.

It was well done, Mannfred reflected. In the current situation, there was no denying that the lesser vampire was a necessary element to the survival of his meagre force. But, by confiding something of what he knew regarding his former comrade, he not only demonstrated a greater level of cunning than Mannfred had suspected him capable of, but was extending what was at once an offering of trust and a politely couched warning that he would not be dealt with so easily.

'I underestimated you, Helmut von Carstein. It will not happen again. Perhaps, given our bloodline, I ought to have known – but we have fostered our share of dullards as well. Now tell me what you know or suspect,' said the elder von Carstein. 'In exchange, I will reveal to you the secrets of the tomb kings.'











Sailing along the north coast of Araby came a vast armada. It was a ramshackle conglomeration of ships from nearly every era of every sea-faring nation in the world. Algae and rot had set deeply within both ships and crew alike, but for all that the fleet sailed at great speed. Fell winds drove them and they sailed beneath skies of black.

This was the fleet of Luthor Harkon, Pirate King of the Vampire Coast.

Answering Nagash's summons, Harkon was bringing his zombie-laden holds to the Land of the Dead. The vampire paced the deck of his ship, the *Black Coffin*, checking the sails. The same wind that blew the ominous cloud inwards towards Nehekhara was taking his fleet straight to where he wanted to go, into the Mortis Delta. It was not far now. In fact, it was so close that he was taking a great chance by not cutting loose the transports. If enemy vessels attacked now, they were much too vulnerable.

Unable to help himself, Harkon did not give the order, but instead, strode to the prow, peering into the murky darkness ahead for some sign of the foe, a glint of sail, or the sound of great banks of oars churning. The entire warfleet of Nehekhara was most likely assembled somewhere between his current location and his destination. It would be foolish to be caught in open waters with his fully loaded transports.

Harkon, feeling he had risked enough, gave the order. Knarrs, trade-cogs, and heavy merchantmen turned for shore. Likewise, all the warships that hauled barges serving as transports turned. They would build up momentum before cutting loose the hulks behind them, tacking quickly into the wind before they too grounded themselves upon the shallows. At one point, they were so close to shore that he could hear the rolling breakers and see the dim outline of ruins standing upright on the highpoints of the rocky coast.

As the *Black Coffin* headed out to deeper waters, Harkon looked back to watch a full third of his fleet smash to timbers upon the jagged reefs. Here and there, a few ships navigated deeper channels before grinding ashore. Harkon was sure that one of those would be the *Desolation*, the rotten ship of his second in command, Captain Drekla. Already Harkon could see thin grey lines shambling out of the water to form up on the banks.

The seed was planted, Harkon thought, now it was time to let it grow. The Pirate King gave the order to stay sails, for he wanted to sail up the delta upon the high tide. With little else to do, he resumed his pacing on deck.

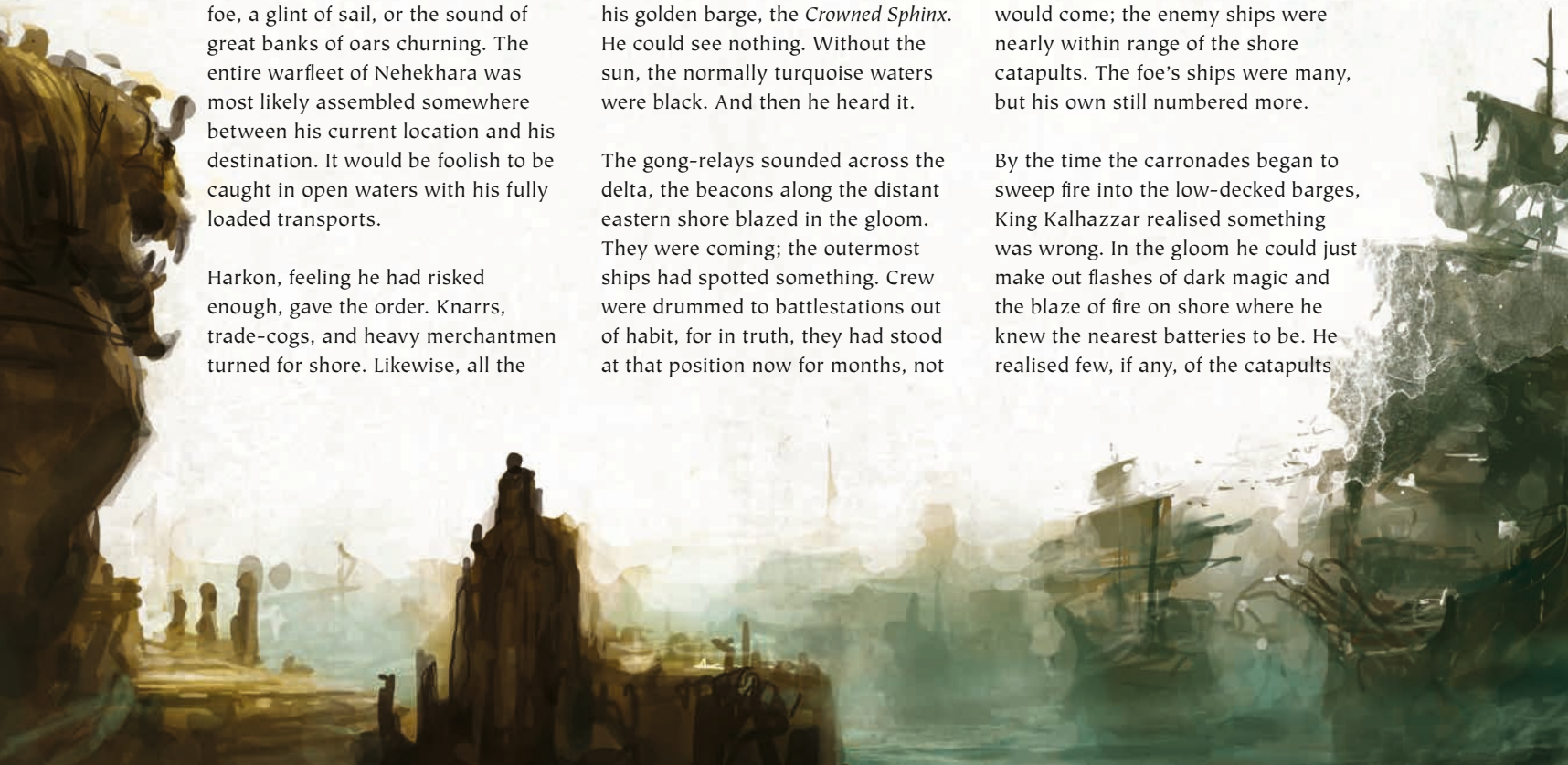
Only miles away, King Kalhazzar looked out from the topmost deck of his golden barge, the *Crowned Sphinx*. He could see nothing. Without the sun, the normally turquoise waters were black. And then he heard it.

The gong-relays sounded across the delta, the beacons along the distant eastern shore blazed in the gloom. They were coming; the outermost ships had spotted something. Crew were drummed to battlestations out of habit, for in truth, they had stood at that position now for months, not moving save for the roll of the tide. The barges, galleys and longboats hoisted anchors and dipped oars, awaiting King Kalhazzar's signal. Decks of archers nocked arrows and held their bows ready. He would draw the foe in, allowing the shore batteries to loose devastating volleys, before he ordered ramming speed.

Harkon opened hostilities by firing *Queen Bess*, the hell-hammer cannon that took up most of the *Black Coffin's* middle deck. It spoke in tongues of fire, its roar heard all the way to the city of Zandri. Its tremendous shot screamed across the waters before hitting the *Claw of Usirian*, splintering bone and sending petrified timbers spinning hundreds of feet into the air. The great warbarge sank in moments, taking hundreds of warriors and crew to the bottom.

When the great cannon spoke next, it was accompanied by others up and down the approaching line, for the wind had brought more of the black-sailed ships closer so that lesser ordnance might join the chorus. Stoically the Khemrian fleet weathered the hail of shot, unflinching as geysers of spray erupted in the water around them, or debris whirled across their deck. King Kalhazzar knew his time would come; the enemy ships were nearly within range of the shore catapults. The foe's ships were many, but his own still numbered more.

By the time the carronades began to sweep fire into the low-decked barges, King Kalhazzar realised something was wrong. In the gloom he could just make out flashes of dark magic and the blaze of fire on shore where he knew the nearest batteries to be. He realised few, if any, of the catapults



would be firing. Drawing forth his glittering khopesh, the king ordered ramming speed.

Luthor Harkon saw the warbarges, indeed, they were so close he could hear them coming, for sound travelled well across the water. His supernatural senses could pick out that the steady *tom-tom* of the drums had increased, and the rhythmic creaking of the oars was accompanied, strangely, by chants and grunts – an odd tradition to maintain, he thought. It was almost time to unleash his secret weapon.

It had taken decades to procure and had cost Harkon many zombies. Some dozen ships in his fleet carried them. Out from storage in barrels of salt water came the enormous bladders, slimy things filled with liquid carefully extracted from inside the enormous reptiles that voyagers to Lustria called salamanders. It need only to be squeezed into the air to catch flame.

Working in teams of two and three, zombies untied the cumbersome bladders and lurched into position. The weapons' short range was not an issue, for the low-silhouetted warbarges were swiftly making headway across the water towards Harkon's front line of sail. Gouts of flame belched forth just as the first wave of barges sent their rams crashing into the rotting timbers of Harkon's vanguard.

Blazing ships lit the darkness across the Mortis Delta. Some of Harkon's own craft were set alight as zombies misfired, or burning warbarges used their rams to impale the larger men-o'-war. One advantage of the rotten, soggy timbers was the fact that they made poor fuel for the flame, and thus burned slowly, but they tended to split catastrophically when rammed.

The battle was in full swing, with Harkon's second line of ships turning to deliver broadsides into the foe, when some Nehekharan warbarges streaked ahead to inflict crippling damage with their rams. Grappling hooks lashed ships together and fierce boarding actions were fought with sword, spear and club. The waters were aswarm with mortis sharks, and Harkon watched a rotting leviathan rise out of the waves to consume a small craft whole before submerging again. With targets on either side now, the *Black Coffin* opened up with a rolling bombardment, while carronades swept opposing decks clear with grapeshot.

Never before had such a naval battle taken place. Golden-plated warbarges rammed high-decked cogs, and skeletal crews duelled while liquid fire spread all around them. Longboats from Norsca lashed themselves to speedy kebentiu. Fell bats swooped low to attack crew with scything claws, while banshees skimmed over the waves or glided through decks, their wailing screeches splitting skulls. At the bottom of the Mortis Delta, zombies from Lustria continued to grab and grasp at their foes until they sank too deeply beneath the thick sediment.

The battle raged for two full days, illuminated only by burning ships and the ethereal glow of spectres. Not until the last warbarge was sunk, did the fighting stop. Harkon's fleet, although but a fraction of its former rotten glory, was victorious. The Battle of Mortis Delta was won.

Captain Drekla sat across from Luthor Harkon, awaiting his orders. He had been summoned to the captain's quarters aboard the *Black Coffin*. There, behind an ornate bureau carved from Lustrian darkwood, the vampire reclined upon a plushly cushioned chair of an eclectic fashion.

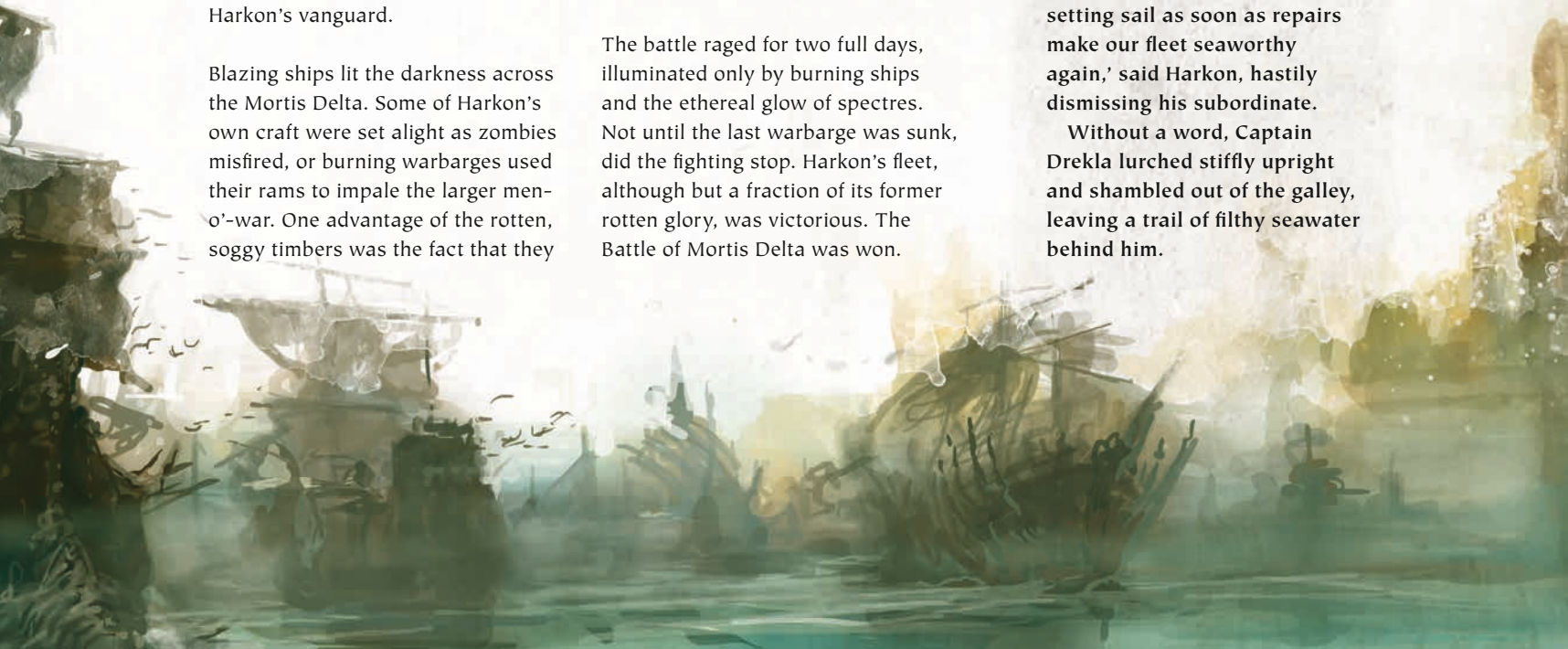
'Excellent work silencing the shore batteries,' offered Harkon, to open the conversation. The vampire waited a long time for a reply that never came. Eventually, he continued.

'As a token of my appreciation, I want you to have this,' said Harkon, as he slid a sun-blanched skull across the desk. 'It was King Kalhazzar. It only stopped talking about an hour ago.'

His expression unchanging, Captain Drekla, the Silver Hook of Sartosa, reached out his briny, barnacle encrusted hands to clumsily grasp the skull. Another long silence filled the room. Luthor Harkon's shifting eyes narrowed as he noticed that his captain was still soaking wet, a dank puddle pooling beneath his chair.

'Well, best patch up the transports we've seized. Fix them as best you can. We'll be setting sail as soon as repairs make our fleet seaworthy again,' said Harkon, hastily dismissing his subordinate.

Without a word, Captain Drekla lurched stiffly upright and shambled out of the galley, leaving a trail of filthy seawater behind him.





Mannfred von Carstein left his remaining troops at the base of the rocky hill while he climbed to its ruin-crowned summit. He did not know, nor would he have appreciated, that the site had once been a Temple of Ualatp, vulture-god of scavengers, merciless patron to those lost in the desert. What he did recognise, was that the hill's rocky slopes, carven steps and toppled pillars would make a defensible position, better than he had expected to find.

There, amidst sand-strewn ruins, Mannfred stretched out his mind, searching for materials to work with. The aura of death was strong here, and the hillside had many skeletons he could raise to augment his battered army. Better still, Mannfred sensed the presence of restless spirits nearby. With the abundant flow of death magic, and his own iron will, Mannfred began the rituals that would bind them to his service. He knew there was not much time before the armies of his foes arrived.

From the east, King Behedesh and the legions of Zandri were fast approaching. The tomb king had already sent forth his cavalry, and these patrolled ceaselessly in a wide perimeter around the base of the hill. Other creatures lurked beneath the sand, should the vampire attempt to break free. King Behedesh had his quarry penned in, and it was his intent to present Settra with the vampire's head. This task was going to be more difficult than anticipated, however, as the high priest Hapusneb had reported another enemy army was disembarking at nearby Pharoakh's Landing. If the foe had sailed down the Mortis River, this boded ill, for the city was Behedesh's own domain.

The king seethed with fury at the very thought. If the invaders had ransacked Zandri or harmed its necropolis, then they would pay – living or undead, he would make them suffer.

The armada that sat at anchor across the River Mortis was that of Luthor Harkon. In the end, it had taken his minions over two weeks of non-stop labour to dredge out the ships that were salvageable after the Battle of the Mortis Delta. Hauling up the wrecks had entailed a great deal of further fighting. Enemy warriors from sunken ships proved a continual hazard. Some bobbed up to the surface clinging to debris, while others eventually navigated the thick layers of silt on the delta's bottom to emerge on some nearby shoreline. There was no telling when the next mud-covered group of undead castaways would next attack. In between battles, Harkon had been busy directing zombie crews in their repair operations, the crude patches making many ships close to watertight once again.

When Harkon's shambolic fleet finally sailed upstream from the Terrorport of Zandri, it was impressive in its size, if not condition. Even with a few vessels surrendering to ruptured repairs and sinking en route, over one hundred and fifty ships remained sea-worthy. All of these craft sat low in the water, as their hulls, both above and below decks, were packed with the living dead. Most pumped out bilge water as they went, as hasty repairs or general rot gave way, and let in the river. Meandering upstream against the current, it was not a swift fleet.

With pride of place at the centre of the armada sailed Luthor Harkon's flagship, the triple masted man-o'-war, the *Black Coffin*, with its black sails billowing. Harkon willed his fell bats to circle the fleet, alerting him of dangers or opportunities. Several times Harkon ordered anchors dropped so that river forts could be bombarded or troops disembarked to ransack the temples that overlooked the river. It was for no reason other than plunder that Captain Drekla and his waterlogged zombie army had disembarked.

Harkon had spotted the stone landing and its steps carved into the limestone cliffs that led upward to hilltop ruins. Accustomed to looting the overgrown ruins of Lustria, the vampire Pirate King had learned to probe even desolate edifices. He had carried off gold idols and jewel-encrusted relics from the least likely of crumbling ruins. As the landing party mounted the top of the long stair from the landing, Captain Drekla saw what was emerging from out of the deep desert.

King Behedesh could not fathom why his two foes did not merge their forces, or send one around in an attempt to outflank him. Even the greenskins that dared to invade his land had shown more tactical acumen than this. However, the tomb king was swift to attack before such obvious manoeuvres suggested themselves to his opponents. The zombie army had only just formed up when the first waves of arrows began to fall amongst them. King Behedesh's attack up the rocky hill was more problematic. The only routes up, save for scaling the steep rock, were two paths. The southern-facing route was wide enough for ten skeletons abreast to advance up the worn steps. The northern track was steeper, and could only fit half of that number across. Behedesh knew he could not take advantage of his superiority in numbers in such a fight, but he was resolute. If it took a century of relentless attacks to wear down the foe and bring back the vampire's head, then so be it.

The Hawks of the Sea, a legion of one hundred warriors, was first to clank and clatter up the stone stairs. The twisted spectral remains of the Vulture Priests met them. Summoned out of shallow burial ditches by Mannfred and clothed in tattered burial shrouds, the phantom creatures suffered no harm from mortal weapons, blades passing through their incorporeal forms. When they reached out their bony hands however, the chilling grasp of the wraiths could rip the soul from out of victim. By the sheer press of so many warriors, the legionnaires forced the floating wraiths upwards a few stairs, however, it cost them a score of their own number to do so.

The Blackshields, the most famous legion out of Zandri, were sent to hack a way to the top of the northside steps. They were formed into ten regiments, each fifty warriors strong. With interlocked shields, the skeletons advanced in perfect step underneath their ceremonial banner – a black half-circle studded with skulls of gold. They made steady progress, their superior swordwork reaping a toll on the skeletal defenders.

Standing between one of the few remaining arches at the top of the craggy hill Mannfred looked down upon the battle. In the short term, his position was strong, but it would only be a matter of time before the desert kings brought forth war engines capable of bombarding the hilltop, or animated stone statues colossal enough in size to reach up and batter Mannfred's defenders. A number of carrion, the enormous winged scavenger birds, were circling lower and lower over the hill.

Although he had bought himself time to come up with another plan, Mannfred knew he was trapped. It was at that moment the vampire lord heard a sound that he had not expected to hear upon this field of battle, so deep in the Land of the Dead. To the south he could make out the rippling *crack* of a regiment of handguns discharging. Leaving his observation of the battles raging up the stairs, Mannfred went to the western edge of the hilltop and looked over the fleet anchored in the river below. In the gloom he could see only halfway across the Mortis River, but it was enough. The nearest ships were warbarges and war barques, vessels in the style favoured by the people of ancient Nehekhara – but there was no way the motley fleet anchoring

mid-river could belong to a king of that land. From that height, Mannfred could just make out rotting hulks of men-o'-war, cogs and frigates out of the Old World. There was only one being who could claim to be master and commander of such a derelict fleet: Luthor Harkon.

Swallowing his pride, Mannfred projected a summons, calling the creatures of the night. In Sylvania thick clouds of bats would have flown to his call, but here in the desert the creatures that answered Mannfred's beckoning were dried out husks – the shells of bats that fluttered on paper-thin wings. Thousands of years ago, Nagash's Great Ritual had seen to it that every living creature in Nehekhara had withered, rising again in undead form. Puny though they were, the bats would serve to bear Mannfred's message to Harkon.

Captain Drekla had just sent a fell bat of his own flapping back to the *Black Coffin*, for he had to get reinforcements or be forced to retreat. His armed landing party was formed to plunder rather than face the enemy battle lines, and more regiments were required if they were to confront the advancing legionnaires.

For his part, King Behedesh had learned of the size of the invaders' armada, putting him in a dilemma. The only location on the Mortis River where it was possible for ships to disgorge troops was the stone-carved ledge called Pharoak's Landing. The steep stone steps that led up from that site could be easily blockaded if he could drive away the zombie regiments that stood formed there. However, the tomb king could not afford to concentrate his entire force to eradicate that beachhead.

King Behedesh had beaten a vampire-led army in the desert and had chased its remnants across many miles, cornering them atop the ancient Temple of Ualatp. Although he did not know his adversary was Mannfred von Carstein, the king had recognised that the general opposing him was a vampire of great power, a being that radiated an aura of murder and arrogance. It was, most likely, one of Nagash's vile captains. King Settra himself had said that it was not enough to break invading armies, but that it was of utmost importance to hunt down and slay their commanders. Too many times in the past had Nehekhara defeated the armies of Nagash or his captains, only to allow those Dark Lords the opportunity to escape, to wreak further ruin in future. In this instance, King Behedesh had no intention of allowing this to happen. None would avoid suffering his wrath.

King Behedesh sent many legions along with his second in command, King Nemhetum, to pen in the zombies, while he turned his full attention to the hilltop Temple of Ualatp. The assault there had stalled, especially along the southern route. The defenders at that point – a hovering formation of wraiths – were proving impossible to shift. They had thus far destroyed three proud legions out of Zandri, with the ethereal spectres suffering no harm in return. The northern track showed slow promise, with the Blackshields making steady progress, grinding down several Sylvanian regiments.

King Behedesh knew where he was needed. Drawing forth the Blade of Setep, its curved edge a shimmering blue in that gloom, he led his Zandri Eternals up the southern path. Before them the wraiths had just destroyed the last of another skeletal legion, the bones clattering down the stairs. Yet even in their victory, the spirits of those ancient priests of Ualatp knew they now faced a more menacing foe. They recoiled from the blue radiance, and would have fled before King Behedesh's blade, but the will of Mannfred was strong upon them. Reluctantly, the wraiths glided downward to meet the oncoming king and his Eternals.

The icy clutches of the wraiths ripped down several Eternal Guard, but in King Behedesh they met their match. The Blade of Setep was a blurred arc of blue: each stroke clove both tattered cloak and evil spirit. With howls of agony, but also of mournful release, the wraiths were slain, finally released from the corrupting will of the vampire invader. Upwards strode King Behedesh, his mummified warriors keeping pace.

In the temple, Mannfred was like a caged beast. He and his minion Helmut had spent their time reanimating skeletons, working to replace those the Blackshields had battered down. With the loss of the wraith blockade on the southern path, the vampires would soon be hard-pressed on two fronts. Before he was forced to resort to desperate measures, Mannfred observed a great swarm of bats streaking overhead. Some of this flying swarm peeled off to begin an aerial battle with carrion, while others raked the tomb king's forces on the stairs. An enormous bat, whose wings were akin to great, ragged sailcloths, flew over the hill and swooped downwards after some unseen target.

After receiving the messages, Luthor Harkon acted swiftly. Summoning the winged creatures that nested upside down upon the fleet's masts, the *Black Coffin* became the centre of a swirling vortex of bats. Only then did the Pirate King sprout enormous, membranous wings himself, flying upwards at the head of a black cloud of the fluttering vermin.

Luthor Harkon had intended to aid his fellow vampire, but from his new vantage point, he had spied a tempting target. At the base of the hill a lone wizard was reading from a scroll, attempting some conjuration. It was Harkon's belief that the whole of these desert armies would crumble if its master sorcerer was slain, so he swooped and dived toward the figure's location.

Hapusneb, Hierophant of Zandri, was alone and vulnerable in the rear of the Nehekharan army. By the time the liche priest picked out the hurtling bat-form streaking downwards from the black clouds it was too late. Luthor Harkon swept by, his twin blades delivering a decapitating scissor-stroke. The scarabs that Hapusneb summoned from below the sands were of no aid to their ancient master, serving only to drag his body beneath the sands.

To Harkon's bitter disappointment, King Behedesh's army still fought on, but without their hierophant, they lost the ability to replenish their losses, succumbing at last to eternity. King Behedesh and his Zandri Eternals hacked apart every regiment that opposed them on the stairs, but after countless combats, their impetus was flagging. Beams of dark magic conjured by the vampires reaped a great toll. But King Behedesh would not be denied. Although the last of his Eternals fell, the tomb king at last strode up the last stone stair, stepping atop the rocky summit.

There, overlooking the Mortis River, King Behedesh pitted his Blade of Setep against Mannfred von Carstein. It was inexorable stamina against unnatural speed, radiant king of old versus lord of the night. Time and again the combatants struck, circled, and then struck again. The vampire landed more blows, one strike sending King Behedesh's golden helm clattering down the hilltop, but none had yet been telling. Though the King of Zandri landed but a single blow, his sword tore through his foe's armour and glanced off the vampire's ribs. Undead flesh sizzled where the blue radiance of the blade touched it.

It will never be known if this could have been the duel's turning point, for suddenly King Behedesh jerked forward, dropping his weapon and clutching at the swordpoint that burst through his chest. Behind him, Helmut von Carstein gave a cruel twist of his weapon before wrenching it back. Behedesh dropped. And so, one of the last tomb kings of Zandri lay there on the barren rock, twitching his final death-throes to the bitter end.

Before the gloating Helmut could say a word, King Behedesh's body gave a final spasm as it erupted into a swarm of Khepra beetles that swarmed over the vampire, consuming him utterly.





Neferata stood alone in a world of howling spirits, a land of dust and ruin.

Once, Lahmia had been the jewel of Nehekhara, an exquisite wonder to the senses. Known as the City of the Dawn, Lahmia was famous for its resplendent white walls, its lush gardens and perfumed air – a mix of lotus flower and exotic spices from the East, stirred by the gentle sea breeze. Now it was a land of desolation – the Cursed City whose ruins were haunted by the damned.

For centuries after her flight from Lahmia, Neferata had dwelt on revenge. That had passed. She had journeyed far into the world and covered herself with riches. But in her cold, unbeating heart she knew that it was a masquerade. She knew that, in a way, she was still running – fleeing from old memories of a time that could no longer be, of a land that no longer was. The Silver Pinnacle, her mountaintop eyrie, had been her small way of recreating a new Lahmia – a nest of luxury and refinement. Nagash's return had ended that.

Now Neferata had returned to Lahmia – not to reclaim her lost lands, but to bury them.

Neferata's army had quickly destroyed the stone sentries that stood guard outside the Cursed City, and it had been child's play for a sorceress of Neferata's abilities to break through the array of wards that surrounded the ruins. She had expected the hieroglyphic seals and deadly curses intended to keep out the vampiric, but she had been amused to discover that half of the magical sigils were designed to keep creatures in. It seemed the slain spirits of those from her original court did not rest easy.

In Lybaras, High Queen Khalida was restless. The messengers had stopped arriving and a queue of emissaries from Mahrak and Quatar had stood immobile in her empty throne room for weeks now, awaiting the High Queen's presence. Yet when Nalharad, the Master of Awakenings for the city of Lybaras, approached the queen's chamber, the Guardians of the Alabaster Tower uncrossed their ornate halberds and allowed the liche priest to pass unchallenged.

'My queen,' said Nalharad, bowing on one knee and stooping his head so that it almost touched the dust coating the floor. 'I bring you the awaited word. The seals around Lahmia have been broken.'

Khalida, tall and graceful, acknowledged the ancient priest with a nod. 'Blessed be the Asp Goddess,' intoned Khalida, as she wove the symbol of Asaph's blessing. 'This day was prophesied; for this I was awoken. Send for Hassep, we march within the hour.'

As Nalharad bowed himself out of the chamber, doors were pulled shut behind him. Khalida allowed herself what would have been a smile behind her death mask, had her flesh not wasted away over the ages. She had waited long to hear those words.

It could have been any vampire who broke the wards which surrounded Lahmia, but Khalida knew the identity of the intruder. At long last, Neferata, Eternal Queen of Lahmia, the First of the Damned – her cousin – had come home.

It was Neferata who had slain Khalida. In the many millennia that had passed since those times of strife, Khalida had dreamed of a thousand deaths she could inflict upon the vampire. The warrior-queen called for her ceremonial armour. She was marching on Lahmia, and her righteous fury would burn within her every step of the way.

Every warrior and every statue of Lybaras had been summoned. Beneath black skies they marched forth, led by High Queen Khalida. As the last legion passed beneath the pylon arches, the city's bronze gates swung closed with a clang of finality that echoed across the sands. They left behind an empty city, its temples and necropolis left unguarded, save only for the wards and curses of the priests.

Khalida led the great procession out of the Lybaras. The Warrior-Queen did not walk to battle, but instead rode upon a gold bedecked ceremonial sky barge. It glided regally above the sands and was symbolic of her victories, for she had taken the trophy from the wars with the lizard creatures of the Southlands. At her side was the Herald of Lybaras, Prince Nefhotep, who bore aloft the sacred totem of their city. Behind Khalida came her famous archer legions, each regiment stepping in unison, marching beneath an icon in the image of the sacred asp. In the centre were hawk-headed statues – the Legion of Phakth, Raptor God of the sky and bringer of swift justice. They had left their guard post in front of the Temple of Phakth, for Khalida had invoked the oaths of unforgivable wrongs that called the ancient statues to battle. Taller still were the necropolis knights – the slithering motion of their enormous necroserpents made them look like as if they were riding upon high seas.

Prince Settuneb, resplendent in his war-carriage carved from ivory, led the chariot phalanxes. Following the chariots, his royal personage high enough to avoid the dust cloud they churned up, King Hassep rode a mighty warsphinx of blackest marble. Queen Khalida had chosen Hassep as her Lord of War, her foremost general and her right hand in battle. This was a great honour bestowed by the most beloved of Lybaras' many rulers, but it was honour surely due, for both King Hassep and Prince Settuneb were of the fabled first dynasty – rulers who

had in life served the indomitable Settra, King of Kings. Behind King Hassep came legion after legion of perfectly ordered warriors, regiments of spear and sword, all bearing the faded colours of mighty Lybaras upon their shields.

Bitter had been the words of that last war council between Queen Khalida and her Lord of War. Hassep had argued that the army should follow King Settra's orders, to march in force to Mahrak. There, they would bar passage through the Valley of Kings or stand ready to take that route themselves should the impending invasion press close to Quatar. To deny Settra was to tempt fate, cautioned the eldest of kings in Lybaras. Khalida, unwilling at first to antagonise her general, heard him out and respectfully declined his suggestion. At Hassep's further questioning, Queen Khalida lost her temper – her rage glowering, visible even though partially covered by her death mask. She made it clear: her will was not to be challenged.

The army that issued forth out of Lybaras was not alone, however.

High King Tharruk, the ultimate ruler of Mahrak, had left that city upon hearing of Queen Khalida's exodus. Fixated as she was on her own vengeance, Khalida had forgotten that the Lahmian scourge had engendered many other grudges beyond her own. King Tharruk too had an old score to settle, as did no less than three of the princes of Mahrak. After losing his line to the blood-drinking horrors of the Lahmian Court, King Tharruk had marched to help raze Lahmia. Seeing the Cursed City burn had been a start, but it was diminished of satisfaction when he learned of Neferata's escape. Tharruk had vowed one day to avenge his family, to bring back Neferata's head to Mahrak.

Unlike Khalida, however, King Tharruk did not have the full support of his kingdom. Only a third of the necropolis' warriors marched with him. Another third of that city's fighting strength had gone west to support Khemri and the last of the awoken of Mahrak were lesser dynasties: petty kings seemingly content to stand guard. The Mortuary Cult of Mahrak had likewise remained, save only for the liche priest Khuftah. Haptmose, Hierophant of Mahrak, had forbidden Khuftah to leave, but the priest had always favoured his king and felt duty-bound to serve him. It was clear to Tharruk that there would be a reckoning upon his return to the city, but his resolve was absolute.

Although many miles of desert separated them, Neferata, the Eternal Queen, saw all in her scrying pool of blood. She marked the progress and multitudes of the armies arrayed against her before languidly stirring the sanguine fluid, the last images of armies marching through the desert swirling away. She smiled mirthlessly before licking her fingernails clean.

In their last conversation before Neferata had set off from Nagashizzar, this was just as Arkhan had said it would be. The ancient liche priest had called her the perfect bait and she was forced to agree. Soon her mere presence in the Land of the Dead would see age-old rivals fighting amongst themselves in their eagerness to rush into a trap.

Neferata called to her handmaidens, beckoning them closer. There were only a few more hours of dalliance before preparations had to be made.



LEGIONS OF LYBARAS

The armies of Lybaras were renowned for their excellent archers. When they marched to war, they were always accompanied by many legions of bowmen, both mounted and on foot.

KHALIDA

The High Queen of Lybaras was slain long ago by her cousin, Neferata, Queen of Lahmia. As she was beloved of Asaph, the Asp Goddess, Khalida was not infected by the vampiric taint, but allowed to die a natural death. In times of need Khalida would awaken, the power of Asaph infusing her mummified remains. It was said that only when the last vampire was slain would Khalida finally rest in peace. Her herald, Nefhotep, fought on foot beside his High Queen, holding aloft her royal banner.





HASSEP

Many of the tomb kings of Lybaras were destroyed in the War of Bones, never to return. Of those that remained, Hassep was the most powerful. He ruled over Lybaras as part of the 1st Dynasty. Having served under the mighty Settra in life, he now did so in death. A warlord of great renown, Queen Khalida used him as her foremost commander, naming him Lord of Armies. King Hassep rode to war atop a warsphinx.

LEGIONS OF THE ASP

There were four regiments in the Legions of the Asp – Sable, Pitted, Crimson and Sand. Each of the formations was known by their distinctive snake banner – totems that they had borne to victory time and again. In death, as in life, the famed archer legions of Queen Khalida had a rightful reputation for deadly accuracy.





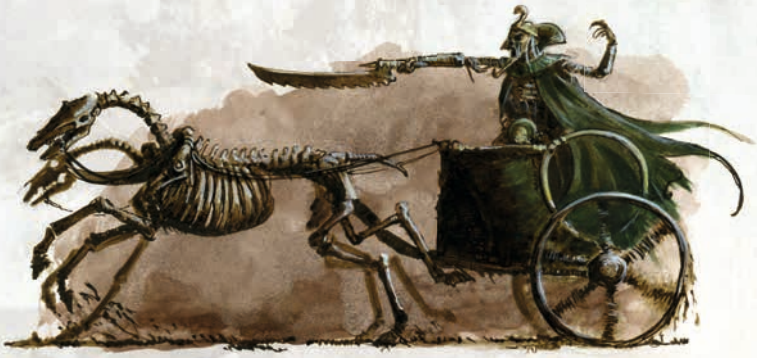
LEGION OF PHAKTH

These ushabti were guardians of the Temple of Phakth – the Hawk God of the sky and bringer of swift justice. They were equipped with great bows from which they fired spear-sized arrows.

KNIGHTS OF ASAPH'S TEMPLE

Nine was the sacred number of Asaph, the Ruler of the Snakes, goddess of vengeance and magic – and nine was the number of knights that guarded her temple. Through the ages, Queen Khalida had learned to use her knights to perfection, often having them target the enemy that most threatened her army's massed ranks of archers.





SETTUNEB'S OWN

King Hassep's son, Prince Settuneb, led this unit from atop a chariot made of purest ivory, carved from the tusks of an enormous sea beast slain by the Lybaras navy. No fewer than ten chariots made up the hand-picked unit, which first gained fame when Settra had called for the Great Games to commemorate the marriage of his sixth son. On that day, it was Prince Settuneb and his own legion of chariots that won the races. Since then, the formation had ridden into hundreds of battles, earning their lord many great victories.



COBRA LEGION

The dreaded banner of the hooded serpent was feared upon the many desert battlefields of Nehekhara with good reason. The Cobra Legion of Lybaras was known for the ability to darken the skies with a hail of arrows, raining death upon any foes that defied them.



GUARDIANS OF THE ALABASTER TOWER

The Alabaster Tower of Lybaras was that city's tallest structure and it housed over four thousand years' worth of amassed treasures. Its guards, who bore a white tower upon their gold-rimmed shields, were known to be steadfast in life, and they showed equal resolve in death – guarding their city's relics for an eternity.

KING THARRUK'S ARMY OF MAHRAK

King Tharruk marched out of Mahrak to aid High Queen Khalida, though he commanded but a fraction of that city's standing militia. This was because Haptmose, Hierophant of Mahrak, had betrayed his king, and secretly promised his support to Nagash.

KING THARRUK

Long ago, King Tharruk's family travelled to Lahmia but never returned. During the besiegement and ultimate destruction of the Cursed City, King Tharruk despaired to find his beloved daughters not dead, but worse. They had been seduced into the royal court, becoming handmaidens to the Queen of Vampires, Neferata. Forced to kill his own kin, Tharruk vowed eternal vengeance. King Tharruk rode to war atop his war chariot and bore the Flail of Mahrak.





KHUFTAH

Few of the Mortuary Cult were left in Mahrak, and of them, only Khuftah joined King Tharruk's army. Bitter was their parting, for he felt betrayed by Haptmose, the Hierophant of Mahrak. And he was, for Haptmose had abandoned faith in his king, gravitating instead towards the promise of Nagash.

RAKPHLOTOK

Like many of his kind throughout the ages, Prince Rakphlotok had felt the bitter sting of Neferata's treachery. Rakphlotok's betrothed was seduced by the vampires of the Lahmian court, choosing an eternal undeath over a life with her husband to be. Upon his return to the world, Rakphlotok was still driven by the same outrage and grief inflicted upon him by the intrigues of the Queen of Mysteries.





JACKAL SQUADRONS OF MAHRAK

The Jackal Squadrons fought in the original razing of Lahmia and the hunt for Neferata that took place in the deserts to the west. They were famed for their lightning-quick assaults and their merciless pursuit of any fleeing enemy. They were led by the Prince Tuten.



MAHRAK LONGSPEARS

In all of the great city of Mahrak, no other regiment of cavalry had come close to winning half of the glory earned by the Mahrak Longspears. From out of the thick clouds of dust kicked up by their skeletal steeds, the Longspears rode – swift to the attack. Nahomahn, the Master of the Horse, led the formation, and had long ago learned the knack of outflanking enemy infantry and breaking them with a single swift charge.



BRIGHT SHIELDS

Known by their distinctive brightly coloured shields and black spear shafts, the Bright Shields of Mahrak had carved out a place in history through their many stubborn defensive stands. They were led by Prince Hamtapek, a noble whose brother was slain long ago by Neferata. Since that time, he had longed for revenge, and would halt at nothing to slay the vampiress.



MAHRAK GUARD

Entombed in the same pyramid as King Tharruk, these warriors had loyally served their headstrong lord since the time of Alcadizaar the Conqueror. They fought with halberds and shields, which bore the half black, half white colours of their city.

THE BATTLE FOR RUINED LAHMIA

The armies of Lybaras and Mahrak passed the boundary obelisks and entered into lands once ruled by Lahmia. The stone markers were now adorned with skull faces and leering images of death. Here, the darkness seemed to hang more thickly. For thousands of years few had passed near the tainted ruins of Lahmia, and fewer still returned from their journey. It was an evil place, where the spirits of the damned still prowled.

Khalida surveyed the broken line of rubble. Once, it had been the high white wall that encircled Lahmia, but had now been torn down to its foundations. No longer elegant and proud, it was naught but a ragged, fire-blackened ring. Beyond that outer curtain was an entire wasteland of ruined city. Sandstorms and long years of neglect ought to have buried the low-lying debris, covered it over in the sediment of eons. Such were the wards upon Lahmia, however, that it was little changed from thousands of years previously when the last of Alcadizaar's armies had marched out following its destruction. To raze the den of vampires, Alcadizaar had gathered a coalition of forces from all the Great Cities, including many from Lybaras and Mahrak. Now, some of those self-same warriors stood once more in the Cursed City. As thorough as their slaughter had been, it had not been enough. This time, Khalida thought, offering silent prayer to the Asp Goddess, Neferata must not escape their wrath.

After a hasty council of war between Queen Khalida, King Hassep and King Tharruk, it was decided to form a line of battle and sweep forward. Whether an army or just a lone vampire resided within the ruins, their scouring advance would miss nothing. Queen Khalida left her palanquin behind, taking her place in the army's centre, amidst her archer legions. King Hassep held her right flank, commanding a wider view from atop his warsphinx, with the warriors of many legions formed around him. To Khalida's left was King Tharruk, regal upon his bejewelled chariot. Flanking him to both sides were his loyal tomb guard, mummified warriors whose bright helms stood out in the gloom. Thus did they advance into the ruins.

In its former days of glory, Lahmia was a sprawling city. Past the intricately wrought gates in the high white walls were wide avenues branching out into vast plazas. Canals and waterways had crisscrossed the roads, servicing the many interspaced gardens within the walls. Enormous colonnaded buildings loomed atop the gently rising hills, and highest of all were the royal palaces, magnificent buildings that overlooked the harbour. Now, all was ruin.

Every building in Lahmia had been levelled, from the vast palaces of the nobles, to the tightly packed mudbrick structures of the poorer quarters. They were now only piled rubble, although a few scattered columns or archways still stood. Through these desolate mounds the streets ran, although the baked clay tiles that once covered the roadways had partially disintegrated, exposing paved stone below. The armies from Lybaras and Mahrak advanced along these wide channels, avoiding the rubble – their feet stirring up dust as they advanced.

They did not have to travel far into the forlorn ruins to find their foe.

From out of the distant blackness came an eerie glow and a terrible wailing. Larger and brighter the lights grew, until their shapes and forms were visible. These were the shades of Lahmia's evil past bound by some will greater than their own. By the time they had glided close enough so that their tattered gowns and flowing tresses could be discerned, it was obvious their beauty had long faded. When they were close enough that their hate-filled faces could be picked out, their piercing screams had the power to disrupt the magic that animated the skeletons, splitting apart their very skulls. The banshees did not advance into combat, however, but drifted tantalisingly near to their foes, screeching their mournful cries. Behind this ethereal onslaught tramped hordes of skeletal warriors – their banners black, their armaments unrecognisible. Yet here and there, upon shield or banner, was etched the symbol of ancient Lahmia, and the regalia of her last queen, Neferata.

Upon sighting those hated symbols a shockwave ran through the legions of Nehekhara. Although they expected to find one that had defiled Lahmia, and had marched out from their cities for the very purpose of confronting her – seeing the banner of Neferata raised once more in the city she had corrupted had an alarming effect. Khalida's hatred flared uncontrollably. How could she dare? With rage in his voice, King Hassep called out for the Vampire Queen, bidding her come forth and receive her due.

The call echoed throughout the ranks of Lybaras and Mahrak until it became a ghostly chant, though it was not carried upon any natural breeze. Thousands of animated spirits from the Underworld lifted up the call, again and again calling out the name of Neferata, the target of their vengeance long-denied.

Regiments from both sides moved down the wide avenues, while the spectral creatures effortlessly floated over the mounds of rubble. Of Neferata there was no sign, nor were any other vampires yet visible. Thus the battle in the ruins began in earnest, with the fight broken down into many separate encounters by the uneven grid of the ruined city.

First to strike were Queen Khalida's archer legions, for they had the means to slay at a distance. Methodically the skeletons grasped and nocked their arrows, pulled hard on their bows, adjusted their aim and let fly. They fired steady volleys, one after another which rained down upon their foe, felling entire rows at a time. Regardless of losses, the hordes came on, often treading upon the fallen. Despite losing rank after rank, the foe gradually closed the distance. Lifting high her staff, Khalida led her legions into battle.

In his wrath, High King Tharruk raced his chariot to meet the foe, leaving his armoured infantry guard behind in the dust. The impact of the tomb king's chariot was like an avalanche crashing through the enemy warriors, the churning wheels crushing the bones of the fallen. Whirling the heavy weights of his flail, Tharruk was a force of destruction, clearing a swathe around him. But what were a dozen dead to a hundred-strong regiment that knew neither fear nor panic? Slowly and surely, the skeleton horde closed about the entrapped Tomb King. Tharruk laid about him, striking left and right to smash through helm and skull alike, but even fuelled by his inexhaustible rage, he could not keep pace against so many. Although King Tharruk's gold scale armour turned most of the spears thrust toward him, it did not stop them all. Both armour and king were rent in many places.

Only the arrival of his tomb guard saved King Tharruk from being overwhelmed. The mummified warriors crashed into their foe and the destruction redoubled. The tomb guard of Mahrak were unnaturally strong and wielded heavy-bladed halberds with a deadly skill. Chopping and hacking, they soon struck down the opposing regiment's standard, taking pains to trample the reviled images underfoot. Onwards they pressed, King Tharruk's hatred driving them forward as they fought their way up the wide avenue.

On Khalida's right flank, Hassep was in the thick of the fighting. The ancient king's warsphinx made the all difference to the deadlocked combat. Seemingly immune to harm, the leonine statue waded forward to crush the opposition, and masses of the foe fell before the beast of black marble. Despite his successes, Hassep kept a wary eye on the tides of battle, his great height allowing him to peer over the ruins. He was ready for the enemy to extend their line to attack his unguarded flank, but the chariot legions led by his son, Prince Settuneb, stood ready to intercept them at the first opportunity.

'The Palace of Blood once stood over there,' said Neferata, wistfully. Few of her assembled handmaidens remained from those days, and she knew that none of them would be able to envision the splendours that once stood upon this site.

She remembered well the graceful aesthetics of that building, the open, colonnaded temple that had let in the breeze, from what was now quite fittingly known as the Bitter Sea. The nights had been best – such blissful excess, when blood ran more freely than wine and the whimpering of innocents echoed through the halls like sweet music.

The distant wailing of some anguished spirit rose to an undulating crescendo and dragged Neferata back from her memories.

'I fear that howling spirit more than Khalida's vengeance,' mocked the Eternal Queen, smiling at her gathered handmaidens.

'Whatever it once was, Lahmia is no more,' said Neferata, her eyes searching. She looked not to the south, where the battle was slowly raging closer, but around the ruin-dotted hill from whence came the last piercing cry.

Neferata moved to a half-standing pillar, tracing her hand over worn hieroglyphics. A grinding sound of stone on stone could be heard, and then the column's base shifted, revealing time worn stairs leading down, into the dark.

'Here, my sisters, is the route of our escape at battle's end,' gestured Neferata with a graceful sweep of her hand. 'It will lead us far from the city, so that we can retreat to the mountains when the time comes for us to depart.'

Knowing she had lingered long enough around the ancient ruins, Neferata moved to break up the gathering. 'Now it is time for us to join the battle so that we may be seen. How anxious my cousin must be! Do you hear her army call my name?' said Neferata, flashing a smile that briefly unveiled her true, bloodthirsty self.

Seeing the worried looks on the faces of the handmaidens that surrounded her, she addressed them. 'Do not concern yourselves, my sisters – this tunnel has proven the salvation of our bloodline once before, and it shall do so again.'

Nervous laughter followed, but Neferata paid no attention. She had taken note which faces had shown genuine concern and which had merely feigned it. To the Eternal Queen, such nuances were as plain as a full moon against the night sky.

'But remember – when their troops set foot in the palace district, we will rendezvous here. I wait for no one,' declared the vampiress, offering a unsettlingly sweet smile that lingered on Lycindia. Neferata already knew that an accident would befall that one, and that she would never make it back to the meeting point in time.

The Battle for Ruined Lahmia was not a single, definitive clash of might, but a running battle consisting of hundreds of small conflicts. Whilst it took nearly two days for the massed legionnaires to surmount one mound of rubble, elsewhere, a weeklong stalemate raged back and forth over an empty canal. Time was difficult to measure with the sun obscured by the roiling black clouds above. However, the passage of time was meaningless, for the undead did not need to eat, rest nor recover from wounds, and so they fought on. Victory or defeat was all that mattered.

The dusty roads were the main avenues of assault, but it was vital to guard flanks against counter-attacks. Time and again the legions of Lybaras and Mahrak pushed forward, only to see their gains turn to losses as ghouls crept out of the rubble to overwhelm lead regiments. At the wide opening that was once the great market – the fabled Plaza of One Thousand Delights – Queen Khalida's archer legions decimated the foe before finishing them off in the press of close combat. After days of struggle to gain a single street, the capture of a half-mile square was a major advantage. Khalida's legions pushed further and further into the Cursed City.

Khalida's right flank was bogged down. They had to fight through the poorer districts of the city, where the road often turned into a narrow, labyrinthine series of trenches through rubble piled chest high. Down those narrow channels a single chariot from Prince Nefhotep's legions would rumble – clearing the way by crunching over a half-dozen foes or more. At last, its momentum spent, the chariot would grind to a halt where it was eventually overwhelmed by zombie hordes. Another chariot was sent in to follow up on that small gain, and another and another. Thus did King Hassep proceed, each new advancement exacting a high toll. Following behind the fighting legionnaires, the liche priests tended to a field of inanimate bones, restoring the fallen by infusing their remains with magic. But their time-honoured practices could not keep pace with the mounting losses.

Something else besides the feuding armies stalked the ruins of ancient Lahmia. Fell spirits haunted the rubble. Sustained by everlasting hatred, they fought neither for Khalida and her allies nor for Neferata and her hordes. Instead, they sought only to feed, seeking out souls – whether banshee or legionnaire they cared not – and consumed them. As they fed, the creatures grew stronger, yet their hunger was never sated.

On the ninth day of fighting, High King Tharruk still swung his flail with righteous anger, pushing hard to extend his advance upon Queen Khalida's left flank. He had been in the thick of the combat since it had begun, and by will and martial fury, he had led his legions to penetrate deepest into the ruins of Lahmia. After his chariot was destroyed, King Tharruk fought on foot, but he still stood strong. This was largely due to the incantations of the army's lone liche priest, Khuftah. Wounded many times over, the tomb king had commanded the attention of Khuftah, who used ancient rites to regrow bone and knit back Tharruk's magically held sinews. The king's supporting troops, however, grew more and more depleted as the battle raged on.

And then the vampires joined the fray.

Amidst the rattle of bones and the ringing of blade on shield, the shrill laughter sounded mocking and out of place. King Tharruk looked up, angry and indignant, to see a bone-frame coven throne pulled crashing into his tomb guard. This was not Neferata, the one he longed to kill, but her foul get nonetheless. From their cushion-bedecked platform, the lithe beauties glowed unnaturally, shining in the gloom. To Tharruk, the graceful beckoning of the trio was an outrageous provocation.

King Tharruk redoubled his onslaught, hoping to bull his way through to the vampires. The king doubted he would make it in time, sure that his own Mahrak Guard would claim the honour of slaying those vile creatures before he could arrive. Yet, to his amazement, the mummified warriors were struck dumb. Some continued to fight, but their martial prowess was so sapped that their clumsy halberd swings struck nothing but air; others dropped their weapons altogether. A few tomb guard even turned upon their comrades and struck them down, bedevilled as they were by the coven's charms. The pallid handmaidens laughed anew – a derisive titter crueller than sword strokes to the ancient king.

Tharruk had almost bludgeoned his way to the coven throne when one of the vampiresses saw the king forcing his way closer. She fixed him with her crimson glowing eyes and a shockwave trembled over the tomb king. For a moment he was overcome – mesmerised by passions of the flesh long forgotten. Tharruk, however, was a mighty King of Nehekhara, and not so easily dominated. Shaking off those distant memories, his will once more his own, he swung his heavy flail, pulping the she-devil. The taunting laughter of the remaining two vampires turned to shrieks of bestial fury as all guise of their seductive beauty vanished.

In their rage, the vampires hurled themselves at their quarry, attempting to duck under King Tharruk's death-dealing flail in order to rake the tomb king with their claws. They did not fight alone. Tharruk's tomb guard fought valiantly at their king's side, though they were badly outnumbered and it was not long before the last of them was stricken down. Alone, but defiant, the king kept fighting long after he was surrounded. Skeleton warriors thrust spears into his body, and a scything stroke from a vampiress split asunder the cobra crown of Mahrak. Yet still the king fought on.

While attempting to come to his king's aid, the liche priest Khuftah met his own end, dragged down and slain by a mindless horde. Defiant to the end, King Tharruk kept fighting, his last blow his finest – for all three of his flail's weighted orbs ploughed into the face of the second vampiress, spattering her brains across a wide arc. This mighty swing left the tomb king defenceless, and the last vampire did not miss the opportunity, splitting open his ribcage and severing his spine. Even upon his own destruction, the great king was not yet done. His ultimate vengeance unfulfilled, Tharruk's dying curse utterly destroyed the handmaiden who had struck the last blow, her body burning black before turning to dust.

In the centre, Queen Khalida vented her frustrations through her snake-headed staff. Luminescent green venom shot forth, engulfing the oncoming ghouls before they could reach the archer legions. She had led her forces through the fighting and now stood on a wide avenue that led through the rubble and began to climb the slight rise. In the distance she could now see the beginnings of the palace district, where the ancient temples and royal villas had once stood. She was beginning to despair of her hopes of vengeance, when she caught sight of quicksilver movements and the flash of russet tresses at the fore of the enemy troops forming up in the distance. It was, unmistakably, a vampiress. Not Neferata, but surely one who had received her blood kiss.

The lambent green light of her staff reflected in her death mask, the Queen of Lybaras began driving her legions forward, eager to position them in range to unleash their deadly volleys. Long had she slumbered on her reliquary throne within the Temple of the Blessed Asp; long had she dreamt of her revenge. Khalida would work her way up through every cursed handmaiden until, at last, she reached their brood matriarch: the Queen of Vampires.

Firing as they advanced, Khalida's Legions of the Asp rained doom upon the skeletal horde as the two regiments closed. Just before the battle lines met, Khalida called out a challenge, daring the vampiress to pit her blade against the Venom Staff. With a mocking smile that bared her fangs, the handmaiden of Neferata slunk away – dodging through the ranks of her skeleton warriors as she sent them forward.

Unfortunately for the vampire, Khalida was prepared for just such a manoeuvre, and sent her necropolis knights to bar the fleeing vampire's path. Unable to hack her way quickly enough through the elite necroserpent riders, it was only a matter of time before the vampiress was forced to face Khalida. For a moment, the two circled each other slowly – both combatants getting the measure their opponent.

Both fighters moved on the balls of their feet, ready to shift in any direction, as able to defend as to lash out on the attack. Once, twice, three times the vampiress darted forward with a stabbing thrust, trusting to her preternatural speed. Yet each time Khalida moved with a graceful ease, writhing just enough so the blade missed by inches.

The vampire was fast; fast enough to have slain Khalida when she was still a creature of flesh and blood. But the Queen of Lybaras was no longer mortal, and more than a match for her foe.

Quicker than a striking serpent, Khalida lashed out. In a blur, her snake staff coiled around the vampiress' arm, forcing her blade to drop clattering into the dust. Then Khalida delivered a swift blow, her bone-claw gauntlet punching clean through the creature's midriff, lifting the vampiress off the ground so that she hung transfixed.

Before she died, the handmaiden told Khalida all that she wished to know.





After much fighting, King Hassep and Prince Settuneb had pushed their way out of the narrow pathways of the slum quarters. Once more, they could deploy their legions into the wide phalanxes that had brought so many victories before. The wide avenues allowed greater manoeuvrability for their chariots and cavalry, and several times they were able to catch their foes in the flank by sending their swifter elements down undefended side roads.

A wary and judicious warlord, King Hassep was relentless, but not reckless. He settled for grinding victories, rather than taking unwarranted risks. His methodical approach won each section of ruin, one at a time. After the gradual eradication of enemy forces in what had been the Plaza of the Dawn – King Hassep divided his forces equally and sent them up the three lanes through the rubble.

Neferata witnessed the steady dissolution of her forces as she scryed in the bloodpool. The plan was for her army to draw out the forces of Lybaras and Mahrak and to hold them in Lahmia as long as possible. She was hoping to eke out several more days before she fled. However, unless something was done to stymie the advance of King Hassep, then her armies would not last half a day longer. She had hoped to avoid engaging the foe herself, but now it seemed the only way to buy the necessary time.

Summoning her steed, Neferata moved to her last line of defence between the palace district and the advancing forces of King Hassep. There, she joined the cluster of her handmaidens and took command. For many years she had longed to return to Lahmia, but that dream was gone. Now Neferata wanted to leave that haunted and dismal land. And soon, back in the palace district, her senses had once again warned her of something terrible lurking in the ruins. She ordered her makeshift Lahmian army forward.

Mounted atop the enormous warsphinx, King Hassep was the first to spot the enemy's incoming reinforcements. He did not notice the vampires' presence until beams of dark energy emanated from the approaching battle lines, powerful blasts that ripped holes into his tightly packed forces. And then King Hassep saw her, the one his queen hated above all others.

Neferata landed in the midst of the adjacent avenue. For a brief moment, King Hassep hoped his infantry, the Spears of Lybaras, would close upon her, catching the vampiress before she could get her magical steed to lift off. Then he saw Neferata unleash her sorcery. A dark funnel of black cloud tore out of the skies and twisted down into the vampiress herself. Taking a deep breath, Neferata filled her dead lungs before exhaling a howling blast of deathwind. Enclosed by piled rubble, the stone-cobbled street was like a trench, channelling the mystic gale straight down the marching columns of troops, allowing none of its deadly impact to dissipate. Such was the dark power of that spell that the hundreds of skeleton warriors who were trapped screamed in anguish, as their souls were torn from their corporal forms a second time.

King Hassep had no defence against the tearing winds of sorcerous blasts that were depleting his assault. Yet retreat was not an option, and so there was no hesitation from the elder war general: he pushed forward as quickly as possible. His son, the tomb prince Settuneb, drove his chariot up the now empty passage through the rubble, while Neferata cooly awaited his coming.

The crash of shields slamming and bones breaking announced the meeting of the two forces along the other two roadways. There too, King Hassep marked the presence of the

handmaidens; their supernaturally quick movements were easy to pick out. Though in life the martial skill of the champions of Lybaras would surely have prevailed, there were none who could match the unholy ferocity of the vampires in undeath, and so Neferata's bloody sisterhood churned through the legionnaires, turning the tide of battle.

Turning his warsphinx to where the line was weakest, King Hassep moved to counter the vampires' onslaught. Thus, the ancient king did not witness the sorcerous atrocity that Neferata directed at his son, turning the prince and his chariot to dust with but a gesture, laughing as she spurred her beast to bound through that dust, sending it swirling up and over the ruins. For many thousands of years King Hassep and his son had never been parted, yet there could be no return from that dark magic. For a long moment, the ancient king could do naught but stare at the whorls as they drifted across the ruins of the Cursed City.

The vampire queen's rampage was not ended, for she flew straight into the chariot legions, splintering them to fragments. She laughed as she slew – a hateful queen of ruin who laid low all those who had come to slay her.

At that moment, a nightmare galloped from the north. Upon its back rode Naaima, one of Neferata's handmaidens. She brought word of the enemy in the centre nearing the palace district. One by one, Neferata called out her handmaidens, ordering them to draw back. Last of all, she called to her handmaiden Lycindia, However, before Lycindia left, Neferata bid her to relay the message to the Lahmian sisters further in the ruins. To speed her along, the Vampire Queen dismounted and gave the handmaiden her dread abyssal.

Before she herself turned, Neferata reached into the abundant death magic to raise the dead to fight once more. Summoning all her effort, she screamed the incantation in hellish fury before collapsing to her knees. She looked up, fulfilment spreading over her face as she watched an entire army's worth of skeletal fighters lurch upright once again.

After her brief recovery, Neferata's journey back went quickly. She was pleased with herself. She had taught the foe to advance more cautiously and left behind more troops than when she joined the fray. The First of the Vampires had also secretly given a command to her mount; it would not return to Neferata, but instead hurtle into the foe's battle lines. It would be better for Lycindia if she died in the fighting, for if they captured her, it would doubtlessly be an unnaturally prolonged ending for one such as she. With smug satisfaction written upon her face, Neferata did not notice until too late the dozen bodies riddled with arrows surrounding the stairs that led down to the passage beneath the Temple of Blood.

From behind that half-standing pillar strode a tall, elegant figure – Khalida Neferher, Warrior-Queen of Lybaras.

'Welcome, cousin – I have been waiting for you,' said Khalida, cold steel in her voice.

Neferata instinctively bared her fangs and hissed, then, with an effort, forced a smile. 'Which of my handmaidens talked? Was it Annaliesa?'

Now it was Khalida's turn to feign warmth, though her mask rendered her hauntingly expressionless. 'I asked her many questions; her name was not one of them.'

Neferata understood. It was to be a duel – just the two of them. 'I'm afraid I didn't bring the ceremonial blades this time, cousin – did you?'

Khalida advanced, her movements lithe and graceful. She assumed the stance of an honour-duel, raising her weapons: a snake staff and a bone-claw gauntlet.

Neferata's aristocratic features sharpened as she drew forth a pair of blades and assumed her stance. 'It never had to be this way, cousin,' said the Eternal Queen.

'No,' answered Khalida, 'it always had to be this way.'

Khalida's first lunge drew vampiric blood, shocking Neferata. How did she get so fast, she thought? What had she become?

The duel swung back and forth, the two combatants moving at blurring speeds. They circled and wove an elegant and deadly dance, matching feints and, parrying strike after strike. Three times did Khalida's surprising speed allow her to land glancing blows. Her staff lashed out with the quickness of a striking serpent.

Neferata, her black blood trickling from her wounds like ink on porcelain, had yet to land a blow.

Intent upon each other, the duelling queens did not notice the rapidly dropping temperature. A chillness stole over the area – and then it was upon them, bounding into their circle, grasping at each of them.

The spirits of so many tortured souls, cursed for thousands of years had congealed under the black skies of death magic. Burbling and hungry, the spirit daemon struck out, scattering both Neferata and Khalida.

Seeing her opportunity, Neferata leapt down the stairs. She lifted the lever that moved the column above, sealing her in and away from whatever that thing was.

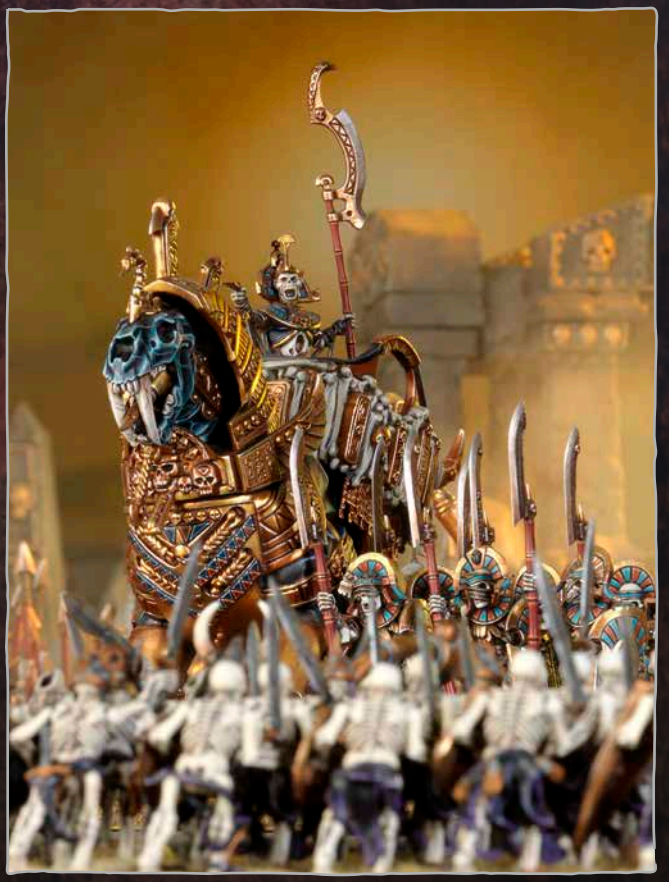
From above came a piercing scream of purest anguish – though whether it stemmed from peril, pain or vengeance denied, Neferata knew not.

Onwards she ran, weeping tears she did not know she still possessed. Perhaps she wept for her lost sisters? Perhaps it was frustration? Or the fact that she was, once more, fleeing for her life from beloved Lahmia?

By the time she reached the cold, desert air, she had left all the Cursed City behind her, and she was once again Neferata, the Eternal Queen.













The desert was deathly still. Beneath the glowering black skies, a heavily cloaked figure glided purposefully southwards. It drifted several feet above the desert, leaving no trail upon the sands.

To the east lay the haunted ruins of Lahmia, where a bitter battle had just begun. To the immediate west loomed the rock wall known as the Nabatean Tombs – a high cliff into which were set many ancient burial chambers. Towering above that carven bluff ragged peaks marked the southern spine of the Worlds Edge Mountains.

The land was barren, but it was far from uninhabited. Beneath the surface, enormous scorpions lurked in ambush. The vibration of a single footstep would be enough to draw their attack, and they would burst from below to grab and sting their prey, before dragging it back under the sands to consume it. Bone jackals could hear a quivering heartbeat at one hundred paces, while schools of sand sharks prowled the dunes, hunting for signs of movement or the scent of blood.

The traveller moved steadily forward, unconcerned.

Once, drifting near to the engraved tombs in the cliff side, the lone figure attracted the unwanted attentions of a trio of sepulchral stalkers. From deep beneath the sands their otherworldly senses tracked the traveller, triggering an impulse to hunt and to kill. When the stalkers reared out of the sand, they did not unleash their death-gaze. Instead, the creatures backed off, re-submerging themselves beneath the dunes. Their eyes – which saw both the material and spectral realm – instantly recognised their true master.

The Great Necromancer Nagash had returned to the Land of the Dead.

Without pause, Nagash continued his journey, moving at speed. He did not know how long the Nehekharan armies would remain occupied in Lahmia and he needed to reach Mahrak as quickly as possible.

Once known as the City of Hope, Mahrak had been built as the eastern gateway into the Valley of Kings. The city's sturdy stone edifices were crafted into the mountainside itself. With high outer walls built to keep out barbarian invaders, Mahrak was constructed to deny access to the canyon beyond, where lay the fabled tombs of long-dead kings. Now, sandswept and decrepit, Mahrak had begun to crumble. Its fortunes had declined for so long it became known as the City of Decay.

King Settra had never trusted the city of Mahrak. When first the King of Kings had conquered Nehekhara, only one of the great cities refused to pay him tribute: Mahrak. During the rebellion called the War of Kings, it had been one of the last and most difficult of kingdoms to subjugate. Nearly every plot to undermine Settra's rightful rule had some element that could be traced back to that city. Before Settra's iron-willed alliance forced the Great Necromancer to flee back to Nagashizzar, there were accusations that several of the kings of Mahrak had been in negotiations with Nagash, although the Eternal King could never fully unravel those nefarious plots.

It was for these reasons that Settra had demanded a tithe of the city's armies to bolster Khemri. Furthermore, he had sent word to Queen Khalida, commanding her to march with her armies to strengthen the defence of that eastern gateway. Her refusal to comply was cause for great consternation amongst the priests, and they did not dare tell their high king. Settra feared an attack through the Charnel Valley, but more so, he sought to secure more loyal subjects in that city. He trusted few of the Kings of Mahrak, notably favouring only King Tharruk, but he too had disobeyed Settra, allowing his quest for vengeance to draw him northwards to the ruins of Lahmia.

As it transpired, Settra was right not to place his trust in the remaining kings of that city.

When King Tharruk marched his forces out to join Khalida, he left behind a city whose armies and garrisons were largely afield. No sooner had the Eagle Gates swung closed behind King Tharruk than the Hierophant of Mahrak began his manoeuvres, acting openly for the first time. He was Haptmose, Master of Awakenings, the most powerful of Mahrak's Mortuary Cult, yet it had been long since he was last content.

When the whispering in his head started, Haptmose had listened.

While those in the necropolis still slept dreamlessly, it was the ever-wakeful liche priests who wandered the vast empty hallways. The liche priests had endless daily duties, as they had for days on end for countless centuries. It was their task to renew ancient seals, to read the signs of the oracle and to monitor the deathless sleep of their charges. It was in that stillness between awakenings that the voice first spoke to Haptmose. It whispered the same secret things he thought only to himself. It said the kings he served were petty. It, too, lamented how they prostrated themselves beneath the unworthy and all-controlling Settra. The voice bade him look around. The city was crumbling, its glory faded.

The voice grew as the Wind of Shyish rose across the world. Growing bolder, the voice offered Haptmose the things he most coveted: power, respect, and order. The liche priest knew that voice; there had never been any hint of deception. Haptmose knew it was the voice of he whom others were afraid to name – Nagash. It had been some time since Haptmose had called that voice 'Master'.



Of the twelve tomb kings of Mahrak, only four remained in the city. Of those, King Nebwaneph was the most powerful and the most ambitious. Encouraged by the whisper that would not leave his mind, it had been easy to lure Nebwaneph and his legions to a cause that promised rulership. King Obidiah had been alarmed at the suggestion of disobedience, and consequently there was trouble with his latest awakening. Even after Settra's call to wake all the kings and their legions, Obidiah slept on in his sarcophagus, as did his loyal tomb guard. King Omanhan III was the weakest willed royalty of Mahrak and joined the moment he was confronted by Haptmose and King Nebwaneph. That left only a few of the lesser Mortuary Cult priests and King Bhemrodesh. It was these individuals that Haptmose sought out before King Tharruk had even marched out of view from the city walls. Some of these bent beneath what Haptmose considered irrefutable logic, others refused. Once more, king fought king, but the battle was brief, for King Bhemrodesh was badly outnumbered and not expecting the extreme and sudden violence employed.

By the time Nagash arrived, the fighting was over and the vast Eagle Gates swung open to welcome him.

Hungry from his journey, Nagash was led by Haptmose to the tomb where King Obidiah slept. The priest sealed the crypt behind his master, so that no other might see nor hear what was about to take place. It was best, Haptmose theorised, not to test so soon the new and fragile allegiance of the others.

Within hours, all those who remained in Mahrak were heading westwards through the Charnel Valley, following a road made of skulls and bones. Once called the Valley of Kings, this valley had been one of the wonders of the world, a deep-set canyon filled with colossal statues of gods and mighty kings of old. Not a single one of those eternal guardians, or the necrotect artisans who carved them, remained. All had all been called to war elsewhere. Empty plinths, tombs and temples were all that was left.

As they neared the western end of the valley, with the alabaster towers of Quatar almost visible in the gloom, Nagash halted. Chanting fell words of power, the Great Necromancer cast back his cloak and thrust his outstretched arms to the black heavens. Purple lightning flashed and the air thrummed with power.

A distant rumbling began far out of sight and, like rolling thunder, cascaded down the Charnel Valley. The very mountains collapsed inwards and the temples carved into the cliff faces shattered.

Much had been happening all across Nehekhara, and many armies were on the move. In the centre, where Krell had opened Nagash's latest invasion attempt, progress came grudgingly. The war in the centre had ground forward, the slow-moving campaign gradually leaving the Salt Plains and entering the desert. Here, north of Khemri and west of Numas, was an expanse where the sand seas were made of undulating dunes, as if ocean waves were frozen in time and thereby transformed.

Over the months of hard-fought battles, Krell had grown to admire the skill with which his opponent, King Phar, handled his army. The tomb king had used chariot legions to attack out of a sandstorm, and had buried his own troops in the sand to launch a successful ambush on a featureless plain. Hit and run attacks by fleet cavalry formations had attempted to isolate and destroy various elements of Krell's forces, from targeting his necromancers to drawing out and killing his varghulfs. King Phar used encircling chariot strikes to extract his forces from the twelve-day clash over the krokidon-filled oasis. That had just been another battle that Krell had hoped would prove decisive, but turned out to be just another minor gain. More than ever, Krell longed to crush the tomb king's skull beneath his armoured foot.



Krell had lost count of how many battles his forces had fought to reach this far south. His dust-covered army was still a sprawling horde of many thousands, but he could not land a telling blow to finish his opponent. After engagements – regardless of victory or defeat – both sides replenished their lost warriors, either directly from the spoils of the battle, or from the bone-rich battlefields that dotted the barren desert. At long last, however, the wight lord felt he was on the cusp of delivering the sweeping victory that would leave him free to advance all the way to the great city of Khemri itself.

Seeking a means to pin down and destroy the swift elements of King Phar's army, Krell had requested aid from the most powerful necromancer in his force: Dieter Helsnicht. A necromancer of vast knowledge, Helsnicht vowed he could find and raise great, winged warriors of bone – the powerful morghasts. These were exactly what Krell sought, but it had taken months before Helsnicht could make good on his word.

At first, the old necromancer claimed all he required was a location with a great many bones – an easy request to fulfil in the Land of the Dead. Many of the battlefields they fought across were strewn with bones – refuse from current battles or the detritus of long, unremitting ages of war. Yet none would do. Some sites, Helsnicht claimed, were contaminated with the wrong kinds of energies, other bones would not serve, the necromancer simply using them to raise yet more skeletal infantrymen.

At long last, however, Helsnicht had deemed a site suitable. Krell's army had pushed the foe off a series of low hilltop burial mounds that had been partially uncovered during recent sandstorms. Helsnicht, accompanied by a pair of necromancer assistants, entered the tombs, ancient burial mounds that had not been disturbed since Nagash's last expedition to conquer his former realm. Helsnicht did not emerge for a full day, and when he did stagger forth, he did so alone. The ritual had worked, however. Hulking brutes emerged in his wake, each standing twice the height of a man, their thick bones fused with armour. There, beneath black clouds, Krell's formidable new shock formation stretched their tattered wings and readied themselves once more for battle.

Krell stationed the constructs in his army's centre, where their lumbering size was partially concealed by bannertops and the dust raised by the troops to the fore. Once again, the army was on the move, advancing southwards through the desert. There were rarely more than a few hours between skirmishes at this point, but now, however, Krell had a surprise of his own.

While Krell's forces halted atop the burial mounds, King Phar had indeed prepared another attack. The tomb king split his infantry legions into two, placing them far to either flank along the path he estimated his foes would take. The third group was made up of massed chariots screened by his light cavalry and these waited directly in the centre of the wight lord's advance. This would present Krell with a dilemma: if he advanced to close with the centre, the swift chariots could easily outdistance his infantry, initiating combat only if it was to their

own advantage. It would also expose his horde's flanks. Krell could split his own force to engage the multiple armies, or he could attempt to veer off to engage one of the flanking forces, hoping to destroy it before the others closed upon him. All presented opportunities for King Phar to exploit.

With his chariot atop a high dune, King Phar watched as Krell halted his vanguard upon a distant crest. Without the aid of the Hawk Banner, it was likely that Krell had only now been able to discern the spread of armies that faced him on the horizon.

With all the boldness and efficiency King Phar had come to expect from his foe, the invaders were soon on the march. The tomb king watched his opponent split his hordes – a central force pressing forward, while two blocks split off to confront the flanking armies. In this situation, the plan was for the massed chariots to await the oncoming foe – drawing them further and further away from their 'wings'. Then, at the last opportunity, the chariots would wheel to the side, breaking into two distinct armies – King Phar's chariot legions of Numas and the phalanxes of King Ramssus of Bhagar. These would evade the foe's centre and race off to join the attacks upon the flanking infantry. If all went well, they would dismantle those forces before Krell's centre could return to their aid.

If only King Phar had held his gaze longer on the infantry in the centre. In his surety of what was coming, and his eagerness to enact his plan, the tomb king failed to see what was only partially hidden behind the bobbing spears and swaying banners of the oncoming skeletal warriors.

Krell led the central attack personally, marching up the dunes and nearing the crests where the chariots awaited. He could hear the clash of battle lines behind him and knew the other armies were engaged. The screen of enemy horse archers had taken off, and was already encircling his forces, peppering them with a steady shower of arrows. Now that he was so far distant from his flanking armies, Krell fully expected the chariots to attempt to pull back, either to draw them further into the desert, or to attempt to aid the fighting on the outer flanks. He was not disappointed.

At some silent signal, the chariots wheeled, breaking suddenly to the left or right. With their skeletal steeds pulling hard, they raced to get beyond the reach of the oncoming infantry. It was perfect timing: the chariots would make it away – but only just.

The morghasts bounded over the skeletal warriors before them, just clearing the spear tips and banners. With a few flaps of their tattered pinions, the constructs launched themselves into a long glide that sent them crashing into the side of the chariots. Wheels, steeds and crew were smashed by the impact of that onslaught. With a savagery unmatched by the emotionless undead elsewhere on the battlefield, the bony hulks wielded their great glaives – polearms that ended in cruelly curved blades – to deliver two-handed, sweeping blows and pulverising downwards chops. The light chariot frames were broken asunder, pieces sent spinning to flip over the chariots racing beside them.

Deeper and deeper into the Numasi forces ploughed the morghasts. With little room to manoeuvre, the chariots began to pile upon each other – the Desert Shrikes ploughing into the Raptor Legion. Wooden frames collided, throwing dagger-sized splinters in all directions, and bones crunched between whirring spokes. Crews pulled hard on the horses' reins in desperate attempts to wheel their war carriages away from the pounding blows of the rampant morghasts. Soon Krell's infantry reached the bogged-down chariots and the already one-sided battle turned into a slaughter.

King Phar had timed the chariot's turn perfectly, but he had not anticipated what came hurtling over the front of his foe's battle line. He recognised the creatures, having fought them in a previous age when Nagash had attacked Nehekhara. He knew then that his chariot legions would be mauled.

Although it galled him to flee, King Phar knew it was the only viable course. A last stand would accomplish nothing. Like the broken column whose fall leads to the collapse of the whole temple, the loss of the chariot legions signalled the end of his campaign. Without his chariots, King Phar could no longer extract his infantry from the grinding combat.

Along with some two dozen of the rearmost chariots, King Phar was free, driving away from his foe. Behind him, the armoured wight that led the enemy forces stood atop a broken chariot axle and deliberately levelled his great axe towards him in challenge.

So great was the urge to stop that King Phar reined in his chariot, halting to look back at the mayhem. Hundreds of chariots had been destroyed, while the remaining ones put up a last fight. The morghasts were everywhere, pounding survivors as they clambered out of their broken craft, hitting them so hard that bones scattered across the sands.

As his warrior's honour demanded, King Phar regarded the enemy champion and raised his own weapon in acknowledgement, before turning his chariot and heading south, towards Khemri.

Phar had done all that he could. He knew what was awaiting Krell in Khemri. Soon the scions of Nagash would feel the wrath of Settra.

COALITION OF THE DEAD

It was the plan for each of the spearheads that penetrated Nehekhara to join forces and assault the city of Khemri. Ultimately, this was a ruse to occupy Settra while Nagash found a way to enter the most heavily guarded city in Nehekhara. The following armies joined that of Krell upon the floodplains of Khemri.

ARKHAN

Dark Lord and First Lieutenant of Nagash, when Arkhan the Black marched to war he emptied Nagashizzar – taking with him both the standing army and scraping together the bone pits to fill out his force. He marched along the western reaches of the Worlds Edge Mountains to Quatar. It had been long since he had visited that city, and it had no fond memories, for Arkhan had borne capture and foul torment there. Now, however, Arkhan came to collect those traitors who had signified their willingness to turn upon their former kings.





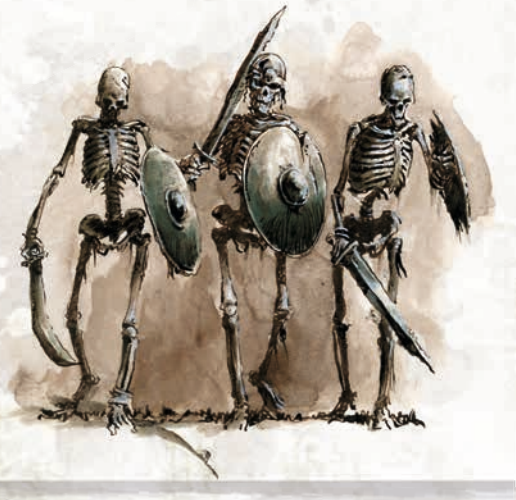
NAGASHIZZAR GUARD

This massive formation was the black armoured might of the fortress of Nagash. Arkhan ended their silent guardianship of Nagashizzar, ordering them out to form the centre of his army. Outside the Gates of Khemri, the wights from the north proved superior warriors against the skeletons of the desert. Only when they crashed headlong into the Hawk Legions of Settra did the Nagashizzar Guard find a worthy foe. Had not the battle ended otherwise, they might still be clashing endlessly there.

GLOWING GHOULS

Too long these foul creatures were kept in the pits of Nagashizzar. Though the warpstone was mostly mined out, the contaminated walls were more than enough to affect these gangly undead creatures. They glowed eerily in the night, a green-tinted nimbus of sickly colour.





IRON BRIGADE

This was not a rabble formation raised from the slave-pits of Nagashizzar, but rather bones raised from the battlefields of the Badlands. Their true name forgotten over the ageless march of time, they were now known by their iron helmets and swords. Doubtless they were some proud regiment of a long-lost kingdom, their shallow graves disturbed, their long sleep interrupted as they were called once again for battle.



THE TRAITOR KINGS

Through his necromantic powers and whisperings on the Wind of Shyish, Nagash was able to turn several key figures in both Mahrak and Quatar. They were led by Haptmose, the Liche High Priest, known as the Traitor of Mahrak. With him were King Nebwaneph and King Omanhan III. Three legions of Mahrak and a phalanx of ushabti marched at their command.

THE GROLBECH GREEN MEN

The Empire town of Grolbech was unfortunate enough to be in the path of Nagash's army as it marched southwards, heading for Black Fire Pass. The town was razed and its people turned to zombies to join the force. They gained their regimental name after emerging out of the Marshes of Madness – for the foul algae there had dyed their undead flesh a truly sickly, if remarkable colour. For a banner they carried a pole topped with the torso and head of the priest of Sigmar who had attempted singlehandedly to turn back the undead host. Now zombiefied flesh, the old priest moaned and struggled against the cords that bound him to his pole. It was possible that, before his mouth filled with swamp mud and befouled water weeds, the priest's words were coherent. If indeed he still maintained his rightful mind, then truly was he cursed to a hideous fate.





THE ARMY OF LUTHOR HARKON

Although a late arrival at the final battle, Luthor Harkon, the self-proclaimed Vampire King of the Lustrian Coast, at last arrived to join the battle before the walls of Khemri. With him he brought his right hand, the Silver Hook of Sartosa, Captain Drekla and his innumerable zombie formations. Alongside this motley crew fought Mannfred von Carstein.

GRAND ARMY OF SETTRA THE IMPERISHABLE

The largest and most formidable army in all of Nehekhara, the Grand Army of Settra had rarely been awoken in its entirety. To augment this massive force, Settra called upon the other great cities of Nehekhara to send auxiliary legions and a great host of war statues.

SETTRA

Rightfully proud, Settra had borne the title King of Kings for many thousands of years. He was the ultimate conqueror of Nehekhara – doing so once in life and many more times in his ageless undeath. A master tactician and merciless warrior, Settra had lost battles in his long career, but he had never lost a war. It was his intent to draw out and crush his foes on the floodplains before the gates of the city of Khemri.





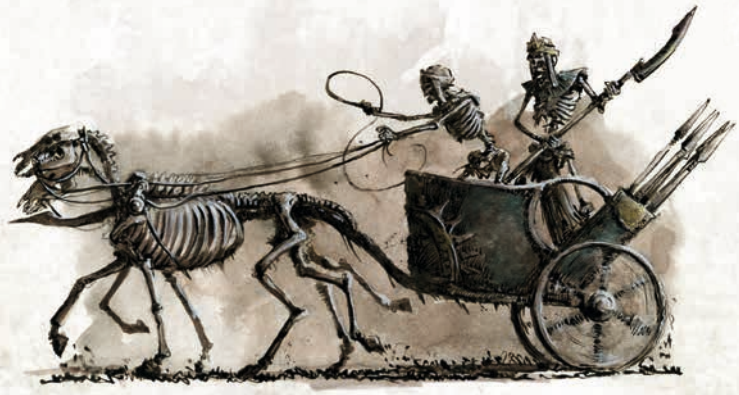
HERALD OF SETTRA

By tradition, Settra had a chosen herald and personal champion. At the beginning of the Battle at the Gates of Khemri, this position was taken by Nekaph, the fortieth to serve in that honoured position. He bore the flail of skulls and served for many long millennia. After his fall to Arkhan the Black, Nebbetthar, Captain of the Royal Chariot Guard was next in line for the honour. In accepting to carry Settra's banner, Nebbetthar became the forty-first so honoured.

THE MORTUARY CULT OF KHEMRI

These were the priests of Khemri, ancient liches who performed the duties of awakening and maintaining Settra's armies and the lesser kings of Khemri. They were led by Khenteka, the Liche High Priest and Hierophant of Khemri. He was the eldest and most powerful of all the Mortuary Cult, save only for the exiled Grand Hierophant Khatep. Even when Khatep was banished, Khenteka never assumed the full title, known instead as Keeper of the Tombs and Waker of the Dead. Second in the order was Nebamun, the Tomb Prophet, and Ankhmare was the Master Embalmer and Keeper of the Sacred Oils. It was Ankhmare who found and hid copies of pages out of Nagash's master works, sowing the seeds that would eventually corrupt him. They were accompanied by two high priests and twelve priests from the fourteen Temples of the Old Gods in Khemri.





THE ROYAL CHARIOT GUARD

The great city of Khemri could field many hundreds of chariots, but none were as powerful or feared as those of the Royal Chariot Guard. These heavy chariots were crewed by tomb guard and led by their great captain Nebbetthar, before he was promoted to higher honours. They bore the signs and insignia of Settra, and they could be seen from a great distance in the desert, for their precious metals and jewels sparkled brilliantly.



HAWK LEGIONS OF SETTRA

Most famed in all Nehekhara, they were the one hundred legions, each one a hundred warriors strong: the dreaded Hawk Legions of Settra. In unlife, these loyal soldiers had become more implacable than ever. Time and again they had set forth from Khemri to conquer, returning victorious. They were known for their turquoise shields and banners, as well the symbol of the double-headed hawk.



LEGIONS OF THE CRESTED SERPENT

The Legions of the Crested Serpent – six legions of bowmen – were the finest Nehekharan archers outside of Lybaras. Each of the legions bore a different coloured totem sacred to Asaph, the asp goddess.



THE WAR STATUES OF RAMHOTEP

Settra had commanded a tithe of war statues from all across Nehekhara, and all obeyed. Furthermore, Settra demanded all the guardians from Charnel Valley to set forth across the desert. They were to safeguard Khemri. There strode the ushabti known as the Emerald Sentinels of Lybaras, the Necrolith Colossi known as the Skull Guardians, and the Jade Phalanx – crocodile-headed statues from a temple in Ka-Sabar, and the Alabaster Army of Quatar. Perhaps most feared of all were the Red Jackals of Rasetra – ushabti who howled as they loped into battle, the blood on their crimson-coated weapons never drying.



THE GOLDEN HOST OF MAHRAK

As part of the Great Tithe summoned by King Settra, the Golden Host marched out of Mahrak to the succour of Khemri. When they lived, the Golden Host bore weapons made of precious metals. In death, however, they had become their namesake – by walking through pools of molten gold. During the Battle Before the Gates of Khemri, the Golden Host of Mahrak was pursued by Luthor Harkon and his piratical crew.

AT THE GATES OF KHEMRI

The city of Khemri was vast and ancient. It had inspired awe for thousands of years before the barbarian men of the north had built anything more than hide tents or cairns of crudely stacked stone.

Travellers, no matter from which direction they came, saw the same thing – the city looming larger on the horizon as each step took them closer. Whether nomads from the desert or a procession of kings arriving to pay tribute – all felt the same dawning wonderment as the city rose up from the flat floodplains that surrounded it. The seventy-feet high city wall was made of black granite and green marble. Behind it towered the tips of pyramids, each one taller than the last. Hundreds if not thousands of them were enclosed within the sprawling city walls – a man-made mountain range beneath which ran a labyrinth of narrow streets and interlacing alleyways. A shining white pyramid dominated the centre, the burial pyramid of Settra the Imperishable. Yet, preeminent over all, dwarfing even Settra's masterwork, was a monolith of blackest stone.

A wonder and a terror to all who beheld it, the Black Pyramid of Nagash dominated the skyline. Its hulking darkness did not reflect the blazing Nehekharan sun, but absorbed it. All who gazed upon that oppressive edifice save for the Great Necromancer himself felt a shuddering chill, even amidst the desert's scorching heat.

Krell beheld Khemri for the first time. Aesthetics were wholly lost upon Nagash's war-minded lieutenant. He focused on the size of the walls and how difficult they would be to cross. He did not wonder or care about how such a massive necropolis had come into existence; rather he was trying to calculate the sheer number of warriors it could station. It was exactly as Arkhan had described it, save only for a hastily constructed outer wall, a mismatch of patchy stonework that would be easy to penetrate. Beyond that, the older curtain wall was impressive for its size, number of battlements and seamless construction. That would prove hard to crack. Krell cared not one whit about architectural style, or ancient majesty.

Above mighty Khemri the skies were a purplish black swirl of concentric clouds. From across the lands they gathered, spinning downwards and funnelling into the apex of the Black Pyramid. The sheer pull of that spiral tore the ragged clouds and allowed a few solitary sunbeams to stab through, before they too were blotted out. Disorienting flickers of light and shadow played across the city.

If Arkhan or Nagash had any specific plan on how best to besiege Khemri, they had not shared it with Krell. He had simply been commanded to attack the city as soon as he reached it. Krell was no stranger to conquering well-defended enemy positions. He had laid low the first of the major dwarf strongholds to fall, torn down the palisades around innumerable settlements, and levelled no few castles in Bretonnia. However, not even storming Karak Ungor seemed as formidable as assaulting Khemri.

Krell looked upon the army arrayed behind him, taking in the myriad banners they bore before turning his gaze back to view the faded grandeur of Khemri. It was the largest city ever built by men. Dieter Helsnicht had raised the remnants of King Phar's decimated force – but even swollen by these additions the army from the north only numbered in the tens of thousands. Krell did not doubt that he could penetrate the outer walls, but it would take a force ten times his own to capture that city, much less hold it. Sweeping his vision along the sprawling walls, Krell realised the enormity of the task at hand.

As of yet, Krell had seen no movement on top of either curtain wall, but he did not doubt that Khemri was garrisoned. There was no use in waiting, so he immediately commenced the assault. At the least, he would rip down the outer wall in dozens of places. That would make subsequent attacks easier. While Helsnicht and the other necromancers attempted to form bone catapults to batter the walls, Krell drew up his forces and began the advance. The fact that his army would likely be destroyed did not enter Krell's mind. Instead, he focused on the maximum amount of damage he could inflict.



Settra looked out upon the invaders forming up for the first assault upon his walls. From his vantage point atop the Tower of the Sun, they looked like tiny dots advancing across the flood plains. This then was the first of Nagash's lieutenants to arrive, he mused. It was a disappointment.

Even in the gloom, Settra could see the army below was no more than a ragtag assembly, a force raised from many different nations and eras. They did not fight for cause or country, they were but mindless creatures enslaved beneath a renegade priest. Nagash had no honour, so naturally he would use whatever tools were to hand in his latest attempt to usurp Settra's throne. The Great King of Nehekhara was angered to see fallen warriors of Numas amongst their ranks. That his foes dared use the bodies of his own subjects to fight him was an insult not lost upon Settra. The Great Necromancer and his Dark Lords would pay for that indignity.

It had irked Settra to sit upon his throne and wait for his foes to move against him. It was not how he had conquered the world or held his throne for thousands of years. When it came to Nagash, however, Settra had learned to be wary.

The prophecies of doom were one thing to prepare for, as Nehekhara had seen much strife and battle. However, when Settra heard loyal priests talk of whispers drifting on the winds of magic, a voice promising power and rule, he knew it could only be the one whose return he had long anticipated: Nagash.

In the five thousand years since Settra claimed the crown and named himself ruler of all Nehekhara, he had ruthlessly put down innumerable usurpers and would-be conquerors. It was not enough to slay such traitors, for they could easily be returned to their burial tombs to be reborn again. Instead, they had to be ritually destroyed. Priests would curse their very souls and set their ruined bodies ablaze. It was Settra's wish to deny afterlife to those who attempted to wrest away his rightful eternal rule.

Yet, for all that legendary intolerance, the worst offender still walked the world. The renegade priest who had wreaked more havoc in Nehekhara than any other – the very one who had cursed the lands into a realm of undeath, had not been destroyed. He even had the temerity to return, to attempt a new invasion.

In his long campaigns fighting against Nagash and Arkhan in the past, Settra had learned that neither he, nor his priests, could match their dark magic. In the end, Settra had beaten them because he had proven to be a shrewder tactician. Nagash might be a fratricidal, power-mad priest grasping for position beyond his station, but he was no fool. He might hope to win a military victory, but Settra believed Nagash had some other plan. The Great King need only look at the vortex of dark clouds funnelling out of the sky to remind himself of what he faced.

It would not be enough to slay Nagash or Arkhan the Black on the battlefield. It had been done before, yet here they were again. To this end, Settra had commanded the liche priests to prepare something especially awful. Khenteka, the High Priest and Hierophant of Khemri, assured Settra that his will had been done. Once slain, the bodies of his hated opposition must be dragged through Khemri before being ritually destroyed and burnt. The liche Ankhmare, the Master Embalmer and Keeper of the Sacred Oils, had created a method of soul-destroying that was both efficient and extremely painful.

Setting aside these satisfying ruminations, Settra turned back to the paltry army at his gates. There would soon be more on the way. If they wished to be destroyed piecemeal, then so be it. He did not yet need to join the battle, however. He motioned for the signal to be given to Ramhotep. It was time to show their foes what that wall was really made of.



The outer wall detached itself piece by piece. Massive stone sculptures made in the images of gods, kings and mythical creatures came forth. They broke off and discarded the plaster facades that had disguised them and strode to battle.

There were towering warriors carved out of cliff faces, and marble beasts that prowled on all fours. A colossus made of bronze clanked towards the front; the sword it bore was four times the height of a man. A sphinx of black obsidian thudded past, a molten fire burning within it, visible when it opened its maw to roar. Tomb scorpions scuttled to the desert floor to send up gouting columns of sand as they burrowed below – their stinger tails briefly cutting across the surface like shark fins before they tunnelled deeper. In moments, only piles of churned sand showed that the enormous scorpions had ever been there. Rank after rank of ushabti formed up, great battalions of the war statues moving out to meet Krell's oncoming army.

It was a mighty force. There marched the Emerald Sentinels of Lybaras, the Skull Guardians and the snake-headed Necrosphinx of the Charnel Valley. Amongst the animated stone army prowled the gold-skulled necrosphinx from Mahrak and the Jade Phalanx – ushabti from the temple of the crocodile god in Ka-Sabar. The Alabaster Army of Quatar had stepped down from their plinths that lined the wide avenues of that great city, and the Guardians of the Gates of Numas – two warsphinxes decorated with ornate bands of gold – advanced in stride as they headed to battle. The Red Jackals of Rasetra howled as they came loping – the blood on their crimson-coated weapons never dried.

It had been Ramhotep, the greatest necrotect of Nehekhara, who had done Settra's bidding and formed the animated army into a bastion that surrounded Khemri. Now, with his whip cracking the air behind the war constructs, it was Ramhotep who ordered the dismantling of his own wall.

Krell was neither shocked nor dismayed at this situation – those particular feelings had meant little to him in life, and absolutely nothing in undeath. Lifting high his black axe, which glowed with a nimbus of purple in the permanent twilight, Krell commanded the horns be sounded. The war horns of the north had been long buried in cairns or cloven in battle, and it was no natural wind that reverberated within them. So it was that the noise they made was at once discordant and dirge-like. Nonetheless, they rang out, their challenge unanswered save by the steady ground-thumping advance of the stone war constructs.

A few catapult shots landed amidst the war statues – a testament to Dieter Helsnicht's necromantic knowledge and his drive to see the batteries into action. A hawk-headed stone giant burst apart, falling to ruin upon the desert – but there was no barrage heavy enough to slow down the foe's advance. Moments later, the constructs' enormous strides carried them into Krell's battle line.



Wading into the packed warriors, the war statues crushed bodies with every step. Colossi swung stone maces like pendulums to send bones and shattered shields skywards. The obsidian sphinx ploughed into the Crimson Guard. Originally a company out of Numas, they were raised to fight on the side of their previous destroyers, but the sphinx soon put an end to that. Breathing jets of flame, the lumbering beast turned the formation into a blazing conflagration that lit the darkness, and stomped the remains to cinders and ash.

Krell and his Doomed Legion were hard-pressed. The Red Jackals of Rasetra attacked with the savagery and bloodlust of hot-blooded mortals, yet their sculpted stone bodies bent blades and resisted all spear thrusts. Wielding their weapons in two-handed grips, the Red Jackals whirled through the Doomed Legion, destroying them faster than they could step up. Two of the jackal-headed statues had fallen before Krell's axe blows, but everywhere else along the front was one-sided slaughter. Not even the wight lord could have long survived that onslaught, had not the morghasts arrived.

Stepping over the broken pieces of a stone colossus, the winged constructs hurtled into the ushabti bearing down upon Krell. Daemons of spirit and bone, the morghasts wielded great halberds, crashing them down upon the war statues with such force that sparks and stone shrapnel flew in all directions. It was a battle of ferocious equals, the armies' elites squaring up against one another. They traded great, hacking blows, their animated spirits so strong that they clung to any sliver of life. Severed arms still clawed, stretching out to grasp, to deal more damage before the magic binding them was wholly broken. Headless statues continued to whirl, hoping to contact with the foe one last time before the enchantments tethering their spirits to the stone statues finally dissolved.

When the dust settled, few were left standing. Krell, twenty of his Doomed Legion, and a half dozen morghasts stood amidst the wreckage. All around them the battle raged, with the war statues demolishing the skeletal hordes. Before Krell could organise the survivors, another group of ushabti swept in for the kill. This was the Jade Phalanx – crocodile-headed statues from a temple in Ka-Sabar. Hissing and snapping their long jaws, the green guardians used both ends of their enormous bladed weapons – cutting down the last of the morghasts before closing on Krell.

From the north came the sound of war horns, but Krell had no time to contemplate who or what this might herald. Swinging his enormous axe in sweeping arcs, Krell forced the ring of jade ushabti back, hacking off hands and breaking weapon tips with the strength of his blows.

And then, for a moment, Krell was flying through the air. Great black whirlwinds of black cloud had spiralled out of the sky and churned across the battlefield, separating the two forces. With a ripping grind that caused all but the largest of the pyramids to shake and shudder, the ground split asunder.

An enormous cleft gashed through the sand down to the bedrock and down again to blackness below. Hissing waterfalls of sand plunged into the abyss, sweeping along many skeletons who fought against that tide of sand. A warsphinx, its claws unable to find purchase on the sand, teetered and was gone into the yawning gulf.

At long last, Arkhan the Black had arrived and joined the battle.

Hovering ahead of his marching army, Arkhan landed near to Krell and spat out foul strings of arcane syllables and incantations, unleashing the considerable fury of his magics. Most of the war statues were trapped on the Khemri side of the gap, for its width was too great for all but the tallest to traverse. A few of the stone monstrosities were still wreaking havoc amidst Krell's remaining hordes, but, outnumbered and surrounded, they were eventually toppled and smashed.

Krell pulled himself up, for the whirlwind had flung him at least thirty paces. Striding over broken bones, he headed towards where Arkhan sat atop his dread abyssal, its lashing tail stirring up clouds of sand and dust.

Too late did Krell feel the surge beneath him.

Erupting from underneath, a tomb scorpion barrelled forth, grasping Krell in an enormous pincer, tendons of ancient leather and sinew pulling taut to snip the wight in half. His axe fallen, all Krell could do was attempt to pry the vice grip loose as the beast held him up high off the desert floor, trembling in its effort to crunch through his armour. Straining to force open the compressing claw, Krell was oblivious to the scorpion's whip-tail, which struck downwards in a blur.

The stinger darted down to penetrate his battered chest plate, punching all the way through and out of his back before being withdrawn just as quickly. Suffused with dark energies, Krell's undead body felt neither cold nor pain, yet he sensed the unnatural toxins that dripped from the stinger-tipped tail dissolving the magics that bound his will to his skeletal frame. At last, Krell forced open the claws, his battered body dropping unceremoniously to the sands.

Reaching instinctively for his axe, Krell swung a double-handed, heaving blow that embedded deeply into the scorpion's head. Even as he did so, however, its pincers darted out, frantically seeking to reclaim what it had dropped. With a shearing snip, the wight lord's head was sent tumbling to the sands, dozens of feet away from his body.

By ripping a chasm to separate the opposing battle lines, Arkhan the Black had bought time for his army to deploy. His host had marched from distant Quatar. Half were troops from the north that had accompanied Arkhan from Nagashizzar, and the remainder were those of the traitor kings out of Mahrak and Quatar.

With Krell twitching in the throes of reincarnation, it was Arkhan alone who took command. In the presence of his master, Arkhan had grown more powerful. Beneath the canopy of death magic, he wielded his necromantic abilities like extensions of his own ironbound will. Arkhan reached out through the winds of magic and directed undead regiments as easily as moving the pieces upon a gaming board. The majority of his forces he ordered into line to reinforce Krell's army.

Arkhan took a different tack when commanding the tomb kings who had defected to join Nagash. He was careful to appear diplomatic, bidding them to action, rather than ordering them outright. He had spent years as vizier to Nagash, and Arkhan had learned to coerce others by wielding words as effectively as using a sword. Although thousands of years separated that time from the present, those skills were as persuasive as they had ever been.

King Nebwaneph, the traitor of Mahrak, was not used to hearing Arkhan's voice inside his head. However, prompted by Arkhan's unusually politic bidding, the king marched his archer legions to the edge of the chasm, where they opened fire upon the war statues that stood immobile on the other side. King Omanhan III and his sons were requested to hold the eastern flank.

Arkhan saw that other war constructs were marching along the miles-long chasm, seeking its termination so they could continue the fight. More problematically, he saw Ramhotep leading a team of necrotects towards the rift's edge. Accompanying them marched a whole battalion of necrolith colossi – the Guardians of Phakth – out of the Charnel Valley. It would only be a matter of time before they bridged the gap.

From the Tower of Ptra, Settra looked down upon the battle. Although many thousands had already been destroyed, Settra knew that the arrival of Arkhan the Black upon the battlefield signified the conflict's true beginning. He did not doubt that Nagash would be close behind, although it was also possible that the Great Necromancer was already there, disguised in some fashion.

King Settra had been angered to see the broken warriors from Numas raised once more to fight against him. That emotion paled in comparison to the incandescent rage that overwhelmed the King of Nehekhara when he saw Nebwaneph and his legions from Mahrak fighting as part of Arkhan's host. These were not mindless husks, but his own subjects rebelling against him.

Sorcery and betrayal had ever been Nagash's methods. It was time to meet the usurpers upon the battlefield, it was time to show them with blade and spear the true power that ruled Nehekhara. Settra called for his chariot to be made ready.

Meanwhile, through relentless commands and the inexhaustible labour of the war statues, Ramhotep had already fashioned three bridges across the fissure. Two were made from broken stone pillars the colossi had carried out of Khemri. In perfect stride the jackal-headed statues passed through the main gates before hoisting the massive columns to span the gap. The third structure was made by the bronze necro colossus, who laid himself down, his mighty form straddling both sides of the crevasse. More bridges were on the way, as a procession of war constructs hauled forth broken walls and temple rooftops to serve as makeshift platforms and gangways.

Arkhan made his foes pay dearly for the bridgehead, and had he more archer legions or war engines then he could have reaped an even greater toll. Even with the necrotects making battlefield repairs, several of the larger stone constructs were felled. One of the column bridges was struck by repeated catapult shots; a dozen ushabti sent tumbling down as the stone pillar eventually cracked apart and collapsed inwards.

The bottleneck at the bridge crossings forced the war statues to attack Arkhan's battle lines in smaller groups – a lone warsphinx here, a single ushabti legion there. This proved less overwhelming than the previous charge, as vastly superior numbers met the stone monstrosities, eventually working to pull them down. However, it allowed valuable time for the necrotects to further engineer more and better crossings. By the time nine bridges were in operation, the legions within Khemri were released to join the battle.

Out they marched in serried ranks, one massive formation after another. They streamed forth from the main gate – two hundred warriors at a time walking abreast from out of those enormous bronze doors. First came the Jackal Legions, the Sable Spears, and the Desert Vultures. Following in turn were all the great Legions of Khemri, their names carved into thousands upon thousands of obelisks, each representing a glorious victory. Through those gates came the fully awakened might of the most powerful city of Nehekhara. But troops did not just pour from the main gates, they issued forth from dozens of lesser portals along the long walls. From the Pylon Gates of Phertra came the chariots – driving out and forming up in their fighting formations. So many chariots entered the flood plains that the plumes of dust from

their passing rose up higher than the city wall. The massed cavalry that emerged from the Gates of the Six Towers and the Gates of Ptra shook the desert floor with the pounding of their hooves.

Sure that Nagash and his underlings would strike towards Khemri, Settra had demanded a tribute of troops from each of the Great Cities. Many of the most famed fighting legions of Nehekhara now strode out of Khemri, including the Khepra Guard, the noble-born warriors of Rasetra's Crocodile Squadron and the gilded Golden Host of Mahrak. Even in their thousands, not one of these regiments, however, was granted the honour of exiting from the main gates.

And finally, to a fanfare of hornblasts came the most famous of all Khemri's warriors: the Hawk Legions of Settra. Time and again they had set forth to battle, proudly marching beneath those mighty gates. Always they returned victorious. For an enemy to see their turquoise shields upon the battlefield was to know defeat. Their legions stood ten thousand warriors strong. Although this accounted for less than a tenth of Settra's total infantry, numbers alone could not account for their prowess. In life it had been said that each blade wielded by the Hawk Legions was reputed to equal four weapons of the enemy. In death, the Hawk Legions bettered that percentage, but the dead no longer boasted of their feats.

As the soldiers struck their shields with blade or spear and stamped in perfect step, the war horns reached a blaring crescendo. From inside the city the ceremonial gongs sounded from every temple.

Thus did Settra, Lord of Khemri, the King of Kings, the rightful Ruler of Earth, Sky and the Four Horizons ride to war. The Crown of Nehekhara sat upon his brow, the Blessed Blade of Ptra in his mighty grasp, and war burned in his hollow eye sockets.

The ratman padded across the dust-covered floor with inhuman stealth. The inner tombs within the burial chambers of the royal pyramids of Numas were full of cunningly designed deathtraps. But neither pit nor poisoned dart did harm to the black-robed messenger. He had an uncanny knack for not setting off such devices, and the agility to leap, duck or dodge the killing effects of the ones he could not bypass or circumvent.

He was Skrikk Skrittleclaw, Adept of the Black Hood, one of the killing claws of Clan Eshin. His senses – vision, smell, taste, touch and hearing – were all strained to the utmost. Skrikk's whiskers brushed against a trip wire of ancient sinew, and he knew he had missed stepping upon that last false cobblestone by less than a toe-claw.

Deeper and deeper Skrikk probed the catacombs, until he came to a door marked with powerful hieroglyphics. He recognised what he was looking for – the Sign of the Scarab and the sacred symbols of Usirian, Lord of the Underworld. He held his breath while he tapped the sequence, breathing again only when the stone portal slid open.

In the silence of the tombs, the rasping stone on stone rumble made Skrikk's insides turn to liquid and he fought to hold back the pressing need to squirt the musk of fear.

As the echoes from the stone portal's opening died away, a voice boomed out of the darkened tomb beyond. 'Who dares?' Clicking sounds moved closer.

Prostrating himself upon the ground, his muzzle touching the floor, Skrikk spoke, his voice a squeaking whisper, his usage of the ancient language awkward. 'Greetings, Prince Apophas,' said the skaven. 'I am here as an ambassador of the Council of Thirteen. The rulers of the Under-Empire bid that I bring you tidings. I speak-tell of a soul that has thwarted the tombs too long. I talk-squeak of a spirit coveted by Death itself. Will you hear-listen?'

Skrikk peered into the pervading darkness, awaiting an answer. The scuttling, scratching sounds of a million segmented exoskeletons edged nearer.

'Tell me,' said a cold voice that spoke so closely in Skrikk's ear that the master assassin started.

'Good-good,' said Skrikk, his muzzle twitching beyond his control, 'hear me you will. I speak of one who would master death, who would cast down the Gods of the Underworld and take their place. Once-ago he did the same to the desert kingdom, made it the place of dead things. You know of whom I speak.'

Met only by hissing silence, Skrikk went on.

'He is not immune to death, not yet. Much reward for killing one that has escaped death for so long. There was a sword-blade that could kill-slay the Great Death, but it was stolen from us. My masters bade me tell you of a sword-blade that is near to you – greatest of weapons in Nehekhara. Very slay-kill. It is called the Destroyer of Eternities. In the great-triangle of King Nekhesh it lies.'

Skrikk winced as suddenly things crawled over him. Large beetles swarmed over him in their rush to get out of the door. He felt their heavy carapaces and grasping claws, but thankfully not their rending mandibles. And then they were gone – a rushing sound heading out of the tomb.

He had done it; Prince Apophas was gone. Skrikk was so relieved he did not register the hissing sounds at first. Before leaving, the Scarab Lord had opened all the snake pens on his way out.

Through tireless effort, many bridges spanned the rift. The majority of these were opposite the main gates, but others had been staggered along the crevasse's length. The steady procession of legions from the main gate was hardly slowed in its crossing. They drove off Arkhan's few archer legions in good order before beginning to assemble in fighting formation.

The legions of Khemri arrayed themselves in neat blocks behind banners of gold. Soon Settra's main battle line was longer and deeper than Arkhan's host, which was only now finishing off the last of the war constructs. Those animated statues that had not already rushed the foe, perhaps a third of their original number, assumed positions scattered throughout the newly formed line. Their bulky forms towered over the rank and file.

A sea of turquoise shields faced Arkhan's host, with skeletal archers interspaced between the massed spear companies. Already at the very edge of their range, the bowmen had begun to send hissing flights of arrows to rake the foe. They kept up these volleys as the host began its advance – the whole battle line clattering forward at a steady, methodical pace. But the vast centre did not advance alone.

Not one, but two other army groups had formed as they marched out from under Khemri's walls. The chariot host of King Rakaph, a master of wheeled warfare, attacked from the east. On Rakaph's right side rode his fourth and favoured son, Prince Nepharr. Upon the back of his chariot Nepharr carried the Dawn Banner. An heirloom of the Second Dynasty – the troops who marched under it had never known defeat.

Looping to the west to avoid the crevasse came another force – a mix of infantry, cavalry and chariot commanded by King Phurthotek of Bhagar. He strode to battle on foot and fought at the centre of his Immortal Guard. To him were entrusted the tithed forces from all around Nehekhara – their different coloured banners and shields representing all the Great Cities. Flanking King Phurthotek were the Slaughterers of Bhagar – a pair of necrosphinxes who had felled kings and monsters alike.

Settra had commanded them all to war, and there would be no mercy.

Khenteka, the Hierophant of Khemri, and his league of liche priests let their presence on the battlefield be known. From out of the blackened skies they called forth a rain of skulls. Like death-faced meteors these streaked downwards, trailing plumes of fire behind them. Flexing his indomitable will, Arkhan banished half of the incoming barrage, but the remainder struck home. The streaking skulls exploded upon impact, rising up into whirlwinds, skullstorms that tore apart entire regiments, scattering their remnants far from their burial mounds to the north.

From the centre of his line, mounted atop his dread abyssal, Arkhan the Black surveyed the oncoming blocks of infantry advancing at their methodical pace. Clouds of arrows hissed downwards. His own battle lines held steady – the remaining necromancers and renegade priests doing their best to restore those felled by missile fire. In his last calm moment before the ensuing clash, Arkhan stretched out his will, seeking contact with his master. Arkhan had never liked this plan. It was not sacrifice that galled him, for he had died for his master, and would do so again. Rather, it was trusting others. Arkhan hoped all was prepared by those inside Khemri, for he did not know how long he would last against the full might of Settra.

The first wave of attackers met, crushing together with shield-shivering violence. Undead warriors slashed and stabbed, their shields colliding. Skulls were split and ribcages smashed. Across the floodplains the battle lines collapsed into each other, becoming a thousand swirling melees. Like a tide, the battle ebbed and flowed; pushing forward in one area, steady resistance blocking it in another. In several places Arkhan's wall of troops collapsed, or was smashed aside. Like water flowing through breaks in a dam, the floods of enemy soldiers pushed deeper into Arkhan's host.

The deepest headway was made by an undeniable charge of a battalion of warsphinxes, six of their number flattening Arkhan's forces a regiment at a time. As the lumbering beasts lost momentum, they were forced into drawn-out combats with the skeletal hordes. Although one-sided, at least the sheer numbers of warriors was slowing down the advance of the stone constructs. Behind them, however, the Ebony Guard now charged, pushing past the beleaguered sphinxes. They had nearly cut their way through Arkhan's army, and as he had no reserves, he was forced to personally counter the assault.

Landing before the oncoming tomb guard, Arkhan flung out his skeletal hand and canted a fell verse. He unleashed a sizzling flash that burrowed into the sands before the feet of the Ebony Guard. Instinctively, the mummified warriors paused, hunkering momentarily behind their high black shields. Then, when nothing happened they advanced anew towards Arkhan, blades high. Before they had gone ten paces, however, they were scattered by a column of skulls that burst out of the desert floor. The tower was wreathed in balefire, and atop it sat a grim pedestal, a deadly throne of power. With two beats of its leathery-skinned pinions, Arkhan's mount alighted upon this conduit. A crackling nimbus of power flickered around Arkhan and coursed through his bones. The liche priest laughed as he shaped the



winds of magic into his own raging torrents of doom, sending forth bolts of oblivion that blasted the Ebony Guard to dust.

On both sides, the warriors continued to press forward, driven relentlessly on by the lash-like will of their masters. In the centre there was no room for the re-animated fallen to stand up; many were crushed to splintered bone, and those fragments further pulverised by the heaving masses. When the waves of re-animating magic swept over them, these disparate parts would reassemble only to be crushed down again a second, third or fourth time, often never able to rise and strike back in that fearsome grind of combat. Curved khopesh met rusty blade from the barbaric north, ghoul claw raked sun-bleached skull and turquoise-coloured shields bearing intricate hieroglyphics.

The sound of thousands of hooves pounding the desert heralded the onset of the chariot army of King Rakaph. In a cloud of dust and arrows, horse archers wheeled away, revealing a mile-wide line of chariots, their skeletal steeds just breaking into a gallop, their wheels a blur. As they closed, the charioteer archers sent forth their own hail of arrows as the traitors of Mahrak stood ready to receive the enemy charge.

In the centre, the Hawk Legions of Settra were a storm of blades – their turquoise shields pushing the northern hordes back. The Hawk Legions cut down ghoul-packs, destroyed zombies in their hundreds and smashed apart a half-dozen skeleton regiments raised from bone-pits of the former slave mines deep below Cripple Peak. Not until the Hawk Legions ran up against the Nagashizzar Guard did they meet their equals. Standing toe-to-toe, these massive heavy infantry formations battered each other, trading blow for blow in a clash of blades on ancient armour. The black-armoured wights of the northern barrows stood firm against the bright shields of the mummified tomb guard. Behind each force, the necromancers and liche priests gravitated, pouring forth all their powers to raise the fallen and boost the powers of their own fighters, as flashes of witchfire lit the underside of the swirling canopy of black cloud.

Into this onslaught rode Settra – the Chariot of the Gods cleaving a path through the ranks of the foe, crunching over the bones of those he rode down. In the distance Settra saw Arkhan atop a hovering creature of bone, and he steered his chariot in the Liche King's direction.

It was then that Khatep, eldest of liche priests, moved from the shadows to bar Settra's path. The Great King of Nehekhara was outraged that the exile dared walk Khemri's streets, let alone stay his king's righteous hand, but the ancient priest would not be cowed. Instead, he spoke of the Destroyer of Eternities, buried in the tomb of King Nekesh, a weapon so mighty it could even lay Nagash low. When he had finished speaking, Khatep bowed his head and awaited the deathblow he knew would be his. Settra, his rage turned cold as night by the priest's impertinence, did not keep Khatep waiting long for oblivion.

On and on the battle surged. Without pause, without pity the undead fought. Relentlessly they battered and stabbed each other, crushing the fallen underfoot. Tarnished swords broke, sun-brittle spears shivered to splinters, but interminably, the skeletal warriors fought on. If they had nothing else to use, they tore at each other with jagged bits of broken blade or their bony hands. They knew only the implacable wills of their masters or kings, and they had been commanded to slay their foes.

The Jackal Legion of Khemri numbered five hundred strong when they crashed into the enemy on the far flank. Headlong they charged into the Iron Brigade, skeletons raised from a nameless battlefield to the north, identified only by their helms and blades wrought of iron. For two days without respite they clashed, chopping the opposition down and being hacked apart themselves. It was a battle of attrition that whittled both sides, so by the third day there were but twelve of the Jackal Legion locking blades with seven members of the Iron Brigade. They swung their weapons with as much vigour as they had three days before at the battle's start; the only difference was that the desert floor around them was now littered with a carpet of broken bones.

As the last of the skeletons from the north was shattered, the field of shattered bones attracted the attention of Dieter Helsnicht. He had been fighting up and down the battle line, but always he sought out fertile sites such as this. With a keening call upon the Wind of Shyish, the master necromancer blew unlife back into the fallen warriors. So potent was that hellish incantation that all the skeletons – both Jackal Legion and Iron Brigade – lurched up together, the mismatched cadavers now fighting for the same side. The few remaining undead that fought for the Nehekharans were no longer the victors, but were instead surrounded and swiftly hewn down.

And so it went all across the battlefield, only it was more disordered. Even those warriors whose blades found their mark were themselves hacked apart from behind or pulled down by those trampled, but not yet destroyed. Bolts of magic scythed through the ranks, howling winds that aged bones to dust roared past, or eldritch vigour coursed through one side or the other. While the spells lasted, such formations left behind their characteristically spasmodic attacks, becoming fast and fluid for a time, allowing for unprecedented periods of martial prowess. The ground shook with the unstoppable advance of enormous stone necrotitans as they ploughed by, leaving wakes of destruction through the press of fighters.

Most often, it was all for naught. In an instant, necromancy negated days of struggle and hard-won ground, restoring those that had fallen. In some cases combatants slew the same foe repeatedly, only to find that they had been raised up again, returning the balance of forces back to what it had been when the fighting first broke out. Where the fighting was thickest, or where a warrior managed to chop down a necromancer or liche priest, the killing could proceed at a rate faster than any magic could replace.

After four days of non-stop battle, the armies of Settra were gradually gaining the upper hand. Despite Helsnicht summoning back entire armies at a time, and Arkhan's ability to unleash swathes of sorcerous destruction, Nagash's Dark Lords could only just counter Settra's greater numbers. However, they had no answer to the might of the war constructs and the devastating charges by the chariot army of King Rakaph. Also, a new weapon had emerged out of Khemri.

In the intense gloom beneath the unnatural skies a light stabbed across the battlefield. The Keeper of the Casket had magically summoned forth a dais of bone. Atop that skull mound sat a casket inscribed with horrific wards of malediction. Upon opening that ornate sarcophagus blinding beams flashed forth, pulsing up and down Arkhan's battle line. Where the light struck, skeletons and zombies collapsed, the magic binding them together broken. This was no illuminating beacon, but screaming streams of the tormented souls of those imprisoned by the tomb kings.

The torrent of tortured spirits from the casket of souls struck Arkhan's dread abyssal as he flew above the battle. Arkhan had no counter to this magic, for his mind had been elsewhere. He had just completed a long and arduous incantation to restore a large portion of his right flank where King Phurthotek and the Slaughterers of Bhagar were demolishing all in their path. Momentarily blinded and his mount crippled, Arkhan had no choice but to spiral downwards.

Three times during the battle Settra had pressed his chariot deep into the onslaught, seeking to challenge the reviled liche. Three times Arkhan had seen Settra coming and, instead of facing the king, had fled. This time, however, Settra would not be denied. Smashing his chariot through the press, the king crunched over the bone-strewn field. He was met by a withering beam of power – but the King of Kings was not without protection from the arcane arts. As if it had struck an invisible barrier, the dark magic diffused into harmless flares of purple smoke before it could strike Settra. The skull-faced scarab brooch of Usirian – God of the Underworld – saved the king, who closed fast upon Nagash's vizier.

Arkhan the Black had long plagued Settra – his distant machinations and constant attempts to corrupt the liche priests had marked him for death. Yet always, Arkhan had escaped. Settra swung an arcing blow with his Blessed Blade of Ptra. Leaving a trail of flame behind it,

the stroke beheaded Arkhan's dread abyssal with a single flash. Settra had just enough time to aim a looping backstroke before his chariot raced by and he knew much satisfaction as he felt its burning-hot edge slice solidly into and through Arkhan's ribcage.

As Settra wheeled around for another pass, a second war chariot arrived. This was Settra's herald, Nekaph, who was never far from his liege. He swung his flail of skulls to finish off Arkhan, but the blow never landed. The flame-blackened liche spat a word of power and motioned with his gnarled hands. Nekaph, in the act of winding up for his triumphant strike, instead seized up utterly. As Arkhan clenched his skeletal fingers with a sound like cracking branches, so too did Nekaph collapse inwards upon himself. Nekaph's mummified body fell as his spirit was siphoned away – torn free by the dark magic and cast into the winds of oblivion.

Seeing his herald destroyed by black magic, Settra bellowed in rage. He lowered his long-bladed weapon like a lance and made to destroy the Liche King. Zombies moved to intercede, but Settra simply ran them down – nothing would stay his wrath this time. Yet Arkhan, even with his ribs smashed and burnt, was a master at eluding judgement in this world and the next. Time and again he had disappeared from battles lost to let others pay for a defeat. With a hasty incantation, Arkhan surrounded himself with dark spirits, cloaking himself behind a veil of blackness.

Settra, however, would not be denied. As he channelled his vengeance through his weapon, the Blade of Ptra glowed like the Sun God himself. It sliced through the pall surrounding the liche, catching him before he could slip into its concealing dark. At the bite of Settra's holy weapon, a cry of rage and pain echoed across the battlefield. Arkhan was rent in two.

Called in desperation by their master, a pack of dimly luminescent crypt-ghouls was loping towards Settra like jackals after a lion's kill. Settra tethered the halves of Arkhan's body with stout chains to the back of his chariot. Then, joining his royal guard, they swept forward into the glowing pack beasts, pulverising them under their wheels before driving off back to the city. Behind him dragged what was left of Nagash's vizier and chief lieutenant, the ravaged remains leaving a viscous smear in a line toward the city gates.

High above the warring undead, the black clouds tore apart, revealing skies of deepest blue. Sunlight stabbed down upon the battlefield as the swirling clouds broke and dispersed with unnatural swiftness. Until then, the passage of time had been impossible to reckon under the black pall. It was now clear, however, that it was dawn in the middle hours, and a new day was breaking.

Ankhmare knew it had happened, felt again the pressing presence in his mind. He went to the Temple of Usirian, God of the Underworld, where the preparations had been carefully laid out. Nerves wracked him – never in the thousands of years of service had he attempted magic such as this.

Four other priests joined him, washing their hands in the sacred oils and rubbing the holy sands on the few leathery bits of skin that still clung to their parched bones. Ankhmare wondered which would ask questions first. And then, Settra arrived.

'I have done as I said. The body of Arkhan the Black,' stated the king, gesturing to the dusty lumps chained to the back of his chariot. 'You will complete the ritual and ensure his spirit will never again pass beyond the Realm of Usirian,' commanded Settra.

Ankhmare nodded. 'Yes, Oh King of Kings. I, Ankhmare, Master of Embalming, Keeper of the Sacred Oils, will not be extending the life of this one's body, but wholly ending it.'

Satisfied, Settra watched the priests unhook the remains before he returned to his chariot and was gone.

The priests busied themselves with their preparations. The body was placed in the sarcophagus. Ankhmare chanted, caressing the oils onto the burnt body of the fallen. It was possible several of the priests noticed him, for he felt their stirrings.

Pressing on before the questions began, Ankhmare put forth the hieratic urns and canopic jars. Each of the liche priests grasped one of the urns and formed a circle around the sarcophagus. Only when all was ready did Ankhmare bring forth the ancient tome, its skin binding ancient and cracked. Knowledge of the whereabouts of that book was a death sentence, but the voice had told him exactly where to find it.

'My brother Ankhmare,' said Nebamun, 'These are not the usual accoutrements for the work of sealing a spirit into the Realm of Souls.'

Ankhmare's stern look held them, at least until he read aloud the first spell of binding that froze the priests in place. Though paralysed, they could still see and feel, and Ankhmare sensed their rising panic. The second and third reading came straight from that most feared of books in the world.

Even as the priests' spirits were drained into the urns, something within Arkhan's body was released. With a horrific rattle, Arkhan the Black coughed forth a stream of black cloud that slowly rose up and materialised. It crackled with fell energies.

Ankhmare bowed low. 'Master.'

Nagash rose to his full height, his eye sockets gleaming with balefire. He was through the city wards, and beyond the reach of Settra's armies. The route to the Black Pyramid was open.



Settra did not ride straight back into battle after delivering the remains of Arkhan the Black to the Temple of Usirian. Instead, he drove his chariot down the empty avenues of his city. The distant sounds of battle mixed with the echoes his chariot made as it wound through the narrow maze between burial pyramids and passed the massive colonnaded temples. Above, the skies had cleared, and once more the desert baked beneath the hammering sunlight. Settra went to the burial tomb of King Nekesh – for the words of the priest Khatep lingered on his mind.

Settra found the place of honour where the lost king's weapon should have been – but it was gone. An outline of dust showed where the sword had sat on the dais. Settra cursed. Khatep and the priests had always let him down. Full of disquieting thoughts, Settra drove back to the main gates and to battle. He did not look back or he would have witnessed the strange pulse of darkness emanate from the Temple of Usirian or seen the momentary shimmer from the Black Pyramid.

As Settra would soon discover when he exited the city gates, the battle had taken a new turn. More enemies had arrived to join the massive clashes that sprawled across the floodplain. The newcomers had travelled down the Mortis River and disembarked an endless stream of zombies. At long last, the vampires had come.

Much to Mannfred von Carstein's growing ire, Luthor Harkon had insisted upon several raids along their river journey. These minor battles did no more than slow them down and capture tomb plunder. But at last, the armada had neared the city and Harkon ordered his transports run aground. Soon every ship was emptying its holds, and waves of zombies were shambling towards the battle that raged just before the shadows of Khemri's walls. The addition of two powerful vampire lords and many tens of thousands more infantry were much needed reinforcements, and they arrived none too soon.

The loss of Arkhan was a sore blow for the minions of Nagash. The cloud of death magic had also granted a boon to necromancers, so its disappearance made it harder for them to raise back their dead, although there was still an abundance of power drifting on the Wind of Shyish.

To his surprise, Dieter Helsnicht realised he no longer needed the aid of the black clouds. He could still wield fell energies like never before. Hundreds of undead answered his every summons. A few times he felt opposing liche priests attempting to counter his spells, but their insignificant efforts did nothing to disrupt his flow of necromantic might. All it did was alert Helsnicht to their presence, allowing him to track them down. Although dried, he found that the remains of the liche priests of Nehekhara satisfied his cravings. With each new consumption, his ability to see further into the spectral realms and his influence over its dark energies increased.

While Helsnicht's prodigious feats of necromancy allowed the eastern flank to replace its losses and hold fast, the Nagashizzar Guard almost single-handedly held the centre intact. The western flank of Nagash's minions, however, had been in great peril. Arrayed against their massed hordes were the tomb kings' contingents from all the great cities. There, King Phurthotek had clashed in battle against Ulffik the Blackhanded, the right hand of Krell.

In the midst of his Immortal Guard, King Phurthotek clove through Ulffik's troops. To Phurthotek's flanks were the necrosphinxes, the Slaughterers of Bhagar. They had thus far proved all but unstoppable. They waded through the hordes, scything their own paths

through row after row of foes, their powerful clawed feet stomping those who avoided the guillotine-like sweeps of the razor-edge blades.

Although he possessed none of the genius for war or tactics of his liege lord, in one way he was like Krell – Ulffik was a warrior born. Raising his blade of bone-biting steel, the wight king prepared to plug the growing gap in his battle line with himself and his Grimguard – lesser wights bound to his own unbreakable will.

The battle was over before it had started. The skull-faced Slaughterer of Bhagar fixed its eyeless stare upon the wight king, singling him out. The necrosphinx's blade – taller than a temple column – sliced straight through Ulffik the Blackhanded, effortlessly shearing the warrior in two. The Grimguard fared no better, their blades breaking against the ebony-stone statues. The whole of the western flank would have been open for King Phurthotek, but for the newly arriving zombie legions headed by Mannfred von Carstein and the Pirate King, Luthor Harkon.

Quick to assess the greatest threat, Mannfred sent shadowy darts of dark magic against the towering necrosphinxes. Although those fell blasts might have struck down an entire regiment, they hardly phased the war statues. The only damage they sustained was some scorching on their metal breastplates and a few crack lines appearing in their stone bodies. No battle cry or roars of rage issued from the Slaughterers of Bhagar, but they bulled their way through the zombie hordes, seeking out the source of the arcane bolts.

It was Mannfred's plan to keep as many zombies as he could between himself and those gargantuan foes, using magic to gradually break them apart. He quickly realised, noticing the speed with which the necrosphinxes were ploughing through the walking cadavers, that this was simply not an option. Several thoughts flashed through his mind: first, that it was going to take everything he had just to stabilise this side of the battle, and secondly, where in damnation were Arkhan or Nagash? There was no more time for musing, as his blades flashed out to greet the first of the gigantic butchers.

Into this stalemate rode Settra the Imperishable. He had marked the first high point of human civilization by conquering the known world. None could stand before Settra then, and his skills of commanding a battle had only grown during his long and deathless reign. At his side rode his newly appointed herald, Nebbetthar, champion of the Royal Guard and next to be so honoured as to carry the king's personal icon. As their chariot travelled along the contours of the battle line, Nebbetthar watched in awe as his king manoeuvred his troops. Settra's flickering thoughts were commands that shifted legions; his will was law.

Settra bade Rakaph pull back his chariots, for he had lost their shock attack value by allowing them to be mired into the press of combat. Spying a narrow gap in the foe's centre, Settra boldly sent the Jackal Legions through it. Those that fought upon either side of the gap were locked in their own struggles and could do nothing to prevent the breakthrough. Having penetrated the enemy lines, the Jackal Legions, like their namesake, could now worry and harass the foe. Thanks to their flanking attack, some progress was at last denting the ranks of the hitherto unbreakable Nagashizzar Guard.

Nebbetthar could see immediate gains from his liege's deft troop repositioning. Slowly, inevitably, the enemy battle line began to crumble before the relentless pressure.

With the black cloud cover gone, the battle was now marked by the rise and fall of the sun. Not that the undead slowed whether beneath blazing heat or the green-tinted light of the unnaturally large moon, Morrslieb. Unfettered by mortal concerns, on and on they warred – an endless clash, a grim and skeletal parody of the vast and eternal wars fought in the north, where the Realm of Chaos spilled over.

Dieter Helsnicht looked out and rejoiced. No one else had seen the spectral pulse, the great surge of the Wind of Shyish. He alone knew what that change foretold.

'Master,' Helsnicht crooned.

A whole new realm had recently opened up to the necromancer, for he could now see the powers that flowed through the Land of the Dead. He could touch the purple strands of Shyish. If he closed his eyes and concentrated he could view the pathways downwards to the Underworld. And he saw what waited there. An ancient power, cold and faceless, looked out upon him. And for a brief moment, Helsnicht quailed.

Then, pressing upon his will, he felt a singular voice speaking into his head, which replaced the usual chatter that had taken over his thoughts. This voice was different, and Helsnicht was overcome with awe and reverence while the words echoed in his mind.

***'I HAVE NEED OF YOUR AID, DIETER HELSNICHT. COME WITH ME INTO THE UNDERWORLD,'* boomed Nagash's voice.**

And with that, the voice in his head was gone; the other voices that had filled his mind of late slowly returned. Their presence mattered not, for Dieter Helsnicht knew what to do. He saw a path, a ghostly trail to the spectral realm. His master was waiting for him there.

With a rasping convulsion, Arkhan emerged out of cold oblivion and was suddenly aware again. He ached. It was not a pain of the body, but of the soul. His spirit was tethered to his broken shell by only the barest of threads. As Arkhan gained more awareness, he recognised where he was – the Temple of Usirian, God of the Underworld. His mangled body lay upon a slab sarcophagus. Before him were four Mortuary Priests, each clasping a opened hieratic jar with bony fingers. These were the ones that the traitor priest Ankhmare had siphoned – their souls trapped within the jars, and then used to power the spell that unbound Nagash's spirit. It was the residual effects from that ritual that had sparked Arkhan back to consciousness.

Arkhan had not been in favour of this plan, deeming it too dangerous. Only by draining much of his power could Nagash bind himself within Arkhan. The Great Necromancer had expelled much of his own spirit into the clouds itself. That power had gone into the Black Pyramid – a monolithic repository built to trap the energies of the winds of magic. If his master could only make it within his sanctuary supreme of old then he would be able to reclaim his full spirit of old – and more besides.

Long ago, Arkhan remembered that Nagash had attempted to place himself above the gods of Nehekhara, demanding worship in lieu of those elder deities. There would be no repeating that half measure this time, thought Arkhan as he attempted to pull his upper body together with the severed lower half. If Nagash reclaimed his powers and absorbed all the collected energies within the Black Pyramid – then the old gods themselves would know fear.

Miles away from the temple, in the necropolis and burial tombs of sprawling Khemri, an odd pursuit was taking place. Despite his best efforts, Ankhmare trailed far behind. As a member of the Mortuary Cult, he had embalmed the corpses of kings and priests for over five thousand years, and he had employed every bit of his craft and knowledge upon his own body. There was, however, only so much he could achieve against such staggering age. Even bound by strips of sacred cloth and anointed with blessed unguents, his mummified limbs were balky, his gait a stagger. As such, Ankhmare struggled to keep pace with his master.

Nagash's towering presence filled the alleyways. He did not stride down the passageways that wound between the pyramids of the dead, but instead glided over the cobbled surface. Amidst all the labyrinthine twists and turns, Ankhmare lost sight of his master several times. Once, he turned the corner just in time to catch a glimpse of trailing robes, and at another juncture he was forced to follow Nagash's trace – a lingering chill that defied the baking heat of the desert. Yet, even if he lost the path, it mattered not. Ankhmare knew their final destination.

At last, Ankhmare emerged from a narrow alley. Before him hovered Nagash, his tattered robes drifting upon a non-existent breeze. Above the Great Necromancer loomed the Black Pyramid – they were under its enormous shadow. But Settra had not put all his faith in his wall of war constructs or his vast armies upon the floodplains. The entrance to the Black Pyramid was guarded.

At the base of the dark monolith prowled not just any warsphinx, but the Golden Guardian of Ptra. Its lion-like body was hewn of black marble, and the construct's armour and stylised mane were made of purest gold. It glinted brightly and stood out from the dark mountain that rose behind it. Pacing back and forth like some enormous predatory feline, the sphinx stared balefully, never once taking its hollow eyes off Nagash. The creature's tail was scorpion-like, replete with venom-dripping stinger. This lashed back and forth, cat-like, in the sphinx's mounting anger.

It was Nagash who broke the stand-off. Even from thirty paces behind, Ankhmare could feel the sudden surge of energies as the Great Necromancer lowered his staff. A blast of wind whipped towards the sphinx, whorls of sand mixing with the phantasmal skulls that howled within its midst. The buffeting gust was a wind of ages – a curse that aged those who felt its foul breath, advancing them hundreds, if not thousands of years in an instant. Made of enduring marble, the sphinx weathered the spell and suffered only minute fractures. The warriors and bone howdah upon its back were not so fortunate, however – aging to dust and swirling off into the air with the final gust.

With a roar of challenge, the Golden Guardian lumbered forward – its every footfall sending vibrations that shook the ground. Nagash chanted fell syllables that summoned forth a stream of spirits from the very air, their ethereal forms gliding out to surround and strike at the oncoming stone beast. Where weapons of steel would have shattered upon the warsphinx's nigh-impenetrable body of black marble, the spectre-blades clove hilt-deep. Lunging and biting at the encircling spirit warriors, the warsphinx came onwards, its front paws swiping out to crush Nagash.

Nagash's floating form pulled backwards so that the enormous claws tore only at his trailing robes. He again chanted unspeakable words and reached into the winds of magic with his mind. Uttering another enchantment, Nagash unlocked a flow of dark energy; it enwreathed his form, so that he exuded a crackling halo of shadow.

Ankhmare would have willingly sacrificed himself for his master if it might have done him any service. Yet he knew his wizened form could

do naught against such strength as the warsphinx displayed. His own magic was in binding spirits and the longevity of mummification, and offered his master no help. So Ankhmare watch in awe as the two powerful beings clashed.

The Golden Guardian of Ptra gave a grating bellow. Its fanged jaws attempted to clamp down on the spectral warriors that encircled it, but its efforts were futile. Distracted as it was, the marble beast's great claws also failed to connect with Nagash. After its forelimb smashed a crater into the cobbled road, the Great Necromancer reached out himself – his own bony claw raking the stone. Only then did Ankhmare understand the dark energy surrounding Nagash. His very touch was full of death magic, withering anything he caught within his grasp. Although his contact with the warsphinx was brief, man-sized chunks of marble chipped and sheared away. Now it was the Golden Guardian of Ptra's turn to edge backwards. But it was too slow, for Nagash thrust forward, floating high enough to plant his open hand against the warsphinx's broad chest. With a crack like thunder, the beast's armour plate cracked, the marble beneath it splintering. Into this softening crevice Nagash thrust his great staff.

Ankhmare was amazed to the see the Golden Guardian of Ptra stall, motionless for a moment, as if it and Nagash were locked in a battle of wills. The Great Necromancer shook, trembling as if from great effort. And then, starting slowly at first, the great statue began to crumble. With a last cascading avalanche of black marble, the warsphinx completely fell to ruin. Even as the cloud of marble shards settled, Nagash was gliding over the rubble. His form was bent over and moved slower, thought Ankhmare, as if it had taken a large portion of the Great Necromancer's energies to topple his foe.

Without once looking back at Ankhmare, Nagash passed under the arched opening and was gone, disappearing within the pitch-dark halls of the Black Pyramid.

Dieter Helsnicht was mad – raving mad. He realised this himself as he drifted through the halo of light, over the river of fire and entered through the gates of bone. Although he had never been here before, he knew these to be the many-pillared halls of the Underworld – the ultimate sepulchre of Nehekhara. Somewhere in this spectral realm waited the faceless deity, the Bearer of the Scales – Usirian, God of the Underworld.

Drowning out even the voices within his own head, Helsnicht could hear the multitudes crying out. For this was the Realm of Spirits. Here, worthy souls awaited a golden paradise, or a call to animate a body or war construct in the material world. Here also, the wretches and condemned lived an eternity of torment.

Then he saw his master. In this realm, Nagash's power was magnified – he was a towering titan, a walking colossus of death. He waded through the sea of souls, surrounded by his own fell nimbus.

***'I HAVE NEED OF YOU,'* boomed Nagash's voice within the fragile bounds of Helsnicht's mind.**

'I am here, master,' Helsnicht answered – although he noticed that his spirit self was not his body as he knew it, but instead a writhing, amorphous mass, and he spoke with many mouths.

On the horizon, another behemoth strode, a looming figure that patrolled the sea of souls. Usirian, the faceless god, was coming.

It was Dieter's task to read all of the Nine Books of Nagash – the full works of the Liber Mortis – and he did so simultaneously. Although he had spent most his unnaturally long lifespan searching out these tomes, he had found and read only fragments, often from poorly copied manuscripts. Now, all their dark knowledge coursed through his system. On he read, in many voices, shouting spells of binding.

Nagash and Usirian battled – the fight raging across levels beyond the comprehension of mortals. It was a war of wills, an eldritch battle and a clash between gargantuan powers. Their blows were thunderclaps, their scouring deathcurses would shrivel nations. The heavens shook with the fury of that struggle, the reverberations shaking both the material world and the Realm of Chaos.

Nagash was the greatest necromancer the world had ever known, and he drew upon the awesome power reserves hoarded within the Black Pyramid. Usirian was much diminished from the Golden Age of Nehekhara, when a nation fuelled his being with worship and fell offerings. Yet still, he was an elder god, and wielded might beyond the ken of mortals. On they struggled, each unleashing strikes that would level mountaintops.

While the faceless god battled Nagash, Dieter Helsnicht completed his ritual. With a final last wail, every soul in the Underworld was bound to Helsnicht – all of them were his to command. With a sweeping gesture from multitudinous arms, Helsnicht caused the spirit sea to rise up and smite Usirian. Not even one of the old gods could stand against the tide of souls. As the faceless god attempted to rise, Nagash struck three times, each blow reverberating across the Underworld, a death knell, a doom of gods.

Helsnicht watched as his master greedily consumed what remained of Usirian. Nagash arose, more terrible than ever.

It began as a single ripple of energy pulsing outwards from the Black Pyramid, travelling in all directions. This was followed by a terrible, keening wind that swept the battlefield. The howling gale whipped at tattered banners, tore off flaps of bandage-wrapped skin, and shrieked as it whistled through hollow eye sockets. Shadows raced across the sands, their icy blackness defying the light and heat of the sun. The largest shadow of them all moved more slowly. Implacably, it spread from the Black Pyramid, filling the immense city of Khemri. As it reached the enormous bronze gates, a pillar of dark energy burst upwards from the pyramid's pinnacle.

From out of the blackness, from out of the very realm of the dead he emerged, and doom and death gleamed from where his eyes should have been.

Nagash had come to the battle.

For the briefest of moments, the battle paused. An eerie silence settled over the sweeping floodplains as all turned. Whether animated by a soul from the Realm of Spirits or mindless husk driven only by the invisible lash of its necromantic master, all halted the battle and for a moment gave the new Lord of Death his due.

Nebbetthar, champion of the Royal Guard and newly appointed herald to King Settra, stood paralysed like the others. Then, like crashing waters rush to fill a dried riverbed, so too was he flooded with single-minded purpose. For beside Nebbetthar, King Settra, his iron-hard will unmoved by that terrible presence, had broken the spell, shouting forth a single rallying cry of defiance. Loyalty to their king was foremost to the legions, and all across the floodplain the battle began again in earnest.

For those regiments nearby, Settra issued forth strings of new commands. The archers – the Legions of the Crested Serpent – wheeled about, for they were ordered to bring down the monster coming out of the gates. At Settra's bidding, the skies were made dark with arrows.

Nebbetthar watched as Nagash roared his displeasure, his gaping maw distending impossibly to emit a swarm of insects. These were not living creatures, but blackened husks, skull-faced scarabs with ripping pincers. They descended upon the Legions of the Crested Serpent before another volley could be fired. The swarm covered them like a living carpet, reducing them to bone dust before moving on to the next target.

It was difficult for Nebbetthar to look directly upon Nagash, for he was wreathed in a baleful cloak of fell power. Something about that dark aura made Nebbetthar recall a feeling he had long since forgotten about – fear. Before him stood the end of all things, and Nebbetthar was reminded that black oblivion awaited them all. He did not want to approach Nagash, but his spirit was again steeled by his liege, for King Settra had ordered the sounding of the war horns. Lifting high his golden totem, Nebbetthar willed his own chariot into line at his king's side. They rode towards the city gates and the monster that stood before them.

There were others that would reach Nagash more quickly than Settra's chariot legions, however. The first to arrive was a bronze colossus, its great strides transporting it over legions and ravine alike. As the giant warrior bore down upon Nagash, its great sword was raised, but that blow that would never fall. Somehow, Nagash had transfixed the colossus, confounding it and breaking the will of its animating spirit. After long moments frozen in mid-swing, the metallic behemoth about-faced with a groan of contorting bronze, and strode off before smashing its way deep into the ranks of the Settra's Hawk Legions.

The remnants of a much-battered legion, the Sable Spears, advanced. When they had marched out of Khemri, they had numbered over five hundred warriors strong, although only about fifty remained. Their bronze helms were dented, their shields mauled, yet they answered the summons of their king. They marched in perfect unison towards the hovering figure before gates.

In an effort to resurrect the fallen warriors of the Sable Spears, a nearby liche priest, Almanrha, attempted to tap into the rich flow of the winds of magic. His reading of the sacred scroll ended in a gurgled strangle, the dusty papyrus bursting into flames. Almanrha's call to the Realm of Souls was answered, not by the souls of long-dead Nehekharan warriors, but by Nagash. It was he who ruled the Underworld now.

Up and down the sprawling battlefield came more anguished cries as all the liche priests made this horrible discovery. An impenetrable arcane barrier blocked the time-honoured spell that had summoned spirits from the Realm of Souls for over five thousand years. Other incantations – those that did not call upon the Underworld – worked as normal. However, with the ability to recall souls denied them, every legionnaire or war construct that fell could no longer rise again to join them. Worse still, even as their own troops would now lose the grinding battle of attrition, the scattered bones were rich fodder for enemy necromancers.

So it was that the unreinforced Sable Spears lowered their bronze-tipped spears and closed with Nagash. A storm of skulls, a whirlwind of destruction spun outwards at Nagash's command and crashed into their oncoming ranks. The maelstrom destroyed nearly half of the legionnaires – their bones scattered far. The remaining warriors, however, jabbed at the floating figure, seeking to bring Nagash down.

A slayer of gods he might be, but Nagash was not impervious to harm – not yet. A thunderous blow with his staff swept away the first row of his attackers, but more stepped over the fallen and took their place. So many spears thrust at him that some found their mark – piercing his armour. With staff and sword, Nagash finished off his assailants.

The chariots of Settra's royal guard were held up, forced to hack their way through intervening hordes. But even through the press of zombies, Nebbetthar could see that there was now but half a mile of open ground between themselves and Nagash. The Great Necromancer had been wounded, the rents in his armour dribbling an unnatural ichor. Already Nagash was chanting, using his necromantic powers to repair the damage caused by the Sable Spears. Nebbetthar saw Nagash's attempts to restore himself, and redoubled his attacks in an attempt to carve his way free of the zombies that clambered on all sides. Either they must slice out of the entangling foe, or something else must slow down Nagash.

As if in answer to Nebbetthar's wishes, the sand behind Nagash began to boil up. Unseen by the Great Necromancer, Prince Apophas, the Cursed Scarab Lord of Numas, arrived on the battlefield.

It had been Prince Apophas' curse to search the world for a soul that could take his place in eternal torment. The bargain he struck with Usirian, God of the Underworld, guaranteed that he would only know rest when he could provide a soul that deserved eternal torture as much as himself.

Riding atop a crest of surging Khepra beetles, the revenant Prince Apophas rose up from the desert. He surged higher and higher until he rode upon a tidal wave of writhing black carapaces that loomed over Nagash. At the apex of the oncoming wave was Prince Apophas, his radiant blade, the Destroyer of Eternities, gleaming brightly. That sword was a Nehekharan legend, but those who did not recognise the blade, even the most mindless corpse, could perceive the raw and deadly power of that instrument of death.

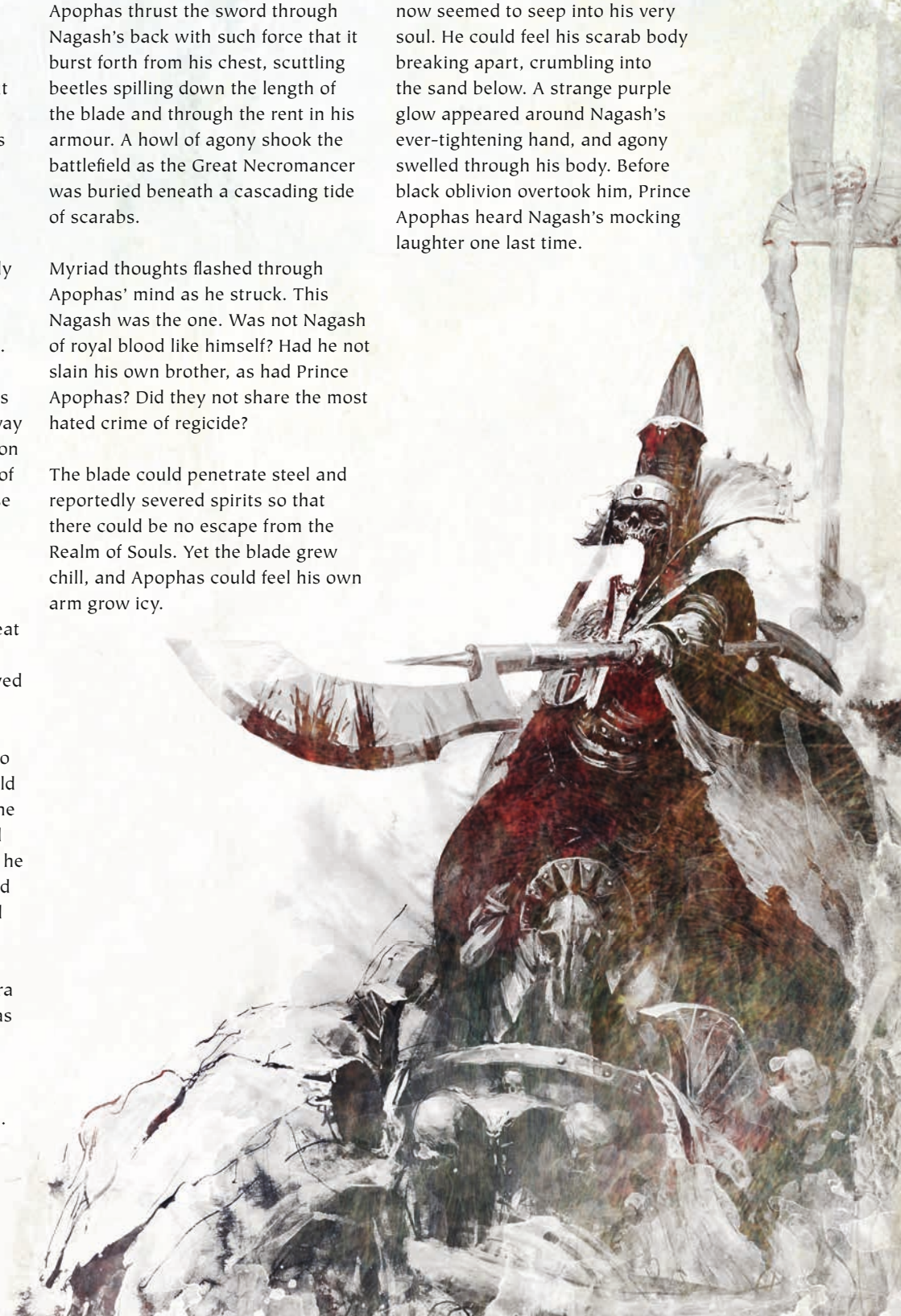
Too late Nagash sensed the impending doom descending upon him. Prince Apophas thrust the sword through Nagash's back with such force that it burst forth from his chest, scuttling beetles spilling down the length of the blade and through the rent in his armour. A howl of agony shook the battlefield as the Great Necromancer was buried beneath a cascading tide of scarabs.

Myriad thoughts flashed through Apophas' mind as he struck. This Nagash was the one. Was not Nagash of royal blood like himself? Had he not slain his own brother, as had Prince Apophas? Did they not share the most hated crime of regicide?

The blade could penetrate steel and reportedly severed spirits so that there could be no escape from the Realm of Souls. Yet the blade grew chill, and Apophas could feel his own arm grow icy.

As the Destroyer of Eternities began to fade, Apophas felt powerful hands pull him face to face with Nagash. For a moment the towering figure contemplated his captive. Apophas felt the weight of some invisible presence pressing upon him, the scrutiny of a hateful will.

The chill Prince Apophas felt earlier now seemed to seep into his very soul. He could feel his scarab body breaking apart, crumbling into the sand below. A strange purple glow appeared around Nagash's ever-tightening hand, and agony swelled through his body. Before black oblivion overtook him, Prince Apophas heard Nagash's mocking laughter one last time.







For long moments all Nebbetthar could see were zombies. Each khopesh chop sent limbs flying as the royal chariots slowly worked their way clear. In the distance, Nebbetthar had seen Prince Apophas attack, washing over Nagash in a swarm of beetles. When next he got a clear view, however, he saw Nagash had risen once more. The sword that had impaled him was gone. The Great Necromancer had a single hand upon Prince Apophas' throat, lifting the Scarab Lord high so that a trail of scarabs trickled to the ground below. It looked as if Nagash was mocking his foe while he choked the life out of him, but Nebbetthar was too far away to hear anything.

A purple nimbus of power throbbed suddenly in Nagash's hand as it clamped around the Scarab Lord's throat. With contempt, Nagash hurled Prince Apophas unceremoniously to the ground, where he exploded into a cloud of scarabs. For an instant a mass like a black pool of liquid slid across the desert before the scarabs burrowed down into the sand and were gone.

At Settra's side, Nebbetthar was hewing and lopping a path through the zombies. With great effort they had at last cleared the way for the royal chariots to pull clear of the zombies penning them in. Once they had the space to build up their own momentum, the chariots simply rolled over and crushed the few foes that remained in their way. Having fought through to the King's Banner, they were joined by the Winged Legion, a fifty-strong chariot formation. En masse, they rumbled forward.

The gathered chariots were closing swiftly with Nagash. Nebbetthar felt the Great Necromancer's piercing gaze pass over him – the hollow eye sockets penetrating his being. Nagash had seen the oncoming of Settra, had marked the great procession of war carriages that now raced towards him.

Elsewhere, across the sprawling battlefield, Nagash's army was slowly gaining the upper hand, but there were no troops nearby to intercede on his behalf. Reaching into the spectral realm, Nagash summoned forth a mighty weapon. He made a sweeping motion with his skeletal hand, and an ethereal sickle swept across the battlefield. It seemed to Nebbetthar that he heard a whoosh as an enormous invisible blade passing near. Many chariots and crew were scythed down, their bones rattling into the sand. Those that remained raced onwards, seeking to bring down Nagash, to crush him beneath their wheels. Behind them, great plumes of dust rose upwards.

When the moving wall of chariots was less than two hundred lengths of their skeletal horses from Nagash, the Great Necromancer unleashed a withering beam from out of the hollow sockets of his eyes. The bones of those that bore the brunt of its rays immediately began to blacken, so that by the time the chariots were one hundred lengths away, those affected were reduced to a walking pace – the skeletons of the crew and steeds slowly disintegrating, simply falling away with each step. By the time the remaining chariots were within fifty lengths, they had wasted away to less than nothing.

Yet Settra rode on, Nebbetthar standing proud by his side. There remained but three other chariots from the Royal Guard and some dozen of the Winged Legion. They were close enough now to hear Nagash chanting fell words of power, his upwards raised arms preparing the charioteers for what came next. From out of the sands burst skeletal hands – clawing, grasping at the steeds' pounding hooves, reaching out to grab the spinning wheels of the chariots. At first, these had little effect save for altering the sound – the hiss of the wheels rolling over sand was replaced by a noise as if they were driving over a field of bones, snapping and cracking limbs. The heavier chariots ground over this new impediment, but the lighter craft of the Winged Legion slowed and were lost, the forms rising out of the desert to overpower them.

The chariot to Nebbetthar's immediate right burst into dust, but then they were upon their foe, thrusting spears and swinging khopeshes. Nagash met them with his staff and sword. He parried Settra's decapitating strike with the Blade of Ptra, the resulting sunburst flash seeming to dispel the aura of gloom that clustered around the Great Necromancer. But he could not escape all the oncoming chariots. Nebbetthar's war carriage and the last of the Royal Guard clipped the hovering body as it attempted to glide out of the way. The collision was terrific, its impact shivering their chariots and sending them tumbling over the sands.

Rising from the sand where he had been thrown, Nebbetthar's right arm was frozen. He had dared to strike Nagash. Although his blade bounced off the black armour of his fell foe, that blow had cost him. His movements were slowed, as if he was wading through dense sand, and he struggled to turn over. Looking down upon his body, Nebbetthar could see that his legs were mangled, twisted into new angles. He could see the wreckage of his chariot, one wheel thrust upwards in the air, still spinning lazily. His banner too had been ripped apart and lay in scattered pieces. To Nebbetthar's immense relief, however, his liege remained to fight on.

Settra alone was still in command of his craft. He was wheeling the Chariot of the Gods about for another strike, the four steeds pulling hard through the sands. His quarry, Nagash, had been knocked to the ground. He rose slowly, his robes billowing outwards although there was no wind to stir them. Nagash leaned heavily upon his staff, as if weary or wounded.

As Nebbetthar crawled, pulling himself across the sands, the Great Necromancer spoke to the skies, pointing his staff at Settra.

Against enemy magic, the King of Nehekhara had relied upon his enchanted brooch, an amulet that surrounded him with the protections of Usirian, God of the Underworld. It did nothing to protect him now.

A dark cloud of life-leeching forces emanated from Nagash's staff, washing over Settra and his chariot. Living creatures would have succumbed to that mist of death, their life drained out of them. For the undead of Nehekhara, however, the threat was wholly different. Their bodies were lifeless, but it was their spirits that were assailed. Beneath the indomitable will of Nagash, the skeletal steeds were shorn of their animating impetus and collapsed, their chariots splintering into ruin. Settra emerged from the wreck, as iron-willed as the Great Necromancer himself. Although fully immersed in that necrotic haze, his spirit remained firmly tethered to his mummified body. Lifting high the Blessed Blade of Ptra, he shouted his defiance as he strode towards the usurper.

Nebbetthar was pulling himself towards Nagash. The Great Necromancer was focused on Settra and took no notice, already beginning another incantation. Nebbetthar realised that neither he nor his king would be able to close before Nagash completed his spell.

Settra was a warrior-king. He alone of the tomb kings had rudimentary knowledge of the secrets of the liche priests, but it was in his blade that Settra put his trust. Now he called for Nagash to accept his challenge, to pit his sword against the weapon of the righteous King of Nehekhara.

In answer, Nagash spat out the last syllables of his spell and clenched his bony fist with a loud crack. Settra was but ten paces away when he was halted. Straining, the king lurched forward, staggering against some invisible force. With great exertion, Settra halved the distance, and was just out of reach with his blade when he was lifted high into the air. He hung there, suspended like some broken puppet. Those with the witchsight saw ethereal creatures of grim countenance winding about the King of Nehekhara, holding him aloft.

The light from the blessed Blade of Ptra dimmed and fell to the sand. The Nehekharans, knowing that their cause was lost, abased themselves before Nagash, he who was their conqueror.

Ignoring his own wounds, Mannfred looked on in amazement. He had arrived in time to see Nagash crush the massed chariot charge and rise up from what had looked to be his doom. Now, the Great Necromancer held the mighty Settra, King of Nehekhara, like a fly in amber. Dwarfed by the enormous hovering form looming over him, Settra looked puny and insignificant.

'IT IS OVER,' said Nagash. His words rolled like thunder across the desert and Mannfred's mind as one.

So are we all, thought Mannfred.

'THE UNDERWORLD IS MINE. NEHEKHARA IS MINE. SOON, I WILL HAVE THE POWER TO CONFRONT THE GODS OF CHAOS THEMSELVES.'

As Mannfred watched, Nagash turned his back on Settra, speaking ancient words of power and raising his bony claws towards the heavens.

A low rumbling shook the ground. It began as a deep growl, but rose in volume until it evoked the world's dying bellow. As the sound reached a deafening roar, the Black Pyramid uprooted itself, tearing up great slabs of bedrock as it came. It rose high in the air, the jagged scar left beneath it revealing unguessed-at catacombs below. At Nagash's summons, the pyramid floated closer – a looming mountain that blotted out the sun.

Nagash turned and addressed Settra once more. The words boomed through Mannfred's mind, leaving a dull pain in their wake.

'I CAME NOT TO CLAIM NEHEKHARA, BUT GODHOOD.'

Mannfred felt a sick sensation. Nagash was no longer merely the most powerful of his kind, but a being on the threshold of something far, far greater. Mannfred had yet had hopes of manipulating or betraying the first; the second was proof against even his grandest schemes.

'I HAVE HUMBLED YOU, SETTRA, PROUDEST OF KINGS. BUT NOW I OFFER YOU HONOUR.'

Mannfred knew what was to come, for he sourly recognised that Settra's path echoed his own. Too late, he saw the opportunity lost. He had faced the same choice, and had lacked the will to resist. For the first time, the vampire realised that he should have fought as Settra had, that together the two of them could have prevailed. But that moment had been lost long ago.

'BOW BEFORE ME, AND YOU WILL BE ONE OF MY MORTARCHS. DENY ME, AND PERISH.'

Settra said nothing at first, but hung defiant in Nagash's grasp. Then he raised his head to meet the Great Necromancer's gaze.

'SETTRA DOES NOT SERVE,' he shouted, trembling with rage. 'SETTRA RULES!'

'SO BE IT,' Nagash intoned, stretching out a claw towards the struggling king.

There was a blinding flash of emerald light. A chorus of brittle snapping sounds split the air as Settra's body was torn apart and flung across the sands. The broken limbs twitched once, and then lay still.

Settra, the Imperishable, Great King of Nehekhara, had finally met with defeat.





With Settra's defeat, Nagash cast down the city of Khemri. He did it alone, without the assistance of his minions, marshalling the fell sorceries that were his to command. The stones of Khemri fought Nagash, resisted him with every fibre of their being, but the Great Necromancer would not be denied. Great clouds of dust swept across the desert as minarets were torn down and temples shaken apart by tremors loosed through the rock. The shatter of tiles and the shrieking of torn metal wracked as walls collapsed, the upper floors of buildings tumbling into the ancient passageways below.

The assembled kings and vampires watched in silence as the temples and palaces that had weathered the millennia tumbled into ruin. They knew that the labour was as much a lesson to them all as it was an erasure of Settra's rule. Defy me, and you will be torn asunder, and your cities too will be dust; that was the lesson Nagash taught that day.

Settra watched also. Even though he had been torn limb from limb, sparks of unlife still remained in Settra's body, and the witch-fires in his eyes blazed impotently as Nagash heaped further humiliation upon him. The king's severed head lay lodged deep within the sand, and none dared approach it – not because they any longer had fear of Settra, but because they dreaded interfering with Nagash's last act of vengeance.

Settra's great palace was the last to fall, its gilded columns stricken down by dark fire, and its walls battered to crumbled rock. The great golden statue of Settra that had stood before the gate was a molten pool, bubbling fitfully amongst the wreckage. When finally the metal had cooled, Nagash's labours were complete – or so the onlookers believed.

Nagash raised his hands one final time, and the desert sands rose up. The assembled armies were islands in a dry flood, the sands flooding past them like waves. Again and again they smashed down on Khemri's fallen stones, crushing the remains of the city beneath them. For hours, the sandstorms raged, until all but the topmost spurs of ruined statues could be seen. Only then did Nagash cease his labours.

'IT IS DONE.'

Those three words echoed far across the lone and level sands, and all there knew the lie concealed within. It was not done – it was only just beginning.

After the destruction of Khemri, it was not long before the rest of Nehekhara was cast into ruin. The Great Cities fell in turn, their armies forced to bend their knee and accept Nagash as their master, else they were summarily crushed and their bones scattered. Few chose the latter fate. Word of Settra's defeat had spread like desert carrion upon the wings of a storm, and only the very proudest chose to follow his example. Only King Phar of Numas remained defiant to the end. He knew his doom the moment the foreboding tip of the Black Pyramid broke the horizon on approach to his city, and fought as he believed a king should. Alas, he did so to no avail.

Of the others, only Khalida considered resistance. Yet in the end, even she, proud daughter of Lybaras, bent her knee before the Great Necromancer, for she knew that only through her continued existence could she at last take revenge upon Neferata.



Shortly after, the largest army of the dead ever seen marched north from Nehekhara, the Black Pyramid looming large in the skies above. In its gloomy chambers, Nagash held council with his surviving Mortarchs, including Krell, now restored. Of Dieter Helsnicht, none knew but Nagash, and none dared ask. But he served still – a multi-headed guardian of the Underworld, a spectral monstrosity who kept watch over the gates of that nether realm. There was little time to lose. Daemons stalked the lands around Sylvania, for they could taste the wellspring of magic Nagash had placed there. That power was vital to Nagash's final ascension to the ranks of godhood, and he would not yield it. Sylvania would be his fortress now, a new kingdom from which to impose his will upon a chaotic world.

There was still much to be done – the first battles had been won, but the true war was only just beginning.



The winds howled across the moonlit desert that had once been Khemri. They had done so ever since the Black Pyramid had departed, their caress strangely cold in that burning land.

Nothing stirred, not even Settra's remains. Though dismembered, the Great King yet survived, his scattered remains half-buried by the sands. Nearby, a crack-visaged statue, its lower half buried beneath the dunes, stared sightlessly into the sky.

It cannot end this way, Settra raged wordlessly, just as he had every day since Khemri's fall. Yet the words rang false even to him. The Great King could not even recall how many days it had been since Nagash had laid him low. Time no longer had any meaning to him. There was just the harsh light of day and the numbing stillness of night, over and over again, with no hope of cease.

Settra saw a glow in the distant east, and knew that dawn was rising. He never saw the sun set, only its rise, for his head was now as fixed in its aspect as the statue of his former glories. Another day was come, and with it the circling carrion who saw his bones as tokens to be fought over. Each day, Settra's angry shouts had driven them away, but each day they grew bolder. Soon, Settra knew they would lose their fear altogether, and his bones would be strewn across the realm of Nehekhara.

For the first time in millennia, Settra the Imperishable, the Great King of Nehekhara, wished that he were mortal, if only so that he could die.

The wind swept across the sands once again. Settra felt a will not his own surge through his scattered bones, making them whole once more and infusing him with a new strength.

Settra staggered to his feet, his thoughts of despair fading like a desert mirage. He felt strength coursing through his limbs, a vigour he had not known in millennia.

Was this some trick? wondered the Khemrikhara.

Four voices that were somehow one danced on the breeze, their words bubbling with laughter.

'The battle is only over if you wish it. You can be a king again.'

Settra gave no reply, and stared silently across the Khemrian sands.



