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WARHAMMER  
AGE OF SIGMAR

# Nagash

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## THE UNDYING KING

JOSH REYNOLDS



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AGE OF SIGMAR

# Nagash

THE UNDYING KING

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# NAGASH

THE UNDYING KING

JOSH REYNOLDS



BLACK LIBRARY



## **WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR**

**From the maelstrom of a sundered world, the Eight Realms were born.  
The formless and the divine exploded into life.**

**Strange, new worlds appeared in the firmament, each one gilded with spirits, gods and men. Noblest of the gods was Sigmar. For years beyond reckoning he illuminated the realms, wreathed in light and majesty as he carved out his reign. His strength was the power of thunder. His wisdom was infinite. Mortal and immortal alike kneeled before his lofty throne. Great empires rose and, for a while, treachery was banished. Sigmar claimed the land and sky as his own and ruled over a glorious age of myth.**

**But cruelty is tenacious. As had been foreseen, the great alliance of gods and men tore itself apart. Myth and legend crumbled into Chaos. Darkness flooded the realms. Torture, slavery and fear replaced the glory that came before. Sigmar turned his back on the mortal kingdoms, disgusted by their fate. He fixed his gaze instead on the remains of the world he had lost long ago, brooding over its charred core, searching endlessly for a sign of hope. And then, in the dark heat of his rage, he caught a glimpse of something magnificent. He pictured a weapon born of the heavens. A beacon powerful enough to pierce the endless night. An army hewn from everything he had lost.**

**Sigmar set his artisans to work and for long ages they toiled, striving to harness the power of the stars. As Sigmar's great work neared completion, he turned back to the realms and saw that the dominion of Chaos was almost complete. The hour for vengeance had come. Finally, with lightning blazing across his brow, he stepped forth to unleash his creation.**

**The Age of Sigmar had begun.**



# ONE

## PLAGUE-FIRES

*I still endure.*

*The skies weep, the seas boil, the ground cracks, but I still endure.*

*Let the stars gutter and the suns go cold, and still, I will endure.*

*The reverberations of my fall shattered mountains.*

*My servants are in disarray, bereft of my guiding will.*

*But I still endure.*

*I am death, and death cannot die.*

*It can only be delayed.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

The mountain air trembled with the squeal of splitting wood as the outer stockade succumbed to the greedy flames. The fire was not natural, for no natural flame burned the colour of pus. Natural fires left ash in their wake, not virulent, shrieking mould. It was a fire roused by sorcery, and only sorcery could snuff it. But there was no time. And, in any event, there was no one among the Drak who possessed the strength to do so. Not even their war-leader.

Tamra ven-Drak, voivode of the Drak, oldest of the highclans of the Rictus Clans, felt her soul wither as the great hall where she'd been born collapsed with a groan. Lodge poles burned like torches, and the skulls of three generations screamed useless warnings to their living kin from their rooftop perches. The fire spread like a thing alive, leaping from peaked log to thatched roof without pause.



‘Back, get back,’ she cried, shoving her clansfolk along, away from the creeping flames and towards an ornately carved stone archway. ‘To the inner keep – go!’ A stream of frightened faces surrounded her, pushing and shoving to escape the oily haze which preceded the plague-fires. The walls of the inner keep were high and sloped backwards, surrounding the lodgehouses of the highborn, as well as the great storehouses which fed her folk in the darkest months of winter, and the icy wells which drew fresh water up from beneath the earth.

The walls had been built in centuries past by greater artisans than her people now possessed. What few living warriors that remained to her clan were stationed there, loosing arrow after arrow at the invaders. Once the last of her folk were safely through, they would retreat down through the lichgates hidden beneath the lodgehouses and within the great wells, then along the secret paths that led into the surrounding wilderness. Those ancient paths had been carved for this very contingency after the black days of the Great Awakening, and they would be the salvation of her people – if she could buy them the necessary time.

Tamra held her ground, letting her clansfolk break and flow around her. The enemy would be inside the outer palisade in moments, and she intended to greet them with all due hospitality. She was a daughter of the Drak, and could do no less.

She caught the edge of her chest-plate and shifted it. The armour was old and ill-fitting, digging into her flesh at inconvenient points. An heirloom from the Age of Myth, it had belonged to her father, and had been handed down from one voivode of the Drak to the next for generations. A stylised serpent, once a vivid red but now a faded brown, marked its faceted surface. It was the symbol of a fallen kingdom, and of lost glories.

*Sister.*

She glanced at her brother. His empty eye sockets burned with witchfire flames, and his fleshless fingers clutched the hilt of his barrowblade tightly. *You should go. They will be here soon.* His words echoed in her head like a freezing iron wind. *Your responsibility is to the living. Leave this to the dead.*

‘No, Sarpa. We will meet them together.’

She recalled the day he’d died to an orruk blade, and the ceremony that followed. She’d left his body on a high slope, to be picked clean by scavenger birds and flesh-eaters. She had carved the sigils of rousing into his bones herself, as he would have done for her. As they’d both done for the dead who now surrounded them in a phalanx. The old dead, the loved dead, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers; the countless generations of the Drak, stirred to fight anew

for hearth and home. Death was not the end for the Drak. They lived and died and lived again, to serve their people and their god, and they had done so since the coming of the Undying King and the Great Awakening.

And now the dead were all her people had left, in these final hours. They outnumbered the living two to one, with barely several hundred of her people left to flee. Most of their living warriors, and the hetmen who'd led them, had fallen, slaughtered in open battle by an enemy far stronger than them. But the dead held firm, and so would she. She could feel them fighting on the walls and in the streets. The majority of the dead were scattered throughout the outer keep and along the palisades, fighting to delay the inevitable. One by one, their soulfires were snuffed out as the enemy pressed ever forwards.

'We hold them here, until the outer village is empty,' she said. 'Then we retreat, no faster than we must. Let them blunt themselves on our shields. We are Drak. What we have, we hold.'

*We hold*, the dead echoed. The skeletons were armoured in bronze and carried weapons and shields of the same. Steel was precious, and carried only by the living; they needed it more than the dead. She could feel the flicker of soulfire animating each of the fleshless warriors, the brief embers of who they had once been. Such was the gift of the highborn of all the Rictus Clans. Only those who could stir the dead could lead the living.

Overhead, black clouds grumbled with the promise of a storm. The skies of the north were never silent, never peaceful. The snow had ceased for the moment, but soon it would be replaced by rain. Purple lightning flashed in the belly of the clouds, and she watched it for a moment. Then, the pox-flames parted and the enemy arrived in a rush.

The first to come were the hounds, their fur soggy with pus and their eyes faceted like those of flies. They bayed and loped forwards in a seething mass of rotted fangs and blistered paws. Bronze-tipped spears slid home, turning their howls to shrieks. Those beasts that made it through the thicket of spears died to swords and axes. As the hounds perished, their masters arrived, lumbering through the plague-fires. The blightkings were monsters, clad in filthy tabards over grimy war-plate marked with the sign of the fly.

They advanced with a droning roar, hefting outsized weapons in flabby hands. They struck the bronze shield wall like a foetid fist, and the line bowed inwards.

'Sarpa,' Tamra said, fighting to keep her voice calm. Her brother stepped smoothly towards the enemy. His barrowblade sang a deadly song as it rose and fell, removing limbs and heads. The blightkings' momentum was broken in

moments. They fell back, their droning song giving way to cries of alarm.

They retreated, seeking shelter in the plague-fires. But she could hear the distorted jangle of pox-bells and the thump of skin drums, and she knew more were coming. These had only been the most eager, the least disciplined. She looked around the palisade yard, watching as the last houses of her people were consumed, along with the bodies of the dead. Where the plague-fires burned, her magic was as nothing, and the dead were lost.

*They are coming,* Sarpa said.

‘Fall back to the archway. Tighten the line.’ She had learned the art of the shield wall from her father, and from his mother before him. Their spirits had whispered to her, in her infancy, and shown her much: the proper way to wage war, to raise walls, to lead. The dead had taught her the lessons of a thousand years. But they had not prepared her for this.

The lands claimed in millennia past by the Rictus Clans were far beyond even the northernmost cities and principalities of Shyish. They were harsh lands, clinging to the frozen coasts of the Shivering Sea. No enemy had ever come so far north in all the centuries since the coming of Chaos. Or at least none had survived the attempt. Those the cold did not claim inevitably fell to the shambling packs of deadwalkers who haunted the thick forests and ice floes in ever-growing numbers.

But these creatures – these rotbringers – were different. They easily endured conditions which had defeated even the most frenzied of the Blood God’s worshippers. And now they were at her walls, battering down her gates. The remains of her strongest warriors hung from their flyblown banners, and the villages of her people were smoke on the wind.

This siege was the culmination of an assault on her territories which had lasted days. The rotbringers were marching north, and they seemed disinclined to leave anything larger than a barrow-marker standing in their wake. Her people had been driven steadily northwards from steadings and camps, until they’d had nowhere else to run. She hadn’t had enough warriors, living or dead, to do more than delay the foe. And now, not even that.

How had it come to this? Was Nagash dead, as the southerners claimed? Had the Undying King truly fallen in battle? How could one who was as death itself die? Her mind shied away from the thought, unable to accept such a thing. Nagash simply... was. As inescapable as the snows in winter, as ever present as the cold, he had always been and always would be. To consider anything else was the height of folly.

Chortles of barbaric glee filled the night as scabrous shapes climbed the palisades. She looked up. These ones were men, rather than monsters, but only just. Clad in filthy smocks and rattletrap armour, they carried bows. Some of them might even have been Rictus, once, before they'd traded their souls for their lives. She'd heard from refugees that several of the lowland tribes had joined the foe, though whether freely or under duress no one had known. It didn't matter. Whoever they had been, they were the enemy now.

*Shields*, Sarpa said.

Bronze shields were raised with a clatter, covering Tamra, even as the dead continued to retreat. She heard the rattle of arrows, and saw one sink into a skull. A yellowish ichor had been smeared on the arrowhead, and it ate through the bone in moments. The skeleton collapsed, dissolving into a morass of white and yellow.

Tamra hissed in revulsion and flung out her hand. Amethyst energies coalesced about her fingers before erupting outwards in an arcane bolt. The palisade exploded, and broken bodies were flung into the air. As the echo of the explosion faded, the blightkings gave a roar and thudded forwards, supported by more of their mortal followers.

The dead reached the archway a moment later. 'Brace and hold,' Tamra said, as Sarpa pushed her back into the archway. It was the only route into the inner keep, short of knocking down the walls themselves, and these were not mere palisades of hardened wood. They were hard stone, packed by dead hands in better days. Sorcerous fire might eat away at them, but it would take time. Her people would be gone by then, scattered into the crags and hollows. There were hidden shelters in the high places, and secret roads in the low. Some of them would escape. Some would survive, and find safety among the other clans.

Axes crashed against shields for what felt like hours. The dead held firm. Sarpa stood beside her, waiting with eerie patience for what was surely to come. Tamra looked up at the archway, which rose high and wide around them. A hundred generations of Drak artisans had added to it, chiselling away cold stone to reveal scenes of life and history, great battles and small moments, the story of her people. She placed a hand against it. 'I will miss it,' she said.

*We hold*, Sarpa said.

'Yes,' she said. 'Hold.' That was what Drak did best. Come raiding orruks, marauding ogors or vengeful duardin, the Drak held. Their bronze shield walls had never been broken before today, and she was determined that they would not break again. Not while she drew breath. 'Hold, brothers and sisters. Set your feet

and lift your shields. We are Drak.'

*We are Drak*, came the ghostly reply. The dead held, as they always did. She reinforced their will with her own, adding her strength to theirs. Bronze swords slid between locked shields, seeking swollen flesh. Bodies piled up before them, creating a second wall, this one of flesh. She considered drawing them back to their feet, but her strength was flagging. Best to save her power for holding this last phalanx together.

All around her, great maggoty axes hewed apart bone and bronze. Skulls fell to the snowy ground and were crushed beneath the tread of the enemy. The dead retreated, their line contracting. They left a trail of carnage behind them, but the enemy continued to press the assault. Tamra's breath rasped in her lungs as she spat darkling oaths. Amethyst fires seared pox-ridden flesh clean, as chattering spirits ripped warriors from the ground and sent them crashing into the stones. But it was not enough. Soon the spirits faded and the purple flames dimmed, leaving only the oily green of the plague-fires.

The archway cracked and crumbled as the dead were pushed back. The courtyard of the inner keep was empty of all save for those who had died on the walls. With a thought, she jerked them to their feet, though it repulsed her to do so. It was not right to animate the dead thus, not when flesh still clung to their bones, but necessity drove her. The deadwalkers lurched towards the foe, tangling them up, buying her a few more moments.

*You must flee now, sister*, Sarpa pulsed, his voice piercing the veil of pain that was beginning to cloud her thoughts. Her skull ached, and her heart stuttered in its cage of bone. She had never attempted so much magic in so short a span. All around her, the last lodgehouses of the Drak were burning. Stores of food, hoarded against the winter, were consumed by the flames. The ancient wells, which had served her folk since time out of mind, now vomited up a virulent steam, as the waters within turned foul and black.

She backed away, clutching her head. The back of her legs struck something. She turned. An immense wooden effigy, carved in the likeness of the Rattlebone Prince, stared down at her with empty eyes. As a child, she had prayed to Nagash, begging him for the strength to aid her people in battle. When she made the bones dance for the first time, she'd thought that he had answered her, that he'd blessed her. But where was he now? Where was the Undying King when his people needed him?

*Tamra*, her brother said. *Go*. Thunder rumbled overhead, as if in agreement.

'No. I will not leave you.' She flung out a hand, trying to summon the strength

for another spell. 'I will...' She trailed off as a hush fell. The pox-worshippers had broken off their attack as they spilled into the courtyard, holding back, as if in readiness for something. 'What are they doing?'

*Waiting*, Sarpa said.

Tamra did not ask for what. She did not have to. She could feel what was coming easily enough. The flats of rusty axes thudded wetly against pustule-marked shields, and the droning song of the pox-worshippers rose in tempo. Their ranks split like a wound, disgorging a rotund shape, clad in foul robes. The newcomer waddled towards the dead, a leering grin stretched across his pallid features. Toadstools sprouted in his wake, pushing through the yellowing snow, and a cloud of flies swirled about his head like a halo.

Tamra could taste the fell magic seeping from him. A sorcerer. The same who had set the palisades alight and burnt the forests black.

'Well. Well, well, well. What have we here?' His voice was like mud striking the bottom of a bucket, and he flashed rotten teeth in a genial smile. 'Dead men walking.' He sniffed and looked around. 'This is the place for it, I suppose.'

He gestured, and a pox-worshipper limped forwards, cradling a grotesque banner in the crook of one bandaged arm. The creature set the banner upright. Plague-bells dangled from a daemonic visage wrought in iron. A pale liquid sweated from the face and pattered to the ground, causing virulent wisps of smoke to rise from the churned snow.

'I, Tulg, claim this place in the name of the Most Suppurating and Blightsome Order of the Fly,' the sorcerer said. He gesticulated grandly. 'Be joyful, for life returns to these dead realms.'

'This place is not yours to claim,' Tamra said loudly. Loose snow whipped about, as the storm grew in intensity overhead. Thunder rumbled. The crackle of the plague-fires was omnipresent. Somewhere, a hunting horn blew. She tried to shut out the noise, to focus on the enemy before her. If she could kill him, the foe might flee. Her people might yet be saved or, at the very least, avenged.

'Is it not? We seem to be doing a fine job, regardless.' The sorcerer looked around. 'I see no defenders of merit. Only old bones and a scrawny woman. If that is the best you savages can muster, our crusade will be easier than Blightmaster Wolgus claimed...'

'Kill him,' Tamra said. The dead surged forwards, their fleshless frames lent vigour by her will and fury. The sorcerer laughed and swept out his hands. Plague-fire consumed the remaining skeletons, one after the other. She staggered as their soulfire ebbed and her spells were torn asunder. The ache in her head

grew worse, and she clutched at her scalp.

*Back, sister.* Sarpa shoved her aside as a claw of green flame swept down and he thrust up his shield to meet it. For a moment, he held it at bay, but the flames writhed around the edges of the shield and the bronze began to corrode. It blackened and sloughed away, and the flames poured down, engulfing her brother. He sank to one knee, his spirit groaning in her head. *Tamra... sister... run...*

Lightning flashed, searing the night. She heard the sorcerer utter a startled oath, and she screamed as her brother's soul was snatched away from her flagging grip. Smoke billowed, filling the courtyard. Coughing, she sank back against the statue of Nagash.

'I beg you help me,' she said, staring up at the effigy. 'Heed me, Undying King. Heed your servant in this, her hour of need. Help your people...' Her voice cracked and she slumped against the statue. Tears froze on her cheeks. 'Help us.' She saw the blackened hilt of Sarpa's barrowblade and snatched it up. As she lifted it in both hands, it crackled with the fading sting of lightning and burnt her palms.

'I do not know what sort of sorcery that was, but lightning or no, it will avail you nothing,' the sorcerer said, as he waved the smoke aside. 'I think I will chain you to my master's palanquin, corpse-eater. Or what's left of you. You do not need your arms or legs to stump along, awkward though it may be.' He coughed. 'And your scalp will look fine hanging from the banners of the Order of the Fly.' He clapped his pudgy hands together gleefully. 'So... arms, legs and hair. In that order, I think.'

'Come and take them, if you can,' Tamra said, forcing herself upright. Grief sat like a lead weight in her chest, along with not a little fear. Her brother was gone. But she was a daughter of the Drak, and death was to be embraced. She extended Sarpa's blade. She heard the winding of a hunting horn again, closer this time.

The sorcerer chortled and advanced, green fire dripping from his crooked fingers. 'Maybe I'll burn your tongue out as well. You seem like the type to curse overmuch.' The pox-flames flared bright and began to swell around him. As they did so, a shadow fell over him, and he glanced up, eyes widening. 'What—'

A flash of red and black descended. The ground shook, the flames were snuffed and the sorcerer vanished, his body abruptly pulped beneath the curving talons of the monstrosity which now crouched between Tamra and her foes. A long, whip-like tail of vertebral segments lashed with feline agitation as fleshless jaws

sagged, exhaling a cloud of masticated spirits. The wailing spirits swirled about the beast, bound to its creaking bones by some fell sorcery. The blightkings drew back from the dread abyssal as it pawed at the snow, fastidiously scraping what was left of the sorcerer from its claws.

Its rider leaned forwards in her saddle, a mocking expression on her youthful face. She was beautiful, Tamra thought, though it was a deadly kind of beauty, like that of a fine blade. She wore black armour, studded with bones, and a tall headdress, in the fashion of the ancient kingdoms of the Great Dust Sea. Her exposed arms were the colour of marble, and her lips were blood red. Her eyes shone like those of a great mountain cat caught in the torchlight.

‘Did we interrupt? My apologies – Nagadron grew impatient.’ The rider’s pale hand stroked the black iron bones of the dread abyssal’s neck. At her touch, the monster stiffened and uttered a piercing shriek. ‘I am Neferata, the Queen of Blood and Mistress of the Barrowdwell. And you... well, it doesn’t really matter, does it?’ Her thin lips stretched in a feral smile as she drew a long curved blade from a sheath on her saddle. ‘After all, you’ll be dead soon.’

The dread abyssal surged forwards, limbs clicking like the workings of some great mechanism. Neferata leaned low, and at her gesture, the bound spirits boiled forwards. They rolled over the blightkings and their mortal followers like a malignant bank of fog. Spectral claws and blades separated heads from shoulders and spilled intestines into the snow. The blightkings tried in vain to strike back at their unearthly foes, but their blows chopped harmlessly through the smoky forms.

Nagadron slammed full tilt into the distracted blightkings, and Neferata’s sword flickered out, capitalising on the damage done by her spectral warriors. She gave a shriek of laughter as the dread abyssal bore a bloated warrior down and bit off his head. An arcane bolt sizzled from her palm and zigzagged through the ranks of pox-worshippers, reducing them to smoking husks. As the slaughter progressed, Tamra heard the hunting horn once more, louder than ever, and felt the ground tremble beneath her feet.

The blightkings broke as Neferata savaged a path through their ranks, and they began to spill back towards the archway, seeking safety. But there was none to be had. A column of armoured riders astride coal-black horses speared through the archway and into the disorganized rabble. The newcomers wore black armour, and their pale feminine faces glared out from within baroque helms as they lashed out at the foe. They pierced the enemy ranks like a blade and the column split in two, encircling the pox-worshippers. The carnage which



followed was brief and cruel. When the last of the blightkings lay dissolving in his own juices, Neferata turned her monstrous steed back towards Tamra. As she passed by it, she uprooted the plague-banner and tossed it aside. 'You are welcome,' she said, looking down at Tamra.

'Thank you, great lady,' Tamra stuttered. She had heard stories of the being known among the Rictus Clans as the Great Lady of Sorrows, but seeing her in the flesh was something else entirely. The vampire radiated a terrible strength, as if her lithe shape were but a mask, hiding something infinitely more monstrous within. Eyes like agates bored into her own, and she felt as if her mind and soul were being peeled back bit by bit.

'You are of the Drak?' Neferata said. She gestured to her face. 'You have that look, something about the jaw.'

Tamra sank down to one knee, leaning against her brother's sword. 'Yes, O Queen of Blood. I am Tamra ven-Drak, voivode of these lands.' She looked up. 'Or I was.'

'Yes. You look a bit like dearest Isa. The eyes, I think.'

Tamra hesitated. Queen Isa ven-Drak had been dead for centuries, and her bones long since dust scattered on the wind. Neferata turned away as one of the black riders trotted towards her. 'The rest of our blightsome friends?' she asked.

'Scattered, my lady,' the vampire said as she removed her helmet. 'Or impaled, for those who follow to find.' She had been beautiful, once, and still was, if you ignored the hunger in her eyes and the stains of old gore streaking her ornately crafted war-plate.

'Ah, Adhema, your little jokes will be the death of you, I fear.'

'But not today, mistress.'

'No, not today. Today the Sisterhood of Szandor has won a great victory,' Neferata said. She looked back at Tamra. 'Where are your people? Some survived, I assume.'

'Fled into the crags and hollows,' Tamra said. She rose at Neferata's gesture. 'Where it is safe, my lady.'

Adhema snorted. 'There is no safety. Not here or anywhere else.'

'No. But perhaps we might make such a place.' Neferata raised Tamra's chin with the tip of her sword. 'Call your people back. They must go north, to the shores of the Rictus Sea, to the great redoubt there. You know it?'

'I... yes. Is-is this the word of Nagash? Has he returned? Is he to lead us in battle once more?' Tamra couldn't stop the questions from spilling out.

'Nagash?' Neferata said, looking down at her. She leaned over and spat in the

direction of the effigy. 'That is for Nagash. And good riddance to him.'

Tamra watched the goblet of crimson spittle slide down the statue's cheek. 'Where is he?' she asked, softly.

'Not here, sister,' Neferata said. 'I fear we have only ourselves to look to, in the dark days to come.' She gave a mocking smile. 'And what a relief it is.'



# TWO

## THE UNDYING KING

*The Corpse Geometries are awry.*

*Their night-black formulae is rendered powerless by the madness of ruinous gods.*

*Order has been cast down, and Chaos reigns.*

*My kingdom shudders beneath a terrible lunacy, unfettered and ever changing.*

*But I still endure.*

*I will ever endure.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

On a basalt throne, far below the reach of any light, a vast figure stirred. A great hand, shrouded in a battle-marked gauntlet, reached up to touch a fleshless cheek as if to brush away some irritant. Immense bones, blackened by fire and scarred by blades, creaked in their housings as a massive head tilted upwards. Light flared deep within abyssal sockets, as consciousness returned. The Undying King awoke. Something had disturbed his slumber. A voice, calling his name, somewhere out in the dark.

No. Not one. Many. A thousand, a million. A storm of voices, crying out for him who had made himself a god; crying out for the Rattlebone Prince, the Great Necromancer... crying out for Nagash. And Nagash could not answer, for he lacked the strength.

A hollow laugh slipped from between tombstone teeth. This, then, was the true price for wresting divinity from the claws of fate: to hear, to see, and be unable to act. His mind shied away from the deluge of prayers, focusing instead on the one which had caused him to stir.

He cast his gaze about his empty throne room. Great pillars, made from the bones of entire generations, stretched upwards into the silent dark. Mosaics of onyx and amethyst lined the floors and walls, depicting his victories over the old gods of the underworld during the Age of Myth. So many victories. And one singular, inescapable defeat.

Now, spiders crept across his frame, spinning their webs between his ribs and over his eyes. Worms squirmed in the hollows of his bones. He snuffed out their lives with barely a thought and drew their deaths into him. It was not enough. Unfulfilled, he reached out and caught up one of the ghosts which clustered about his throne. The spirit struggled in his grip and came apart like a morning mist, flowing into the nooks and crannies of his form as Nagash devoured its soulfire. Somewhat reinvigorated, his attentions turned outwards, following the voice which had awakened him.

Nine heavy tomes, each the size of a man and containing the accumulated wisdom of aeons, rose up around him, their heavy chains rattling loudly. The flabby pages of the books flapped with a sound like thunder as the Undying King hurled his fell spirit upwards, through the tangled caverns of Stygxx and the shadow-haunted palaces of the Amethyst Princes. Mile by mile, his consciousness crawled upwards, pulling itself along like a choking fog through the minds and husks of the dead which inhabited the underworld. In hidden redoubts and outposts, deadwalkers stiffened as Nagash's awareness suddenly occupied their rotting frames, if only for an instant.

His consciousness rode a flock of bats out of the lightless caverns, swirling up into the bloody skies. And then he was striding the night wind, bodiless and unseen. He crossed the brackish waters of the Sour Sea in the blink of an eye, and he raced above the great indigo veldts of Anku-Wat in the fleshless skull of a dire wolf. But no matter how far he travelled, or in what direction, the scenery was always the same – war, unending and all-consuming.

The armies of the Everchosen marched on the manses of the dead, and there was little Nagash could do save watch through the eyes of his servants and remember. He walked the fire-shrouded streets of Sepulchre as a shadow, and he saw the great tapestries of ghost-silk burn in flames of azure and cerise. In Morrsend, he watched through the poached eyes of a cooling corpse as a coven

of soulblight vampires defended the living against the ferocity of the Blood God's worshippers, and were consumed by their own bloodlust.

Wrathful now, he roared silent curses as Crypslough stirred from its enforced slumber in the silent tombs of Yyr and shrugged off its chains. The zombie dragon, first and greatest of its kind, slid into the sky with a single beat of its ragged wings. It was not alone in its escape from Nagash's bindings. The black shape of the Surnok Spinebat, huge and loathsome, emerged from the craters of the Wraith Moons, free to hunt the star fields anew. And everywhere, the gateways to long-sealed underworlds cracked wide and wept malignant spirits.

All that he'd built was beginning to crumble. The delicate precision of the Corpse Geometries had unravelled, and order overturned by chaos. Souls were spewed free and unbound into the skies, loosed from battlefields that had become monstrous abscesses of necromantic energy. The untended dead roamed in vast, ever-increasing hordes, endangering all who crossed their path. Those he had once counted as servants sought to carve out fiefdoms of their own from the carcass of his once realm-spanning empire. And all because of—

‘Sigmar!’

Nagash turned. Burning towers stretched up towards the sky, casting a hazy radiance over the waters of the Bitter Sea. With but a thought, he was there, standing amidst the smoke and carnage, watching through the hundredfold eyes of the newly slain. He knew this city: Helstone. Its rulers had bended the knee to him, though they did not worship him. A proud people, mighty in war and cunning in trade. But not anymore. Now they were burning and dying, as the lords of Chaos ran rampant through the Ninety-Nine Circles. Nagash felt a flicker of satisfaction; perhaps if they had prayed to him instead, it might not have come to this.

‘Sigmar!’ the voice cried again. A prayer, perhaps, or a curse. Curious, the Undying King followed it, striding from body to body. Atop a crumbling tower, he found the speaker, and more besides. The one who cried out was a prince of the city, clad in iron and silks, fighting to hold a terraced tower. But there was another with him: Manfred von Carstein, last prince of a forgotten kingdom. As ever, he glowed with spite and stank of ambition.

How many times had he chastised the Mortarch of Shadow for some scheme or other? He'd lost count. There was a certain joy to be had in conjuring new punishments for so deserving a creature, though he could not recall what the first had been, or the reason behind it. It did not matter. If Manfred survived, there would be more betrayals and more punishments. It was his nature. As sure as

death itself, Mannfred would always seek his own advantage. Such relentless drive was almost admirable, in its way.

Nagash watched as the vampire hacked down one roaring blood warrior after the next, fighting alongside his mortal ally with frantic courage. The tower creaked on its foundations, and the ancient stones burst as daemons and mortals alike scrambled up its sides. The mortarch fought back to back with the Helstone prince as red-skinned bloodletters looped towards them. Nagash turned away from the desperate conflict, his attention caught by another voice. A familiar one this time, not raised in prayer, but in invocation.

He left Mannfred to his fate and followed the voice across the vast mountains of the north, into the shattered ruins of the six kingdoms of Rictus, to the shores of the Shivering Sea. He remembered these lands, if only dimly. He had waged a war here, one of many. Those who should have been thankful for their status had instead used it to strike at him. Six kings of old, steeped in the arts he had dredged up from the deep wells of the underworld, had set themselves in opposition to fate. For six days and six nights, Nagash had fought and utterly destroyed the armies arrayed against him. And on the sixth day, he had taken the lives and souls of the kings, reducing them to blighted husks.

He had interred what remained of them in the crags overlooking the Shivering Sea, sealing their damned souls away within the rock until such time as he judged them suitably chastened. But the bindings he had looped about them had begun to grow weaker with every passing year since his defeat. Even now, he could sense the Broken Kings, rattling the bars of their cages and crying out for release.

As he passed over the great ice-rimed forests and snow-capped crags, the sky was riven by fire and storm. Lightning flashed, bringing with it the stink of the heavens. Was Sigmar watching, sealed away in his pitiful realm? Nagash hoped so. It was his dearest wish that the barbarian should be made to endure every torment inflicted upon Shyish thanks to his treachery. When he had become whole once more, Nagash would storm the gates of Azyr and drag the barbarian from his throne. He would cast him down. Aye, and Archaon with him.

All creation would bow before Nagash. All would be one, in Nagash. All would be well, because Nagash so commanded, and to defy Nagash was to defy death itself. And no living man or god could defy death. Not for long.

Far below, refugees struggled through waist-high snows, forging a path through the dark heart of the forests. The Rictus Lands had once been heavily populated, despite the harsh conditions. Now, plague and war had decimated the once-proud

clans, reducing them to scattered bands, fleeing ever northwards towards the sea. He felt no sympathy for their plight. Had not their ancestors betrayed him? Had they not defied him? And yet, they were his – his to punish, or raise up, as it pleased him. They were his, like all those who dwelled in the Mortal Realms were, sooner or later. He would not countenance either their destruction or salvation in any name but his own.

Following close on their heels came the invaders, a motley column of despoilers stretching for countless miles, across fjords and floes, through forest and fen. No single army this, but several, joined beneath a solitary, flyblown banner. It resembled nothing so much as a wave of gangrene creeping across a shattered limb.

Rotbringers. The servants of the Plague God, usurpers of life and death both. In their wake, the natural order was undone. The snows melted, the barren scrub flourished with hateful life and the icy rivers became turgid with filth. Where they passed, the forest began to warp. The trees sprouted unnatural growths, or else sickened and died before crumbling to stinking mulch. Stones split to reveal slobbering mouths which panted hymns to the Lord of Decay, and the beasts of the crags shed their fur for coats of mould and scaly scabs.

A howl went up from the flanks of the monstrous column. The cyclopean plaguebearers and beasts of Nurgle who trudged alongside the mortal warriors had caught a glimpse of his spirit as it observed them. They could not truly see him, for he was far beyond the limits of their perception, but like all animals, they knew when a predator was near, and they brayed their fear to the skies. The mortal rotbringers would not understand. Not yet. But he would teach them.

He pressed on, hurtling through skull and skin, dragging himself along a chain of carrion birds and the bodies they fed on. As he neared the Shivering Sea, the voice which had called to him became clearer. Familiar.

‘Master, I bid thee to appear. Your servant would speak with thee.’

The frozen sea was full of the dead and the things which feasted on them. A million bodies hung unmoving in a web of shattered ice-cutter galleys and trading vessels which stretched beneath the surface for miles in every direction. They had all perished at once, and suddenly. This had been the price of defiance. To defy death was to welcome it, to beg for it.

‘Master, I feel you near. I humbly beg an audience with thee.’

The voice was insistent, yet respectful. Measured. Nagash rose upwards, climbing a ladder of the sunken dead, passing like a cloud of silt through thickets of broken spars and shattered masts. The thoughts of the Broken Kings scratched

like mice at the underside of his awareness as he breached the surface.

Entreaties, implorations and demands swirled up through the bore holes of his mind. Even after so long, they had not learned their place. Or perhaps his current state had led them to grow bold in their confinement. He banished their voices with a twitch of his consciousness, and turned his attentions to the speck at his feet.

‘Speak, my servant. Speak, my mortarch.’

Arkhan the Black, Mortarch of Sacrament, stood on the icy surface of the Shivering Sea and gazed up at the colossal horror which loomed over him. Nagash, the monster he had served for a millennia – and likely would for many millennia more – had appeared suddenly, like a strike of black lightning, streaking down from weeping skies.

The Undying King was impossibly vast, his towering form surrounded by a flickering corona which changed hues, ever shifting from green to black to purple and back again with painful rapidity. His shape had issued like smoke from the cracked ice, and it wavered in the cold wind which whipped across the sea.

An army of moaning spirits, the courtiers of Stygxx, swirled about Nagash, drawn helplessly into his hellish orbit. They blended together and broke apart in a woeful dance of agony. The wide skull, lit by its own internal flame, gazed down at Arkhan.

‘My lord, you look... well,’ Arkhan said. It was a lie. The Undying King’s great skull was cleft from crown to jaw, and his armoured form was battered and twisted. Bones were broken, sections of armour missing, and a sickly radiance poured from a hundred wounds.

‘Speak,’ Nagash repeated. Ragged spirits squirmed from his maw as he spoke, joining those which swirled madly about him. Behind Arkhan, the crouched shape of his dread abyssal, Razarak, stirred. The creature scented the soul-stuff leaking from Nagash and growled hungrily.

‘I crave a boon, O Undying King,’ Arkhan said, gesturing for his steed to be still.

‘There is an army coming,’ Nagash said. The thunder of his voice made the ice beneath Arkhan’s feet crack and shift.

Arkhan nodded, pleased by his master’s apparent lucidity. It was a rare enough thing, these days. ‘There are always armies, my lord. Grist for the mill, as you used to say.’



‘Yes. They creep across my bones like maggots. I can feel them. I wish them gone, Arkhan. I wish all of it... gone.’

Arkhan paused, trying to parse the meaning to that statement. ‘The forces of Chaos have no intention of leaving, I fear. They have come to stay. And your realm suffers for it. We must drive them from this place.’

Nagash said nothing for long moments. Then, he said, ‘Do you know what “Nagash” means, my servant? It means absence. Nothing. Null. I am nothing, and yet I am everything. I am the end of all things, and the long night which follows the setting of the last sun.’

‘So you have said, master.’

Nagash spread his long arms, as if to encompass the horizon. ‘What is Chaos to me? It is nothing. As the fire is nothing to the cold which follows the snuffing of the final ember.’

Arkhan nodded sagely, as if he hadn’t heard the same speech a hundred times before. Or some variation of it, at least. Nagash often liked to pontificate on the theme of power, and his memory was not what it once had been. His speeches were rote and almost ritualistic. ‘But that ember must be snuffed all the same, my master.’

‘And so it shall be. Chaos will devour itself. It must. Chaos is fire, and fire is not eternal. Only the cold is eternal. Only the dark. Only Nagash.’ The looming shadow lowered its arms. It wavered, pierced through by falling snow and the bruise-coloured light of the setting sun.

‘And what of your servants, my lord? What of those who seek only to serve you?’

‘My servants? What are servants but extensions of my will? Your thoughts are my thoughts, your voice is my voice. You are but a shadow of a memory, given form and power by my will. Rejoice, Arkhan, for the burden of your destiny is not your own.’

This too was a variation on a very old theme, and Arkhan bore it as stoically as ever. More than once, over the centuries, he had considered rebellion. And more than once, he had discarded the idea as quickly as it had come. How does one rebel against a god? The answer, given all available evidence, was badly. ‘As you say, my master.’

‘A part of me desires only silence, to snuff out the light and let the dark rush in and fill the void which was once Shyish. Let the Three-Eyed King fight such an unravelling, if he would. I care not.’

Arkhan waited, but Nagash had fallen silent. He often did these days, no doubt

lost in his own memories and the manifold perceptions of his fragmented consciousness. Finally, Arkhan said, ‘And yet, we are still here, master. You have not snuffed out the light.’

Nagash looked down at him, as if only just recalling his presence. ‘I have not. Why did you call me here, my servant?’

‘A door to Stygxx forms beneath the sea, master. A gate to your redoubt. The enemy is coming here to take it. If they succeed, they will flood the underworld with their filth. I seek to thwart them.’

The Nine Gates to Stygxx were born anew every nine months, and they grew, aged and died in the same span, crumbling to dust before appearing elsewhere in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. That is why the Dark Gods had yet to find Nagash, for none could predict where and when the Nine Gates would open. That fickleness was one of the reasons Stygxx alone had remained inviolate, while the rest of Shyish shuddered in turmoil.

The other reason was Nagash himself. Of all the servants of the Ruinous Powers, only Archaon possessed the fortitude to face the Undying King in open battle. And Archaon was wise enough to resist the temptation to challenge Nagash – even weakened as he was – in the underworld. But others lacked such wisdom. Scenting blood, the scavengers sought the gates, and entrance to the underworld. When one was found, the slaves of darkness soon raced for it, each seeking to be the first to breach it in the name of their abominable patrons.

‘And will you do so alone?’ Nagash asked. He sounded almost amused.

Arkhan hesitated. ‘Neferata is here. We will defy the foe in your name.’

Nagash’s attentions began to wander. ‘I saw Manfred. He defies them as well, elsewhere. Alongside the living,’ he intoned absently.

‘Living or dead, all who call Shyish home serve you,’ Arkhan said smoothly. ‘All fight in your name.’ Even if they were treacherous jackals like Manfred von Carstein.

‘A lie. Some worship falsehood, and deny the truth of my divinity. But they will know, soon enough. Soon...’ The great shadow tensed as a ripple of something passed through it. Pain, perhaps, or anger. For Nagash, they were often one and the same, as well as constant. Arkhan studied the shadow the way a sailor might look to the sea, in an effort to determine how dangerous the next few moments were going to be.

‘Soon, master,’ Arkhan agreed.

The shadow twitched. The lamp-like eyes rolled away, staring out over the sea towards the indistinct horizon. ‘Soon, I shall reach into the sky and close my fist

about the stars. I will snuff the fire, one ember at a time. But not now. Not yet.’ Nagash turned back. ‘There is an army coming.’

‘Yes, master. So you said.’

‘What would you have of me, my servant?’ Nagash stared down at him. ‘You called, and I have come. Speak.’

‘I ask that you aid us in this battle.’ Arkhan lifted his staff. ‘Bestir thyself, master, and show the foe what it means to challenge the Undying King in his place of power.’

Nagash said nothing. His form wavered and became a ragged, writhing morass. Then the titan shape dissolved into a flock of shadowy carrion birds, which sped away in all directions, screeching. Arkhan lowered his staff with a sigh. Only time would tell whether Nagash had understood. Nearly a century of having something close to the same conversation almost every day was beginning to wear on him. The Battle of Black Skies had broken Nagash in more than just body, and what was left of him raged anew each day, as stuttering fragments of memory coalesced briefly before flying apart once more.

Even now he was a hole in the world, an absence of heat, light and life given voice. More a force of nature than a god, he still possessed his share of foibles. Nagash had been something less once, and he was determined never to be that again. As such, he did not cope well with defeat. He could not conceive of it, and floundered in its wake.

Once, that would not have been the case. Arkhan could not say how he knew this, but he did. Once, Nagash had understood subtlety and the ways of guile. He had thought as a mortal thought, and persevered as only mortals could. But somewhere along the way, he’d forgotten. He’d become something else: a vast, irresistible force. Implacable and yet, as evidenced by his current state, all too fragile.

And now he was mad as well. Perhaps he hadn’t always been so, but he was now. A mad god, gnawing his own vitals, trapped in a single moment of defeat and unable to move past it. That was Archaon’s true victory. With one blow, the Three-Eyed King had undone all that Nagash had come to believe himself to be, and reduced him to but a ranting shadow.

It was only temporary. For all intents and purposes, Nagash was eternal. While Shyish endured, so too would Nagash. Destruction brought only rebirth. And a wounding, such as this, was only a delay at best. Nagash would recover, but it would be slow, and he would lose a bit more of himself in the process. In time, the Undying King might even ascend to the abstract and become one with the

chanel mathematics of the Corpse Geometries.

Arkhan knew this as surely as he knew his own name. At times, he thought that he was not merely Nagash's servant, but was instead all those pieces of him which had been shed in his ascent to godhood. He was the mirror image of his master, and a reminder. For as Nagash became less an individual and more a force, so too did Arkhan become the reverse. 'And little enough profit has it brought me,' he said.

'Still talking to yourself, I see.'

'It is the only way I can converse with an equal. Hello, Neferata.' Arkhan turned. The Mortarch of Blood approached boldly across the ice, her dread abyssal pacing in her wake. His own steed growled softly in challenge. Like their masters, the dread abyssals did not get along. He laid a bony hand across Razarak's snout, calming the creature.

'Hello, Arkhan. I have gathered more survivors. The last of the Rictus Clans are arriving at the redoubt now. Those who have survived this long, at any rate.'

'And those who have not?'

She smiled, displaying a single, delicate fang. 'They're busy elsewhere.' She made an elegant gesture. 'I saw the shadow, and the carrion birds. Has he woken up again, our master?'

'He has.'

'More's the pity. This would be easier without him, I think.' Neferata looked up. 'What did he say?'

'There is an army on the way.' Arkhan looked at her. Once, he might have considered her beautiful. Perhaps part of him still did. But it was an icy beauty, inhuman and dangerous and, ultimately, untrustworthy. Neferata served only herself in this, as in all things.

She laughed. 'Well then, we should prepare a proper greeting, don't you think?'



# THREE

## POX-CRUSADE

*The Three-Eyed King calls himself Godslayer.  
His daemon-blade shattered my bones.  
My rites and magics were torn asunder.  
My body was left to the dust, and to the dust I returned.  
But I stir once more.  
I am death, and I contain multitudes.  
Listen.  
Believe.  
I am death, and all are one in me.*

– *The Epistle of Bone*

The blizzard had come up suddenly. The air was thick with snow, and for the third time in as many days, Festerbite wished he'd stayed in the Jade Kingdoms. At least it had been warm there, even if the trees did try to kill you every so often. His steed whickered harshly, snapping at the persistent flakes in irritation.

'Waste of effort, Scab,' Festerbite said. 'Save it for the flesh of our foes.' The horse-thing grumbled, and redoubled its efforts to take a bite out of the blizzard.

Hunched over in his saddle, snow pattering against the rust-rimmed holes in his helm, Festerbite whistled a mournful dirge. It did little to cheer him up. His mouth ached in that old familiar way. A new fang was coming in. He reached up under his helmet and scratched at the blistered bone of his lower jaw. The flesh

had long since rotted away, and a thicket of yellow, glistening fangs emerged at random points from his jawbone.

Still scratching, he looked around. Shyish was an unpleasant realm, and this region of it doubly so. It was all ice and snow. Everything was either frozen or hard, or sometimes frozen hard. And it was far too quiet. In the Jade Kingdoms, the air throbbed with bird song and the hum of insect life. Here, the only sounds to be heard were the phlegm-choked laughter of his fellow knights, the clangour of plague-bells and the droning hymns of the faithful.

Nonetheless, it was an honour to be here. Blightmaster Wolgus had chosen Sir Festerbite from amongst the teeming hundreds who served the Most Suppurating and Blightsome Order of the Fly to be his second in command for this expedition. There were more experienced knights with greater glories to their names, but Wolgus – Hero of the Pallas Ghyredes, Breaker of the Cobalt Bastion – had chosen him, had asked *him* to ride with the pox-crusade and bring the fire of life to the cold lands of the dead.

Festerbite, eager for glories of his own, had not been able to say no. One could not deny the request of such a hero. Of the seven chosen blightmasters of the Order, those ordained by the Lady of Cankerwall herself, Wolgus was the youngest and the most energetic. He had carved out new territories for the Order in the wilds of Ghyran and Chamon, and he had matched wits and blades with the enemies of Nurgle wherever they might be found. It was Wolgus who had slain the Tzeentchian champion Gog of the Twelve Tongues, and Wolgus who had broken the enemy's lines at the Black Cistern. And it would be Wolgus who led the Order to victory here, in these cold, dry lands. How could he fail, with such an army at his back?

The column, which comprised the main thrust of the pox-crusade, stretched both behind and ahead of Festerbite. Thousands had flocked to join this holy undertaking. Some were mortal; many were not. Most were capering zealots, clad in tattered robes and bearing the mark of the fly on whatever scraps of armour they had been able to scavenge. They beat drums and rang bells with carnival exuberance as they trudged through the snow in disorderly mobs.

Others were of a more professional disposition, dressed in hauberks made from toad-dragon hide and carrying wide iron-rimmed shields as well as festering blades and spears. These were the chosen armsmen of the Order, drawn from the blighted levies of Festerfane and Cankerwall, as well as from the smaller demesnes which sheltered beneath the aegis of the Order. They marched in orderly formation behind the steeds of their masters, chanting in low, steady

voices.

Festerbite's fellow knights, all chosen by Wolgus as Festerbite had been, were towering brutes, clad in the thick maggoty war-plate of their Order. They wore mouldy tabards displaying the sign of the fly. Each of them had quested for and tasted the sour syrup of the Flyblown Chalice, delivered to their lips by the Lady of Cankerwall herself. They had taken the seven times seventy-seven oaths to the King of All Flies, and now rode for the glory and honour of Nurgle. Most sat astride bulky steeds like Festerbite's own, but some marched in the ranks, leading bands of putrid blightkings or brawling beastkin. Mounted or not, all were true knights, intrepid and bold.

The firstborn children of the Lord of All Things lurched, squirmed and lumbered into battle alongside his mortal followers. Droning songs of war rose up from the squelching ranks of plaguebearers, accompanied by the buzzing of a million fat-bodied flies. Beneath their cloven hooves, snow melted and soil became vibrant with virulent hues. What little plant life there was beneath the frost bulged obscenely, roots thick with wormy pus. An invigorating miasma spread outward from the column, giving the land a more civilised texture.

A groan caught Festerbite's ear and he turned. One of the mad monks had collapsed, body black with cold. Festerbite turned his steed and urged it towards the fallen warrior, as the mortal twitched in his death throes. Sturdy as the servants of the Order were, this harsh realm was a fiercer enemy than many were prepared for. The trail of this pox-crusade was littered with the bodies of the faithful. The conditions claimed numerous lives, but there were other dangers aplenty in these unhallowed lands. The Order had faced deadwalkers, wrathful spirits and horrors without name since first crossing the Bridge of Scabs and breaching the Ithilian Gate.

As Festerbite drew close, several of the dying man's companions hunkered over the body, sawing at the flesh with rusty blades. Food was in short supply, and most had to make do when and with what they could. The mortal rotbringers were under a constant threat of starvation, and they had resorted to eating the weak when their supplies got too low.

'Leave him, you cackling jackals,' Festerbite barked, leaning over to slap a rotbringer with the back of his hand. The creature spun, diseased features twisted in a snarl. Festerbite's steed whinnied and snapped its teeth together inches from what was left of the pox-worshipper's nose. The robed pilgrim ducked away, bandaged hands lifted in acquiescence. 'Are you Bloodbound, to so greedily sup at a brother's flesh?' Festerbite demanded, before relenting slightly. 'Let him lie,

so that his body might fertilise this parched soil, but take his weapons and armour if you must. No reason to let those go to waste.'

'Thank you, great one,' the leprous pilgrim gurgled, as he and his fellows fell to stripping the body. Festerbite watched them for a moment, and then wheeled his steed around.

'And thank you, Scab,' he murmured, patting the horse-thing's neck. Scab hissed and snapped good-naturedly at his hand. Festerbite dropped a fist between his daemonic steed's ragged ears. 'None of that now.' He twisted in his saddle as something caught his eye. He nudged Scab in the ribs and the horse-thing clopped away from the column.

A pole jutted from the icy ground like a grave marker. The weathered wood was slick with frozen blood, along with less savoury liquids. It stood upright in the snow, surrounded by heaps of shattered armour and broken weapons. Heads decorated the hollows carved into the pole's length. The cold had mummified these grisly remnants, reducing the flesh to little more than parchment stretched tight over bone. Some still wore helmets or tarnished circlets of office. There were brass horns twisted into the rune of Khorne, and the bird-shaped helms favoured by Tzeentch's chosen cat's paws. Whatever their origin, all were lit by an internal fire, visible through their eye sockets. And all still spoke.

A hundred voices, whispering softly, their words lost in the relentless moan of the storm. Festerbite found himself straining to listen, wondering what they had to say. Would they curse him, or were they trying to warn him? He nudged Scab closer. The horse-thing resisted at first, but a brutal thump of his heels inclined it to his way of thinking.

He drew close to the pole, one hand on the hilt of his rotsword. Behind him, the column trudged on. He leaned forwards, peering into the softly glowing eyes of what had once been a blood warrior. The Khornate killer had not died easily, to judge by the marks which decorated his skull. Broken teeth clicked in a twitching jaw as whatever force animated the skull continued to speak. Festerbite shifted in his saddle, trying to hear.

*I... see... you!*

He jerked back, eyes narrowing. Snow crunched beneath clumsy feet, somewhere just out of sight. Scab pawed the ground restlessly and whickered in discontent. Festerbite sniffed, suddenly aware of an all too familiar odour. With a curse, he jerked Scab's reins and turned back towards the column. Scab needed no urging to break into a gallop.

'Deadwalkers!' Festerbite roared, as he yanked on his mount's reins. 'Ware the



flanks!’ Behind him, the hungry dead staggered out of the swirling snow, a tide of rancid flesh and grasping claws. They spilled unsteadily towards the column. Arrows hiss-cracked into putrefying skulls and were left sprouting from crooked backs, but the dead swarmed onwards. It wasn’t the first time the column had been attacked by the wandering dead, but their numbers increased with every assault.

‘Sling your bows, fools – this is butcher’s work,’ Festerbite said, urging his steed back down the line. ‘Molov, bring your axemen. Think of them as trees.’ Around him, the column was falling into a battle line with practised speed. Spears rattled down, forming an improvised barricade. Zombies weren’t that dangerous, if you could keep them at a distance.

‘Trees don’t bite,’ Molov bumbled. The blightking’s antlered helm seeped noxious juices, which dripped down and turned the snow to pus as he led his obese god-blessed warriors through the ranks of the faithful, shoving aside the more fragile mortals. The putrid blightkings were bloated with the favours of Nurgle, their bodies swollen with holy corruption. They were slabs of fat and muscle bound in straining skin and armoured in rust-pitted war-plate.

‘They do in the Jade Kingdoms,’ Festerbite said. ‘If it’s any consolation, these shamblers smell a sight better than those piles of walking kindling. Make a prettier fire as well. Now shut your mouths, lift your axes and follow me.’ He kicked his steed into motion. The horse-thing shrieked eagerly as its blistered hooves tore the earth. Molov and the other blightkings began to drone a hymn of war as they followed at a ponderous lope.

Festerbite drew his rotsword as he drew near to the closest of the deadwalkers, and removed its head with a single slash. That didn’t stop it, of course. Bravado aside, the shambling dead were more dangerous than they looked. There were hundreds of them, more than enough to swamp the column and even shatter it, if Grandfather Nurgle chose not to favour them.

He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on hewing at the grasping corpses as they pressed close about him. His steed shrilled a challenge and reared, pulping skulls with its hooves and trampling the fallen into mush. ‘That’s the way, Scab,’ Festerbite said, as he lopped off a rotting talon. ‘Make them mulch for Grandfather’s garden. For the glory of the Order of the Fly!’

But as he fought, a great shadow seemed to spread over the corpses, filling their shrunken limbs with strength. They attacked with renewed ferocity, and Festerbite felt a sudden thrill of fear. It had been so long since he’d felt such a thing that it took him by surprise. He hesitated, and paid the price. Rotting

fingers clawed at his steed, tearing gobbets from the horse-thing's unnatural flesh. It screeched in pain and reared, hurling him from the saddle.

Festerbite fell heavily to the ground. His steed was bowled over by the deadwalkers and a wave of clawing, biting corpses washed over the struggling beast, hiding it from view. Incensed, Festerbite lurched to his feet and hacked at the zombies. He began to bellow a hymn to Nurgle as he fought, but the words caught in his throat as the head of every deadwalker turned towards him as one, their eyes glowing with an amethyst light.

He backed away, sword extended. The sound of the battle had grown dim, as if it were far away. The dead closed in on him, trailing bits of his unfortunate steed in their wake. They moved with unnatural purpose. Normally, they fought like the dullest of beasts, but these moved in unison. The ground trembled beneath his feet, and he saw the shadowy presence again, rising up over him like an avenging god. He heard the distant rumble of something that might have been a voice as the dead crashed against him.

Festerbite fought back, desperate now and without his usual confidence. They surrounded him on all sides, prying at his armour, gouging his flesh, hindering his blows. They were a quagmire of unfeeling flesh, immune to all save the most savage of blows.

One of the deadwalkers suddenly clutched at Festerbite's throat, its fingers tightening with inexorable strength. A strange fire burned in its ruined sockets, and sounds that might have been words slipped from between its ragged lips. He could almost hear a voice, like a bell tolling in the deep. His grip on his sword grew loose as the zombie's flickering gaze bored into his eyes, and deeper still, into the squirming malignancy of his soul.

*I... see... you*, it said. It was the same voice as before. A voice as black as the pit and as deep as the sea. The words shuddered down through him, and his heart convulsed in his chest. And then, the deadwalker's head was rolling free, and its eyes lost their hateful lustre. Festerbite sagged back, coughing. Hooves trampled the deadwalker's body into mush. The animal's rider laughed.

'What have I told you about letting them get hold of you like that? Here, give me your hand.' Wheezing, Festerbite caught the proffered hand and was hauled to his feet. He looked up into the murky gaze of Blightmaster Wolgus, and assayed a smile.

'He was quicker than I expected, blightmaster.'

'They always are, Sir Festerbite. The dead move fast, especially in these lands.' Wolgus wore a halo of flies about his wide skull, and his body creaked with the

power of Nurgle as he studied the battlefield. His battle-scarred, baroque armour was marked with stylised flies and leering faces. ‘Well done, my boy. Made a proper mess of them I see. Grandfather is pleased.’

‘And you, my lord?’

‘Always, boy, always. Else I would not have sponsored you for knighthood.’ Wolgus heaved himself from the saddle. The snow melted beneath his feet, turning to glistening slurry. ‘The Lady of Cankerwall herself spoke as to the mighty deeds you might yet perform, in the name of the King of All Flies.’ He caught Festerbite by the shoulders. ‘And all of Festerfane will echo with the stories of what you and I accomplish here in these barren wastes.’

‘As you say, blightmaster.’ Festerbite bowed his head.

‘As jolly as this is, I feel I must remind you that we have a schedule,’ a deep, gulping voice said. Festerbite glared over Wolgus’ shoulder at the massive shape shambling towards them. ‘Not that I wish to interrupt such a touching moment, but, well... these poxes aren’t going to spread themselves, you know.’

Wolgus sighed and turned. ‘As ever, your counsel is most welcome, Gurm.’

‘Of course it is. I am an endless fount of wisdom.’ Gurm leaned forward on his palanquin chair, knobbly fingers tap-tapping against the hilt of his balesword. The Herald of Nurgle was a bloat-bellied, lanky-limbed child of the King of All Flies. His grey-green skin writhed with maggots and rot-fly eggs, and his mighty antlers were fuzzy with a vivid crimson mould. He wore a battered breastplate over his sunken chest, a stylised fly painted on it.

Gurm was an ardent patron of the Most Suppurating and Blightsome Order of the Fly, and had fought beside its knights on a thousand battlefields. Even so, he was a daemon, and Festerbite put little stock in his loyalty to their holy creed. Daemons were fickle things and prone to treachery, even the jolly children of Nurgle. They sought glory in the eyes of their creator above all else.

As if reading his thoughts, Gurm gave a liquid chuckle. ‘The dead do not tarry, Wolgus. And neither should we.’

‘You’ll forgive me if I choose to ensure our flanks are safe from further attack before we move on, I trust.’ Wolgus dropped a hand to the pommel of his sword. ‘This is not Ghyran, and these forests are full of worse things than tree-kin.’ He gestured to Gurm’s palanquin. It was crafted from the still-living bodies of four sylvaneth. The tree-kin were bound together by sutures of pus-coloured sap, and their withered limbs had grown into one another, forming the palanquin. A branch-wreathed head jutted from each corner, bark faces twisted in elemental agony. Their thick legs held the palanquin aloft, and glistening tendrils sporting

poisonous thorns thrashed about them.

Gurm blinked his single eye. 'You sound as if you fear these lands, Wolgus.'

'I fear nothing that walks or crawls. But I see the world for what it is, not as I wish it to be.' Wolgus thumped his breastplate. Festerbite nodded in agreement. That was one of the central tenets of their order. Clarity was Nurgle's gift to his chosen: to see the world as it was, stripped bare of the tattered masks of desire and hope, leaving only a beautiful despair. There was comfort in surrender, and joy in acceptance. There was love there, at the heart of all endings, and serenity at the end of all things. And it was that bleak serenity which the Order of the Fly served. It was that serenity which they sought to impart to the ignorant and the savage.

'There is a better way than this. A softer road, and a gentler darkness,' Festerbite murmured, watching as the last of the deadwalkers were put down by Molov and the others. Wolgus chuckled.

'I know those words,' he said. 'I heard the troubadour, Onogal, sing them at the last gathering of the Order. How we applauded.'

'Would that he were with us now, for we could do with some gaiety in this fell place,' Festerbite said. 'The shadows loom close, even on the brightest day.'

Wolgus clapped him on the shoulder. 'I wish they were here as well. Brave Sir Goral, serene Dolorugus, and even bawdy Sir Culgus, who fought beside me at the Bridge of Scabs and held it for twelve days against the blood-mad hordes of Khorne. Glory is all the sweeter for being shared with one's fellows.'

'Speak for yourself, my lad,' Gurm said, with a phlegm-soaked chuckle. 'The scum rises to the top. And if we wish to be that scum, we must press forwards without delay. We must drive forwards, until the trees end and our prey find themselves caught between us and the sea.'

'And we will. As the Lady herself foresaw, in the stew of portent.' Wolgus grinned confidently. Festerbite saw no flaw in his reasoning. The Lady of Cankerwall was a seer without equal, and she could read the skeins of fate and moment in the effluvial smoke of her bubbling pox-cauldrons. Her will was as that of Nurgle, and the Order fought in her name as much as that of the Lord of All Things. From her noisome chambers, she orchestrated the sevenfold forces of the Order of the Fly, sending them where Nurgle decreed: to raze this forest, or build this citadel; to crush these foes, or conquer this demesne. And the Order did so, for to serve the Lady was to serve the Lord of All Things.

She was older than the Order itself, older even than the Jade Kingdoms some said, and had come upon the first of those who would become her blightmasters

in the Age of Myth. Veiled and sitting astride a blightsome steed, she had drawn brave knights to her from across the kingdoms and anointed them in Nurgle's name. She had spoken to those first questing knights of honour in the service of Life itself, and her song had opened their courageous hearts to the sweet chivalry of despair.

It was the Lady who had set them on this course, for reasons they did not ask nor needed to know. That she had asked was enough. What true knight could resist the request of a Lady so great and fine as she who had guided them all these many centuries?

'If the Lady has foreseen it, so mote it be,' Festerbite said, piously.

'Hear hear,' Wolgus said. 'Our victory is assured. Else why would she have sent us?'

'Yes, well, no reason to laze about, is all.' Gurm sniffed and spat. He thumped his palanquin and the sylvaneth shoved themselves upright with wheezing hisses. 'Get them moving, Wolgus. Busy hands are blessed hands.' The palanquin tottered off, carrying the Herald across the battlefield and away.

'He's in quite the hurry,' Wolgus said, when the daemon was out of earshot.

'I've never seen him this insistent,' Festerbite said. Scab limped towards him, its scaly hide already healing. The horse-thing nuzzled him affectionately, and he patted its muzzle as he watched Gurm's palanquin jolt away. 'He's playing some game, isn't he?'

Wolgus nodded. 'Of course. That is his way.' He turned. 'Fear not, gentle Festerbite. Whatever scheme he is concocting, it will only be to our benefit. We alone possess the endurance to come so far into the hinterlands of this accursed realm. And we alone shall reap the glory of its conquest. The Lady has seen it.'

Festerbite thumped his chest in salute. 'For the Lady, blightmaster.'

Wolgus smiled. 'Yes. For the Lady, and the Realm Rotting.'

The air stank of sweet stagnation. In even the smallest death, there was life, and to Dolorous Gurm fell the pleasure of nurturing it. He left Wolgus and his knight to their mutterings of faith and chivalry and began his customary inspection of the battlefield. Everywhere he looked, rotbringers were hacking at the dead, ensuring that they would not rise again. Even the bodies of their fellow warriors were not exempt from this mutilation. To die in Shyish was to trade one master for another, and, as yet, not even the Dark Gods themselves could prevent the Undying King from raising up their fallen warriors for his armies.

This was not the first time, or even the fifth, that the pox-crusade had been

forced to defend itself from the mindless dead since its arrival in Shyish. And since the dead seemed so eager to greet them, Gurm had decided to put them to good use. This newly sown field of corpses would yield fertile wonders, in time.

Everywhere, sour flesh swelled with newborn disease, and he gestured to his scribes. ‘Note these buboes, and how they ripen,’ he said, indicating one of the fallen deadwalkers. As his servants scrambled to do his bidding, he sank back onto his cushions with a sigh. Sprawled atop his palanquin, Gurm surveyed the battlefield and imagined the garden to come.

There was potential, here. Others might not see it, but he did. It would take time and patience, both of which he had in abundance. Ghyran was a veritable paradise compared to this – a realm fit to bursting with the stuff of life. Diseases needed no encouragement there, or barely any. Even the most fragile pestilence flourished in the hothouse of the Jade Kingdoms.

It took no skill. No talent. ‘Quantity is the aim of the unimaginative,’ the daemon gurgled, knocking a knuckle against the inflamed bark of his palanquin. One of the sylvaneth gave a raspy moan and shuddered. Pus-like sap bubbled up from between the cracks in the bark, and Gurm dipped a finger in it. He stuck the glistening digit in his mouth and sucked it clean. ‘But quality – ah, quality – that is the mark of the true creative. One must have vision, if one is to stand out amongst the faceless hordes.’

And Gurm had vision to spare. This realm would be his canvas, upon which he would paint a virulent masterpiece. Papa Nurgle would raise him up for it, and bestow upon him all the choicest of compliments, as befitting a master craftsman.

Still, one couldn’t be a craftsman of any sort without the proper tools. Gurm glanced over his shoulder. Wolgus stood in conversation with his inner circle, planning the advance. Doughty knights, all, and devoted to the King of All Flies. Gurm idly gnawed the blisters on his finger. It had been a fortunate day when he’d made the acquaintance of the Most Suppurating and Blightsome Order of the Fly. Rising from the blighted noble houses of the duchies of Festerfane, Cankerwall and the Pallas Ghyredes, the knights of the Order had fought at the forefront of Nurgle’s armies in Ghyran since the fall of the Black Cistern.

Who else but the Order would have dared to leave the safety of Ghyran and cross the Bridge of Scabs? Who else would have challenged the feathered warders of the Ithilian Gate, and emerged victorious? They were staunch servants of Nurgle, though they valued their honour a touch more than Gurm felt was warranted. A good gardener was pragmatic, as well as inventive. The

Order's chivalric ideals often got in the way of more practical concerns. But they made for excellent warriors, and were more trustworthy than braggarts like Gutrot Spume or ambitious fools like the Glottkin. Indeed, compared to their fellows, the warriors of the Order were almost... naive. They were idealistic nihilists, seeking to spread the sweetest of despairs. That idealism made them the perfect sort of shield. Other warlords might begin to question, to plot and scheme for their own glory. But not the Order.

It had been child's play to convince Wolgus, one of the seven blightmasters of the Order, to embark on a crusade into the wilds of Shyish, so that they might free it from the tyranny of death and raise its folk up in the ways of pox and sweet despair. And thus far, they had done just that. In the months since they'd passed across the Bridge of Scabs and pierced the Ithilian Gate, every force the primitive inhabitants of this land could muster had been smashed by the pox-crusade, and many of the native tribes had come around to their way of thinking. What profit in worshipping death, when life offered so much more, especially in regards to general longevity?

The pox-crusade had marched steadily north since their arrival all those months ago, guided by Gurm. He had led them into the glacial wilderness, where no other servant of the Ruinous Powers had yet managed to triumph. At his insistence, they had slogged through icy fens and across barren tundra into the Rictus Lands, driving the savage clans before them. Through blizzards, freezing rains and howling winds, he'd led them ever northwards, counting on Nurgle's blessings to see them through conditions which would have spelled disaster for lesser warriors.

Flies buzzed about his head, humming secrets. Gurm nodded sagely. 'Thank you, little ones,' he said. His flies had spread across these lands the moment they'd breached the Ithilian Gate. Their faceted eyes saw everything, and they reported it back to him. And what they reported was: Chaos. Everywhere, the membrane between realms was punctured. Realmgates vomited forth the servants of the Ruinous Powers, come seeking glory and conquest as they had in Aqshy, Ghyran and Chamon.

But the kingdoms of death were strong. It would take time to wear them down, and it would bleed the armies of Khorne and Tzeentch white. And while they spent themselves on the walls of Helstone, in the streets of Gravesend and amid the docks of the great port of Ossuary, Gurm would snatch victory from under their very noses.

Shyish was Nagash, and Nagash was Shyish. That much he'd learned from the

delicately blistered lips of the Lady of Cankerwall, before their departure. For a mortal, she was most insightful. The seer had whispered to him of the Undying King. The king was the land, and the land, the king. Wound one, harm the other. Archaon had delivered the first blow, but another was required, this one to the very heart of realm and ruler both.

There was a path to the underworld close to hand. He could sense it, and his flies sought it. When he found it, he would lead his brothers into it. They would fill the underworld with a flood of bounteous filth and drown the Lord of Death in glorious fecundity. And it would be Dolorous Gurm who held his bony skull beneath the slimy waters. Gurm and no other. He glanced around at Wolgus, and chuckled.

He saw no reason to share his true aims with his mortal cat's paws. The Order of the Fly would shield him until such time as he reached his goal. Then, they would be dispensed with. If any survived the battle to come, he might induct them into his own service. Once he'd divested them of their foolish notions of chivalry and honour, of course. There was no place for that sort of claptrap in the service of the Lord of All Things.

Gurm knuckled his eye and chuckled again. Now was the time to strike, while Nagash was wounded and weak. Once he was destroyed or, failing that, bound, then Shyish would fall. Like Ghyran, it would belong to Nurgle, and the Lord of Decay would grow stronger yet. The garden would spread across two realms, life and death inextricably bound in chains of glorious rot.

Gurm shuddered in pleasure at the thought. The Three-Eyed King might be content to rest on his laurels, but Nurgle was always busy.





# FOUR

## THE RICTUS

*The law of Nagash is this.*

*My will shall be the whole of thy desire, whether in life or in death.*

*You speak with my voice, and strike with my hand.*

*Refute all other gods, for what are gods to one who is death? Nothing, as you are nothing, save what I choose to make of you.*

*Nagash is all, and all are one, in Nagash.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

The assembled voivodes of the Rictus Clans stood in a wide circle, arguing. All save Tamra. It was the first time she had been to a conclave. Her brother had been to two before his death. He'd never seemed to have enjoyed them, and now she could see why. There was little fun to be had in watching more than a dozen old men and women bellow at each other for hours on end. But such was the way of the Rictus: all voices must be heard, all consideration made. From the lowest of the lowborn clans to the highest of the highborn, all had their say in a conclave.

There should have been more of them. The lands of the north were divided between six hundred clans, some larger, some smaller, but each with their own voivode. But there were barely more than twenty of them here now. There were whispers that some had joined the foe, forsaking old loyalties in the name of survival. Others had died in their steading, or fled into the deep hills. Those who

remained, like Tamra, had retreated north to the Mandible.

The conclave chamber sat at the top of the highest tower in the redoubt known as the Mandible. It had once been the citadel of one of the legendary Broken Kings, though which one nobody knew. Few who lived dared to speak their names, and the dead were forbidden to speak of them. Whichever of them it had once belonged to, the redoubt was still a mighty fortress, as the Rictus judged such things. It had high sloping walls of quarried stone, reinforced with iron, and was shaped vaguely like a jawbone, as its name implied.

The ruins of the city outside the walls were of similar make, or had been, before fire and sorcery had torn them asunder. And beyond them lay the sagging, rime-encrusted remnants of the ice-docks, which had once played host to those who dared the frigid waters of the Shivering Sea, including traders from the Rime Isles and Helstone. The Rictus had ruled the north and all had sought their patronage.

Some said the duardin of the Cacklebone had built citadel and city both, in payment for an unspecified debt. Looking around, Tamra could easily believe it. The conclave chamber was open to the sky, and its walls had been ruptured by primeval calamity, but it still stood and showed no inclination to collapse any time soon. The worm-folk were great ones for working rock and stone, shaping them as easily as a child might shape ash and grease. What they built could not easily be knocked over. The weapons they forged were highly prized as well. Many a clan had bartered themselves into penury for the chance to own a duardin-forged blade or two. She glanced down at the barrowblade now belted about her waist, and ran her thumb over the heat-scarred pommel.

It was all that she had to remind her of Sarpa. Even the remnants of his soul were gone, torn from existence in some manner she didn't fully understand. It was as if he had been claimed by the storm itself. 'Foolishness,' she murmured.

'Oh, I agree, but one must allow for tradition, mustn't one?' Neferata said from behind her. Tamra glanced at the mortarch. Neferata stood a respectful distance from the circle, lazily watching the proceedings. Her dread abyssal crouched behind her, its skeletal chin resting on her shoulder. It growled as it noticed Tamra looking at it. Neferata reached up and swatted it on its muzzle. 'Quiet, Nagadron, I'm trying to listen.' She looked at Tamra. 'Why a circle?'

'All are equal, in life as well as in death. Rictus speak with one voice, or not at all.' It was an old tradition. One started by the Broken Kings, or so the stories said.

'As long as it's the right voice, I have no objection.' Neferata tapped her lip

with a thumbnail. ‘Still, we have precious little time for old men to shout about things they cannot change.’ She stepped past Tamra and swayed into the centre of the circle, one hand resting lightly on the pommel of her sword.

The other voivodes fell silent, their eyes were on Neferata. Some of them were frightened, others wary. A few, challenging. All, however, were respectful. One did not rise to the rank of mortarch without first climbing a mountain of corpses, and it was Neferata who had brought most of them here, either by summons or personally. Tamra rubbed her cheek tiredly. She and those few of her folk she could find had followed the mortarch and her knights through the wilderness for days, until at last they had caught sight of the Mandible.

More refugees arrived every day, flooding in as the rotbringers laid waste to the north with pox and fire. Warriors from a dozen or more clans manned the broken walls, or saw to what repairs were within their power to make. If the Rictus were to make their final stand, the Mandible was a better place than most. The walls were high, the wells deep and it was defended on both sides by mountain and sea.

In the circle, Neferata cleared her throat. ‘Voivodes of the Rictus, I greet thee in the name of the Undying King.’

‘And we greet thee, Mother of Night,’ said one of the voivodes. Arun of the Ung was the oldest of all of them, his face little more than a skull wrapped in parchment. He had seen a hundred winters more than any other man of the Rictus, and he looked as if every single one were weighing on him, hunched as he was inside a voluminous coat of furs and leaning against a staff of bone and wood. ‘Have you brought his counsel, as well as his greetings?’

‘Better,’ Neferata said. ‘I have brought myself, and my kindred. We will stand beside the Rictus in battle, as we once did, in seasons past.’

‘Are we to stand then?’ another voivode spoke up. Bolgu was the leader of one of the coastal clans, the Fenn. He was a big man, broad and built thick. He wore a cuirass of banded bone, marked with necromantic sigils, and the scars of old battles disfigured his fleshy features. ‘To what purpose? No, better to flee across the ice. We will take our ice-cutter galleys and seek sanctuary on the Rime Isles, and wait for this pestilence to burn itself out. Let them fight the flesh-eaters and orruks, if they wish.’

‘And when they follow you?’ Neferata said. ‘Where will you flee then?’

‘We could seek aid from the duardin,’ another voivode, Myrn, said. She was a frail thing, all skin and bones, her face tattooed with the tribal markings of the Wald. ‘Their holds are under the shadow of the Great Enemy as much as our

palisades.’ She looked around. ‘We trade furs and meat for iron and steel. Let us trade them for warriors instead.’

‘The spirits have said that the high gates are closed and the deep drums are silent,’ Arun said, his voice creaky with age. ‘The duardin will not fight this war for us.’

‘I suspect that they are busy fighting their own,’ Neferata said. ‘After all, where the followers of pox roam, the creeping ratkin are not far behind.’ She wriggled her fingers for emphasis. ‘Gnawing their way up, as the blighted legions dig down.’

‘Then there is no hope,’ Bolgu said.

‘And what am I, then?’ Neferata said, bemusedly.

‘The servant of a dead god.’

The other voivodes murmured at this, though whether in agreement or shock, Tamra couldn’t tell. Perhaps it was a little of both.

‘And how do you know he is dead, mortal?’ Neferata said, almost gently. ‘Did he visit you? Perhaps to tender his heartfelt goodbyes?’

‘We all know he is dead,’ Bolgu said. ‘We heard the thunder of his bones breaking, the scream of the souls loosed by his fall.’ He tapped his chest. ‘We felt the shattering of the Corpse Geometries, deep in our hearts.’

‘How awful for you,’ Neferata said. ‘To have so little faith, I mean. Nagash cannot die. Nagash *is* death. He is this realm. The high mountains are his bones, the seas, his marrow.’

‘Then where is he? Why does he not stand before us and speak these words?’

‘And who are you, that he would deign to speak with you?’ Neferata laughed. ‘You are maggots, grubbing in his flesh. Be grateful, and speak softly to me or not at all.’

Bolgu growled and Tamra felt the winds of death thicken. ‘Mortarch or not, you are in our demesnes now, and it is you who will speak softly, vampire.’ Ghosts congealed about him, clutching misty weapons. Bolgu could call the drowned dead as easily as another man might whistle for a hound. ‘We will not be mocked. We hewed kingdoms from ice, and drew down the light of the moon to warm ourselves. We are Rictus.’

‘Then act it, fool,’ Neferata said. She spread her pale arms. ‘I am the oldest of the old, and in me is the strength of time out of mind. I have weathered apocalypses beyond your imagining, and strangled newborn gods in their cradles. Would you pit yourself against me?’

Bolgu opened his mouth, and Tamra wondered whether he were suicidal or

simply stupid. The Fenn plied the Shivering Sea, with all of its inherent dangers. Perhaps having faced the horrors of the deeps, the voivode of the Fenn could not conceive of someone as fragile-looking as Neferata being a threat. If that was the case, he was in for a nasty shock.

‘Be silent, Bolgu, be still,’ Arun said. ‘The Queen of Blood is a guest here. We owe her courtesy, at least.’ Bolgu subsided with a grimace. Arun turned his milky gaze on Neferata. ‘You say you have brought yourself – what do you offer? Will you fight for us?’

‘Yes, and more besides. I will teach you to fight, such as you never fought before.’ She turned and clapped her hands. ‘Adhema, Rasha... bring the maggot.’

The doors to the chamber slammed open, and two armoured figures, one of them Adhema, strode in, dragging a third in chains. Tamra couldn’t say when they’d taken a prisoner. Perhaps at her steading, or even along the way. Some rotbringers had ranged far ahead of the bulk of their forces, acting either as scouts or merely following their debased whims. This one had been hard used by his captors, and the two blood knights were not gentle as they hauled him into the centre of the circle. They cast him onto the floor, and he lay gasping. Tar-like ichor dripped from his many wounds. It seemed inconceivable that he could still be alive. He gurgled something, and Adhema’s boot found the side of his skull.

Tamra flinched at the sound. Adhema glanced at her and winked. The kastellan had spoken little to her since they’d arrived, which suited Tamra fine. Neferata was bad enough, but Adhema radiated a feral need for violence. For her, the only good kill was a bloody one, and all that lived was prey. Tamra had little doubt that if Neferata had not been there, Adhema and her warriors would have ridden down the Drak after finishing off the rotbringers.

‘Why have you brought this... filth, here?’ Bolgu demanded. He and the others stared at the chained rotbringer the way they might a mad dog. Tamra studied the leprous creature with more curiosity than fear. He was not a Rictus, or even a man of the south. His features were too round, too wide beneath the mask of boils and scabs. He stank, but not with the clean reek of decaying flesh. Old tattoos in the shape of weaving vines and ragged leaves marked the visible portions of his flesh, and his teeth were etched with runes.

‘To get to the truth, one must dig,’ Neferata said. She crouched beside the bound warrior and caught his chin. With the fingers of her other hand, she traced a line down his chest. Thick, oily blood beaded on his flesh, and he grunted in pain. The grunt became a cry as she twisted her claws into his chest. Adhema and the other vampire leaned close, eyes alight with interest, their hands on the

hilts of their swords.

Dark liquid splattered the ground as Neferata indulged herself. Every so often she would pause and murmur a question, sometimes in a tongue that Tamra didn't recognize. It was a soft language and put her in mind of a summer breeze and rustling leaves. When the rotbringer answered, he spoke in a similar tongue, albeit more guttural. When he didn't answer, Neferata hurt him; quite badly, judging from his screams. Tamra was surprised. She'd thought the servants of Nurgle all but immune to pain.

Unable to watch for long, Tamra turned away. She looked out through one of the broken walls of the chamber and tried to ignore the screams. Her gaze was drawn to the high rock face which hung over the Mandible. Craggs jutted like fangs from the looming shape of the Wailing Peaks, their uppermost tips hidden in the thick clouds which shrouded the skies. The Wailing Peaks extended from the coast and down into the southlands, stretching like a scar of rock across the body of the north. Besides the usual wild beasts, they were populated by tribes of savage orruks, bonesnapper gargants and roving packs of deadwalkers. In the fading light of the day, she could see flocks of carrion birds circling the lower crags. As the wind turned, she heard their raucous shrieks, and something else besides. A whisper of sound, like a voice calling from afar.

*Free... us...*

She blinked. She'd spoken to the dead often enough to know when a spirit was speaking. But she did not know these spirits, or recognize their voices. She tried to ignore them, but they persisted, their whispers growing more urgent. She heard a groan, and tore her eyes from the distant peaks.

The rotbringer was dead. Neferata stood over him, cleaning her hands with a rag torn from her cloak. 'Burn it, but be wary of the smoke. They can sicken the blood, even in death.' She looked around. 'Well? You heard. What say you?'

'It changes nothing,' Bolgu said. 'We knew they were coming. What use knowing their names or where they come from?'

'Knowledge is the key which unlocks the gates to power. I have eyes in every realm, and I see much and learn more.' Neferata tapped the side of her head. 'Knowing the name of your enemies is as good as knowing their minds. I have heard of this... Order of the Fly before. They are crusaders, like the ancient warrior-lodges of Gheist or the Brotherhood of the Ox in Helstone. They seek to convert their foes by fire and sword.'

'And?'

She smiled thinly. 'And it means that they will not stop until every last member

of your race is dead or in service to the Lord of Decay, fool.'

A murmur ran through the gathered voivodes. Tamra barely heard it. The dead demanded her attention.

*You call... we come. Unbind us, break our chains, free us...*

Their voices echoed through her skull, flattening all thought beneath their hideous pressure. 'Who are you?' she hissed. Neferata glanced at her, but said nothing.

*Free... us...*

*We hear... drums... war...*

*Break... chains...*

*Break them.*

*Break them.*

*Break them!*

Bony fingers snapped. Tamra blinked. A skull, lit by hideous radiance, gazed down at her and she stumbled back, heart thudding. She had not heard Arkhan the Black enter the chamber. Neither had anyone else, if the looks the other voivodes were tossing their way were any indication. She had seen the Mortarch of Sacrament only at a distance since her arrival, but every necromancer among the clans could feel the harsh weight of his power beating on the wind, day and night. Up close, it was even worse.

'What ails you, Tamra ven-Drak?' Arkhan said, as he lowered his hand.

'The-the dead...' she began. Her mouth was dry, and her head ached with the muted thunder of their voices. 'Who were they?'

'Do not listen to them, child,' Arkhan said. Though he spoke softly, his voice reverberated through the marrow of her, and her fingers tightened convulsively on the hilt of Sarpa's sword. 'Pay the Broken Kings no heed. They are oathbreakers and thieves.'

The Broken Kings. The name pulsed through her like a deep ache. The last kings of the Rictus, bound in the dark with their armies by the will of Nagash. 'But surely we could use them,' she said, without thinking. 'We need men – we need armies. Why leave them bound in ice and rock?'

'For spite's sake. They broke the law of Nagash and must be punished, though all the world suffer for it. Without the law, disorder reigns.' Arkhan studied her with flickering hell-lit eyes. His skull was worn smooth by time and tide, and his black teeth gleamed in a fixed grin.

'I do not care about that,' she said, startling herself. 'I only care about my people, about their survival.'

Arkhan said nothing. His gaze dimmed, for just a moment. ‘That is to your credit.’ He stepped past her, and into the circle. The iron-shod ferrule of his staff struck the ground with every step, echoing like a funerary bell, silencing all conversation and argument.

‘You squawk like hens,’ he said, simply. ‘Shall we flee? Where shall we flee? Across the sea? Where across the sea?’ The liche turned, fixing his gaze on each of the chieftains in turn. ‘Never considering that I stand between you and any route you might take.’

Silence. From the hasty glances, Tamra suspected that the mortarch was right. Neferata laughed. ‘I did try to tell you,’ she said. She set her elbow up on Arkhan’s shoulder and smiled prettily at the Rictus. ‘I am the sweetmeat and he the stick. Deny me, and you get him.’

‘They will not deny you, I think.’ Arkhan tilted his head towards her. ‘Few can.’

‘Flatterer,’ she said. She pushed away from him. ‘Two mortarchs stand with you. Nagash’s eye is upon you. This is the moment you were born for, shaped for. This is the reason you possess the embers of power that flicker within you. Would you toss them aside? I thought the Rictus were black iron, but perhaps they are merely glass.’ She glanced at Arkhan. ‘Perhaps we should have gone east with Mannfred, eh? To Helstone. Maybe the Princes of the Ninety-Nine Circles are made of sterner stuff...’

Shouts of denial greeted her words. Tamra saw her lips curve in a slight smile, before blossoming into full mockery. Neferata threw up her hands and turned to face Arkhan. ‘Do you hear something, Arkhan? Goats, I think. Stubborn and fearful, all at once.’

‘They are right to be afraid. They are mistaken, however, in the object of that fear.’ His eyes blazed brightly, filling the air with a shimmering amethyst radiance. ‘They fear the enemy, when they should fear us, O Queen of Blood.’

‘As well they should, O Prince of Bones,’ Neferata said. She turned, scanning the faces which surrounded them. ‘For if we so wished, we could simply slaughter them here and then raise them up. If they will not serve in life, they will serve in death.’ She cocked her head. ‘So, then, the question is before you – life... or death?’

‘Both.’

Tamra hesitated. She hadn’t meant to speak. Neferata looked at her and smiled. Tamra swallowed a sudden rush of bile and stepped forwards, drawing her brother’s sword as she did so. ‘I am Drak. What we have, we hold.’ She flipped



the blade and extended the hilt towards the mortarchs. ‘And we will serve the Undying King in life and in death. For that is the law of Nagash.’

‘That is the law,’ Arkhan said, thumping the ground with his staff.

‘Yes,’ Neferata said. ‘Quite.’ She tapped the pommel of the barrowblade and pushed it back towards Tamra. ‘Sheathe your claw, sister. You will need it soon enough.’

The rotbringers were within sight of the Wailing Peaks when the bone-giant rose up out of the snow with a great rending creak, startling a flock of carrion birds and uprooting a few scattered trees. Festerbite had thought it merely a hillock at first, one of the many which dotted these barren lands. Its enormous bones were marked with flickering amethyst sigils and shot through with twisting tree roots, and it wore a battered cuirass of curious design. It clutched an immense khopesh of bronze in its hands, which it raised over its skull.

Warriors scattered, leaving behind the chains and ropes attached to the great way stones which they had only half uprooted. The stones, like the hundreds of others they had torn down on their advance north, had been raised in honour of Nagash. Thus they were fit only for the toppling, but it seemed they had a guardian.

‘Fall back!’ Festerbite shouted as the khopesh descended through the curtain of falling snow with a thunderous hiss. The curved blade fell, and a blightking exploded from the force of the impact. The bone-giant wrenched the khopesh free of the bloody snow and swept it out in a titanic arc, bisecting men and beasts alike. The mortal adherents of the crusade scattered in panic. They fled in every direction, seeking to escape the undead monster’s attentions as it strode into the midst of the fragmenting column. Supply wagons tipped as panicked animals reared and shrieked as their handlers lost control of them.

Armsmen attempted to make a stand, slamming together their shields and extending black-bladed spears. The bone-giant strode through them as if they were nothing. Limbs and heads flew as the khopesh thudded down and out. Zealots called out to Nurgle for aid, but their prayers went unheard as the construct slaughtered them. The winter wind rose wild, as if urging the monstrous construct on to greater feats of violence.

‘Rally to me,’ Festerbite snarled, yanking on Scab’s reins. ‘To me, fools.’ Few listened, and those that did died soon after. The bone-giant rampaged through the ranks, slaughtering any who dared stand before it. The column split in two like a rotting chunk of wood. Festerbite gave up his attempts to rally the mortals and

drew his rotsword. He thumped Scab's ribs, urging the steed towards the undead monstrosity as the rotbringers streamed past, fleeing. Other knights followed suit, seeking to claim the glory of battle for themselves, riding down fleeing armymen and cultists alike in their haste. Horns blew and bells rang as they closed in from all sides.

'Too slow, Festerbite,' a knight crowed as his steed pounded past Scab.

'Cheat!' Festerbite snarled. 'You're a cheat, Oga!'

Oga laughed and hunched forwards in his saddle, a great filth-encrusted glaive clutched in one hand. He hewed at the bone-giant's leg, seeking to bring the titan to its knees. Instead, it twisted around and snatched the unlucky knight from his saddle. It was faster than it looked. Oga cursed and struggled, but to no avail. Festerbite winced as the giant squeezed its claw and popped Oga's head like a pimple. It then hurled the body in his direction, and he was forced to slide half-off his saddle to avoid the tumbling carcass.

Scab charged between the giant's legs, and Festerbite hacked at the bone. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the khopesh slice out, leaving a headless knight galloping past, ichor spurting into the frosty air. Several others struck the bone-giant's legs and torso with their spears. The weapons splintered on impact but caused the bone-giant to lose a step. Festerbite raced out of reach as his fellow knights wheeled about. The khopesh thudded down, cracking the earth and throwing snow into the air. Scab stumbled, but retained its footing. Others weren't so lucky. Horse-things fell screaming, and their riders were tossed to the ground.

As the bone-giant turned its attention to the fallen knights, plaguebearers raced towards it, droning out a baleful war song. Festerbite readied himself to charge once more into battle, but a shout from Wolgus stopped him. The blightmaster gestured for him to fall back.

'But my lord—' Festerbite began.

'One side, one side, child. Let Papa Nurgle's own deal with this obdurate automaton,' Gurm said as his palanquin thudded past, accompanied by an honour guard of plaguebearers and beasts of Nurgle. Wolgus' steed cantered towards Festerbite.

'Let the Herald earn his keep, my friend. We need to reform the column, just in case this is but the opening thrust of an attack.'

Wolgus jerked his reins, turning his brass-scaled mount about. Festerbite followed him, swatting hesitant rotbringers with the flat of his blade. Armymen reformed their lines, locking their iron-rimmed shields together in a rough wall.

The less disciplined elements of the crusade would require more than a few bellowed orders and a swat from a sword to regain their courage.

He turned, prepared to say as much to Wolgus, but the blightmaster anticipated him. 'I know. A distraction. It will take us hours to reorganize the column. Delay atop delay.' He turned, roaring orders to chieftains, pox-abbots and hedge-sorcerers. The Order's subordinate commanders were doing what they could, but the bone-giant's attack had been well timed. The snow was falling thick and fast, and many men would be lost in the storm.

Festerbite whipped around as he heard a high-pitched yowl. A beast of Nurgle collapsed in on itself as the khopesh sliced through it. But its slimy secretions began to dissolve the ancient blade, and the bone-giant was forced to leave what was left of the weapon embedded in the ground. Gurm roared out a command and the remaining beasts of Nurgle galloped towards their new playmate, trailing mucus and other excrescences in their excitement.

The bone-giant staggered back as the beasts clambered up its frame, yelping jovially. Bone began to sizzle and burn as the acidic attentions of the beasts took its toll. For every one it flung aside, two more nuzzled at its form, eating through armour and sigil alike. After a few moments of murderous affection, the bone-giant collapsed into a suppurating heap, and the beasts rolled across the snow, yapping in surprise.

'And that's the way you handle that,' Gurm said, reclining on his palanquin. The sylvaneth moaned as they carried their daemoniac master towards Wolgus and Festerbite. 'What chance have the dead against life unbound?'

'More chances than just that,' Festerbite said. 'How many did we lose?'

'There's always more pus in the wound,' Gurm said. He blinked slowly. 'Besides, what price expedience? If it makes you feel better, I will take my brothers and scout ahead.'

'Do that. We'll be making camp.' Wolgus forestalled Gurm's mutter of protest. 'The storm grows worse. We need shelter for the more fragile servants of our lord and master. We must make camp, else we'll have no army left come tomorrow.'

Gurm stared at him for a moment, and then nodded. 'As you say, blightmaster. I shall ensure that no more surprises await you in your chosen campground.' He thumped his palanquin and the sylvaneth bore him away. Daemons loped in his wake.

'He is angry,' Festerbite said.

'He is frustrated. Daemons live in the moment. They know little of the business

of day to day. Gurm would have us march our army to death and then question why we failed to overwhelm the enemy when we find them.’ Wolgus shook his head. ‘He is a great help in battle, and a great annoyance otherwise.’

‘If he hadn’t been here, we might have lost more warriors than we did,’ Festerbite grunted, watching as the last remnants of the bone-giant dissolved into a pale soup. Murky steam rose from it, and the snow had melted all around. Warriors prodded it with spears, as if to reassure themselves that it was no more.

‘It accomplished what it came to do, regardless,’ Wolgus said. ‘Another delay, another day lost to this wilderness. Gurm says we must press forwards, and quickly, though that is what he has been saying since we arrived in these cursed lands. But I am inclined to agree, if only because our foes seek to hinder us so obviously.’ He turned in his saddle, scanning the storm. ‘Can you feel it, Festerbite? We are being watched. Gauged and measured.’

Festerbite could and did. He glanced around, wondering what other horrors hid in the swirling snows. One bone-giant had ruptured the column and delayed their holy work. What if there had been two, or three? The crusade might have ended here and now. His hand tightened unconsciously on the hilt of his sword. ‘Let us hope we are not inadequate to the task, my lord,’ he said.

Wolgus dropped an amiable fist on his pauldron. ‘Fear not, my friend. The Order of the Fly has never met a foe we could not best in battle, or outlast in the field. Not the root-kings, in their halls of wood and stone, and certainly not the unquiet dead of these gloomy lands. We will free them from the tyranny of death, and teach their peoples the true glory of sweet despair.’ He gestured to the half-fallen way stones. ‘Take some men and see to smashing those stones. We will accomplish one task this day, at least.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Festerbite said, not really listening. In the falling snow, he thought he saw something, a vast shape, thin and loathsome, with two hell-spark eyes, burning like torches. The eyes stared through him, peeling away all that he was or ever had been. Then, the indistinct shape turned and strode away into the murmuring depths of the growing storm and was gone, and Festerbite could not say that it had truly been there in the first place.

The blightmaster was right. They were being watched. Despite what Wolgus believed, Festerbite feared that they had already been judged, and found wanting.



# FIVE

## THE GATE BELOW

*Every dead thing.*

*Every whispering shade.*

*Every rasping soldier of bone and gibbering carrion-eater is mine.*

*Every living bird, every breathing beast, every man, woman and child.*

*They all hear me, as you hear me, in your marrow, in your heart and quavering spirit.*

*Know this – whosoever believes in me, whosoever follows the will of Nagash, shall prosper.*

*Listen, and be joyful.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Nagash stood, a black mountain amid swirling snows. The lands around him were dead, full of bare trees and frost-coated rock. He had drawn the last ergs of life from this place and into himself to further bolster his dwindling might. The embers of his power stirred in the depths of him as his shattered consciousness coalesced in fits and starts. His mind slipped and slid down rat warrens of painful memory, seeking the path to the present.

He heard again the clangour of war, as the armies of the enemy invaded his realm through the realmgates. Daemons and mortal warriors alike poured into Shyish in their untold millions. For every gate he closed, two more burst wide to vomit forth a ceaseless cavalcade of horrors. The dead were numberless, but the

servants of Chaos were limitless. The air had crackled with magic as Chaos sorcerers strove against the black arts of his mortarchs. Chaos champions with blazing weapons and god-hardened skin had cut down the dead in their hundreds, only to be at last pulled under by a foe who could not die again.

The unstoppable force met the immoveable object, and Shyish quaked to its very roots at the fury of their struggle. Once more, he felt the impact of the daemonblade as it crashed down against his temple, splitting bone. Nagash was no more wholly a thing of flesh than he was of spirit, and such a wound, delivered by a normal foe, would have been as nothing. But the Three-Eyed King was anything but normal. Four gods had poured their fury into him, and he blazed with a hideous strength. The blade he'd wielded had chewed apart bone and soul alike with greedy speed, gnawing at all Nagash was and ever would be, seeking to unravel the story of him.

Iron claws dug gouges in ruined bone as the Undying King clutched at his skull. An echo of that final, fatal moment still reverberated through the hollow places within him, and his titanic shape shuddered.

'I am broken, and my realm with me.'

His words echoed through the sepulchral air. Dead souls scattered, frightened by the thunder of his voice. He paid them no heed. How many times had he felt that same moment in his darkest dreams, repeated across ages and worlds? It was not always a daemonblade. Sometimes it was a simple sword, enchanted beyond all measure; at other times, a hammer, glowing with ancient magic. But always, there was the blow to body and soul, and his mind... fragmenting, scattering, fleeing.

'And yet, I endure. Death cannot die. Not while the stars wheel and the suns burn.'

He was death, and death could not die, *would* not die. Let the realms spin apart and reality crumble. Nagash would endure, a black thorn thrust in the heart of worlds to come, just as he'd always done. But not without cost. There was always a price for survival, but it was a price he would gladly pay.

A sudden clarity pierced the fog. He recalled what he had come here to do, though not why. He would remember, in time – a moment, or a day. Time had little meaning to one who was outside its reach. And if he did not remember, loyal Arkhan would surely remind him. For now, he was content to simply act.

The enemy were caught by the storm he'd conjured, their momentum stalled in the lowlands south of the Wailing Peaks. Now was the time to strike a mortal blow. One iron claw extended. Amethyst lightning crawled along the crudely

forged facets, before streaking off into the storm.

‘Awaken,’ Nagash said.

The snow whipped about him. The storm howled, and something howled with it, a cry of denial and lunatic frustration. ‘So, you would pit your will against mine?’ Nagash spread his talons, and veins of purple light stretched out, piercing the clouds of frost. Anger strengthened his will, and his mind stiffened. Lucidity sliced through his mental fog like a razor, returning in an instant. ‘I defeated you easily in life. What chance do you have in death?’

Deep within the snow, something shrieked. It was a sound of equal parts hunger and fear. A good sound.

‘Yes. Remember. Remember who is master here, and who is the slave. Now... *awaken.*’

Hollow eyed and wide mouthed, ogors lumbered out of the storm. There were close to a hundred of them, a once-mighty tribe, reduced to eternal servitude by the will of the Undying King. They slavered mindlessly as their frost-bitten limbs clawed uselessly at the amethyst chains which looped about their thick necks and torsos. Nagash lifted his hand, drawing the sorcerous bindings tight. Even so, they struggled, more out of stubbornness than anything else.

‘In life, you sought to poach upon my domain, to eat that which was forbidden. In death, I bound your bestial souls to the snows, so that, like the cold, you might never be sated.’

The ogors – or rather, these things which had once been ogors – howled and gibbered. Whatever dim thoughts they might once have possessed were long gone now, lost to centuries of unending hunger. They were one with the storm, with the winter wind itself. Their simian shapes bled into one another, dissolving and reforming as they writhed in their chains. Nagash swept his hand out, dragging them to their knees.

‘You will listen. I will loosen your chains. You will feed. You will glut yourselves.’

He spoke steadily, impressing his malign will upon the scattered flickering of soulfire. They shrieked and screamed, resisting with feral strength. Even dead, and mad, they were stubborn beasts. But he was the Undying King, and his will was as the will of the universe itself. He gestured, and the amethyst chains evaporated.

‘Go. Feed and rejoice in my name.’

The horde of hungry spirits turned, their forms billowing and fading, to rejoin the storm. But the wind howled with purpose now, and Nagash turned his mind

from it, satisfied. He could not call up an army such as he might once have done, but he could delay the enemy and deny them a chance to rest. He could bleed them. These lands were filled with the detritus of a millennia of wars and skirmishes, and he would employ it all.

The rest would be up to his mortarchs. He judged them more than equal to the task, whatever the quality of their tools. It was why he had chosen them to serve, after all.

He looked up at the mad iridescence of the Wraith Moons and, for a moment, lost himself in the contemplation of those elemental forces which held them suspended. In dim, distant days, he had made a study of the Mortal Realms. They existed concurrently, bleeding into one another like rivers running into the sea. They were separated by the thinnest of membranes or the thickest of walls. In Shyish, the membrane was thinnest.

All realms connected equally to his, for the dead, whatever their realm of origin, were drawn to Shyish and to his service. He could see the pathways into all of the realms: to the south, the warm green of Ghyran; to the east, the harsh coppery glow of Chamon; and above them all, past the Wraith Moons, the shimmering azure radiance of Sigmar's realm.

'Azyrite...'

The memories flowed up like blood welling from a wound. A hand, blazing like the heart of a star, dragging him from the cairn where he'd lain insensate for millennia without number. The mountain-crushing convulsions of the last of the Hydragors as he drove the ferrule of Alakanash, the Staff of Power, into its vast brain. His armour turning black from the blows of the volc-giants, and Zefet-nebtar, the Mortis Blade, growing impossibly warm in his grip as he hewed canyon-sized wounds in their colossal, continent-spanning bodies.

Back to back, he and Sigmar had fought against impossible odds. They had been allies. Twin gods, one light, one dark, born anew from the corpse of a half-forgotten world. Side by side, they had sought to impose order on the chaos which beset the fledgling realms. For a time, at least. The fire flared anew, stirred by rage. He threw back his broken skull and screamed in rage.

Sigmar had betrayed him.

His allies had betrayed him. *Him*.

The living, aligned against the dead. It had always been thus. They feared him, as well they should, for his glory could not be contained to a singular realm. Nagash was death and death was a constant, whatever the realm. All souls were his, all life came to his kingdom in time, even that which was claimed by false



gods and trickster spirits.

The fire at his core grew hot, and the halo of bruised light which surrounded him flickered. He drew strength from his rage, battering on spite. They had dared to cripple him, to weaken him and leave him vulnerable. Archaon would never have attempted to invade had the Azyrite not done so first, and thus left the way open. Sigmar had torn a wound in Shyish, and the infection of Chaos had slipped in.

Once, great cloud banks of souls had drifted peacefully into his grip. But now, the dead knew no peace. Souls were trapped, like detritus in the wounds between worlds. They did not come to him, save on rare occasion. Many were drawn shrieking into the realms of Chaos, or else lingered at their place of death, ignoring his summons with a tenacity which infuriated him. The Corpse Geometries were askew, and his calculations made false. He was no longer the Undying King, but a pretender to his own throne.

He hissed in rage, and the wind writhed in sympathy. He lacked the strength to summon his servants in all their innumerable ranks or to confront the foe openly. His hold on the upper world was tenuous at best. Until his body had recovered, he was confined to this wraithlike form, unable to affect the world, save indirectly. But he did not need a body to wage war. He did not even need a mind, or at least not a whole and healthy one. All were one in Nagash, and Nagash was all. The deadwalkers and the bone-giant had been but the first and least of his weapons. The spirits of snow and hunger were greater still. And he would use them all, from the least to the greatest.

He spread his arms, and his will extended like the tentacles of some immense kraken, reaching out to stir dim, guttering embers of soulfire across the wide wilderness. All dead things in the north stirred, whether buried, drowned or roaming. New fallen or older than the stars, they turned as one to heed him. Some with reluctance, others eagerly, but all turned regardless.

‘Come.’

The word thundered through the marrow of the world. Broken limbs bent to the task. Mouldering paws scabbled at hard earth and bodiless souls sped through bower and glen. The word of Nagash was inescapable and irrefutable. They would come, in their numberless legions, and fall upon the living. They would kill until there was only silence. The north would be at peace once more, undisturbed and as orderly as a tomb, at least for a time.

For this would not be the last invasion. Distantly, he could hear the enemy scabbling in the dust of the cairn-lands, seeking to break the seals of the Starless

Gate and flood into Stygxx. The gate was a massive edifice of stone and bone, wrought into a gigantic fortified entryway in ages past by the Amethyst Princes, as befitting the only open road into their deep realm. It was the single path by which the living might journey into Stygxx, and its winding length had once played host to merchant caravans from Helstone, Ossuary and the Scarab City.

Now, in the shadow of the gate, battle raged. The slaves of darkness fought each other, for want of other opponents, and their champions mocked the name of Nagash. Always they sought to undermine him, to undo all that he had accomplished. The Dark Gods feared him, for in him was the Great Inevitability made manifest. All things died – even gods. All things, save Nagash. Nagash alone was eternal. Inescapable. Unavoidable.

But their servants could not be allowed to gain entrance to the underworlds of Shyish, either through the Starless Gate or any of the nine lesser gates, whose cycles of birth and death were known only to him and his mortarchs. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with his renewal, or to slow his return.

Shyish was his. The dead of all the Mortal Realms were his. And he would defend what was his, even unto the destruction of all that was. He was death, and death could not be denied, only delayed. The storm roared up around him, its fury increasing with his own. And then, just as suddenly, it died down. The snows fell and the wind dipped. Lucidity shivered apart, leaving behind only numb introspection.

Lost once more in his memories, preoccupied by what had been, Nagash turned and strode north. His form spread across the sky and faded into the darkness.

‘He is gone again,’ Arkhan said, as the weight of Nagash’s presence faded. He and Neferata stood on the ice, far from the shore and the broken citadel of the Rictus. The Shivering Sea spread out around them, a vast grey expanse of ice that stretched to the very horizon.

Neferata nodded. ‘Of course he is. What was he up to, and was it any use?’ They’d both felt the call. Nagash had long ago dispensed with any pretence of subtlety when it came to dealing with the dead. His voice was the rumble of an earthquake or the roar of a hurricane, drowning out everything else for as long as he spoke. The cunning conqueror of old was lost now, perhaps forever, subsumed by the force of nature he had become.

‘Some.’ Arkhan turned. ‘He stirs the spirits of snow and hunger, and the ancient guardians left behind by the Broken Kings – the malignants and deadwalkers as well. The enemy numbers are parsed and pared away, as I planned.’

‘As you hoped,’ Neferata said. She looked out over the ever-shifting, icy surface of the Shivering Sea. The crumbled remains of a once-massive harbour clung to the shoreline. Frozen ropes creaked in the wind and tattered sails flapped mournfully. Sea birds perched on every surface, squabbling amongst themselves.

Arkhan inclined his head. ‘Either way, our task is made easier.’

‘Easier, but still nigh impossible.’ She stroked Nagadron’s broad skull, as the dread abyssal rubbed against her. ‘Before Archaon wounded him, this would have been but the work of a moment. Now...’

‘You speak as if he is dead,’ Arkhan said.

‘Isn’t he? You were at the Battle of Black Skies even as I was. I helped you carry what was left of him into the underworld. He is but a shadow of what he once was, and there is less of him every day. It is as if he is... fading, becoming no better than one of those spirits which cling to him like wailing barnacles.’

Arkhan was silent. Neferata stared at him, willing him to speak. Finally, she said, ‘What happens when he’s dead? Truly dead?’

‘He cannot die. What is death to one such as him? A setback, nothing more. A moment of a thousand years and he is returned. You know this, and yet you persist in questioning him.’ Arkhan looked at her. ‘Why?’

‘A better question might be – why do you not?’

‘Faith.’

‘I call it cowardice. Nagash is a lie, Arkhan. Like all gods, his power is built on falsehood. Comforting stories to convince the gullible.’ Neferata turned away as the ice shifted slightly beneath her feet. The Shivering Sea had earned its name fairly. From shore to shore it was a mass of compacted ice floes. The air was alive with a constant, booming crackle as the frozen waters bobbed continuously underfoot. In a way, it reminded her of Nagash – cold, predatory and void of all humanity.

‘You have witnessed his power for yourself,’ Arkhan said.

‘I didn’t say he wasn’t powerful, did I? Merely that his godhood is an unsubstantiated claim, and nothing more.’

‘Now you sound like Mannfred.’

Neferata hissed. ‘Low, even for you.’

‘But true. It is your nature to question, I think. A simple predatory instinct to worry the throat and crack the bone, to dig for the softness within.’ Arkhan gave a rattling sigh.

Neferata peered at him, eyes narrowed.

‘Are you calling me simple?’

Arkhan laughed. ‘Perish the thought, O Queen of Air and Darkness. Merely pointing out that you are as he made you. As Mannfred is, and as I am.’

‘He made us treacherous, then, as well as ambitious?’

‘Of course. I suspect that it is the thought of either you or Mannfred taking his throne which drives him. You are the whetstones which sharpen the blade of his purpose.’ Arkhan looked at her. ‘I fear that purpose slumbers now. He is here, but he does not notice us. His mind was broken on the blade of the Three-Eyed King, and it is scattered across the realm.’

‘But it is strongest here, in this place, isn’t it? I can feel the weight of him on the air, like an oncoming storm.’ Neferata looked around. ‘Is he listening now, do you think?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Why did you insist on meeting here, Arkhan? Of what value is this place to us? There are better places for a last stand.’

‘Like Helstone?’

‘Yes, or any one of a hundred other citadels which yet remain standing. A half a dozen kingdoms to the south owe fealty to me, and they would gladly take to the field in our name. Instead, we come here, to a snowy waste, full of savages and ice. So there must be a reason. What is it?’ She didn’t expect an answer. Not truly. Arkhan could not resist being cryptic, even with her. It was his singular vice, if a dead man could be said to have such a thing.

‘Call it whimsy.’

‘Do not play the fool with me. I can feel it, Arkhan. As can you – a newborn gate to Stygxx, somewhere far below us.’ Neferata tapped the ice with her foot.

‘Yes. It was born a few months ago. Not long after the fall of the Basalt Reach.’ Arkhan leaned against his staff. ‘I suspect it is the reason for this sudden invasion. The north holds little else of interest for the followers of Chaos.’

‘It could be a coincidence,’ Neferata said. Arkhan looked at her. She shrugged. ‘Don’t give me that look, old bones. I breathe the very stuff of subterfuge, and even I know that coincidences can sometimes happen, especially when all of existence is in upheaval. Reality is dying a slow death, and such twists of fate grow ever more commonplace.’

‘Does it matter? They come, and we must fight. At least until the gate ceases to be in a few months’ time.’

‘And what if it remains for a century? Will you stand here on the ice for a hundred years? Two hundred?’

‘It will not. They only last for nine months. You know this.’

‘And what if, by some magic, the Ruinous Powers hold it here? What if they prevent it from dying? How long will you stand watch?’

‘I will stand as long as I must. As long as Nagash commands.’

‘You sound like Tamra,’ Neferata said.

Arkhan glanced at her. ‘You take a special interest in that one, don’t you?’

‘She is powerful.’

‘Is that the only reason?’

Neferata chuckled. ‘Perhaps not. But it is the only one I care to share with you. If she survives, she will make a powerful piece in the games to come.’

‘And is that all they are to you? Pawns on a board?’

Neferata eyed him. ‘What are they to you?’

‘Chattel,’ he said.

‘A lie,’ she said. ‘I know you, Arkhan. And I know that you are more kindly disposed towards the living than one might guess. They have a fire in them, one that has long been extinguished in you. You bask in their heat, seeking to rekindle that which you once were.’

‘And so?’

‘The fire inside burns hottest of all.’ She leaned close. ‘Be careful that you do not burn yourself, old liche.’ Arkhan clicked his black teeth in dismissal. Neferata drew back. ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

She looked up. There was no sign of Nagash, but that meant nothing. He was in the air and the cold. Despite her denials, she knew that Nagash permeated his realm in ways almost impossible to fathom. ‘Do you think he will help us, when the time comes?’

‘I suspect so.’ He turned. ‘Look.’

Neferata turned. The voivodes, led by Tamra, made their way carefully across the ice. They skirted the frozen timbers and tangles of ancient rope which marked the remains of the sunken wharfs and docks of the Mandible, and trudged directly for the two mortarchs.

‘You have come to a decision, then?’ the liche asked, as they drew close.

‘We have, O Lord of Sacrament,’ Arun called, shouting to be heard over the ice. ‘We are agreed – the Rictus must stand and fight. If we are to be worthy of these lands, we must be prepared to defend them.’

‘Well said.’ Neferata clapped her hands.

‘Maybe so,’ Bolgu said. ‘Or maybe it’s a fool’s gesture.’ The burly voivode looked around. ‘We do not have the men to make it more than that.’ He glanced

at Tamra. ‘Even counting the dead.’

Neferata smiled. The other voivodes recognised their betters instinctively. And even if they had not, the rulers of the Drak were surrounded by the spirits of the drowned. Ghosts clung to her coat, weeping, or else leaning in close to whisper into her ears. It was said that where Nagash walked, the dead could not help but stir. Those who were strong in the ways of necromancy woke the unquiet dead without intending to.

Tamra’s face was pale and strained. Neferata could hear the murmur of the ghosts from where she stood. The Broken Kings spoke to the voivode of the Drak, pleading their case. Arkhan had only confirmed her suspicions in that regard. Tamra ven-Drak was infinitely more useful than her fellows, and had the potential to be more useful still, should she survive the battle to come. Already a plan was forming in Neferata’s mind. Perhaps this spot would serve for a final stand, and more besides.

She pushed the thought aside. She had fears to allay. ‘Do not fear, you shall not defend them alone,’ she said, looking at Bolgu. ‘Reinforcements are all around us, in the deep waters and the high crags. We shall draw the foe in, and catch him in a vice of bone and flesh.’

‘The high crags? You mean... you would seek out the Prince of Crows?’ Bolgu said, with a start. ‘That beast has been raiding our camps since before I was born. And they’ve only grown bolder in recent months. My sister had a child snatched through an open window.’

‘Lucky woman,’ Neferata said. ‘Ancient enmities must be put aside if we are to survive. We all serve Nagash – living, dead or otherwise. The ghoul-tribes will join us in war, either as they are or as ambulatory corpses. There is no third option.’ She glanced at Tamra. ‘I will go into the hills tomorrow. You will accompany me. A representative from the clans should be there... as a show of good faith.’

Tamra ducked her head. ‘As you will, O queen.’

‘Such a nice girl,’ Neferata said, glancing at Arkhan.

The liche looked away.

The undead wolves pierced the curtain of snow like black arrows. A few at first, then more, then hundreds, loping across the ice field towards the rotbringer camp with a speed no living creature could match.

Pus-veined horses reared, whinnying in fear as they yanked at their pickets. Sentries retreated into the camp, bawling for aid. The rotbringers had only just

begun to settle in to wait out the storm. It had come upon them suddenly, not two days since they'd fought their way through the latest horde of stumbling corpses to come between the servants of Nurgle and their goal. The storm's fury was such that it had made pressing forward impossible – even the rotbringers' endurance had its limits. Barely a third of the tents were up, and warriors scrambled to retrieve their weapons.

Festerbite stepped into Wolgus' tent. 'Blightmaster, we are beset by wild beasts.'

'Not just beasts, I think,' Wolgus said, pushing past Festerbite. 'Beasts do not move with such discipline or come in such numbers.'

'Deadwalkers,' Festerbite said. The wind had grown fierce, and eerie howls slithered through the encampment. Snarls and screams filled the air, and low, gaunt shapes darted into tents and atop wagons, eyes burning with sorcerous malignity.

'Something very much like them.' Wolgus hefted his shield. 'Come, let us see them off.'

Together, the two knights trudged into battle. The snow fell thickly, making it impossible to see more than a sword's length ahead. Snarling lupine shapes sprang at them from every direction. Muffled though it was, Festerbite could hear the rattle of weapons and the sound of steel biting flesh – others were fighting back. There was no time to retrieve Scab; the horse-thing would have to protect itself as best it could.

The rotbringer camp stretched for miles in every direction. It was a massive, sprawling jungle of tents and wagons, crudely divided into seven circles. Each circle was under the overall command of one of Wolgus' subordinates, and under ideal circumstances any of them would be capable of repulsing an attack. While the fanatics and the beastherds made do with what they had, the tents for the Order's armsmen were set up in concentric circles, with rough avenues from the outer circle to the inner. Stakes dipped in pox-broth jutted from the outer perimeters, and heavy boil-encrusted pavises, each the height of two men, lined the outside of the outer ring of tents, protecting them from arrows.

None of this, however, deterred the wolves to any appreciable degree. They bounded past the stakes and winnowed between the pavises. They tore through tents, savaging those they found within. Horse-things galloped through the camp, harried by slaving wolves, and lone warriors soon found themselves overwhelmed and buried beneath a pile of hairy bodies.

Slowly, Wolgus and Festerbite were joined by others as they pushed through the

camp: blightkings, armsmen, wild-eyed beastmen and even a few pox-monks, chanting frenzied hymns to Nurgle as they wielded mace and flail in his name. The growing band fought its way towards a light which blazed up from the camp's centre.

Warm and noxious, the light melted the snow on the air and provided a welcome beacon for the struggling rotbringers. Warriors flocked to it from throughout the camp, fighting their way through a snapping gauntlet of undead beasts. Plaguebearers stalked the edges of the light, hacking down any corpse-wolf that got too close. The Order's mortal warriors staggered between this unnatural barricade and fell panting to the ground.

Festerbite was not surprised to see Gurm at the light's heart. The Herald of Nurgle was still sat atop his palanquin. The twisted sylvaneth had sprouted jewel-like seed pods which pulsed with a baleful radiance, and the ground about them steamed.

'Wolgus, my lad...' Gurm chortled, waving them towards him. 'I am most pleased to see that you are not filling the belly of one of these curs. I was about to send my flies to look for you.'

'Your concern warms the cockles of my heart, Herald,' Wolgus said. 'These things are being controlled, aren't they?'

'How ever did you guess?' Gurm licked his lips. 'You can practically taste the death-magic on the air. And some of these beasts were dead before this realm was a gleam in its creator's eye.'

'Like the bone-giant earlier,' Wolgus said. 'A trap. They wanted us to camp, so that we might provide easy meat for these creatures...'

'Then let us show them we are not such easy prey,' Festerbite said. A plaguebearer squalled as a wolf knocked it sprawling. Before it could react, the daemon was dragged out of the light and into the hissing snows by the lupine zombie. Festerbite glanced at Gurm. 'Not all of us, at any rate.'

'We endure,' Gurm said, a trifle defensively. 'That is what Nurgle made us to do.'

'No. I will not stand here and die.' Wolgus hefted his sword. 'I am a blightmaster of the Order of the Fly, and I will not perish in so unworthy a fashion.' He glanced at Festerbite. 'Are you with me, my friend?'

'Where you lead, my lord, I shall always follow,' Festerbite said.

Wolgus nodded and stepped towards the edge of the light. 'I do not know what fell spirit inhabits these husks, but whoever you are – reveal yourself!' he cried, as he slapped a snarling wolf out of the air. 'Or do you lack the courage for



anything other than half-hearted attempts at assassination? Show yourself. Face me in honourable combat, and perhaps Nurgle shall move me to grant you clemency!

‘I don’t think they’re listening,’ Festerbite said, as a half-rotted corpse slammed into his shield, jaws snapping. The wolf looked as if it had been dead for months, and it smelled worse, although under different circumstances, Festerbite thought he might have enjoyed the pungent aroma. Its teeth shattered on his shield, and he cleaved the beast’s skull in two.

‘Oh, he’s listening,’ Gurm said. Pestilential vines had sprouted from the ground around his palanquin, and a quartet of nearby wolves was caught in their writhing embrace. The corrupted sylvaneth who made up Gurm’s chair shrieked in fierce agony as they manipulated the whipping tendrils. The wolves thrashed as the vines pierced their mouldering flesh and inundated them. Eventually, the vine-shrouded shapes went still. Pus-coloured blossoms sprouted on them, and the vines snapped away from their issuers with a squelching hiss.

‘He who?’ Wolgus demanded. ‘Who attacks us?’

‘Why, Nagash of course,’ the daemon said. ‘I thought I made that clear earlier.’

Wolgus shook his head. ‘Impossible. He is dead.’

‘So are they,’ Gurm said. He gestured to a broken-backed wolf as it dragged itself towards Wolgus. ‘Everything in these cursed lands is dead or soon to die. It does not seem to hinder them overmuch.’ Out in the snows, something howled.

‘Nagash,’ Festerbite murmured. The name tasted strange to him, like a curse whose meaning escaped him. It was said, in the seeping halls of Cankerwall, that the Lord of Decay and his brothers-in-darkness had sealed Nagash away in a crypt of forgotten moments, burying him in the weft of time itself. But he’d been freed by the false god, Sigmar, and together they had sought to impose hideous, unchanging stagnancy on the realms of men.

Wolgus stomped on the dead wolf’s skull. ‘Nagash is dead. The Three-Eyed King broke him, and his legions with him.’ He chopped through the spine of another, his rotsword eating away at its bones.

‘Death is not the end in this realm, not even for its ruler,’ Gurm said.

‘These are delays, nothing more. But why?’ Wolgus said. He turned to Gurm. ‘Speak, Herald. What does the King of All Flies say?’

‘Only that you must press forward, blightmaster. Ever forwards, never backwards. That is the way of it. We must drag this place from its stupor and make of it a garden. And quickly. That is your charge, and mine.’

The last of the wolves had fallen, but the howls continued. Festerbite turned,

scanning the camp. He could still hear the sounds of fighting, though dimly, and the screams. He blinked. For a moment, he thought he'd seen something larger than any wolf, prowling through the tents.

The howls rose with the wind. Full of need and rage such as he had never known, they pierced Festerbite clean through. He looked about and saw that he was not alone in this. Even Wolgus looked taken aback.

'What is it?' the blightmaster demanded. 'Speak, Gurm – tell me!'

'Something worse than a wolf,' the Herald said. The daemon rose to his feet and chopped through one of the glowing seed pods. He tossed it to Festerbite. 'Cast that into the snows. It will take root where it falls and give us more light.'

The seed pod convulsed in his hand like a thing in pain. Glowing pus dribbled down his armour as he stepped forwards and hurled it out into the storm. Where it fell, the snow instantly turned to steam, and foetid brambles sprouted. More glowing seed pods emerged from the fast-growing brambles, washing the area around them in hazy light.

Festerbite was so preoccupied by this sudden vibrancy that he failed to notice the enormous shape speeding towards him through the snow. A shout from Wolgus caused him to turn. Something massive caught him by the head. A moment later he was wrenched from his feet and slung bodily through a sagging tent. He hit the ground hard and lay for a moment, trying to catch his breath. As he forced himself to his feet, he found himself surrounded by the bloated shapes of ogors.

But they were unlike any ogor he'd ever seen. Their forms swelled and shrank with the storm, and their eyes were hollow with hunger. They'd gnawed their lips to tatters, and each was missing a portion of flesh and muscle from its bulky frame. They stretched cold-blackened fingers towards him. He swept his sword out, but it passed cleanly through the cloudy shapes. A howl bristled upwards as they closed in on him. Too-solid blows rained down on his shield, crumpling it with monstrous ease. Hands scrabbled at his head and ankles. With a growing sense of panic, he realised that while they could easily touch him, he couldn't say the reverse was true.

Festerbite ducked his head and bulled through the ghostly ogors, eliciting a howl of frustration as he slipped their grasp. More of the hungry ghosts appeared, floating or shuffling through the snow. He saw one slide its greedy fingers into the chest of a hapless blightking, removing the warrior's heart with a triumphant groan. Another descended on a fleeing rotbringer and swallowed him up whole, leaving behind a contorted corpse curled up in the snow as it moved

on to its next victim. The camp echoed with the screams of dying men and the howls of the barbarous spirits.

Everywhere he looked, ogors moved through the camp, slaying any who stood against them. Even the plaguebearers were having difficulty. As he watched, one unlucky daemon was caught between two of the cannibal sprits and torn asunder with a wet squelch. He heard a voice call out, and turned to see Wolgus striding towards him, his sword burning with a malignant light. The ancient runes etched into the blade pulsed wetly as the blightmaster swept it out and removed the head of one of the murderous spirits.

‘Sir Festerbite – look out!’

Festerbite whirled around, but it was too late. The spectral ogor caught him up in its semi-tangible paws and tore at him in a frenzy. It ripped his shield from his arm and dented his war-plate. Festerbite screamed and chopped at it, trying to break its hold. His weapon passed through it harmlessly, but even so, it hurled him aside. Bleeding, he shoved himself to his feet. The ogor reached for him again, but stopped as a black blade emerged from its chest. The spirit arched in agony and clawed at itself as its form came apart like smoke on the wind. Wolgus stepped through its fading shape and caught Festerbite’s arm. ‘Let’s get you back into that light of Gurm’s. It seems to pain them, somewhat.’

‘Your sword...’

‘I had this sword from the Festering Seers of Plax. The contagions woven into its steel affect even the dead. Plague-fire seems to work as well. Would that we had a few more sorcerers in our ranks.’ He slipped Festerbite’s arm over his shoulder. ‘Come, good sir knight. I’ll not leave one of my brothers to the mercy of such bestial spirits.’

Festerbite’s limbs were mostly in working order by the time they reached Gurm and his light. More seed pods had been distributed, creating a makeshift barricade of pestilent foliage. The ogors cringed back from the light, gnashing their broken fangs soundlessly, before turning to seek easier prey.

Outside the circle of noxious light, the fell spirits continued to ravage the camp. Occasionally, Festerbite would glimpse a flash of plague-fire or hear an agonized howl. The spectres weren’t having it all their own way; there were some in the Order who possessed mystical blades or sorcerous abilities which made them a match for the ethereal dead. But not many. Not enough. Festerbite dabbed at his wounds. ‘Maybe we should have stayed in Ghyran,’ he murmured. Heads nodded, and agreements were murmured.

‘And leave this realm to suffer so?’ Wolgus asked, looking around. ‘No. This is

a pretty trap, I admit. But we will endure it, as we always have.’ He shook his head. ‘You hear, spirits? You cannot break our will, for it has already been broken. And our bodies are made of sterner stuff than bone and meat. Come upon us in wrath or in silence, and still we will triumph. Delay us, and we will only fight all the harder. Death might be inevitable – but so too are we.’

Festerbite couldn’t contain the phlegm-choked cheer that welled up in his throat. The others joined him, until all of their voices were raised in a cry of defiance. Outside the daemon-light, the dead continued their attack. But it would be over soon enough. The night always ended, and the storm always abated. Some of them would survive – enough to continue the crusade, enough to wipe the north clean, and make of it a garden fit for a god.

Wolgus thrust his sword into the ground and spread his arms, as if daring whatever force was controlling the dead to come and face him. ‘Do you hear me?’ he cried. ‘Are you listening? This is the moment we were created for. We are the knights of the Order of the Fly, the chosen sons of Nurgle. And we are implacable as the passage of time itself!’



# SIX

## THE PRINCE OF CROWS

*This realm is mine.*

*All that endures within it is mine.*

*Every soul, every mind.*

*All are one with the Great Necromancer.*

*I see through every eye, and speak through every voice.*

*My blood seeps through the broken earth, and the fire of my wrath ignites the sun.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Tamra stood on the edge of the crag, surveying the horizon. The sky here was streaked with shimmering ribbons of coloured light. The Mandible was but a distant speck, limned by the white shore of the Shivering Sea. The great slopes below were thickly forested and blanketed in snow and ice. She could see the pale smoke of cooking fires and the vast black clouds which accompanied the foe. ‘They are not far at all, are they?’

Neferata clasped her shoulder. ‘No.’

‘From here, I can see what’s left of the old harbour. My grandfather told me stories about it. About the riches and spices and strange animals that could be seen on the wharfs, in the days before the Great Awakening. Of violet-feathered birds from the Skull Isles, and the great bats which the men of Gheist bred for war...’

‘Yes,’ Neferata said. ‘It was a thing of glory, in its time. Before Nagash came striding south and smashed it all to bits. A great docklands such as this part of the realm had never seen. It played host to the ice-fleet of King Elig ven-Fenn, which sailed to the Rime Isles and beyond, unto the very edge of the realm itself.’ Neferata stretched out her hand, drawing shapes on the frosty air. ‘The Rictus were mighty, in their day.’ She looked at Tamra. ‘They could be again.’

‘I know this,’ Tamra said. ‘But I doubt I will live to see it.’

‘Doubt is the whetstone of hope,’ Neferata said. She squeezed Tamra’s shoulder gently. ‘Come. Time is of the essence. We must make ready, for the foe will be here soon.’

‘How soon?’

Neferata hesitated. ‘Hard to say. Days, maybe. A week. A month. But sooner, rather than later. The trap is baited, and now we must ensure that the jaws will slam shut properly.’

Tamra bristled at the thought of her people as bait, but she held her tongue. To serve in life and in death, that was the law. And she would serve.

She looked at the cave. ‘Is this his lair, then? The Prince of Crows?’ As she spoke, she heard a caw from the trees. Carrion birds waited in the branches, watching. It was said that such creatures were the eyes of Nagash, for wherever there were carrion birds, so too there were the dead. What they saw, the Undying King saw.

‘That is what you call him, yes. I knew him by another name, once.’ Neferata looked up at the birds, her expression unreadable. ‘He will be a strong ally, if he can be made to listen to reason.’

‘And if not?’ Tamra asked.

Neferata smiled. ‘Well, we’ll see, won’t we?’ She turned away.

Tamra followed Neferata towards the mouth of the cave. It sat high and back on the crag. The entrance resembled nothing so much as a borehole, angled downwards into the depths of the crag. It was almost lost to view, hidden by a thick copse of scraggly trees. Skulls hung from the branches on ropes of hair and dried ligament, dire warnings carved into the weather-scoured bone. She could feel ghosts watching them, murmuring softly in ancient tongues. The wind stirred the skulls, and they clacked loudly. She stopped and stared.

‘Scared, poppet?’ Adhema purred. The blood knight sat atop her coal-black steed nearby, hands draped over the pommel of her saddle. ‘You smell like it.’ The other blood knights chuckled softly, crimson eyes watching Tamra.

‘Fear keeps the mind sharp,’ Tamra said.

Adhema smiled. 'Helps with the taste, as well.'

Tamra turned away. Adhema laughed.

'Quiet,' Neferata said. She stood by the mouth of the cave, peering into the dark. 'Wait here. No matter what you hear, do not enter these caves,' she continued, looking up at Adhema. 'We will return before the moons rise.'

The blood knight nodded, frowning.

'If you're certain, my lady,' she said.

'If I were not, I would not be doing it,' Neferata said. She crooked a finger. 'Tamra, come.'

Tamra followed the mortarch dutifully. She tensed instinctively as they entered the shadowed cave. The smell of rot was thick on the air, and bones littered the ground. Animal, mostly, but some all too human, and many of those little. She gagged.

The cavern sloped downwards. She heard the drip of water and the squeak of bats. As they descended, Neferata plucked a broken skull from the ground and breathed into it. The skull, now glowing with a pale radiance, lifted up from her hands and floated ahead of them. Its light cast strange shadows on the walls. Besides the water and the bats, Tamra could discern a shuffling, sliding sound. She gripped the hilt of her sword more tightly.

'Why didn't we bring the others?' she murmured, fearful of speaking too loudly.

'One doesn't introduce a new predator into another's territory without asking. It's dangerous, and rude besides.' Neferata smiled. 'That's why I left Nagadron at the Mandible. One must display politesse in these situations – a lesson you'd do well to remember, sister.'

'Why do you call me that? We are not sisters.'

'Are we not? We are both members of a great sorority, Tamra ven-Drak – the women who speak for the dead. Men drag the dead from their slumber and bind them, but we coax them up. We do not enslave. Instead, we command, as is our right.'

Tamra shook her head. If there was a difference there, she wasn't seeing it.

Neferata glanced at her and smiled. 'You are my sister because I have decided such. If it displeases you, I shall not call you that again. Does it displease you?'

Tamra hesitated. 'No,' she said, finally. 'It is a great honour.' And it was. For was Neferata not Mortarch of Blood, the Sword of Nagash and kastellan of his citadels? Her name echoed through the histories of every kingdom, and her hand had guided the fates of untold billions, both living and dead.

Neferata laughed. 'There are some who would disagree, I assure you.' The echoes of her amusement bounced from wall to ceiling, setting bats to flight. She stopped. 'Ah. Look, sister. What do you see?'

By the light of the floating skull, Tamra could see images painted on the walls of the cavern. They were primitive, but somehow recognisable. Drawn to them despite herself, she stepped closer. They showed wars, famines and feasts, victories and defeats, crudely rendered by uncertain hands. 'Are these... What are they?'

'A record of ancient times. The story of those who inhabit these caves, and how they came to be here.' Rocks clattered as Neferata continued on. Tamra turned to follow, though not without some reluctance. 'What do you know of those days?' Neferata asked. 'Of the foolish ambition of High-King Tarun and his five cousins, and their final stand here?'

'My mother told me tales of Queen Isa and her brother Rikan,' Tamra said, stumbling after Neferata. She could hear the whispering of the Broken Kings, rising up out of the dark. She and Neferata were close to where they had been entombed, and their voices were clearer now. She could also make out the words. Not the usual implorations these, but instead... warnings?

Neferata's hand on her shoulder startled her. The vampire had moved behind her so quickly that Tamra hadn't noticed. 'Rikan the Handsome and Isa the Wise,' the mortarch said. 'The children of Arek ven-Drak, left to rebuild his clan in the wake of Nagash's invasion. And what do you know of them?'

'Rikan vanished in the third year after the Great Awakening. Some say he tried to kill Nagash, in order to free his father's spirit...'

'Yes,' Neferata said. 'The handsome ones are always a bit foolish. The Drak were better left to Isa at any rate. They didn't call her "the wise" for nothing.'

'I am descended from her,' Tamra said, proudly. 'It was she who composed the nine rites of revivification, and taught us how to keep the deadwalkers at bay after the Great Awakening.'

'Mm. And I taught her,' Neferata said.

Tamra paused. 'How old are you?' she asked, before she could stop herself.

Neferata laughed. 'Older than these hills, and younger than the seas.' She frowned. 'And sometimes I think I am older even than that.'

Tamra made to reply, but a sudden thrill of cold ran through her. She stopped, eyes searching the shadows. Vague shapes, clad in ancient armour and robes of archaic cut, beckoned to her from out of the darkness. Their broken skulls glowed with witchfire, and their voices swelled like thunder.



*Free us... free us, daughter of our daughter... free us... do not listen to her... queen of lies... free us...*

‘Be silent,’ Neferata snapped. ‘We did not come here to speak to the dead.’

The Broken Kings receded sullenly. Tamra had not thought that ghosts could be offended, but these plainly were. ‘They are retreating.’

‘You hear them as well, don’t you?’ Neferata asked. At Tamra’s hesitant nod, she smiled. ‘I thought as much. You are more sensitive than the others. They can call up the dead, but you can also hear them. That is good.’

‘I wish they would be silent,’ Tamra said.

‘Why? If their cries bother you so much, tell them so. Silence them.’

Tamra looked at her. ‘I do not have such power.’

‘Don’t you? If you can hear them, then they can hear you. Speak – bid them be silent, as I did. Here, I will help.’ Cool fingertips were pressed to Tamra’s temples. Her heart sped up as Neferata leaned close and murmured, ‘Relax your mind. Let them in. They cannot harm you. Not while I am here.’

Tamra closed her eyes and forced herself to do as Neferata said. In her mind’s eye, she saw crackling amethyst skeins stretching down into the roots of the mountain and heard the rush of voices, like batwings fluttering against the inside of her skull.

*Free... us...*

‘No. Be silent,’ Tamra said, and Neferata echoed her. ‘Be still.’

*No... no... speak the words... shatter our chains...*

‘I said be still,’ she grated, pressing back against the sudden surge of pressure. They clawed at her mind, demanding and pleading. She lashed out, letting her anger heat the blade of her disdain. A thin scream, as if from some animal, greeted her blow, and the voices receded with a sound like leaves whirling down a culvert. When she came back to herself, she was panting from the exertion. She felt wrung out, and every limb trembled. ‘They are strong.’

Neferata released her and stepped back. ‘In life, they were steeped in the stuff of death. The first of your folk to learn the secrets Nagash guarded so jealously, for so long. I suppose Arkhan told you to ignore them?’

Tamra nodded. ‘He said that they were oathbreakers.’

‘Of course he did. For Arkhan, the world is a muddle of absolutes. That is his prerogative, as the mouthpiece of a god. For the rest of us, well... things are not always that simple.’ Neferata caught one of Tamra’s braids and gave it a gentle tug. ‘Once, six kings, brothers all and rulers of six mighty kingdoms, sought to challenge Nagash. They thought power was their due, that it was theirs by dint of

the sweat on the brows of their forebears. And so, when Nagash claimed these lands for his own, they sought to hold what they had.'

'What we have, we hold,' Tamra said, softly.

Neferata smiled. 'Yes. Six stood against the Undying King. And six great kingdoms were broken into six hundred petty, squabbling fiefdoms. All that power, once concentrated, was diffused. A good policy for peacetime, but a bad one when the winds of war blow anew.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is time for that power to once again be consolidated. Not six hundred, not even six, but one.' Neferata held up her fist. 'The time for debate, for argument with equals, has passed. Now is the time for swift action. Do you understand?'

Tamra swallowed. 'No.'

Neferata chuckled. It sounded to Tamra like the contented rumble of a tigress, fresh from the kill. 'I think you do. You hear the dead, Tamra ven-Drak. So listen to me now. You alone of your fellow chieftains have stood firm against the enemy in the field. You alone have survived where countless others have fallen, never to rise again. It is you whom the Broken Kings beg for their freedom, not Bolgu or the witch, Myrn.'

'I will not free them,' Tamra said, quickly.

'Nor did I imply that you should. But do you not think that the fact is significant?' Neferata circled her, trailing long fingers across the nape of her neck. 'Love is earned, but power must be taken, sister. That is where the Broken Kings made their mistake, and where your fellow chieftains make theirs. They, like Arkhan, see the world as an absolute. Thus it is, and thus it must ever be. But when Nagash came, the old order was overthrown and a new order raised up.'

'And now?'

'And now, new is old, and must give way as its predecessor did.' Neferata leaned close, and Tamra shivered at the unnatural chill which radiated from the vampire's flesh.

'I will not break the law of Nagash. I cannot.'

'And what is the law? Serve Nagash, in life and in death. How will you serve him, as you are? Chieftain of a scattered tribe, one voice amongst many? You hide your power, refusing the path fate has laid out for you.' Neferata's fingers played across Tamra's throat and her cheeks, spider-light touches. 'I understand, more than you can know. But there is a time to rage against fate, and a time to accede to it.'

Tamra stepped away from the vampire. Neferata's eyes glowed like those of a beast in the dimness of the cavern. 'Even if I did, what would be the use?' she said, quickly. 'The Rictus have neither the numbers nor the discipline to make even a single army. Those days died with the Broken Kings.' Her words echoed strangely in the cavern, and she had the impression that someone or something other than Neferata was listening. She heard a soft skittering in the dark, and she felt her hackles rise in a sudden premonition.

'Did they? I think not. And even if they did, what is death to you or I?' Neferata laughed. 'Besides, the Rictus are greater than you imagine. Whole armies crouch in these lightless tunnels, waiting for the call to war.' She clapped her hands together, and all at once they were limned with an amethyst fire. Purple light swelled to fill the cavern.

Tamra stared about her in dawning horror. The sudden radiance revealed hundreds of monstrous shapes surrounding them, either on the floor or clinging to the walls. There was no need to seek out the ghoul-tribes, it seemed.

'The corpse-eaters,' she spat, reaching for her sword.

Neferata caught her wrist. 'More than that, Tamra ven-Drak. These are your kin. They too are Rictus, though greatly altered by time and the magic radiating from the tombs of the Broken Kings. Who do you think painted those murals? Now, be silent.'

Tamra did as Neferata commanded, biting back a denial. The Rictus respected death in all its permutations, but corpse-eaters were slaves to it. Her people occasionally consumed the flesh of enemies, but only in ritual fashion and at certain times of year. And they never cracked the bones or rooted in entrails like a forest pig. But ghouls were beasts, and worse than beasts. The Drak hunted them with dogs and fire in the weaning season.

'Who comes hither?' a guttural voice called out. 'Speak, lest we slay thee.' It spoke in an archaic dialect, and Tamra could only just understand it. She had not imagined such creatures could talk. The thought of it sent a shiver down her spine.

'You may try, by all means,' Neferata replied. 'Who are you, to demand my name?'

'We are Rictus, and these ramparts are ours.'

'And I am Neferata, Chatelaine of Gallowdeep Manse and Voivode of the Nightlands.' She spread her arms, her hands still wreathed in crackling purple flames. 'Do you still wish to challenge me?' A sudden hush fell over the scuttling shapes, and they drew back as one, away from the light and from her.

Neferata nodded in satisfaction. ‘I see you still know me. Good. That will make this easier. Where is he? Where is the Prince of Crows?’

‘Here, O Queen of Blood.’

Tamra whipped around. The voice had come from close behind her. She drew her sword, but not swiftly enough. Strong hands gripped her throat and bore her backwards. She struck the ground painfully, and let out a cry. A monstrous face glared down into hers, every scar and wrinkle illuminated by the light from Neferata’s hands.

‘Isa?’ the monster said, in evident confusion. ‘Is that you, Isa?’

‘Get off her, Rikan. She is not yours,’ Neferata snarled. She booted the creature in the face, knocking it sprawling. ‘Touch her again, touch anything I have claimed without my permission, and I will burn your pestiferous kingdom to ashes.’

Rikan swept out a long arm, driving Neferata back. ‘Who are you to lay claim to anything, Queen of Lies? These lands are mine. I am High-King of the Rictus, son of Arek ven-Drak and last prince of the Sudden Reach.’

Tamra froze. It couldn’t be, could it? She stared at the feral monstrosity, trying to discern his features beneath the filth of ages.

The ghoul-king righted himself and crouched, ready to attack. ‘These lands are mine to guard, until such time as Nagash forgive us our trespasses,’ he continued.

‘And will that forgiveness be forthcoming, when you blithely attack his messenger?’

‘Messenger?’ The creature’s eyes narrowed. ‘Then he has absolved you of your crimes?’

‘What crimes would those be, Rikan?’

The ghoul-king threw back his head and howled. The others joined him, until the cavern reverberated with their caterwauling. Tamra clapped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the abominable sound. The ghoul-king lowered his head and spread his arms. ‘You know your crimes, woman, even as I know mine. For them, I was left to make a kingdom here, in the dark, with the last of my father’s courtiers. We stand watch over our fathers and keep them still.’

‘Then you are doing a very bad job of it, for I’ve been hearing them for days,’ Neferata said. ‘Whining like whipped dogs, begging to see the light of the moons once more. High-King – pfaugh! You rule nothing. The world has moved on and left you in the dust.’

‘Do not listen to her, Isa,’ Rikan said, glaring at Tamra. ‘It was her honeyed words which set our fathers on the road to ruin. It was she, the mistress of all lies, who pricked the ambition of the great kings and pitted them against Nagash. And all for what?’

‘You tell me, Prince of Crows. It’s your story, after all.’ Neferata smiled serenely. ‘And what a lovely fable it is. If I were at fault for even half of what I’m blamed for, surely Nagash would have struck me down long before now.’

‘And where is Nagash?’ the ghoulish-king said. He lifted his crooked, ape-like arms over his bestial head. ‘Not here. He too is dust, I think. As you will be, Queen of Lies.’ He tensed. ‘I will rend you and make bread from your bones to feed my people.’ The ghouls set up a clamour at that, cheering on their monstrous king.

Tamra looked around, filled with an atavistic dread by the sound. The whispers of the Broken Kings returned, more urgent than before. If the ghouls attacked, she might have no choice but to free them.

Neferata spread her arms. ‘Then step forward, by all means.’ Her smile widened, and her fangs gleamed in the violet light bleeding from her hands. Rikan growled and stepped towards her, claws raised. All around them, the watching ghouls began to slap the walls and floor of the cave, filling the air with a harsh rhythm.

‘No,’ Tamra said, without thinking. She stepped between them, hands raised. ‘We don’t have time for this.’ Heart hammering, she locked eyes with the Prince of Crows, willing him to listen. He snarled, but subsided.

‘Step aside, Isa,’ the ghoulish-king said. ‘I would not see you harmed on her account.’

‘No one will be harmed here,’ Tamra said. She looked at Neferata. ‘We came for help, not to settle old scores.’

‘Mind your tongue, sister. I am no duardin, to nurture petty grudges like a child. He insulted me, and I will not stand for it.’ Neferata’s hand fell to the hilt of the long, curved dagger thrust through her belt.

‘And you insult me,’ Tamra said, softly.

Neferata blinked.

‘I understand now why you brought me. He calls me Isa, as you did. Did you think I would not remember?’

Neferata smiled and inclined her head. ‘I am found out. I fear I’ve grown less subtle in these trying times. Or perhaps you are simply wiser than your years.’

Rikan lurched forwards, talon-tips digging into the sleeves of Tamra’s coat. ‘Do

not listen to her, Isa. Her words are barbed to catch the unwary. She flatters with one side of her mouth, even as she curses with the other.'

Tamra forced herself to meet the demented creature's eyes. He stank of madness and spoiled meat. 'Maybe so,' she said, 'but she is our ally.'

'Ours?'

'You are High-King, and your people need you once more.'

'My... people?'

'The Rictus Clans stand ready to follow you, my lord. Our lands are beset by invaders from the south – spreaders of disease and worshippers of the plague. Their numbers stretch across the horizon, and the thud of their drums shakes the ice from the highest crags.' She spoke quickly, giving him no time to question. 'You've heard them, I know. Sound carries fast in these hills. They destroy all in their path and harry our people.'

'Invaders,' he repeated, dully. 'Who would dare invade us? Our lands are mighty, and our armies mightier still. No. No, this is a trick. I am king. And my royal decree is this – death. Take her,' he said, flinging out a claw to indicate Neferata. He hauled Tamra back. 'One side, sister. Our kin scream in the dark for the blood of she who betrayed them, and we will have our fair due.'

'No,' Tamra said. Desperate, she drew her sword and held the edge beneath his throat. The ghou-king paused, eyes wide.

'Isa? Who taught you to use a sword?'

'My name is Tamra ven-Drak. I am not Isa, though I am descended of her line.' She reached out and gestured, calling on the spirits of those who had died in the caverns. The bones strewn across the cavern floor began to rattle. 'I am your ally, as is Neferata. You must listen.'

'Ally? We need no allies such as her. She is sand and fog. Better to scatter her to the night than seek to build upon her good nature.'

Neferata laughed. 'Your time grubbing in the midden pits has addled you, Prince of Crows. You think Nagash will forgive this?'

'Nagash is dead, and all his slaves with him, I think. Else you would not risk coming here and spinning pretty words of alliance. Nagash is dead. Thus, go all tyrants.' The ghou-king leered at her. 'We are free.' He swatted Tamra's sword away with inhuman speed and leapt for Neferata. The mortarch shrieked and reached for the curved dagger sheathed on her hip as the rest of the ghouls closed in. Tamra stumbled back and flung her will out, into the bones, willing them to rise. They clattered upright, but only for a moment. She clutched her head and screamed, as her will was snuffed in an instant. The dead collapsed

back into oblivion.

*No.*

The word echoed through the vaulted cavern, sending bats into panicked flight. Tamra staggered back against a stalagmite, her head aching. Ghouls wailed and fell grovelling, or else fled into the darkness as the walls cracked and stalactites speared down to splinter across the floor. A pale purple radiance spilled from the growing cracks in the cave walls.

*No. Freedom is an illusion. An aberration. The natural order is maintained. You belong to me, Rikan ven-Drak.*

‘No...’ Rikan mewled. He threw up his talons in denial as rock shifted, contorting itself into a new and more horrible shape. The intensity of the amethyst light grew, bathing the entire cavern. Tamra stared in horrified fascination as part of the cavern wall twisted into the shape of a titanic skull. The great jaws moved.

*Yes. I see all. I hear all. Nagash is all.*

‘Nagash,’ Tamra breathed. His will weighed on hers like a mountain, crushing all thought and desire into base servitude. She wanted to crawl before him, to grovel as the ghouls were doing. It was only that he had not yet noticed her that allowed her to retain her dignity. To be ignored thus seemed at once a blessing and a curse – how much more painful, more wonderful, must it be to have his full attention upon you?

‘My lord,’ Neferata said. ‘A most timely intervention.’

*Neferata. My Mortarch of Blood. My Queen of Mysteries. Why do you cloud your mind? What do you hide from me?*

‘A woman must have her secrets, my lord,’ Neferata said. She did not look directly at the leering skull, Tamra noticed, though whether due to fear or simple caution, she couldn’t say.

*I could take them from you.*

‘Yes.’ Neferata knelt, arms spread, head thrown back. ‘Do as you will.’

The glow blazed brightly, but only for a moment. As it faded, Tamra felt the titanic presence fade with it. Rikan lay on the ground, curled into a ball and whimpering. Neferata rose slowly. She was trembling.

‘You said he was gone,’ Tamra said, her voice hoarse with fear.

‘He is. Mostly.’ Neferata shook herself. ‘What remains is still impressive, however.’ She nudged the insensate ghou-king with her foot. ‘Up, dog. We have a battle to plan.’

The rotbringer camp sprawled across the diseased remains of a village. Its former inhabitants had either drunk from the Flyblown Chalice and accepted the blessings of Nurgle, or they now decorated one of the many impaling stakes which the Order's armsmen raised with much gusto and mirth about the camp. Great tents of hide, silk and scale squatted on the frozen ground, and in the largest of these, the knights of the Order gathered.

'The root-kings came for us then, in their tangled phalanxes,' Sir Balagos said, as he took a long slurp from his ranklewine. He held court amongst his fellow knights, as he often did, sharing tales of triumph and treachery. 'They erupted from the lower levels of the Palace of Roots like termites spilling from a mound. Ironwood shields arrayed in serpentine fashion, the ranks of the duardin undulated, curving forward and coiling back. We knew, with a certainty born of controlled despair, that they would squeeze us like a boil should they close with us. Here was a pretty challenge, and one we rose to meet.'

Balagos was a burly warrior, his immensity barely contained by the creaking facets of his rust-riddled war-plate. He commanded a troop of hardy knights and a scrum of rot-riders – savages from the veldts of Ghyran who spread sickness wherever they roamed. Balagos had fought alongside Wolgus in the Jade Kingdoms, rising to high rank after his part in the taking of the Palace of Roots. Festerbite had heard the story often enough, but it never failed to fill him with a vicarious sense of triumph. The root-kings had been deadly warriors, and the tangled beards of their champions still hung in a place of honour in Cankerwall.

Festerbite wasn't the only one eager to hear the rest of the tale. The other knights leaned forwards on their stools and benches, goblets and mugs clutched tight. It was good to hear a story of triumph, of past victories, in days like these. The inside of the command tent was pleasantly stifling. Servants poured murky water over banks of coals, filling the air with a bitter steam. Chaos hounds lazed on the ground, gnawing broken bones or hunks of rotting flesh. Playful nurglings squawked and fought with each other beneath the benches, or else climbed the legs and capes of the gathered knights.

It was the first chance they'd had to truly rest since the attack by the spectral ogors. The ghosts had faded with the storm, leaving behind hundreds of bodies and a wrecked camp. But the pox-crusade endured. They'd left more than a third of their forces scattered between where they now camped and the Ithilian Gate, but those who remained were more determined than ever. The plague-bells rang day and night now, and the rotbringers sang hymns to Nurgle's majesty with greater fervour than before. It would take more than hungry ghosts to deter the



Order of the Fly from its holy task. Or so they told themselves.

‘Well? Get on with the story,’ Croga demanded. The warrior was a renegade from the lowlands, clad in battered furs and stained, mismatched armour. He’d led his people in sipping from the Flyblown Chalice the very day the crusade had arrived on his doorstep, after first bashing out the brains of his voivode. His skin was already starting to bubble with the blessings of Nurgle, and his warriors had proven to be excellent guides. Even so, Festerbite couldn’t bring himself to quite trust the turncoat. A man who betrayed one oath might very well betray another.

‘Patience is the gardener’s virtue, my friend,’ Wolgus said, stooping to enter the tent. A scrawny fly-monk entered behind him. The zealot wore rough, filth-encrusted robes, designed to inflame and infect the sores on his god-touched flesh. The sign of the fly had been cut into his cheeks and brow. Wolgus motioned. ‘Please, brother. If you would...’

At Wolgus’ gesture, the zealot slid his robes down, revealing a wealth of sores and pus-oozing wounds on his back. Festerbite was amused to see that the encrustations had taken the form of a crude map. The fly-monk knelt before them, proffering the seeping diagram for their perusal. Wolgus caught up a stool and joined them, shooing a nurgling away from the map. ‘These are the lands ahead, as near as we can gather.’ He nodded to Croga as he said it. ‘The ground turns hilly here. High crags, thick forests and then, finally, the Shivering Sea.’ He prodded the map, prompting the monk to squirm. ‘The savages flee before us, racing to the sea.’ He glanced at Croga. ‘No offense, my friend.’

‘None taken,’ Croga said. ‘They’re not running to the sea. They’re fleeing to the Mandible. A redoubt. High, thick walls with mountains on one side and the sea on the other.’

‘I suspected as much,’ Wolgus said. ‘The attacks we’ve endured have been nothing more than delaying tactics, to keep us from reaching them before they’re ready. It’s to be a siege then, if we continue.’ He leaned forwards. ‘Something we lack the numbers for, I fear.’ He looked around. ‘Who are we missing?’

‘Bubos and Phlegmaxius both went south a day ago,’ Balagos said. ‘Looking for plunder, most like.’ They weren’t the only ones. Half a dozen chieftains, captains and champions had gone missing, and their followers with them. Some had doubtless grown bored with the column’s deliberate pace and set off to find what loot they could. But the others had likely perished out in the wilderness, eaten by deadwalkers or something worse.

‘And Tulg the Wide has been gone for nearly three days,’ Festerbite said. The sorcerer had vanished into the north, leading a raiding party against the Drak,

one of the local tribes.

‘Croga’s woodsmen can keep an eye out for both him and the others, though I fear the worst.’ Wolgus frowned as he spoke. ‘I hoped to be the sword, piercing the breast of our foe. Instead, we are to be the cudgel, battering them until they fall.’ He looked around. ‘We need a place to make a stand. Our camps are attacked every night by roving corpses. We need walls and time to rest, to let our poxes wax anew.’

‘My rot-riders spotted a fortress, or what’s left of one, on a high crag two days’ ride to the west,’ Balagos said. He tapped the festering surface of the map with a blunt finger. ‘It would make an ideal keep, with a few civilising touches.’

‘You’d be dead in a week,’ Croga said. He sniffed and spat. ‘I know that heap... It’s already inhabited, and not by anything we’d want to meet. Best give it a wide berth.’

‘By the garden, are all you Rictus so cowardly?’ Balagos said. He slapped the map, causing the zealot to whimper. ‘Who are you to tell a true son of Nurgle where he might go?’

The tribesman grinned blearily at Balagos. ‘Someone who knows which way the wind is blowing. And the wind from that keep blows foul. Nagash himself cracked those walls, and the spirits of the dead rise wild from its stones.’ He looked at Wolgus. ‘This is all Nagash’s doing.’

‘Nagash is dead,’ Wolgus said. The words lacked the power they’d had only a few days ago. Festerbite shifted his weight, trying not to think of what he’d seen and heard since then. Nagash wasn’t dead, or at least death wasn’t slowing him up all that much. None of the others seemed convinced. They looked away from the blightmaster, refusing to meet his eyes.

On that note, the meeting ended. As the others retreated into their stories or a barrel of rot-wine, Wolgus gestured for Festerbite to follow him. He accompanied the blightmaster out into the yellow slurry of the camp. The snow here had long since melted, leaving only patches of scabrous dirt and fleshy, sweating flowers. Tents made of rawhide, filthy silk and tanned human skin flapped in the wind. The comforting hum of flies filled the air.

They’d moved further north since the last attack, and they’d lost more warriors since. It was no wonder the more fragile servants of the Dark Gods had quickly lost their stomach for such expeditions. Every night was full of new horrors. Great bats swooped out of the dark and snatched away horses and men alike. Mournful siren calls rose to brain-splitting shrieks just outside of camp, and come morning, dead sentries littered the perimeter.

Though he said nothing, Festerbite had noticed that Wolgus' earlier fire had begun to dim. The blightmaster was hard-pressed to keep the disparate elements of the crusade in line, and his mood suffered the worse for it. With warriors dying left and right, wandering off or simply disappearing, their once overwhelming force had shrunk considerably in the mere weeks since their arrival. Festerbite and the other knights did what they could to keep the grumblers silent, but it wasn't enough. They needed rest, and time for the mortals to regain their courage.

The heart of their current camp had once been a village, but it was in a sorrowful state. They couldn't stay here long. 'The hope of a moment is but the foundation stone of everlasting regret, and today's palace is tomorrow's ruin,' Wolgus said, looking around.

The village had been burned to celebrate their triumph. Despite the devastation, Festerbite could still see how primitive it had been. There were no great houses here, as there were in Cankerwall, no high ramparts or boil-domed temples. Instead, it was all huts of stone and fences of wood and bone. What few altars or totems were in evidence had been broken and scattered, or else daubed in those hues blessed of Nurgle.

'What manner of god would force his people to live such lives?' he said. 'They huddle in frozen caves, worshipping bones and devouring one another. There is no joy here, no life – only animal persistence.' He looked around. 'I cannot understand it. Why do they not welcome us? Are they truly so ignorant that they prefer such stark deprivation to the rank warmth and noisome beauty of Grandfather's garden?'

'They are savages, good Sir Festerbite, and know no better,' Wolgus said. He bent and retrieved something from the ashes. Festerbite thought it might have been a child's toy, before the flames had gotten to it. Wolgus dusted ash from it, and stood. Still examining it, he said, 'That is why we have come – to teach them, to turn them from their false god and to the worship of the true powers which rule the realms. As we have begun to do in Ghyran and in Ghur, so we shall do in Shyish.'

'Do you think they will thank us?' Festerbite asked. Already, thick creepers were winnowing through the snow, and blister-flowers were blooming in the ashes. Soon, the snows would melt away, and the air would grow warm and thick, the way it was meant to be. The dead on their stakes were rotting now, their flesh blighted by the very wood which pierced it, and the miasma which erupted from them would soon sweeten the air and soil.

Wolgus tossed the toy down. ‘It doesn’t matter. The thrust of our crusade, Sir Festerbite, remains the same – to free the living from the tyranny of the dead.’

‘And a most glopsome endeavour it is, my friend,’ Gurm said, as his palanquin shuffled towards them on creaking limbs. Plaguebearers shuffled in his wake, sewing the broken ground with mouldy seeds culled from the twisted sylvaneth. This place would blossom full in time, vomiting forth the pestilential flowers of Grandfather’s garden. ‘The Lord of All Things is pleased. Listen – the flies hum with his blessings.’ The daemon put one claw to the side of his head in an exaggerated gesture. ‘Such fertile soil you have tilled for me, Wolgus. I look forward to tending these gardens in the aeons to come, for they will yield such a magnificent bounty.’

‘As it pleases you, Herald. We but serve Nurgle’s wishes, as any true knight must.’ Wolgus turned to the daemon. ‘Croga’s pathfinders say they fled north. Towards the sea.’

‘Just like all the others,’ Festerbite added.

The daemon glanced at him. ‘And so? There is only ice there. Ice and snow.’

‘And well they know it,’ Wolgus said. ‘So why do they flee there? And why do the dead seek to delay us so, rather than simply bring us to open, honourable battle?’

‘Who knows why the dead do anything. Nagash is mad, and his puppets are madder still.’ Gurm sank back into his cushions, cyclopean eye narrowed. ‘Perhaps they lack the strength.’

‘Or perhaps it’s a trap,’ Wolgus said bluntly.

‘And so? That’s no reason to let them get away, eh?’ Festerbite grimaced. Most daemons had little understanding of strategy and tactics. They saw no reason not to blunder into a trap, as long as it allowed them to swiftly claim a few more souls.

‘No,’ Wolgus said. ‘Neither is there any reason to hurry.’ He scuffed the ground with his boot, drawing a ragged shape in the snow and ash. ‘The land narrows to an isthmus. We control everything to the south, and can fortify the high passes, preventing escape...’

‘And why would we waste time doing that?’ Gurm asked.

‘Because we have plenty of it. What is time to us? We contain them, until support can arrive from further south. Perhaps we shall even call upon my fellow blightmasters. We hold the Ithilian Gate, after all, and the lands around it. Reinforced, our crusade will surely cleanse the north in Nurgle’s name. And while we wait, we will ensure that your gardens grow fast and strong.’

‘And you think support is coming, do you?’ Gurm leaned forwards, balancing his chins on the pommel of his balesword.

‘Of course. Are we not Nurgle’s chosen pestilence? Are we not his blessed infection, thrust deep into the flesh of this realm? Others will come to join our crusade. I ask only that we give them the time to do so.’ Wolgus spoke so intently that Festerbite found himself nodding along with his words.

‘And let them share in your rightful glory too, I expect,’ said Gurm.

Wolgus hesitated, then nodded. ‘Yes, if need be. The garden is large enough for all. Perhaps those who flee will come to see that, if we but give them time. Even the strongest affliction needs time to flourish. Time is our ally in this holy endeavour, Gurm. Our strength waxes as theirs can only wane.’

Gurm laughed. ‘Your generosity does you credit, Wolgus. Grandfather would surely approve.’ He sat back. ‘But we have a schedule to keep. We are not builders, we are butchers. We must push to the sea and set this land alight with plague-fires. We must make mulch for the garden, and harrow the land so that Grandfather’s bounty might spread.’

‘We lack the numbers to hold this land, Herald.’ Wolgus gestured. ‘These delays have cost us more than time – they have cost us warriors. Supplies. All that we have left, we carry. Our servants are starving, and not even your verdant bounty can keep all of them fed in these conditions. If we press on, we risk losing everything.’

‘And I said we are not builders. We go forwards. Or I go forwards. It matters not at all to me, Wolgus. Cringe in fear, if you wish. I had thought your Order made of sterner stuff than that, but I see that once more Father Nurgle is let down by his mortal children. Oh, how he shall weep when I speak to him of this...’

Wolgus stiffened. ‘You would dishonour me?’

‘You dishonour yourself, with this moaning of numbers and fortifications. There is a perfectly good fortress waiting for us at land’s end. Let us simply take that one, eh?’

‘And if we cannot?’

Gurm scratched his chins. ‘Then you are buried in a shroud of glory. Cankerwall will echo with the songs of your deeds, and those of your loyal knights. Is that not what every knight lives for?’

Festerbite felt a pang at the daemon’s words, and he knew Wolgus did as well. To die gloriously, in Grandfather’s name, was the secret yearning of every servant of the Order. For those who did would surely be reborn in Nurgle’s

garden.

Wolgus grunted and turned away. 'Fie on you, daemon. You prick my sense of duty.'

'As a thorn pricks the flesh of a gardener. A reminder of what is, and what shall be.' Gurm licked his blistered lips and grinned. 'Such is my burden, Wolgus. I am the voice of the King of All Flies, and it is through me that you know his will. And his will is that we press on, further, farther and faster, until all of this realm is his.'



# SEVEN

## THE CROSSING

*Nagash still endures.*

*While he stands, his enemies shall not prevail.*

*Where he strides, all schemes will come undone.*

*Where he sets his standards, so shall victory be assured for those who follow him.*

*Heed the words of Nagash.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Tamra watched as children chased each other across the ruined forecourt, scattering what few goats and chickens remained in their heedless flight. She smiled, thinking of the days when she and Sarpa had done the same. The smile faded as quickly as it had come, and her hand fell to the pommel of his sword.

Even now it was warm with the touch of the lightning which had claimed him. Better the lightning than the plague-fire, perhaps. But he was gone either way. Sarpa was gone. Nagash was gone. The world was dying. She could feel it every time she called up the dead, or spoke to the spirits. It was all winding down, and there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing at all.

*Free... us...*

She closed her eyes and willed them to be silent, as Neferata had taught her. The Broken Kings subsided, if grudgingly. She would be glad when this was done, when she could leave this place and its captive spirits. Let them howl into

the wind, if they wished. So long as she didn't have to hear it. Sighing, she looked up. The forecourt led to the seaward gate, and past it the ruins of the once-great docks were visible. The prows and masts of broken ships jutted from the ice like tombstones. In the dull light of midday, the Shivering Sea seemed to stretch on into an infinity of white and grey.

Somewhere, on the other side of infinity, were the Rime Isles: desolate, empty of all human life and far from the reach of the enemy. It was no wonder that Bolgu and the Fenn wished to flee there. The isles could support the Rictus, though only crudely. They could rebuild, grow and even prosper. Or perhaps that was nothing more than an idle fancy – if even these harsh lands had been invaded, was anywhere truly safe?

She walked as she thought. Warriors nodded as she passed and murmured respectful greetings. Clansfolk offered her choice cuts of meat, jugs of goat's milk and scraps of fine cloth as a show of ritual deference. She thanked them but refused their gifts, as was custom. The people did not serve their voivode. The voivodes served their people.

Outside the walls of the Mandible, the full force of the winter wind plucked at her. She shivered and pulled her coat close as she passed through the tumbledown wreckage of a once-proud city. She could smell the midden pits and the plague tents beyond them. The rotbringers sowed sickness on the wind, and some of the Rictus had fallen ill as they fled their lands. The sick were housed in tents far back from the walls, where they awaited their turn for their souls to be granted the mercy of death, and their tortured flesh, the release of fire. The strongest were tended by lesser shamans and root-witches, whose arts were those of life rather than death. They might survive.

She crossed the shore and stepped into the ruined docklands. Several of the ice-cutter galleys favoured by the Fenns were beached on shore, waiting for the order to shove off. The thick metal-shod prows of the galleys were curved like axes, so as to crack the ice which covered the water and provide ease of passage. If it came to it, the galleys would carry all those who reached them away from danger and to the safety of the Rime Isles.

Frost-encrusted wooden planks creaked beneath her feet as she moved along the docks. The remains of broken ships littered the landscape, protruding at odd angles from beneath the ice. When Nagash had come, he had smashed the fleet first, so that none could escape. Only those vessels which had already been at sea had escaped him. Of those that did, only a few survived the zombie merwyrm and frost-drakes which surged in the Undying King's wake. Some among the



Fenn whispered that many of those undead monstrosities yet slumbered beneath the frozen waters, waiting for Nagash's call.

She stopped at the edge of the docks and looked out over the ice. She could make out the thin figure of Arkhan the Black, still standing where she'd last seen him, his dread abyssal crouched at his side. Beneath the omnipresent crackling of the ice, she could hear the rasp of his voice. He was chanting, though she did not recognise the language.

The Mortarch of Sacrament frightened her. Neferata did as well, but for different reasons. Arkhan, like Nagash, stood at an implacable remove from Tamra and her people. It was as if he were apart from the natural flow of things, and yet somehow more real than the world around him. She could feel the chill force of his power from where she stood.

'Going somewhere, poppet?' a voice called down. Tamra looked up. Adhema sat in the canopy of ragged sails and broken masts above, sharpening her sword.

'I wish to speak to Lord Arkhan,' Tamra said. The blood knight was always around where she was least wanted, or needed. Her fellow blood knights, at least, were helping prepare the Mandible's few remaining defences for the battle to come. But Adhema seemed to have no patience for such things.

'Now, why would you wish to do that, hmm?' Adhema stopped her sharpening and looked down. 'What could you have to say to that old bag of bones?'

'It is none of your affair.'

'No, it isn't. And yet the question stands.' Adhema lifted her sword and peered down its length. 'Are you plotting, poppet?'

'Do not call me that,' Tamra said.

'But that is what you are, poppet – a new plaything for our gentle queen.' Adhema dropped gracefully from her perch. Even in full armour, she made barely any noise when she landed. 'A puppet, a poppet, a play-pretty...' she said, in a sing-song voice.

'You sound as if you are jealous,' Tamra said. Instinctively, she reached out, gathering the spirits which wandered the ice and ruined wharves to her.

Adhema laughed. 'No. Why rage against fate, eh?' She leaned her sword over her shoulder. 'After all, soon enough you and I will be good friends, I think. And she'll have a new favourite, our sweet queen. Then we can commiserate over the steaming heart of a freshly slain enemy. Perhaps you'll even join my sisterhood.' She swayed towards Tamra. 'I'll teach you to use that sword of yours properly. Mayhap you'll teach me to call up the dead.'

Tamra flinched back as the vampire got close. Even protected by a cloud of

dead souls, she could feel the predatory malice radiating from Adhema. Was this what association with Neferata led to? The Broken Kings, Rikan, Adhema... all made into monsters.

‘You act as if I am bound to her,’ Tamra said. ‘But when this is done, I will stay and lead my people. That is my fate.’

‘Keep telling yourself that,’ Adhema said as she walked past. ‘It might even come true.’

Tamra didn’t turn to watch her go. Instead, she stepped onto the ice and made her way cautiously out to where Arkhan stood. Walking across the ice was treacherous, and more than once she almost lost her footing. It had ruptured in places, and freezing waters bubbled up. She could just make out the shapes of sunken vessels beneath its surface, and other less identifiable things. Once, she thought she glimpsed movement, and picked up her pace.

Arkhan was facing away from her, and he gave no sign that he’d noticed her approach. His dread abyssal had, however. The bone-coloured monster stirred and its infernal gaze brought her to a halt. It growled softly, and Arkhan said, ‘Be at ease, Razarak. What is it you wish to say, Tamra ven-Drak?’

Tamra swallowed. She didn’t actually know. It had been an impulse. She groped for a question, and settled on the most obvious. ‘Why do you stand out here, my lord?’

‘Where else would you have me stand, daughter of the Drak?’

Tamra repressed a shudder as Arkhan turned to look at her. There was a clarity to his gaze she found disconcerting. Usually the dead were... muted, somehow. But Arkhan was anything but. ‘No, I mean...’ she began.

‘I know what you mean. I am communing with the dead.’ He turned away. ‘I wonder, do you hear them?’

Tamra swallowed. She did. Voices seeped up from below and dead fingers scratched at the ice which held them imprisoned. ‘I do.’

‘And what do they say?’

‘They wish to be free.’ She looked up. ‘Just like the Broken Kings.’

‘The drowned have better chance of freedom than those six.’ Arkhan thumped the ice with his staff. It cracked, and cold water sprayed up. Tamra stepped back. ‘Indeed, those the sea has swallowed will soon be spat out.’

‘You are... drawing them up?’ It seemed an impossible feat, even for a being as powerful as Arkhan. At her most powerful, she had only ever commanded a few hundred of the dead, and most of those had been family.

‘Indeed. All the dead of the Mandible are stirring, ready to fight again, beneath

your banner.’ The liche studied her. ‘And it will be your banner, if Neferata has her way.’

Tamra looked away. ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘No. You do not wish to know.’

‘These lands have been splintered since the Great Awakening. Nagash, in his mercy, broke us.’ She heard a harsh rattle and peered at Arkhan. It took her a moment to realise that the sound was laughter.

‘Mercy? No. Expedience. Nagash detests waste. Why wipe out your people when they can serve better as a lesson to any who might seek to emulate them?’ He gestured. ‘In those days, rebellions sprang up like flies. The lords of Helstone, the corsair-kings of the Skull Isles, even the duardin of the Helgramite Summit... All sought to deny Nagash his due. And all paid the price. But none so great as the Broken Kings.’

‘I think... I think she wants me to free them,’ Tamra said. She pulled her coat more tightly about herself as a cold wind roared across the ice. ‘Neferata, I mean.’

‘Games within games,’ Arkhan said. ‘It has ever been her way.’

‘We have all heard the stories. The mortarchs are said to speak with the voice of Nagash, but how can they – you? How can one so... so...’ She trailed off.

Arkhan gave a raspy laugh. ‘We are him, and he is us. But we were all someone else, once. In us is Nagash’s power made manifest. But so too are his weaknesses. Neferata is his guile, Mannfred, his ambition, and I...’ It was his turn to trail off. He looked out over the ice.

‘What? What are you?’ Tamra pressed.

‘I am his loyalty – to others, to this realm, to those he claims as his own. What Nagash has claimed, he will hold until time’s last gleaming, even if he must destroy it to keep it.’

‘That is not comforting.’

‘Nor was it meant to be.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because I do not believe you will survive, Tamra ven-Drak. To stand beside us is to court death and worse. But if you do survive, I wish you to understand what it means to serve him. To fail him. To defy him.’

‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘Do not thank me. It is not a kindness.’ He looked at her. ‘Neferata weaves schemes the way a spider weaves webs. Strand by strand, until you are caught fast and trapped.’

‘And is that to be my fate?’

‘If you think to ask, then it is already too late.’

Tamra inclined her head. ‘I thank you for your indulgence, my lord. I shall leave you to your calculations.’

‘As I leave you to yours, Tamra ven-Drak. But, let me say this – Neferata is right about one thing. When the time comes, and you find yourself at the moment, do not hesitate in your decision. The dead travel fast, and only the swiftest of souls can hope to keep up with us.’

Tamra left him there, and as she trudged back towards the docks, she could hear his chant rise anew. Beneath her feet, dead faces pressed against the ice, watching her go.

‘She is a fool,’ Adhema said bluntly.

Neferata glanced at her and then back at the ancient map she held. Tattooed onto a now-crumbling stretch of tanned flesh, the map revealed the shape of the old city outside the Mandible. It was nothing but ruins now, of course. But it never hurt to know the lay of the land.

‘Who is, sister?’

‘The necromancer.’

‘There are quite a few necromancers in this citadel at the moment. At least three of them are women.’ Neferata traced the line of a side street with her fingernail. ‘There’s a sally port east of here. We could use that to flank them, if we can get them into position.’

‘You know who I mean,’ Adhema said. She glanced at the map and added, ‘It’s too far from the central avenue. It would take too much time to get into position.’

‘Mmm, perhaps you’re right. And yes, I know who you mean.’ Neferata carefully rolled up the map and tapped Adhema on the chest with it. ‘If she were a fool, I would not have spared her life. She is cautious – a good quality in a leader.’

‘Too cautious.’

‘That is a matter of opinion. And we both know that, in the end, only one opinion counts.’ Neferata locked eyes with the blood knight until Adhema looked away. The mortarch relented slightly and stroked her second-in-command’s cheek. It was in Adhema’s nature to be blunt. There was little left of the young woman she had been, before Neferata had passed along the dark blessings of the soulblight. ‘If we win – *when* we win – the Rictus will require a

guiding hand. Someone on whom I – we – can count. The other voivodes are decrepit, deceitful or, well, dullards. She is the youngest and the strongest.’

‘So was I,’ Adhema said softly.

‘Yes. But you were meant for bloodier things, kastellan.’ Neferata turned away. ‘You wanted vengeance, Adhema. War and glory, like your sisters. And I have given it to you. The city state of Szandor might be dust on the boots of the Blood God’s servants, but its highborn daughters live to wreak vengeance in its name.’

‘And for that, we thank you, O Queen of Blood,’ Adhema said, bowing her head. ‘But she is still a fool. You cannot trust her to make the right choice.’

‘Oh, but I think I can.’ Neferata smiled. ‘The enemy grow closer by the day. They will be bloody and battered when they arrive, but still formidable. They’ll outnumber us three to one at least – more than that, in the end. There are sorcerers in their ranks, and where sorcerers go, there are daemons.’

Adhema grunted and turned away. Her fingers tapped at the pommel of her sword. ‘Corpse-eaters, deathrattlers and deadwalkers. A pretty army. Why give it to her? Why not just use it yourself?’

‘Who says I’m not?’ Neferata gestured. ‘You must think outside of the immediate, Adhema. We who are eternal must learn to play the long game. Our conquerors will grow weak, in time, as all their kind do. We will outlast them, and rise again when their grip on the Amethyst Realm slackens. The seeds we plant here today will have ripened by then, and grown fat on blood and war. The Rictus will march south on that day, and Tamra ven-Drak will be at their head.’

Adhema nodded in understanding. Satisfied, Neferata looked out over the ruins below, calculating the enemy’s approach. The ruins of the city spread out along the shore and the lower slopes of the Wailing Peaks. Once, the Mandible had been a centre of trade, and the population of the city that surrounded it had been the highest in the north. Two thirds of its people had perished in what the Rictus called the Great Awakening, and their remains still littered the city below, or else stumbled through the surrounding forests as unusually persistent deadwalkers.

Neferata closed her eyes, letting her mind drift. She could still remember the smell of the Shivering Sea in the summer and the cacophony of the docklands. She remembered standing on the ice-wharfs, watching as galleys slid across the turgid waters, sails flapping in the cold wind. She remembered the cheers of the people, as the skeletal guard of King Elig ven-Fenn marched down the boarding ramps, returning victorious from the Rime Wars.

Heady days, those. A million little conflicts, all staged for her amusement. How she and Mannfred had conspired against each other then, instigating proxy wars

at the tiniest provocation. Her pawns against his, and both of them against Arkhan, though in truth Mannfred had always taken those contests more seriously. Arkhan infuriated him on some deep, abiding level. Centuries of confidence and guile would be stripped away with a single rasping comment, reducing her fellow mortarch to spluttering savagery.

Nagash had left them to their games, his mind turned ever inwards, calculating the dread formulas of the Corpse Geometries. Sometimes, he would stir to speak a single word, and a country would die, its inhabitants reduced to raw materials to fuel his continuing studies. Even now, she could not grasp the implications of such acts. She did not understand why the Undying King would craft a continent-spanning pyramid of crystallised ash or build strange mechanisms from bone and viscera. Mannfred had confided to her his suspicions that Nagash was attempting to craft portals to new and stranger worlds, or perhaps create secret routes into more familiar realms.

Whatever he'd been up to, the coming of Chaos had put an end to both it and her intrigues with Mannfred. It saddened her to think of so many plots left undone, so many schemes never to be put into motion. Of course, some she'd adapted and put into play against other targets. The servants of the Dark Gods were... simplistic in their scheming. They substituted complexity and brutality for efficiency, prizing victory over every other condition. And they were almost too eager to turn upon one another, even when it served no purpose. But there was little sport in it, only a sort of satisfying monotony.

She longed to match wits with the Three-Eyed King. There was a foe worthy of her. One who could drive Sigmar back into his fortress-realm, crack the soul of the Great Necromancer and set all the Mortal Realms aflame was surely as cunning as he was dangerous.

But first, she had to win the war here.

*War... here...* came the hissing whisper of the Broken Kings. They fluttered at the edges of her consciousness like frightened birds, and she calmed them with a single word.

'Soon,' she said.

Festerbite was tired.

He'd dreamed of amethyst fires and a great booming voice, calling out to him from the dark. Those blessed by the contagions of Nurgle didn't need very much sleep, but they had to have some at least. And he hadn't had any in days. No one had. Even the animals were on edge; Scab had bitten him three times in as many

hours, and Balagos had been forced to kill his own steed after it had tried to gut him. Luckily, there were plenty of spares, thanks to the attrition they'd suffered getting this far – too many empty saddles, too many gaps in the battle line.

Festerbite wondered if this was how the Order's previous enemies had felt when confronted by the unflagging durability of Nurgle's chosen. But now they'd met a foe they couldn't simply outlast, one whose endurance outstripped even their own.

'The dead – our dead – are following us,' Croga said. The renegade looked exhausted. He'd been in the saddle for three days, conducting raids or simply trying to see off the ravenous packs of deadwalkers which harried their march. Though he lacked any skill with necromancy, he knew the trick of putting the dead down for good. 'Every corpse we've left unburned and intact is marching in our wake. Luckily they are as slow in death as they were in life.'

They stood with Wolgus some distance from a frozen lake, clutching the reins of their steeds. The lake stretched farther than the eye could see, and the land around it was bare rock, covered in hoarfrost. Sparse trees dotted the snowy shore, and birds croaked in the trees. The remains of several great bridges marked the surface, and the ruins of what might have once been some form of fortification stretched out along the shore.

And as with every scrap of land in this grim region, there were the stones – enormous menhirs and way stones of all descriptions and sizes. Some were pockmarked with hollow crannies stuffed with skulls. Others were intricately carved with what Festerbite thought must be scenes from the history of this land. Rotbringers strained at them, seeking to topple them with ropes and tools. Those that could not be toppled would be shattered or defaced. Nothing which gave glory to the false god, Nagash, could be allowed to stand in their wake.

'Not luck, Croga,' Wolgus said. 'It is the hand of Nurgle, stretched out over us. By the time our fallen brothers come seeking our life's blood, we'll be behind the walls of this Mandible of yours. Then it will be a simple enough matter to return them to Grandfather's garden.'

Croga glanced at Festerbite, who looked away. Since his confrontation with Gurm, Wolgus had become almost desperately optimistic. It was to keep the morale of their warriors up, or so he claimed. Festerbite suspected that it was as much for himself as anyone.

'Everywhere we look – glorious desolation,' the blightmaster continued. 'There, see these bones, the way they are compacted beneath the soil? A road, my friend. And that great menhir, half slumped in a copse of trees? A milestone.'

This was once an empire, if a crude one. And now it moulders in a tomb of Nagash's making, neither crumbling nor rising. That is what we fight, my friends – stagnation.'

'We were mighty, once,' Croga murmured, half to himself. Festerbite looked at him. The Rictus shook his shaggy head. 'Once, our clans were kingdoms and our kingdoms ruled the north. From the Shivering Sea to the black stones of Stregocev, we were feared and respected.'

'What happened?'

'Nagash,' Croga said, spitting the name. He made a gesture. 'The Rattlebone Prince strode down from the moon and smote the north, shattering it. He cleaved the land, so that the sea rushed all in, and he shattered our cities, driving us into the wilderness.' He scratched at a suppurating nodule on his cheek, picking parasitic flea eggs from the raw wound.

'And now you defy him again,' Festerbite said.

Croga shrugged and popped a squirming larva into his mouth. 'We have another god now. A stronger one. Besides, Nagash is dead.' He hesitated. 'Isn't he?'

'As coffin nails,' Wolgus said, clapping the warrior on the back. 'Shyish stands at the dawn of a new era, my friends, a time of life and growth that will wipe away the dust of death. And we shall plant the first seeds here, in the north.' He gestured to a group of plaguebearers. The daemons dug seeping trenches in the soil with their swords and sowed blighted seedlings, as they had every time the column came to a halt. As the old order was toppled, the seeds of the new were planted, and the comforting hum of flies was heavy on the air.

Still, Croga didn't look convinced. Festerbite couldn't blame him. Wolgus was doing what he could, but the whispers had been running through the column for days. Between the attacks and the dreams, the disappearances and the sounds in the night, the Order's once-famed discipline was fraying. They'd come further than any other servant of the Dark Gods, and won more victories, but they were paying for it with every step. Now, with the Mandible but a day's hard ride away, fate – or something worse – had thrown one last obstacle in their path.

'No bridge,' Festerbite said, studying the frozen surface of the lake.

'Not anymore,' Croga said, and spat. He gestured to the remains of a stone structure, half-buried in the ice and snow. 'In my great-grandfather's time, there were nine great bridges of quarried stone which spanned the Corpse Run, and towns on either side. But the last of them, bridge and building alike, collapsed during the Bonesnapper Wars, when the gargant tribes came down out of the Wailing Peaks seeking marrow and meat.'



‘Who won?’ Festerbite asked.

Croga looked at him. ‘See any gargants?’ he said, scratching at his cheek.

Festerbite laughed. ‘Well, the ice might be solid enough to cross, if we tread carefully.’ He hesitated. ‘Or we could go around.’

‘It would add days to our journey,’ Wolgus said. ‘Days we cannot afford, according to our esteemed Herald.’ He gestured towards Gurm, who sat some distance away reclining in his palanquin, surrounded by chortling plaguebearers and a number of knights.

Festerbite frowned at that. There were too many in the crusade who heeded Gurm’s urgings. They wanted to be done with this place, with its wandering corpses and screaming ghosts. They wanted victory, even if it meant death.

‘Nor do I wish to camp here,’ Wolgus continued, ‘not when we are so close to our goal.’ He caught Festerbite by the shoulder. ‘We must cross here. But first, the ice needs to be tested to see if it can bear our weight.’

‘May I have the honour of leading the way?’ Festerbite asked, knowing that it was what was expected of him. The Order prized courage in its knights, and the King of All Flies looked with favour upon the bold.

Wolgus nodded. ‘Go,’ he said.

Festerbite nodded and swung himself into the saddle. He called out to a handful of other knights, those closest to Gurm, who eagerly joined him as he rode across the flat forecourt of stones which marked where the bridges had begun. The pillars and posts of the long-demolished structures still rose from the frozen surface, and they had become home to birds’ nests and strange purplish mould. The ruins on the shore were in a similar state. Whatever they might once have been, they were now nothing more than heaps of crumbling stone.

‘Slow and steady, as is the way of Nurgle,’ Festerbite said, as he urged a reluctant Scab onto the ice. ‘No need to hurry, brothers.’

Most nodded in agreement, but one didn’t.

‘There’s every need, Festerbite,’ this knight gurgled as he followed him. He was skinny, and his armour hung awkwardly on his starveling frame. Stained bandages hid his face, and he smelled of unguents and spoiled fruit. ‘We’ve got savages to kill – or had you forgotten?’

‘The thought is ever foremost in my mind, Rotjaw,’ Festerbite said, ‘but we are not Bloodbound, racing heedlessly into battle. However, if you want to gallop ahead like one of the Blood God’s own and drown in icy water, more power to you.’

‘No need to be insulting,’ Rotjaw grumbled. Several of the others chuckled.

Festerbite didn't. He held Rotjaw's gaze as they continued to ride across the ice. Such disloyalty needed to be dealt with at once, before it could endanger the crusade.

'You shouldn't listen to the daemon,' he said without prevarication. 'Any of you.' Rotjaw twitched in his saddle. 'Gurm is our ally, but he does not speak for the Order of the Fly. Wolgus commands us, whether to victory or defeat.'

'Gurm speaks with the voice of the King of All Flies. Even Wolgus says so,' another knight said. Sir Reculix was a brawny brute, with a crown of antlers rising from his corroded helm, and his distended intestines wrapped about his middle like armour.

'That doesn't mean he doesn't twist Nurgle's words to suit his own ends,' a third knight croaked. His rusty armour was shrouded in filth-stained robes, and beneath his hood he wore a mask of bone and iron.

'Sir Blistertongue is right,' Festerbite said. 'The daemon is our ally, not our friend. Remember your true loyalties, and the King of All Flies will smile upon you. Have we not all drunk deep from the Flyblown Chalice, after all?'

'Aye,' came the grumbling murmur. Festerbite nodded in satisfaction.

Scab reared suddenly, shrieking. As he fought to control the beast, Festerbite looked down. A great shadow seemed to spread beneath the ice, twin sparks of amethyst flickering in its depths. The sparks grew to suns as the shadow contracted, becoming a titan skull. The rictus grin split in a soundless scream, and the ice cracked with a hiss. Festerbite looked around wildly. The others seemed to be having the same difficulties.

The ice heaved and water spurted into the air to rain down across them. Five decaying gargantuan corpses rose wheezing from below the broken ice, scattering the knights. The bonesnapper gargants had perished in the water, and their bodies had been preserved by the cold. Bloated paws slammed down, smashing riders and steeds through the ice and into the dark waters below, Sir Reculix among them. Festerbite sawed on Scab's reins, turning the horse-thing about. He began to gallop for safety. It was a trifle cowardly, but being drowned by the water-logged corpse of a gargant wasn't his idea of a heroic death.

'Get off of the ice!' he roared, riding hard. 'All of you – fall back!' Scab's hooves slipped and slid on the ice as Festerbite urged the animal to greater speed. The ice cracked beneath them as they raced towards the shore, and he could hear the undead gargants smashing their way through the frozen waters in pursuit. On the shore, a shield wall was being hastily erected by the Order's armsmen.

‘Loose,’ Wolgus bellowed, from somewhere behind the wall. Plague-fire arrows hissed through the steamy air and arced over Festerbite and the others. Normal flames would have found precious little purchase in the waterlogged hides of the monstrous zombies, but the plague-fires began to burn greedily, consuming wet flesh as easily as dry. One of the gargants collapsed back into the water, its unwieldy form wreathed in oily green flame. But the remaining four ploughed on, groping for the fleeing knights.

Rotjaw screamed as a hand snatched him from the saddle. Ruined teeth snapped shut on the Chaos knight’s skull, silencing his shrieks. Scab’s hooves dug into the shore and the horse-thing charged through an opening in the shield wall. Festerbite jerked his steed around, Blistertongue and the other survivors following suit. The four gargants waded onto the shore, water pouring from their decaying carcasses. More arrows thumped into them, and one’s whole head was ablaze. But they kept coming.

The shield wall held, though only barely. Festering spears and mucus-stained axes bit into the tree-trunk limbs of the gargants as they tore at the armymen. A wheeled altar to Nurgle creaked forwards, pushed by chanting rotbringers. The sorcerers gathered atop it unleashed a flurry of arcane bolts. The crackling bursts tore one of the gigantic corpses apart, sending its smoking husk flopping back into the waters.

‘Ware!’ someone cried. Festerbite twisted in his saddle and saw more enormous corpses rise from the waters of the lake. Slowly but surely, they began to haul themselves towards the shore. In the trees, the carrion birds were croaking in unison, and the sound caused Festerbite to shudder as he recalled his dreams from the evening before. It was the same voice, he was certain of it, stretched between a hundred avian throats.

Rotbringers screamed as they were hurled into the air or pulped between colossal teeth. The undead gargants stormed through the ranks, kicking men aside or simply stomping on them. Plague-fires ate at rotting flesh, but not quickly enough. Two of the gargants lurched towards the war-altar and the half a dozen sorcerers who crouched atop it. Festerbite kicked Scab into motion. ‘Blistertongue, the rest of you – follow me,’ he said, and the knights raced to intercept the monstrous deadwalkers.

Wolgus appeared to have had the same idea. Even as Festerbite reached the altar, one of the gargants loomed over it. Before it could snatch up one of the cowering sorcerers, the blightmaster was there, rotsword in one hand and a mace in the other. Wolgus chopped through the frayed tendons of the gargant’s wrist,

severing its hand. His mace snapped out, catching the brute in the jaw. The corpse staggered back, and Festerbite let his blade play across the backs of its knees as he galloped past. The creature toppled over.

‘Ha! A mighty blow, Sir Festerbite.’ Wolgus sliced a finger from the hand of the second gargant, and then crushed the remaining digits with his mace. The gargant hunched forwards, jaws wide, but before it could take a bite out of the blightmaster, a lasso of thorny vines settled over its neck and skull. The vines pulled taut and the gargant fell backwards, crushing its fellow. More vines, hurled by cackling plaguebearers, lassoed the others who’d made it to shore.

Festerbite saw Gurm’s palanquin trundle past. Plaguebearers tore strips of seeping greenery from the twisted sylvaneth and fashioned ropes from them. ‘Must I do everything myself, Wolgus?’ Gurm called.

‘If only you had mustered the impetus to do it sooner,’ Festerbite said, though not loudly.

Wolgus leapt down from the war-altar. ‘Be not so uncharitable, my friend. Such magics take time to weave.’ He sheathed his sword and laid his mace across his shoulders. The mortal rotbringers were falling back as the daemons dragged the struggling gargants towards the shore. Those corpses still wading out of the lake were met by plague-fire and balesword. Wolgus turned. ‘Croga, Sir Balagos – get them regrouped and ready, just in case this trick of Gurm’s doesn’t work.’

‘It will,’ Gurm said. ‘As we press forward, we bend this realm to our will. Behind us, we have left the seeds for a mighty garden. And here, we will make a feculent wellspring, to feed all the green growing things which will soon populate these lands. And, well, these carcasses will make a fine pontoon, I think.’

The daemon gestured. The corrupted tendrils pruned from the sylvaneth burrowed into the twitching zombies on the shore, dragging them towards one another, no matter how much they struggled. The gargants tore at each other mindlessly as the vines bound them inextricably together. Giggling nurlings squashed themselves into the gaps between bodies, spreading their filth into the champing jaws, while plague-fires melted flesh and bone, furthermerging the struggling corpses into a single entity. Slowly but surely, a crude bridge was taking shape.

At the water’s edge, plaguebearers gurgled and nudged one another as they drove their swords into the broken ice. The water frothed and turned dark, like stew. Steam rose from the melting ice as corruption spread from the baleswords and through the waters. The gargants staggered as the streams of foulness began

to consume their decaying forms. Smoke spewed from their bodies as they lost the ability to do anything more than thrash impotently. Bloated flesh sloughed from broken bones, plopping into the churning waters.

More nurlings surfaced in the liquid corruption. Squealing with pleasure, they began to clamber up the sagging husks of the gargants, squeezing into the holes in their torsos and skulls. The tiny daemons hauled on dissolving strands of muscle tissue and bone, forcing the gargants to slump forwards, adding to the growing bulk of the makeshift bridge.

‘Not much longer now,’ Gurm said, leaning on the pommel of his balesword. ‘Look at the little fellows go. They do get in everywhere, don’t they?’ He laughed and used his sword to poke Festerbite. ‘Eh, Festerbite? Don’t they?’

‘They do, my lord,’ Festerbite said, grudgingly. He looked around, taking note of how many broken bodies littered the shore or floated in the corrupted waters. Once again, it wasn’t force of arms that had won the day but daemonic cunning. They were no better than chaff, absorbing punishment until Gurm could work his schemes. He looked at Wolgus, and knew from his expression that the blightmaster was thinking the same thing. Was this what the Order of the Fly had come to in these nightmare lands?

‘We endure,’ Wolgus said, softly. ‘In Nurgle’s name, we endure.’

Festerbite made to reply, but stopped himself when he realised that the birds had fallen silent. Black eyes watched the rotbringers from every tree and stone. As one, the birds rose into the air with a great cry. As they filled the sky, they seemed to briefly coalesce into a horrid, familiar shape. Then they winged their way north.

Festerbite shuddered. He suddenly felt cold, for the first time in a long time.



# EIGHT

## LIFE-IN-DEATH

*Let them come in their thousands, I will endure.*

*Let the skies weep fire and the earth groan.*

*Let all things perish and tumble into the dark.*

*Nagash endures.*

– *The Epistle of Bone*

Tamra watched her people work with no small amount of pride. Under the watchful eyes of the voivodes, clansmen had emptied the great crypts and ossuaries which stretched beneath the Mandible. The bones of the beloved dead were now arrayed across the courtyard, and women and children moved to and fro among them, seeking to arrange head bone to neck bone and heel bone to ankle bone, in accordance with the ancient rites. The bones had already been marked with knife and ink by those who'd seen to their stripping and interment so long ago, and they were prepared accordingly.

More bones were added from heavy bark baskets and hide sacks. These additions had been contributed by those refugees lucky enough to have gotten away with such valuable heirlooms. 'A good army, if small,' Bolgu said. He observed the preparations beside her, his thumbs hooked in his wide belt. 'We have bronze aplenty, to arm and armour them.'

Tamra nodded. 'Lady Neferata calls to the deadwalkers in the hills and in the sea caves. They will flood the ruins and make them perilous for our foes.' She

ran a hand through her hair. ‘Arun has drawn down the bodiless spirits which linger here, and I have made compact with the corpse-eaters. You and Myrn and the others will see to the raising of our dead.’

‘It doesn’t sound like enough, does it?’ Bolgu said.

‘No.’

‘My ice-cutter galleys stand ready. If the walls fall, some of our people will survive.’ Bolgu looked at her. ‘I doubt either of us will be there to see them off.’

‘We might surprise you. I have no intention of dying here.’ Tamra looked up. The clouds were roiling with suppressed fury. Lightning flickered in their depths. She thought again of Sarpa, stolen by the storm. Despite her best efforts, she had not been able to call up his soul again. Wherever it was, she hoped he was at peace. Bolgu followed her gaze.

‘I’d ask the Undying King for a clear sky to fight under, if I thought he was listening,’ he said. ‘I’d give my left hand to see the sun – just once more, before the end.’

‘You think he does not listen?’

They turned to see Arun hobbling towards them. The old voivode supported himself on a staff made from the bones of his predecessors. He wore a cuirass of tarnished bronze and a helmet made in the shape of a swooping bat. ‘For shame, Bolgu,’ the old man said. ‘Nagash stands with us, even now.’

‘I do not see him, Arun,’ Bolgu said.

‘Because you are not looking. Nagash is in us and around us. He is all things, and all things are one in him. He is death, and we must die.’ Arun bent forwards, his body wracked by a coughing fit. Tamra caught his arm, supporting him until he’d recovered. He patted her hand. ‘All things die, my friends. That is the way of it.’

‘I just wish it wasn’t today,’ Bolgu said.

‘What day better than today? What moment greater than this? Nagash asks that we stand, and so we shall. For the honour of the Rictus, and glory to our clans.’ Arun forced himself erect. ‘We die, and live forever in death. Isn’t that right, child?’

Tamra said nothing. Her eyes were on the women and children, on the men too old to fight or too young to be warriors. Would Nagash raise them up as well? Would they become deadwalkers or wandering spirits, growing more twisted with every passing century? She closed her eyes and rubbed her head, suddenly tired beyond all measure.

Arun gazed at her with gentle eyes. ‘Death and life are a single strand, child.’

The Great Awakening showed us that, and for that alone we should be willing to die for him.'

'Willing or no, we'll die all the same,' Bolgu said. He looked up, at the wooden walkways which lined the interior of the Mandible's walls. 'I don't think she cares either way, the witch.'

Tamra glanced up. Neferata stood on the parapet, her dread abyssal crouched behind her, watching them. Her gaze was unreadable.

'Should she?' Arun said. 'We are but motes in the eyes of the mortarchs. How many generations have risen and fallen beneath her gaze, Bolgu? And how many more to come, in the centuries ahead? She is eternal, and we are finite. That is why it falls to the dead to remember the living.'

Bolgu snorted. 'It's said there's a band of monks, somewhere north of Morrsend, who shed their flesh when they join their order. Their skeletons spend eternity recording all that is said and done in those ancient lands. I wish we had something like that here.'

'Maybe we will,' Tamra said. 'War is not eternal. It is a flame which burns hot for a time and then gutters to embers.' She patted Arun's withered hand. 'When it does, we will be here, the dead and the living alike. And we shall have to find new ways to occupy ourselves.'

'But for now, we need to get our brothers and sisters on their feet,' Bolgu said. He gestured to Arun. 'You are the oldest, will you lead us in this?'

Arun nodded. 'It is my honour and my duty.'

He stepped forwards, raising his staff. The other voivodes gathered around as Arun began to speak the words.

'And Nagash spake unto me, and he said, "Child, can these bones live?" And I spake unto Nagash and said, "Yea, my lord, if thou wish it, they shall live. Thou knows the ways and means of bone and marrow." And Nagash spake unto me and said, "I know them." And lo, did the bones stand, for after life comes death, and after death come life-in-death. All that lives must die...'

'And all are one in Nagash,' Tamra and the others recited, solemnly.

As the words echoed out, a shimmering radiance fell across the long-silent dead, and they began to stir. Twitching phalanges gripped long bones and twisted them into place. Skulls rolled closer to vertebrae, as spinal columns flexed.

'Hearken unto his words,' Arun continued. 'All that lives must die, and all that die are one in Nagash.'

The assembled voivodes raised their hands and staves, and the bones of the dead rose with them. 'All are one in him, and to die is to live.'



‘What is your opinion of our forces, sister?’ Neferata asked, watching the necromantic rite taking place below. Bones joined together and skeletons rose up, one after the next. When it was done, there would be a few hundred skeletons, ready to march. Not many, in the grand scheme of things, but enough to accomplish what was needed.

‘They will not stand,’ Adhema said, as she ran a whetstone over her blade. ‘Barbarians never do.’ The vampire sat atop the parapet, her helmet at her feet.

Neferata looked at her. ‘Is that the voice of experience, or merely opinion?’

‘They lack discipline.’ Adhema smiled thinly. ‘But that can be fixed.’

‘Are you suggesting we kill them, and raise them as deadwalkers?’

‘I will do as my queen commands.’

Neferata snorted. She stroked Adhema’s dusky cheek. ‘Wasteful, sister. Why bother killing them, when the foe will do that for us?’ She smiled. ‘Then we raise them. That way, we get more than one use out of them.’

‘I bow to your wisdom, my queen.’ Adhema held up her sword and peered down its length. ‘What do you wish us to do? Shall we fight here, or...’

‘No. The Sisterhood of Szandor is at its best in the open, with room to gallop. Lead them a merry chase, if you would. Carve them, stab them, bleed them. I want them staggering by the time they reach these walls.’ She held up a warning finger. ‘Do not engage them in open battle, however. I don’t want them bogged down, just bloodied.’

‘They will still be many left, even after that.’

‘What are numbers to us? Grist for the mill, nothing more.’ Neferata leaned over the parapet. Below her, the ruins stretched for leagues, almost to the distant shores of the Corpse Run. It was a forest of broken walls, tumbled rooftops and scattered masonry. ‘They will fell the trees to make siege weapons.’ She patted the parapet. ‘They see the wall, and they will not be able to resist trying to take it. That is why I gathered the Rictus here.’ She turned around and leaned back, fingers interlaced over her stomach. ‘The enemy will make camp on the shore, where it is open, if we give them that time. So long as we keep their attentions here, the battle is ours.’

Neferata pushed herself upright and stretched a hand up. She could feel the power here. Necromantic energy had seeped into the very stones of the shore, and it hung thick on the breeze. The ice of the Rictus Sea hid an incalculable tithe of corpses. There were entire fleets beneath those frozen waters, just waiting for the right voice to call them back to the surface.

She closed her eyes and listened. She could just make out Arkhan’s chanting

from somewhere on the ice. Raising that many dead souls took time, especially with one of the Nine Gates in the vicinity. The gates distorted the normal flow of things in unpredictable ways. But it was simply a matter of time: the ice would crack, the dead would rise, and their foes – this Wolgus – would be caught in the jaws of a trap. She glanced at the crags which loomed over the Mandible, and wondered whether the Prince of Crows would truly honour his word. It was hard to tell with such creatures. Reality was an illusion to them, no better than a dream. If nothing else, the scent of bloodied flesh would draw the packs out of the hills.

Arkhan's chanting wasn't the only sound on the wind. She could hear the clangour of bells and the sound of phlegm-choked bellows. Her nose wrinkled as she caught a whiff of putridity on the air. The enemy were close, and drawing closer with every moment.

'Hello, poppet,' Adhema said.

Neferata opened her eyes and turned. Tamra had joined them. She glanced nervously at the blood knight, and then at Neferata.

'They are here.'

Adhema rose to her feet and recovered her helmet. 'Finally,' she murmured.

Neferata gazed out over the ruins. 'Speak, sister.'

'They've been sighted just outside what's left of the old city by Arun's spirits...'  
Tamra flinched aside as Adhema stepped past her. 'They will be here in a few hours, if not less.'

Neferata nodded. The oldest of the voivodes had bound a number of ghosts to the crumbled remains of the city walls, to keep watch. A cunning tactic, and one she intended to use herself in the future.

'Good. The tall tower there is relatively stable.' Neferata pointed. 'You and the other voivodes who are not otherwise occupied shall go there, to direct the battle. I have drawn every deadwalker for a hundred leagues to this place. They and the hungry ghosts which inhabit these ruins will be yours to command.' She turned. 'Your best archers will take to the walls. Our enemies are durable, but mortal. When the time comes, the honoured dead will march to meet our enemies, who will be in some disarray.'

'And what of you, Lady Neferata?'

'I? I will go where I will, and do as I wish.' Neferata leaned close to Tamra. 'Surely you do not think that I will abandon you, sister?'

'You abandoned the Broken Kings.'

Neferata gazed at her, like a cat puzzled by the bite of a mouse. 'Did I?' she

said.

‘Rikan said...’

‘Rikan is not half the man he used to be,’ Neferata said. ‘I told you not to give credence to his yowling. He is mad.’ She shrugged. ‘Besides, ask them yourself if you wish. You speak to them as well as I. Draw them from their icy tomb and put the question to them. Whatever their answer, we could use the reinforcements.’

‘If you wish the Broken Kings freed, why do you not do it yourself?’ Tamra asked.

‘Did I say that I did?’

Tamra didn’t look at her. ‘I am not stupid, whatever you might believe. I have eyes and ears and a mind to understand what I have seen and heard. Why?’

Neferata was silent for a moment. ‘Such is the law of Nagash. What he has done, his mortarchs may not undo. It is outside our remit, and beyond our power.’

‘Then why—’

‘Because it is not beyond yours, Tamra. We are his servants, bound by geas and darkling oath. He is in our blood and brains. We cannot deny him, save that he wills it. Do not mistake me – on occasion, he lets us slip our leashes. And these days, they are quite loose. But to gainsay him is beyond me. Beyond any of us. But you...’

‘I am beneath him,’ Tamra said.

‘He pays no attention to you,’ Neferata corrected. ‘Not yet. That will change and soon, I think. We will need strength like yours in the days to come. Things will grow worse, before they grow better.’

‘Then there is no hope.’ Tamra slumped.

Neferata caught her chin and raised her head.

‘There is hope in Nagash,’ she said. ‘Nagash is eternal, as is Shyish and all who dwell within it. All are one in Nagash...’ How many times had she said these very words? Faith was an ever-useful tool, and the easiest to abuse.

‘And Nagash is all,’ Tamra said, automatically. ‘If I break the law, I will be punished. My people will be punished.’

‘Better punishment than extinction,’ Neferata said. She set her hands on Tamra’s shoulders, and the woman flinched. ‘Perhaps it will not come to that. Perhaps... Perhaps these old walls will hold. Perhaps the Prince of Crows will turn the tide, or the drowned dead. But our enemies are here, now, and this is only the beginning. After these, will come others – stronger, god-touched and

more savage.'

Neferata could smell the noxious smoke of the plague-fires, the reek of pox-infused flesh on the wind. She could hear the drums and bells of the enemy in the distance, and she knew Tamra could as well. 'This is not the last battle,' Neferata whispered. 'It is the first. The north staggers. Shyish reels. Our realm bleeds. But it is not done yet.'

'What—what must I do?' Tamra asked.

'Survive. Adapt. Show yourself as worthy as I know you to be, Tamra ven-Drak. You will lead armies in the wars to come. The seeds of those armies are here, and if you but listen to me, they shall flourish, and you with them.' Neferata pressed the tips of her fingers against the woman's throat. 'Do you truly wish to protect your people?'

'Yes,' Tamra whispered.

'Then, when the time comes, you will know what must be done.' Neferata turned her around and studied her. 'I will show you such sights when this is done, sister,' she said. She lifted Tamra's chin with a finger. 'There is more to this realm than these dour crags. I will show you the hourglass-lined streets of the City of Lost Moments, and the sunken avenues of Yves in the Bitter Sea. You will stand among the elect of this realm, a true deathlord. You will be feted, and songs of your power will be sung from Morrsend to the Skull Islands.'

'I do not wish any of that,' Tamra said. She stepped back, out of reach. 'I wish only to save my people, to preserve them from the ravages of the enemy.'

Neferata frowned. The girl was stubborn. 'And so you shall. You have my promise.' She looked out over the parapet. 'But first... we have a battle to win. To your post, Tamra ven-Drak. And remember what I said – do not be afraid to do what you must.'

Tamra nodded stiffly and left the parapet. Neferata watched her for a time, and then she turned her attentions to other matters. People filled the outer courtyard: men and women and children, moving to and fro, preparing for the siege to come. Adhema and her knights had taught the Rictus the basics of siege craft. Baskets of heavy stones lined the walls, ready to be thrown at the enemy. Fire-pits were stoked, to fill the air with smoke and better protect the defenders from the biting flies which invariably accompanied the rotbringers.

Once, the Rictus would have had soldiers to do these things. Now, those tasks fell to women and children and the crippled. Neferata shook her head. It was a shame that it had come to this. If Nagash had not destroyed them, the six kingdoms of Rictus might have made for a potent weapon against the enemies

invading the Amethyst Realm.

‘One must make do,’ she murmured. She snapped her fingers and Nagadron heaved itself to its feet, tail lashing. She slid into the saddle. ‘Come, Nagadron. Let us see what the enemy has to offer us, eh?’

‘Lord of All Things, bless and keep me,’ Festerbite said, staring at the distant edifice in shock. The Mandible was as impressive as Croga had claimed. The fortress rose over the ruined city like a barrow of stone and timber. It was bigger than any fortress they’d yet encountered in the dead lands, and stretched from the shore up into the mountains.

‘I told you,’ Croga muttered, turning the spit. The sludge-maggot squealed in pleasure as the flames cooked its green flesh brown. The creatures didn’t mind being eaten, though the same couldn’t be said of those doing the eating. They provided little sustenance, but with supplies running out, and the land close to the fortress stripped bare by the fleeing Rictus, the warriors of the pox-crusade were forced to make do. Croga poked the creature with a knife, causing it to wriggle. ‘It’s almost ready.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ Festerbite said, still staring at the Mandible. The ruins rose wild around it, a great jungle of broken stone and splintered wood. Ragged shrouds flapped like leaves in the wind, and the streets were covered in snow and ice. Festerbite’s hand fell to his sword hilt as he heard the telltale moan of a deadwalker, echoing up from the necropolis.

‘It’ll be our last chance to eat before battle. And there’s no guarantee that there’s anything worth consuming in there, if we make it over the walls.’

Festerbite glanced at Croga. ‘There’s always the dead.’

They sat with the other officers – knights, chieftains and blighted champions. Most looked impatient. It was hard to resist the urge to attack immediately when the enemy was in sight. But the Order fought as an army, not as a horde. They had waged numerous campaigns across the Mortal Realms and honed their tactics to a killing edge. So they sat and muttered among themselves, waiting for Wolgus’ command.

Croga snorted. ‘That’s one way to keep them from coming back, I suppose.’ The sore on his cheek had spread, and his teeth were visible through the tatters of flesh. Rot-fly larvae squirmed beneath the skin of his jaw and neck, and he idly squeezed at them.

Festerbite turned, scanning the makeshift siege-camp as it was cobbled together beneath the shattered outer walls of the fallen city. Plague-bells rang out and

hide drums thumped. Rotbringers made shuffling obeisance before war-altars, listening to the rumbling catechisms of pox-abbots and rot-monks. Nurglings clambered over everyone and everything, rubbing their juices against proffered weapons and armour, including the broad-headed arrows used by the Order's longbowmen. Beastkin danced and capered about plague-fires, inciting themselves into a murderous frenzy.

He looked away as a boil-covered gor hurled itself into the fire with a screech of pleasure. He examined the scrub forest which spilled down the slopes of the Wailing Peaks. The mountains were well named. The wind made odd noises as it curled through the crags and slithered down the slopes into the ruins. 'Plenty of trees, at least. We can make do for siege-weapons, if we need them.'

'If we get the chance,' Croga said. He sliced off a wriggling chunk of sludge-maggot and chewed thoughtfully. 'While we squat here, the army of the dead closes in. A thousand corpses or more, trudging towards us out of the black. Not to mention whatever's lurking in the city, waiting for us.' He pulled another strip of gelatinous meat from the roasting maggot and stuffed it into his mouth. 'And the corpse-eaters, of course.'

'Corpse-eaters?'

'In the mountains.' Croga waved his knife. 'Breed like flies in those crags. The battle will draw them down, sure enough.'

Festerbite nodded. 'Well, that'll make things interesting. What say you, blightmaster?'

Wolgus stood some distance away atop a broken section of wall, his hands clasped behind his back. The blightmaster did not break off his study of the sea as he spoke. 'I say, what will be, will be. The outcome is the same, victory or death. The garden will flourish, and Nurgle with it.' He gestured. 'Where our blood and pus spills, the ground is forever dedicated to the King of All Flies. That is victory enough.'

He turned and dropped to the ground. 'Those walls are more impressive at a distance, I'd wager. There are gaps in them, patched with piled rubble. The towers are broken, and the gate has collapsed. The Rictus have neither the numbers nor the stomach to properly defend that citadel for long. Croga – you will take your woodsmen and fell trees fit for battering rams. I would prefer quantity to quality. Slugtail!'

A bloated beastlord shuffled away from his packmates as Croga rose to his feet, hurriedly stuffing the last of the maggot into his mouth. Patches of piebald flesh showed through Slugtail's mangy fur, and his horns were thick with mould and

fluted like fungal tubes. He wore a filthy tabard, crudely marked with the sigil of the Fly, over his barrel chest. The beastkin made an interrogative noise and Wolgus said, 'To you, brother, will fall the honour of the first sowing. Rouse your children and set them yelping.'

Slugtail threw back his head and yowled. Echoing cries rose throughout the camp, as the beasterds readied themselves for war.

Wolgus doled out commands with crisp precision. The rotbringers, in their robes and corroded armour, would follow the beasterds into war. Behind them would come the core of the Order's forces – the armsmen and the blightkings, marching slowly and with an eye to rooting out any foes hidden in the ruins. And to the knights of the Order fell the honour of warding the flanks against any potential counter-attack. The army would attack in waves, moving up through the city, slowly but relentlessly. By the time they reached the walls, Croga would have enough trees felled to make battering rams.

'We are like the waves of some dark sea, lapping against the shore,' Wolgus said to those who remained. These words were for the true knights of the Order alone. 'We are the scythe, and they, the wheat. Slow, steady strokes clear the field.' Heads nodded in understanding. 'But first, we must give thanks.'

A sigh went up from the gathered knights. An old ritual this, handed down to them by the Lady of Cankerwall, and to her by Nurgle himself. Festerbite felt a pang in his chest, as if his blackened heart had jumped in its cage of worm-eaten bone.

'Kneel, my brothers. Kneel and receive the gift of the Flyblown Chalice.' Wolgus lifted the chalice from his belt. The metal was tarnished and blackened, its gemstones replaced by pulsing insect pupae and throbbing buboes. The seventy-seven verses of the Feverish Oath had been etched into its surface by the great Lady of Cankerwall herself. Every blightmaster was given such a cup upon his ascension, a sign of favour from the King of All Flies.

Wolgus dipped the worm-eaten cup into a puddle. The water turned as black as soot and began to froth with maggoty shapes. The liquid in the cup was the colour of rust, and it steamed in the cold air. 'The very blood of Nurgle, vibrant with his feverish miasma. Drink deep, my brothers. Drink deep, ye knights of the Order, and taste the stuff of victory.'

The chalice was passed from hand to hand, and each knight gulped from it in turn. Festerbite swallowed the pungent liquid with relish. It seared his throat pleasingly, and he felt the warmth of Grandfather's garden fill him. He felt stronger than he had in weeks, and he longed for the chance to test his sword's

edge against the bones of the foe. But the haze of satisfaction was soon punctured by a familiar voice.

‘We are at their very gates, and yet again you choose to delay,’ Gurm said. ‘What am I to do with you, Wolgus?’ The daemon rocked to and fro on his palanquin, causing the sylvaneth to whimper wretchedly. ‘The camp is abuzz, but no movement, no advance... What am I to do?’

‘I assume that you will complain incessantly, as is your wont,’ Wolgus said. ‘But I do not have the time to listen today. Thrice, I have ceded the battlefield to your desire for expedience. I shall not do so a fourth time. Not here, not now. You brought us here to take this place, and now you shall allow us to do just that – in our own way.’

‘We do not have time for these childish rituals of yours,’ Gurm said. ‘Slurping from a cup is no substitute for slaughter, blightmaster.’

The palanquin creaked as he rose to his feet. Wolgus met his gaze calmly.

‘We have nothing but time, Herald. We are at their gates, and the sea is at their backs. Unless there is some other reason we are here? One you have not shared with us?’

Gurm sat back down suddenly, eye narrowed. The plaguebearers surrounding his palanquin raised their blades and murmured in warning. Festerbite drew his sword and joined Wolgus. So too did Balagos and the others. Gurm eyed them warily.

‘Woe be to him who strikes a Herald of Nurgle,’ he said, after a moment.

‘Woe is our lot,’ Festerbite said firmly, the power of the chalice still singing within him. ‘We are the chosen of Nurgle, and despair is the balm of our souls.’

‘Well said, gentle Festerbite,’ Wolgus said. He gazed steadily at Gurm. ‘See to your own schemes, Gurm, and leave me to mine. We will take this fortress for you, never fear. Just as we will aid you in whatever other plot you have brewing in your skull. We swore an oath to free this land from the tyranny of death, and we shall do so – whatever the means, whatever the cost.’

Gurm grunted and, after a moment of hesitation, nodded. He stamped on his palanquin, causing it to turn with the sound of splitting branches. It stalked off towards the shore. Daemons followed, shooting dire glances at the mortals as they went. Wolgus shook his head.

‘I fear our Herald begins to question his patronage of our Order. So be it. We shall win this battle, at least, on our own terms.’ Wolgus looked at each of them in turn. ‘Ride, my brothers. Ride for the glory of Cankerwall and the Order eternal. For the Order!’



‘For the Order,’ Festerbite roared, joining his voice to that of his brother knights.

Gurm sulked on his cushions and stared up at the towering wraith. Nagash had been standing in the sea for days, waiting. While daemons could not feel what men might call fear, they could feel something approaching trepidation. Gurm was feeling that now: a distinct and unwelcome reluctance to advance. Only he and his daemoniac followers could discern the monstrous force looming over the Shivering Sea. To him, it appeared to be a crackling tower of night-black energy, leagues high and wide. An abominable skull surfaced in the black on occasion, and its burning gaze swept across the horizon, seeking and searching. Hunting for them, perhaps.

He’d felt Nagash’s gaze before, at the fall of the Verdant Necropoli in the Jade Kingdoms. The dead had few citadels in the realm of life, but that had been the greatest. He’d felt Nagash’s rage as he’d ordered his legions to tear the barrow-city apart, stone by stone, and found it good. But that had been at a distance, with a realm between them. This, in contrast, was not pleasant at all.

He heard a piteous howl and turned in his seat. One of the beasts had collapsed, trembling, before the intensity of the Undying King’s idle attentions. The daemon whimpered like a wounded animal and rolled onto its back, tentacles thrashing helplessly as it squirmed through the snow. Gurm flicked his gaze to one of the mumbling plaguebearers in his honour guard. The cyclopean daemon grunted and lifted its sword over the quivering beast. At Gurm’s nod, the blade fell, cutting the beast’s fearful yelp short.

Weakness could be tolerated, at certain times. Now was not one of them. He could feel the malignant power of their enemy growing stronger the closer they got. Nagash was weak, yes, but even weak, he was akin to a cold black sun. He was a weight on the world, drawing all light and heat into him. Spirits flocked to him in their thousands, dragged screaming through the snow-addled skies above. Every tree and rock was limned with amethyst light, as if infused with his radiance. He’d hoped the Undying King would be weaker than he was.

Gurm gripped his sword more tightly. Trepidation gave way to agitation; he’d come too far to be stopped now. He’d chivvied Wolgus and his dullards along, helping them just enough so that they could bleed Nagash white while he conserved his powers for the struggle to come. Now, it was his moment, which made Wolgus’ sudden defiance all the more infuriating.

He shook his head. He really should have expected it. The Order waged war the

way a reaper cleared a field, with care and skill, but not with speed. If he wanted this farce over and done with sooner rather than later, he needed to act unilaterally. This was not to be a battle; it was to be a slaughter. And soonest begun, was soonest done.

Gurm stood in his palanquin and swept his sword out, carving flickering wounds on the skin of the very air. His form trembled with the power surging through it. Such a working threatened to render him useless for the battle to come, but it was a necessity. The Order could not take such a fortress unaided, at least not with the necessary speed. Nonetheless, he'd hoped to save such tricks for when they'd had the gate to the underworld in hand.

Still, a dashed hope was much like a scattering of seeds. In time, new hopes welled up from the remains of the old. Such was life. He slashed the air a seventh time, and it began to twist in on itself. Murky light bled from the wounds he'd made, and a familiar droning rose up out of some hidden depths. The air vibrated with the pulse of slick wings and the jolly chuckles of his brethren.

'Come, oh my friends and oh my brothers,' cried Gurm. 'Come fill the air with your rancorous reek – come. Our time is now. Come!'

With a sound like the bursting of a boil, the first plague drone erupted into view, its daemonic rider hunched over the rot fly's bristly head. More followed, leaving a trail of noxious fumes in their wake. They spilled towards the Mandible as Gurm sank back into his seat with a sigh of satisfaction. He rolled his eye towards the coven of sorcerers he'd gathered.

'Call the rest, cousins. Call the sevenfold divisions of decay, and let us bring this farce to an end. We shall drown them in rot and turn the sea red with their blood. Come, and be quick about it. Leave Wolgus and his fools to their play. I have more important matters to attend to.'



# NINE

## BATTLE OF THE MANDIBLE

*Let my enemies advance upon me from the north and the south, east and west.*

*Let the Three-Eyed King rush fast upon me, and I shall cast him down.*

*Let Sigmar seek to stay my wrath, and I shall scour his starlit halls clean of all sound.*

*Stand not between the Undying King and his destined end.*

*Death is not a foe to be beaten.*

*Death simply is.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

The Undying King stood upon the ice and studied the battlefield which stretched below and around him. It was rare that he witnessed such dismal skirmishes first-hand, and he found himself curious. The rotbringers had begun to advance through the city he'd shattered so long ago. Mortals and daemons plunged towards the Mandible, chanting the name of their desolate liege. Nurgle himself was not in evidence – the Lord of Decay lacked the strength to do more than peer into Shyish as yet, and his attentions were fixed elsewhere.

It was just as well. Though every fibre of his being revolted at the thought, Nagash knew he was in no condition to face down one of the Ruinous Powers. Soon, perhaps. But not in his weakened state, and certainly not in this reduced, insubstantial form.

He could feel the scattered splinters of his divinity strewn across the width and

breadth of his realm. They flickered like fireflies, scattered across the nine thousand kingdoms. With a thought, he called out to them, and they began to stir.

In far killing fields, bodies stumbled to their feet, beginning the slow trek of a thousand years. Pilgrims, stirred by prophetic dreams, lifted their sacred effigies onto their shoulders and began to march, chanting his name as their children – and their children’s children – would unto the ninth generation. In devil-haunted ruins, his servants sought his holy fires, driven to claim them in his name. Slowly, the lost pieces of his consciousness would return to him down the black river of time. His patience was infinite, and soon he would rise anew.

For now, he watched as another hole was torn in the flesh of his realm. More daemons flooded into being, like pus squirting from an infected wound. They flew, loped and stamped across his land, injuring the substance of reality further. But they had been unleashed too soon. A mistake – overconfidence, perhaps, or desperation. It didn’t matter either way.

‘A cunning stratagem, my mortarch,’ Nagash said. ‘As you predicted, they have committed themselves too soon.’

Arkhan looked up. The Mortarch of Sacrament was but an ant to Nagash, standing far below. An ant, yes, but loyal. ‘It was only possible with your aid, my lord. It is your strength which makes triumph certain.’

‘Yes. Certain.’ Nagash relished the word. These invaders had begun to infuriate him. No matter how many he’d killed, they kept coming. They had no more sense than the poxes they worshipped. He could feel the damage they’d wrought in their wake, like a slow ache somewhere deep within him. They had burned a scar across his realm, a wound which would fester for centuries, further weakening him. And now they even dared threaten an entrance to his refuge. He wished to punish them, to break them, once and for all.

‘With your aid, I shall draw up the drowned dead and swamp the rotbringers,’ said Arkhan. ‘Let them see how much they like decay then.’

Nagash looked down at him. ‘You ask much, my servant. Can you do nothing for yourself?’

Arkhan was silent, for a moment. Then, he said, ‘Alone, I can draw up a third of those waiting here. But I wished to make an impression upon our foes, my master, so that any who survive might carry tales of your might back with them to lesser realms. Together, we can send a million corpses stalking southwards, carrying word that Nagash is best left undisturbed.’

Nagash pondered this. His power was steadily waning, and he’d exerted himself overmuch these past few days. It was growing harder to maintain his

cognisance, and to affect the world around him. He required sleep – a century or more of slumber, to gather his strength for the battles yet to come. Once he might have considered a show of force to be beneath him. After all, was his power not obvious? But now such a display might buy him the time he needed to recuperate unmolested.

A scratching at his consciousness distracted him for a moment. He turned his gaze towards the Wailing Peaks and the souls interred within the roots of the mountains. They begged him for their freedom, for the chance to fight once more in his name, to serve their people. He silenced the Broken Kings with but a thought. Let them watch their people die on the altar of his greatness. It was only fitting that they bear witness to the final ruination of those they'd led in rebellion so many centuries ago.

And they would be ruined. The last dregs of the Rictus would be broken here, whatever the outcome. The last drops of their treacherous blood would be spilled in his name, as was his due.

‘The mortals will break and flee,’ he said at last.

‘Yes, but not until the dead are ready to greet those who pursue them. Their lives are the coins we use to buy the chance of victory,’ Arkhan said.

‘Still the gambler, eh, my servant?’ A curious statement. He did not know why he had said it, or where the thought had come from. He brushed it aside as unimportant.

‘I am but as you made me, my lord.’

‘And Neferata?’

Arkhan hesitated, for a fraction of an instant. ‘She knows what must be done.’

Nagash pondered this equivocation. Arkhan spoke with the voice of Nagash, in all things. Arkhan was the aleph: the central, unchanging facet around which all of the other mortarchs and deathlords moved. It was Arkhan who threw their petty schemes into disarray when necessary, and Arkhan who kept them from inciting the fury of the Undying King. And it was Arkhan who asked for leniency in regards to those whose treacheries were as numberless as the dead.

Arkhan, who had been with him since his first stirrings, whose voice had been one of those which had comforted him in the dark. There had been other voices there as well, and memories besides. He remembered the coarse feel of sand, and the taste of sweet blood. He remembered the screams of dying gods as he devoured them, one prayer at a time. Now they were a part of him, as Arkhan was.

All were one in Nagash. To serve Nagash was to be Nagash. Arkhan and the

others could not defy him, any more than the Undying King could defy himself. And yet they did so, in a thousand small ways.

‘I created you,’ he said. It was almost a question.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘I raised you up from dust and the memory of dust.’

‘As you say, my master.’

‘You are me.’

‘All are one in Nagash, master.’

Nagash stared down at him. ‘You are merely the cup into which all unnecessary things have been poured. I shaped you and I have filled you. Do not forget that.’

‘All that I am, I owe to your benevolence, my lord. I persist but to serve you. As does Neferata, and as do the clans of the Rictus.’

Nagash looked down at his servant. Then, back out over the battlefield. The air hummed with the sounds of war and death. It was music to him. Souls rose over the Mandible, newly freed from their sheathes of flesh. He pulled them to him and consumed them.

‘Very well,’ he said. He let his hold on the world slacken, and descended into the depths.

The drowned dead were already stirring – that much Arkhan had been able to accomplish on his own. An impressive feat, but Nagash was more powerful yet. His cloudy shape began to thin and split. And soon, the dead began to do more than stir.

Tamra watched in growing horror as the armies of decay marched on the Mandible. The forces of the enemy stretched from shore to mountains, and came on with an air of carnival exuberance. Snorting, stamping beastkin loped ahead of bell-ringing zealots and renegade tribesmen, flying the banners of a dozen smaller clans. And beyond them, the true iron of the enemy – stolid warriors, clad in hauberks and carrying heavy iron-rimmed shields, marching in formation. With them came the bloated blightkings and creaking war-altars, which spewed noxious fumes into the snowy air.

Stomach roiling, she stepped back from the edge. ‘Nagash preserve us,’ she said.

No one responded, though she had little doubt that they were all feeling the same way. The ruined tower the gathered voivodes occupied was close to the outer wall. Once, it would have been manned by clan-archers. Now, Arun led the strongest of the voivodes in a communal chant. Between them, they would be

able to control the numberless hordes of deadwalkers which stumbled through the ruins. It was easy to drag a body to its feet, but substantially more difficult to make it do what you wanted. In most cases, it was enough to point zombies in the right direction. They would instinctively lurch towards the closest source of flesh.

But today required precision, rather than instinct. The deadwalkers would be employed to flank the enemy and hem them in. That meant keeping them all moving in the same direction, at roughly the same speed. Tamra's skin crawled as she joined her voice with the others, trying to block out the hellacious babble of the enemy. She wove the ritual gestures by instinct. She could feel the unnatural hunger of the animated corpses, and the dull animal agony which marked their wretched persistence. Though their souls were gone, their flesh still functioned, still felt the phantoms of hunger, thirst and pain. In trying to control them, her mind was open to theirs. She and the other voivodes were forced to endure the ache of splintered bones and rotting flesh, and the gnawing, unquenchable desire for living meat.

'There are so many of them,' Myrn said. The leader of the Wald looked spent already, her eyes hollow with exhaustion. 'So many...'

'It doesn't matter,' Tamra said. 'Our people are counting on us. What we do now, we do for them.' As she spoke, she could hear the murmurings of the Broken Kings, stronger now with all of the magic swirling about the air.

*Free us... for them... free... us...*

'I cannot,' Tamra hissed. 'I will not.'

Myrn looked at her. 'What?'

'Nothing. The enemy are upon us. Do you hear?' Tamra felt a jolt as the dead sighted the living. The black hunger asserted itself and the zombies lurched forwards with a communal moan. Through their eyes, she could see the front ranks of the foe drawing close. She slackened her hold on the deadwalkers, allowing them to surge forwards.

Arrows rattled across the stones. The bows of the rotbringers were heavier than those of the few clansmen occupying the walls, and they had a longer range. A voivode cursed and gestured. In the ruins below, packs of long-dead hunting dogs loped silently towards the archers. The enemy was bogged down, caught halfway to the walls by the charnel horde. They would have to hack themselves a path through a thicket of clawing hands and teeth.

Tamra gestured, and the smoke rising from one of the braziers in the tower coalesced into the snarling features of the Prince of Crows.

‘How do you fare, sister?’ he growled.

The ghoul-king still had her confused with his long-dead sister, Isa. Tamra had given up trying to convince him otherwise. She suspected some part of him knew the truth regardless.

‘We have stopped the advance for now. You know what you must do?’

‘Aye. We shall fall upon them as we swore. The city shall not fall, sister. And soon, we shall be reunited, and my people made whole again.’

Tamra nodded tersely and broke the connection with a gesture.

‘He’s mad,’ Myrn said. ‘Can we trust them?’

‘He is, and we can.’ The corpse-eaters would come, because Nagash had commanded it. Tamra had said nothing of Nagash’s presence in the caves to the other voivodes. Neferata had insisted that she claim sole responsibility for the act – another strand of her web. Tamra pushed the thought aside. Now was not the time for worrying about the future; the here and now was dangerous enough.

She glanced at the sky, wondering where Neferata was. They could use the mortarch’s strength, if only to alleviate some of the burden on themselves. As she looked up, she heard a deep droning sound. The voivodes’ chanting faltered.

The sky was full of flies.

The Sisterhood of Szandor waited in the lee of a hostelry wall alongside the main avenue for their moment to strike. For five centuries, the blood knights had waged Neferata’s wars on three continents and across two realms, and they were the very picture of martial discipline. They had been trained by the Blood Dragon himself, and had forgotten more about war than most could learn in a lifetime. And yet, even for them, waiting was the hardest part.

Or so it was for Adhema. The gift of the soulblight had done little to curb the kastellan’s natural impatience. War was her art, and she was ever keen to practise it upon the enemies of her queen. She sat atop her restive steed, kneading the animal’s muscled neck with her iron-shrouded fingers, watching as the battle unfolded.

Neferata’s plan was elegant in its simplicity. They needed time to call up the drowned dead and for the ghouls to muster, and for one other element besides, so the enemy had to be caught and held in the ruins. They had to be delayed by hours, or days if possible – battered, bloodied and bruised until the time was right.

Adhema glanced towards the far crags of the Wailing Peaks. Though she was weak in the arts of sorcery, she could feel the pull of the souls trapped there well



enough. An army of the dead and damned, imprisoned by Nagash and unlikely to be freed, save in the right circumstances and by the right person. 'Poor little poppet,' she murmured, with bleak amusement. Neferata's gambits were as fire, burning all in reach. She shook her head and turned her attentions back to the matter at hand.

Outside the remains of the hostelry, deadwalkers flooded the ruined streets. They stumbled towards the advancing rotbringers in ever-increasing numbers, spilling out of broken hovels and clambering out of hillocks of rubble, responding to Neferata's call. Few mortals, living or dead, could resist the whispered entreaties of the Mortarch of Blood. A fact Adhema had learned, much to her own cost.

She could hear the clamour of the foe's bells, and the bellicose roars of beast-things drawing near. The beastmen hacked at the staggering dead with futile abandon, trying to chop themselves a path straight towards the Mandible's main gate. They were joined in this vain enterprise by mortal rotbringers. The frothing zealots chanted the sevenfold name of their god as they smashed zombies to the ground with shields and cudgels. More than one were dragged down and torn apart, or devoured where they stood.

Similar battles were raging on either side of the avenue throughout the ruins. Thousands of deadwalkers pushed southwards like a living wall, stymieing any attempt by Nurgle's followers to advance or slip past. Swarms of bats fluttered about the heads of the sorcerers who crouched on the war-altars the zealots pushed forwards, distracting them. Screeching spirit hosts issued from dry wells and broken buildings, swirling about those who'd invaded the city where they'd died. Everywhere, in the ruin with no name, the dead strove savagely against the living.

Adhema tapped the pommel of her sword, considering her options. A charge now would break the mortals and send them running back along the main avenue. But the true might of the foe was still plodding along. Those were the ones she wanted.

'Taking their time,' she murmured.

She glanced skywards, searching for some sign of Neferata. It was rare that her queen participated in open battle; Neferata was not one to sully her hands, if she could help it. The Rictus, fools that they were, had expected her to lead from the front, as their own voivodes did. She suspected that the mortarch was out on the ice somewhere, waiting for the inevitable. It was on the ice that this matter would be settled. The death-throes of the Rictus were but a sideshow to

Neferata's true purpose.

'The air smells foul,' a blood knight said. Others murmured agreement.

'Daemons,' Adhema said. Only daemons had that particular odour. Strange yowls broke out. The rotbringer ranks dissolved into confusion as heavy slug-like bodies barrelled through them, slashing the air with pulpy tendrils.

Adhema watched the slobbering daemon-beasts flounder through the packed ranks of the deadwalkers. The daemons put her in mind of her father's kennels, in happier days before the fall of Szador, and of the yapping pups of his hunting hounds: all enthusiasm and no brains. The ranks of corpses split and flowed around the daemons, stumbling on to meet the regrouping rotbringers.

'Now, sister?' one of her knights asked eagerly.

'Not yet. Let the offal earn its keep a few moments more.'

She cast a glance at the walls of the Mandible. Somewhere up there, Neferata's new favourite was controlling the dead. Her lip curled back from a fang, and she looked away. In truth, she bore the mortal no ill will. She could not help what she was, or that Neferata was interested in moulding her into something more useful to the mortarch's long-term goals. Nonetheless, it was irksome to endure such manoeuvrings. Luckily, she was in the right place to work out her frustrations.

A low droning sound filled the air. She peered up and saw dozens of large, winged shapes hurtle overhead. She'd fought the servants of Nurgle before, and knew plague drones when she saw them. The daemoniac insects sped towards the walls of the Mandible in their hundreds, bypassing the deadwalkers entirely.

'That bodes ill,' she said absently. But it wasn't her responsibility. The Mandible would fall, sooner or later. It wasn't up to her to protect it. Her role was only to bleed the foe, and savage them where she judged best.

And one other thing besides. A little thing, but annoying nevertheless. Her freedom to enjoy the song of war would only last until the walls fell. The moment the Mandible was taken, she was to lead her sisters back to seek out and keep safe the object of Neferata's immediate affections. The voivode of the Drak was key to victories not yet born, or so her queen insisted. That one deathmage, however powerful, could be so important exasperated Adhema.

Her hopes of enjoying herself for a good long while before then, however, were few. The dead faltered as the blight flies reached the walls and began their attack. The voivodes controlling them were obviously distracted. It would likely be their undoing.

Adhema peered over the morass of battle and saw mounted warriors guiding

their scaly steeds forwards through the snowy ruins, in support of the marching shieldbearers. Chaos knights, bearing the blighted blessings of Nurgle. They were the prey she was after, and she intended to claim them before it was too late.

She kicked her steed into motion. ‘Now, sisters. Time to bleed them a bit.’

The blood knights exploded from the hostelry and galloped into the disorganised mass of rotbringers who packed the avenue. Bodies were sent flying or else crushed beneath iron-shod hooves. Adhema leaned over in her saddle and removed a beastman’s head. Her sisters’ lances pierced bloated torsos and gouged great wounds in those fortunate enough not to be impaled. The hooves and teeth of their nightmare steeds added to the toll of destruction.

Adhema laughed as she led her warriors through the ranks of the enemy. The ruined walls to either side of the avenue were splashed with ichor. Few living things could resist the charge of the Sisterhood of Szandor. Deadwalkers stumbled in their wake.

‘The ones with the shields,’ she called out. ‘Let us crack them wide.’

Iron-rimmed shields splintered as they struck a hastily erected shield wall. Adhema laid about her on either side, cleaving skulls and chopping through upraised blades. The blood knights carved a red path through the ranks, and the mortals broke in the face of such fury, streaming away from the rampaging vampires. But Adhema had already forgotten them. Her true prey was in sight. With a roar, she led her sisters towards the knights of Nurgle.

Adhema shouted for joy as they met in the centre of the avenue.

Rikan ven-Drak loped through the frost-limned trees, sword in hand. His warriors moved in loose formation around him, clutching their own weapons. They descended the slopes of the Wailing Peaks in their hundreds, eager to give battle. The call had come, and they had answered, as he’d sworn. His sister needed his aid, and he intended to give it. The High-King could do no less, recognised ruler or no. He glanced towards the Mandible and cursed.

The monstrous flies swarmed over the fortress in great numbers, and he could hear the droning call of daemons in the ruins. The enemy had come in even greater strength than he’d been led to believe. He found he didn’t mind. More enemies meant more to kill.

‘Come, warriors of the Rictus. There are foes aplenty.’

His brave warriors gave a cheer and charged down towards the rotbringers working to fell trees. They scattered, seeking weapons and shouting warnings to

their fellows. Rikan led from the front, and he caught one of the startled creatures a hard blow with his sword. It flipped head over heels and collapsed into the snow.

His warriors fell upon the others, biting and clawing – no, why had he thought that? He shook his head, trying to dislodge the image of gaunt, grey shapes hacking, smashing and gouging victims with claws and bone clubs. His men were rough, it was true, but they were not beasts. Not like the creatures they fought; not like the one now roaring and slapping his men aside like flies. The monster had been a man once, but now he was a bloated thing, his flesh bulging with abominable larvae.

‘Turn, monster, turn and face the High-King,’ Rikan roared, as he surged towards the creature. The beast spun, and Rikan was forced to swerve beneath the sweep of an axe. He lunged up, catching the haft of the axe and halting its swing. ‘I smell the blood of kinsmen on you,’ he said, as he strained against his opponent. ‘Are you of the Rictus?’

‘I am Croga, beast. First of my clan to accept the blessed miasma of the King of All Flies,’ Croga roared, shoving Rikan back. His axe flashed down, splitting the ground where Rikan had been standing.

Rikan leapt over him, causing the renegade to whirl.

‘A traitor’s death, then,’ Rikan hissed, as he bulled full into the renegade. Croga screamed as Rikan’s claws – no, *his hands* – pierced his chest and slammed him against the ground. Rikan’s jaws gaped wide and he sank his fangs into Croga’s throat. With a jerk of his neck, he tore his foe’s jugular out. He spat the lump of tainted flesh aside and lurched up and away from the twitching corpse, clutching his head.

The appearance of the warriors around him wavered, revealing pale flesh draped in rags and rotted armour, rather than furs and bronze. Bearded faces bled away into feral, fang-studded maws, and determined gazes became mad. Rikan blinked and shook his head.

‘Are you well, milord?’ one of his warriors asked. Gazbrul ven-Wald – a loyal and true servant. But to Rikan’s confused gaze, the man’s expression was at once a querulous snarl and a grimace of concern. He seemed to have two faces, and Rikan could only guess as to which was the true one. He rubbed his eyes, trying to banish the delusions.

‘Aye, Gazbrul, my friend,’ he said, clasping his man on the shoulder. ‘Some effect of the foul miasma which accompanies our foes. It distorts my senses, I fear.’

‘No less than ours, I suspect,’ Gazbrul said, with a shake of his shaggy head. ‘For a moment, milord, I thought you some great beast.’

‘The only beasts here are these rotbringers,’ Rikan growled. ‘They seek to take our lands from us, something not even the Undying King could do. And I intend to show them why.’ His men let out a raucous cheer, and Rikan straightened. ‘Come, brothers... shall we leave our kin at the mercy of these monsters?’ He pointed his sword towards a band of approaching armymen. There were many of them, which was good.

He was quite hungry.

The plague drones filled the air, blotting out the grey light of the Ghost-Sun. The hum of their wings was as thunder, and the stamp of daemonic feet caused the earth to shake. Daemons flooded into the ruins, hewing bloody pathways through the dead. It was everything Gurm had hoped it would be, and more: life against death, fecundity versus stagnation.

‘Look at my lovelies fly, Wolgus – have you ever seen a more majestic sight?’ Gurm called out, as he caught sight of the blightmaster riding towards him at full pelt.

Wolgus sawed back on his mount’s reins, causing it to rear. Hooves slashed out, and nearby plaguebearers scattered with grunts of alarm; Gurm’s palanquin stumbled, nearly tossing him to the ground. He caught himself on a branch and gave it an irritated twist. The sylvaneth squealed, in a voice like snapping green twigs.

‘You could have just said no,’ Gurm said, glowering at Wolgus.

‘I did say no. Did I not say that we would take this fortress?’ Wolgus had his mace in hand, and the haft creaked in his grip. His personal armymen had joined him, and the mortals warily faced the daemons over the rims of their shields. Behind them, the camp echoed with the sounds of battle and the cries of ghouls.

Gurm looked towards the camp, and then at Wolgus. ‘Then why aren’t you out there, taking it? Instead you take your ease here, while your knights ride out to reap glory.’

Wolgus didn’t flinch this time. He’d drunk from the chalice, and he was firm in his convictions once more. ‘It is for a blightmaster to oversee the tides of battle, not splash in its embrace. Lines must be bolstered, ranks firmed, retreats sounded. Such is my burden. Why do you seek to steal my victory, Herald? You have cast my tactics into the dust, and rendered my strategy meaningless.’

‘Actually, you told me to keep to my schemes. And so I have.’ Gurm reclined

on his cushions, his balesword across his knees. ‘You know the camp is under attack, I trust.’

‘I am well aware. My warriors fight to contain it. Unlike you, they are trustworthy.’

Gurm clutched his chest in mock pain. ‘I do not have time to waste, watching you play master-of-sieges, boy. There’s more at stake here than your pride.’

‘Then why bring us?’ Wolgus demanded.

‘Someone must pay the blood toll for getting me here. You were my shield, blunting those attacks which would have sapped my power. Now, I cast you aside and unsheathe my sword for the killing blow. That is war, isn’t it?’

Wolgus shook his head. ‘You have no idea what war is. Nor do I have time to teach you. Is this all for glory, then? Is this to be Gurm’s victory, rather than the Order’s?’

‘It is to be Nurgle’s victory,’ Gurm said. ‘For we serve him in this, as in all things.’

‘But to what end?’ Wolgus pointed his mace at Gurm’s head. ‘What is in that fortress that you cannot wait for us to take it?’

Gurm licked his jowls thoughtfully. Wolgus thrummed with resentment. His honour had been pricked wide, and now bled freely. His warriors marched on the final redoubt of those they’d come so far and endured so much to make war on, and the moment was being snatched from them. Necessary, all of it, but... risky.

‘Perhaps I was overhasty,’ Gurm said. He spread his palms in apology. ‘I was overcome with fervour, Wolgus. Surely you understand. The King of All Flies speaks, and we can but obey.’

‘What does he say, Gurm. And none of your homilies this time – why are we here?’

Gurm sucked on his fangs, debating with himself. If he removed Wolgus’ head now, there would be an outcry. The problem with the Order was that they took the business of war far too seriously. While it was rare, it wasn’t unknown for the servants of Nurgle to turn upon one another for silly reasons. Life was competition, after all. But there was no time for that now. He still needed Wolgus, if only to keep the Order in the fight.

‘A gate,’ he said. He leaned forwards. ‘To Stygxx.’ Wolgus stared at him. Gurm sighed. ‘The underworld, Wolgus. Where Nagash resides.’

‘Nagash is dead,’ Wolgus said automatically.

‘So he is. And what is left of him hides in the underworld. I would seek those aberrant remains out, and fill the guts of this realm with Nurgle’s squirming

legions.’ He extended his sword towards the sea. ‘There – do you sense it, Wolgus? A hole in the world, somewhere below the ice. It is there I must go. But I must shatter this fortress to do so.’

‘Why did you not tell me this before?’

‘Few men are willing to march into the jaws of a god, even a dead one,’ Gurm said. A lie, of course. But Papa Nurgle would forgive him.

‘A holy crusade indeed,’ Wolgus said, absently. He stared out at the sea. ‘To conquer the underworld in Nurgle’s name would bring great honour to the Order.’

‘Indeed it would, my friend, indeed it would.’ Gurm leaned back, pleased. After all, there was still plenty of time to shuck the Order and claim victory for himself. ‘And together, you and I will do just that.’



# TEN

## FALL OF THE RICTUS

*The great bells of Ossuary shall sound nine times, and the seas of all the realms shall dry up.*

*I will stride across the empty oceans, and the drowned dead shall rise at my call.*

*I will crack the earth and shatter the mountains.*

*Nine words shall I speak.*

*And nothing more shall ever be said.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Aged Arun was the first to fall, a scabrous arrow left sprouting from his eye as he stood chanting atop the ruined tower. He slumped with barely more than a sigh. Tamra watched in horror as his skull collapsed in on itself, eaten away by the rot emanating from the arrow. His body began to twitch a moment later, like a side of meat eaten hollow by maggots. Something giggled tinnily as Arun's bat-winged helm rolled away with a clang. A moment later, tiny bloated daemons spilled out of the old man's body and scampered across the tower.

Myrn and the others yelped and cursed as they were forced to turn their attentions to the tiny daemons and away from the battle below, and from the buzzing hordes approaching from above. Tamra stamped on a nurgling as it clawed at her leg. Arrows tore her coat, and she narrowly avoided the slash of a rot fly's stinger. The insect screeched as one of the other voivodes lanced it with



an arcane bolt and sent it tumbling away, wreathed in purple flame.

Everywhere that arrows thudded home, nurglings sprouted. The tiny daemons bubbled up from the slime-tipped heads of the arrows and ran every which way. Tamra snatched up a brazier and scattered burning coals across the closest pack of the tittering creatures. As they screamed and crisped, she looked out over the fortress. The air above the Mandible was full of plague drones. The daemonic riders cut men from the walls with gleaming baleswords, or else hurled fiery skulls.

One of the skulls struck the base of the tower and erupted into plague-fire. Something swelled within the flames and stuck to the stones. Greasy tendrils of smoking wood crept upwards, clutching the tower like a creeper vine. More patches of insidious plant life crept across the walls or spilled across the courtyard, growing in the heat of the plague-fires. Obscene blossoms sprouted from the tendrils, spewing a noxious pollen into the smoky air.

The tower began to shudder as the tendrils that were wrapped about it tightened. Tamra gestured, and a howling cavalcade of frenzied spirits raced to strike at the writhing vegetation. She heard a scream from behind her, and whirled to see Myrn sag, a plaguebearer's blade in her back. The daemon yanked the weapon free and charged towards Tamra, chuckling evilly. She dragged her sword from its sheath as it reached her, and black lightning snapped as their blades met.

She staggered, thrown off balance by the force of the blow, and then stumbled further, as the tower groaned and began to turn on its base. Stones clashed and timbers burst as the tendrils crushed the base of the tower and sent the entire structure slewing towards the wall.

Instinctively, Tamra leapt. There was no time for anything else, not even to shout a warning to the other voivodes. Heart thudding in her chest, the world spinning about her, she screamed. Spectres streaked upwards at her call, and caught her in cold claws. They swarmed about her like a cyclone and carried her roughly to the ground. She hit the earth hard and rolled, barely holding on to her sword.

The tower crashed heavily against the wall, crushing ancient masonry beneath it. Dust billowed as the tower continued its descent, striking the ground with an echoing boom. The wall collapsed inwards, carrying men and daemons with it. She covered her head as shrapnel struck the ground around her. Daemons poured through the newly made gap in the wall, attacking any who staggered into their path.

The dead lurched through fire and smoke to meet the invaders. The skeletal warriors had been meant to counter-attack when the rotbringers drew close to the walls. But now, they marched forwards, battling against the daemons who thrust themselves through the weak points in the walls and spilled into the courtyard. Spirits swept shrieking through the air, duelling with the buzzing plague drones. But the dead were too few, and the daemons almost limitless.

‘Do you live, Drak?’ someone coughed. She rolled onto her back and looked up at Bolgu. Blood stained his furs and war-plate, and ichor smoked on the blade of his axe. He gripped her arm and dragged her to her feet. ‘On your feet, woman. We must flee.’

‘The walls,’ she said, fighting for breath. Everything hurt, and she was bleeding from a graze on her cheek. Plague-fires roared up, casting sickly shadows across the courtyard. She could feel their heat in her bones, and suddenly she was back in her own steading, and her home was burning again before her eyes. Bolgu shook her, snapping her back to the present.

‘The walls have fallen. As I said they would. Come on.’ He half-dragged her towards the seaward gate. People were streaming through it, carrying nothing save children or weapons. A phalanx of skeletal warriors was arrayed before the gate, warding off any enemy who got too close. Tamra jerked her arm free of Bolgu’s grip.

‘I will not flee,’ she said. ‘Not again.’

*Not... flee... free us... free us...*

The Broken Kings howled in her head, pounding at the walls of her consciousness.

He glared at her. ‘And who will lead our people if we die here? Those who can will flee to the galleys. My crews have orders to cast off as soon as the holds are full. If we are not on those ships, they will leave us.’

‘Then go, if you must. I will stay.’ She turned and drew her blade. ‘Someone must hold them back.’

*Hold them back... call us forth... free us...*

‘Let the dead do it,’ said Bolgu. ‘Our responsibility is to the living.’

She hesitated, remembering old hopes and old voices. She looked at Bolgu.

‘Let’s go.’

Festerbite shoved his way through the broken seaward gatehouse, past knots of giggling nurglings. Scab was dead, thanks to one of the monstrous knights who’d engaged him and his brothers in the central avenue. He’d been thrown

from the saddle, and by the time he'd recovered, a dozen brave knights, including Sir Balagos, had joined Scab in death.

He'd engaged one of the creatures, spearing it with a broken standard. When the walls had fallen, the remaining vampires had fled, like the cowards they were. He looked forward to hunting them down later, when the battle was won. There was much honour to be gained by purging the realm of such perfidious creatures. For now, he would content himself with the joys of executing their mortal followers in Nurgle's name.

A skeleton stumbled towards him, its limbs weighed down by giggling nurglings. He took off its head with a single blow. More of the fleshless dead filled the courtyard, battling Gurm's legions and the Order's warriors. Mortals fought, too. They were brave, if misguided, and he felt some touch of pity for them. Their world was coming to an end, and they could not conceive of the better one which awaited them.

Several black-fledged arrows ricocheted off his armour, startling him. Clansmen scurried along the walls above, firing as they fled for more stable ground. The short recursive bows of the Rictus were as toys when compared to the longbows of the Order's armsmen, though he was forced to admit they had their merits at short range when one last arrow sank deep into his arm. There was no pain, but it was inconvenient.

As he paused to pull it loose, he scanned the shoreline. The savages were fleeing for the iron-prowed galleys being shoved onto the ice with great booming cracks. There were not enough vessels for all of them, and some of the savages had turned back to face their pursuers with looks of hopeless desperation. Others fled for the rocky slopes, or sought shelter in the ruins of the once massive docklands which dominated much of the waterfront.

It mattered little where they ended up – all would be brought to heel eventually. Those who would not sip from the Flyblown Chalice and accept the blessings of Nurgle into their hearts would be made into mulch for the garden. But that didn't mean they would be allowed to escape unscathed. Daemons flooded onto the ice in pursuit of the galleys, accompanied by the remaining knights of the Order and the quickest of the rotbringers.

He caught sight of Wolgus' personal banner flapping in the wind, and he felt a moment of elation. The blightmaster was leading the charge, as was only fitting. This was a great victory for the Order of the Fly – perhaps the greatest in its history. Troubadours would sing of this day, and the tapestries dedicated to the long march from the Ithilian Gate would hang in Cankerwall. Wolgus would be

heralded as the greatest of the seven blightmasters, and the Order would have a foothold in the realms of life and death.

Chuckling to himself, Festerbite started towards the docklands. He would leave pursuit of the galleys to those with steeds, and to Gurm's daemonic followers. Instead, he would content himself with cleansing these ruins of savages. He was joined by blightkings and frothing zealots as he entered the tangle of docks, jetties and capsized galleys. He was glad to see Molov still alive, and the blightking nodded to him in greeting.

'A fine day, eh, Sir Festerbite?'

'The finest, my friend,' Festerbite said, with a laugh. 'Come, let us bring the warmth of the garden to these cold souls.'

Mortals fled in terror before them, squeezing like rats through frozen timbers. Some turned to fight, but fell to heavy blades, maces and cudgels. Hot blood slopped across the ice, and Festerbite rejoiced. They had spent too long in the wilderness, fighting things which didn't bleed. 'Don't kill all of them – take those who surrender,' he shouted to Molov. 'We're not beasts, after all.'

As he said it, warriors burst from the shadows and attacked. A spear grated across his helm, and he caught the haft. Wrenching it from its owner's grip, he cut the hapless savage down. 'Yield, and you will be spared,' he roared, kicking the twitching corpse from his blade. 'Submit to the Lord of All Things and find your soul's salvation.'

An axe sank into his arm, and he spun, stabbing the man who'd wielded it. The Rictus staggered back, clutching at his stomach. Festerbite reached for the wounded man, but found himself distracted by a painful blow on the back. He sank to one knee, wheezing, as his attacker circled him and caught up the wounded man.

The woman glanced over her shoulder as she dragged her bleeding burden into the shallows, retreating into the forest of wreckage that had once been docklands. Her narrow features were tight with fear.

Festerbite heaved himself to his feet and stomped after her. 'You cannot escape me, woman,' he called out. 'Yield, and I will grant you mercy. There is no need to die today. Death is the enemy. Seek salvation in life!'

'Quiet,' Tamra whispered. 'Quiet.'

Behind her hand, Bolgu was trying to scream. The wound in his gut was festering far more quickly than she'd expected. Fat maggots squirmed beneath his ravaged flesh, and his eyes were wide with pain. The pox-knight who'd

wounded Bolgu had followed them into the wreckage of the shallows, and was still searching for them with his fellows. The creature bellowed words of mercy and surrender, even as he struck down those who drew too close. She winced with every blow and scream.

They'd been heading for the galleys when they'd seen the rotbringers attacking those seeking shelter in the frozen docks. Despite himself, Bolgu had been unable to ignore their cries. There was more to the voivode of the Fenn than she'd thought, and she felt a pang of regret that she wouldn't have the opportunity to know him better.

Bolgu grabbed her wrist. She looked down at the injured voivode.

'What? What are you trying to say?'

Bolgu clawed at the hooked knife in his belt, and she understood. The rot was in him, eating him hollow the way it had Arun.

'Life in death,' she said, as she drew the knife. He sagged in relief as, with only a moment's hesitation, she sank the blade to the hilt in his chest. He shuddered once and died. She rolled his body away and wiped her hands on her trousers, feeling faintly ill. Bolgu had been the last. As far as she knew, all the other voivodes were dead.

Neferata had been right. Arkhan, as well. And now the moment she'd dreaded was upon her. Past the wreckage, she could see daemons pouring onto the ice. Some pursued the fleeing ice-cutter galleys. Others raced towards Arkhan the Black, still standing his lonely watch. Hundreds more were occupied slaughtering those who sought shelter in the Mandible, or in the forests above it. The walls had fallen and the battle was lost, but her folk were still fighting, still struggling against the inevitable.

And it was inevitable. She saw that now. Victory had never been an option. They were meat, bait to lure in the beast. Neferata waited, somewhere, to capitalise on the rotbringers' exuberance and ensure that the jaws of her trap snapped shut at the proper time. The dead could afford to be patient. Tamra felt no anger, only fatigue.

'I will serve him in life and death,' she murmured. Her hand fell to her sword.

Smoke was rising from the Mandible. The plague-fires burned freely. She could hear her people screaming... fighting... dying. Some of them were still alive. Some of them could still be saved. But she couldn't do it alone.

*We... can... save... them, the Broken Kings whispered. Let us save our people, daughter... let us help them... free us...*

Their voices reverberated in her skull. Her head throbbed, full of visions and

faces, of scenes from the past, or perhaps from the future. The air stank of milk and spoiled meat. The ice cracked beneath her feet. Her breath burned in her lungs, freezing her inside and out. The edges of her vision pulsed black as she stretched out a hand towards the distant crags.

*Free us... free us... free us.*

‘Yes.’ It was easy, once the intent was there. Just as Neferata had said. The bindings were weak, and the ghosts were strong. They wanted freedom, and they pushed while she pulled. So very strong. She heard a gruesome crack, and a roar of stone and ice.

She felt empty as she staggered back against the frozen wood. The pox-knight that had wounded Bolgu whirled at the sound and stormed towards her, chopping through ice-sheathed ropes and frost-blackened wood in his haste.

‘There you are,’ he gurgled. ‘Thought you could hide, eh? An admirable attempt, but the game is done now.’

She got her sword up just in time. The force of his blow knocked her skidding. Bones aching, she fumbled to her feet. She felt like a wrung-out rag. Her head pounded with the rumble of hooves and the rattle of armour. She avoided her opponent’s next blow, and the third. She raised her sword and backed away, panting. The pox-knight stalked after her, a throaty chuckle slithering from his fleshless, fang-studded jaws.

‘Yield, witch. Yield and perhaps I’ll spare you.’

‘I have been made that offer before. I did not yield then. I shall not yield now.’

The pox-knight stopped. He inclined his head. ‘As you wish.’ He swung his blade up in a salute. ‘You are brave, woman. Your suffering shall be swift.’ He advanced, the ice cracking beneath him with every plodding step.

‘Yours will be anything but.’

The pox-knight looked up as a heavy form descended in a shower of snow from the tangle of canvas and nets, smashing him from his feet. The knight’s sword flew from his grip, and a clawed hand drove his head through the ice and into the chill waters below.

‘Do you yet live, Isa?’ Rikan growled, as he held the struggling warrior’s head beneath the ice.

Over his shoulder, she saw the other rotbringers swarmed by ghouls. The sounds of their screams almost drowned out the cacophony in her head. The pox-knight’s thrashings grew weaker as long moments passed. Tamra didn’t speak until he’d fallen still and silent.

‘I live. The others?’

‘They flee across the ice like cattle. You broke his law, Isa. I felt it in my soul.’ Rikan left the body where it lay, half in the ice, and padded towards her. ‘I can hear them riding up from the dark hollows of the earth, and all the souls who dared follow them into the black are riding with them.’ Black blood ran down his gaunt, grey form. Broken arrows jutted from his broad back and shoulders, and seeping sword cuts marked his chest and arms.

‘My name is Tamra...’ she began. The pressure in her head had slackened. But she could still hear the Broken Kings roaring in triumph as they swept down from their mountain prison. She could see the rotbringers in the Mandible fleeing before them. She could feel the shock of a tomb-blade biting into corrupted flesh. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of the unwanted images and voices alike.

*We are coming, daughter... we are free... free...*

‘I know what your name is,’ the ghoul-king snarled, catching her by her coat. He slammed her back against a wooden strut. ‘I know. I know who you are, and I know what you have done. You have freed our father and his brothers, and Nagash will *punish* us.’

‘I did what I had to do. He will understand. Neferata...’

*Free... free... free...*

‘Neferata lies!’ Rikan’s voice was nearly a shriek. ‘I told you that. They all lie. We are lies wrapped in flesh. Nagash’s lie. Nagash’s flesh. And you have broken Nagash’s law.’ He released her and stepped back, gargoyle features twisted in anger. ‘Why?’

‘To save our people,’ Tamra said. She snatched up her sword. ‘I am Drak. What we have, we hold. I have my people, and I will hold them.’

*We will save them... save them...*

Rikan stared at her, crimson gaze unreadable. ‘I thought as you did, once. And now, I think that I am mad.’ He plucked a broken arrow from his flesh. ‘I love you, sister.’

Tamra’s hand tightened on the hilt of Sarpa’s sword. ‘I love you, brother,’ she said, the words like ashes in her mouth.

*Our people... we will save them...*

‘How sweet.’

Tamra turned. Adhema grinned at her. The kastellan looked the worse for wear: her armour was tattered and bloodied, and wounds marked her visible flesh. But she still held her sword, and it was still as sharp as ever. Several of her warriors stood behind her, or crouched in the wreckage, and their red eyes gleamed

hungrily.

‘You stirred them up, didn’t you, poppet?’ Adhema said. ‘I felt it in my marrow. Even as she planned.’ She extended her sword towards Rikan, as he snarled at her. ‘How does it feel, to be a cog in her great machine? Is it all that you hoped?’

Tamra said nothing. What was there to say? Adhema was right. ‘Did you fight your way through the foe just to taunt me?’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, poppet.’ Adhema pointed her sword at Tamra. ‘I came to protect you, to ensure that you survive your foolishness.’ She smiled thinly and spread her arms. ‘You see how much she cares for you?’

Gurm nodded in satisfaction as the walls of the Mandible fell. The skulls that the plague drones carried had been specially prepared for him in Ghyran, pickled in the sap squeezed from corrupted trees. Already the stinking heat radiated by the great tendrils was melting the snow to slurry and blistering the stones. The contaminated plant life would inundate the fortress, converting it into something more pleasing to Nurgle’s eye. Soon it would do the same to the Wailing Peaks themselves, coring out the harsh stone and replacing it with moss, mould and agreeably rancid spoilage.

‘Life against death,’ he said, glancing at Wolgus. The blightmaster rode alongside Gurm’s palanquin. Together, they traversed the corpse-strewn avenue which led to the main gate of the crumbling fortress, leading a band of daemons and rotbringers.

‘Life against death,’ Wolgus echoed. ‘I admit, your way is the faster.’ He didn’t sound happy about it, but Gurm hadn’t expected that. Wolgus was practical, if nothing else. He knew better than to poke a gift rash on the scab.

‘I did say,’ Gurm chortled. His honour guard of plaguebearers echoed his amusement. Behind him, the sounds of battle rose from the siege-camp. Packs of ghouls scuttled through the ruins, attacking isolated warriors. Gurm paid it little heed. Let the beasts have their fun while it lasted. Soon enough, the Order would put their warrens to the torch and hunt them down with bow and hound. Whatever plan the mortals had had, he’d put paid to it.

‘The fortress is ours, and the way to our true goal is open,’ Wolgus said. ‘This is a great victory for the King of All Flies.’ He gestured, and the armsmen who followed them broke into a lope, streaming towards the shattered gates. There was still fighting going on within the fortress, and there would be for some time. But the way was open, and the foe was on the run.

‘Indeed it is. And with it comes the utter ruination of all our enemy’s hopes. He



cannot hide from us for long. We shall beard him in his lair, and drag his broken bones back to Cankerwall.’ Gurm shook his fist at the distant ice. The spectre of Nagash had vanished. Gone back to Stygxx to cower in fear, he suspected.

But he could still hear the chanting. He’d heard it since their arrival, and had assumed it was coming from the Mandible. Now he wasn’t so sure. It was coming from somewhere out on the ice. A grim voice, echoing up to the sky above. It had not faltered, not even when the Mandible had fallen. And he could feel the skeins of magic in the air tightening, as if a great working were nearing its completion.

The looming peaks rumbled, as if an avalanche were in the offing. He glanced over, curious, but saw nothing save the play of fading light across distant snows. He turned his attentions back to the Shivering Sea.

Something was happening, out on the ice. Some last ditch scheme to deny them victory. But it was too late: the north had fallen, and soon all of Shyish would follow suit. The realms of death would become a new garden for Nurgle to enjoy, and the name Dolorous Gurm would be whispered by every blighted blossom.

He thumped the point of his sword against the floor of the palanquin, encouraging the sylvaneth to greater speed. The ice, and the gate to Stygxx, awaited.

‘Come, Wolgus – we have a gate to claim, and a god to humble!’



# ELEVEN

## NAGASH RISES

*There are nine gates and behind them wait my ninefold legions.*

*Nine is the number of the books which contain my wisdom.*

*Nine is the number of my mortarchs.*

*And I shall speak nine words before the final gate, and cast it wide.*

*And all shall be consumed in darkness, as the light of every realm is snuffed  
at the ninth, and ultimate, hour.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Neferata sat back in her saddle and watched as the Mandible collapsed and the Rictus fled to their galleys. She frowned. The battle she'd spent so much time engineering should have taken days, not hours. The daemons had thrown her calculations off. She'd thought that the disgusting creatures would wait until they had the gate to Stygxx in reach to unleash their full power. Instead, they'd burst like an overripe pustule and thrown all her plans into disarray.

'That's the problem when dealing with the stuff of Chaos, Nagadron,' she said. 'It's impossible to predict, even for one as skilled as myself.' The dread abyssal growled and she knocked her knuckles against its skull. 'Ah, well... Even the best laid plans are soon ruined.' She swept her staff out, and murmured softly. The air around her thickened with soul-stuff. Wailing faces took shape, and murmuring spirits clutched at her.

Arkhan would raise the flesh. But she still had the spirits of the drowned and

recently dead to manipulate. While the rotbringers were busy chasing the living, the dead would have their way. The strongest of them shot away from her like comets, spiralling towards the swarm of plague drones which spread through the skies above the Shivering Sea.

She urged Nagadron down, swooping over the ice and the fleeing mortals, followed by a writhing tail of spirits. The Rictus had served their purpose admirably, even though they'd let her down in the end. She was inclined to save some of them at least, if only for Tamra's sake. Nagadron slammed into a plague drone, tearing at it. Neferata whirled her staff and drove the weighted ferrule into its rider's single eye. The daemon's head popped, and she wrenched her staff loose. She swept it out, setting the air alight with the gesture.

Burning plague drones fell twitching to the sea like raindrops about the fleeing galleys, whose iron prows carved a watery path as their oars thumped the breaking ice, shoving the vessels along. Neferata nodded in satisfaction.

Not all of the galleys had been so lucky. Several had been caught, and their passengers and crew fought frantically against the beastkin and rotbringers clambering aboard. She considered lending them aid, but only for a moment. She'd saved a few. That was enough. She had better uses for the dying. She whispered, and on the decks of an overtaken galley, the butchered dead rose again to attack their killers.

*Free...*

The word echoed through her head, followed by a twisting feeling. The sensation speared through her, and she turned towards the distant peaks instinctively. Her keen hearing soon picked out the screams of those rotbringers still in the Mandible. Bellows of triumph quickly turned to cries of panic as a new foe fell upon them with all the fury of the damned. The Broken Kings were free at last.

'Ha! She did it!' Neferata clapped her hands in glee. At least one facet of her plan had fallen properly into place, if a bit earlier than she'd expected. It had been a stroke of luck that one of the Nine Gates had decided to sprout here, necessitating her presence. And even luckier that the Rictus had produced a deathmage capable of doing what she herself could not. She'd hoped the terrors of a grinding siege might encourage Tamra to see her point of view in time, but she supposed imminent extermination served her purposes just as well. Either way, the Rictus Lands once more had an army worthy of the name, and all it had cost her was a ruined fortress and a few unruly tribesmen. A bargain.

'Oh my sister, the glories we shall reap together,' Neferata said. 'The triumphs

we shall see, with your hand in mine.'

Let Mannfred play the hero of Helstone. Let Arkhan stolidly follow a senile god. She would settle for dragging order from chaos and putting right what had been allowed to go wrong. This was but the first step on a long road to victory. With the armies of the Rictus Lands at her back, she would sweep south and drive the servants of Chaos back to the Ithilian Gate and beyond. She would salvage what she could, and bolster those kingdoms loyal to her. A new empire would prosper in the darkness. *Her* empire.

'Nulahmia,' she murmured. She shivered in anticipation.

The rotbringers and daemons pouring onto the ice had not yet noticed the newly arisen enemy to their rear. She intended to see that they didn't, not until it was too late. The rotbringers would be caught in the open, between the drowned dead and the Broken Kings. 'Down,' she whispered to Nagadron, and the dread abyssal shrieked in acknowledgement.

Nagadron plunged downwards, swooping low over the ice. She aimed the dread abyssal towards a group of battle standards, and hunched low in the saddle. Nagadron hurtled towards the standards at great speed, faster than any plague drone, and the dead, both Rictus and rotbringer alike, stirred in its wake. Neferata dragged the dead to their feet as she passed, casting the enemy ranks into further confusion. She spat incantations, shattering the ice beneath the hooves of mutated steeds or setting them aflame. As they swept over the standards, Nagadron banked, twisting in the air. A troop of Chaos knights galloped across the ice below her.

She smiled. It had been too long since she had fought on foot, amid the carnage, and smelled the blood of her enemies as it dappled her flesh. Decision made, she thrust her staff through the back of her saddle.

'Go, Nagadron – kill, with my blessing,' Neferata said, as she slipped gracefully from the dread abyssal's saddle.

She plummeted downwards, jerking Akmet-har from her belt as she did so. The curved blade of jet purred in her grip as she slashed out, opening the wattle throat of a plague drone's rider. She kicked the daemon's body off of the great fly's back. Spinning her blade about, she drove it into the daemonic insect's head and twisted. Thrashing in its death throes, the rot fly fell towards one of its fellows. As the two crashed together, Neferata leapt onto a third, splitting the rider's skull with her dagger. The rot fly twisted in mid-air, trying to sting her. She caught its proboscis and slashed open its bulbous thorax, emptying its guts over the battle below and drenching an unlucky knight in a wash of acidic fluid.

She vaulted from the dying creature and dropped into a crouch on the ice.

Darting forwards, Akmet-har held extended in front of her, she cut through the stringy tendons of a mutated horse, spilling its rider onto the ice. Before the rotbringer could right himself, she was atop him, the tip of her blade sliding through his visor. Laughing, she jerked the blade free and turned, seeking new prey. She caught hold of a passing stirrup and, with a jerk of her shoulder, tore both saddle and rider from the running horse. She slammed the knight down, through the ice, and watched as he was dragged into the depths by the weight of his armour.

A monstrous daemon-steed reared above her, slashing the air with its thorny hooves. She gestured, and a bolt of crackling purple light snarled from her hand. The creature screamed as the arcane bolt tore through its skull, and it sank down, tossing its rider. He was a bulky one, and his battle-scarred armour was more ornate than the others. The breastplate was engraved with a leering face, and the pauldrons were moulded in the shape of stylised flies. Real flies circled his wide head in a humming halo. His face was a mass of scar tissue and weeping sores, but his eyes blazed with malign intelligence.

He was on his feet more quickly than she'd anticipated, and the heavy mace he carried snapped out. She ducked beneath the blow and then was forced to twist aside as the sword he held in his other hand hissed towards her. She stepped back, out of reach. Her spirits swirled about them, preventing any who might have done from coming to his aid. She extended her dagger as she circled him.

'Scars are stories,' she said, 'and I see whole volumes etched upon that reeking war-plate of yours. Do I have the honour of addressing Ocander Wolgus, Blightmaster of the Order of the Fly, Hero of the Bridge of Scabs and Master of Festerfane?'

He hesitated. 'You know me?'

'I know many things,' Neferata purred. 'I know you won your spurs at the Black Cistern, and that you struck the head from the King of Thorns in the Verdant Necropoli.'

'I know you as well, witch. The people of Hallowgrave call you the Ghost-Queen, and the primitives of the Ithilian Vale know you as the Blood Maiden. You are the darksome whelp of Death himself, and a mockery of all that lives.'

Neferata gave a mocking bow. 'It seems we know each other, then. Just as well... I do so hate to kill a stranger.' She set her feet and languidly stretched out a hand. 'Come, good sir. Prithee, do come and dance with me.'

'Have at thee, leech,' Wolgus said. The ice cracked beneath his feet as he

charged at her. Neferata slipped beneath the blow and spun, drawing a rush of ichor from his side. Her obsidian dagger cut through his armour as if it were paper. Wolgus staggered, and clapped a hand to his side. 'That actually hurt,' he grunted.

As he turned, Neferata leapt. Dagger gripped in both hands, she thrust it down. The blade pierced Wolgus' armour, but it became lodged in the corroded metal. She released it and dropped down behind him. Before he could turn, she slashed out with her leg and caught his ankles. He gave a bellow of surprise and toppled forwards. Neferata pounced. He swept his mace out, and she let it smack into her palm. She tore it from his grasp with a hiss, flinging the baleful weapon away. Her palm was scorched black where she'd touched it. She tore her dagger free of his armour and flung up a hand, conjuring a mystic shield as he slashed at her with his sword. The iridescent oval of light cracked when the blade struck it. Grisly runes flared bright along the blade's length and her shield exploded, knocking them both from their feet.

Neferata clutched her aching head. It was never pleasant when a spell was broken, though she'd suffered worse in her time. She'd dropped her dagger somewhere, and now flailed blindly for it. A hand caught her by her throat.

'Would that your allegiance was not seared into your blood, sweet lady,' Wolgus grunted, as he dragged her to her feet. 'For you would find a sure home amongst our Order. Alas, 'tis not to be.' He drew a filth-encrusted poniard from his belt and made to thrust it into her heart. Neferata's hand flashed, catching his wrist and halting the tip of the blade a hairsbreadth from her breast. She grinned as he goggled at her.

'Alas indeed, you lump of spoiled meat,' she said. She caught his other hand and rocked forwards, slamming her brow into his face. Bone crunched and Wolgus staggered, blood in his eyes. Freed from his grip, Neferata twisted, dragging his arm to the limits of its extension and simultaneously driving a foot into his torso.

Wolgus flew backwards, bouncing across the ice. Neferata paced after him, enjoying herself more than she had for many years. As he regained his feet, he scrambled for his sword, reaching for where it lay sticking from the ice. She leapt for him just as he snatched it up. The rotbringer spun, more quickly than she'd expected, and the point of his blade was waiting for her when she landed. The sword tore through her armour and the flesh beneath, narrowly missing her heart.

She fell with a feline scream, tearing the sword from Wolgus' grip. She writhed

on the ice, coughing up black blood. She could feel the cancerous enchantment woven into the steel trying to find purchase on her unnatural flesh. Luckily for her, Nagash had made his mortarchs of sterner stuff – any other vampire would have been consumed by the blade’s sorcerous power. But she was still weak, and growing weaker. She clutched at the hilt, trying to pull it from her chest. Pain spasmed through her, forcing a shriek from her lips.

‘Head and heart, the stories say,’ Wolgus said. He stalked towards her. ‘Pierce the heart and remove the head.’ He flexed his fingers. ‘I’ve done the one, now it’s time for the other.’

He advanced, and Neferata squirmed backwards, spitting hoarse curses.

Daemons galumphed towards Arkhan the Black across the ice, howling eerie dirges. He’d ceased his chanting when they had arrived. There was no more need to draw their attention, after all. They were coming to him, as he’d planned. He could feel Nagash at work in the depths, driving the dead to the surface, and he allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. He’d hoped such a threat to his refuge would provoke Nagash into something approaching lucidity. So long as the servants of Chaos feared Nagash, Shyish would never be conquered. Not fully. A victory here would resonate through two realms.

Overhead, Razarak duelled with the monstrous flies which had preceded the tide of daemons. The dread abyssal could easily hold its own, and Arkhan left the creature to its fun. He had his own affairs to consider.

The leader of the filthy horde was easy enough to spot; Arkhan would have identified him even if he hadn’t known who he was looking for. The ghosts of ice and snow had whispered the name of the Herald of Nurgle to him, and it was a familiar one. The dead of three realms knew it: Dolorous Gurm, the Garden-master. Gurm, who had uprooted the restless dead of the Verdant Necropoli in Ghyran and made a bonfire of their bones. Gurm, who had infected the mindless deadwalkers of the great forest of Fangnettle in the Realm of Beasts, and made them carry poxes and plagues into the camps of the living. Gurm, enslaver of the Dreadmere sylvaneth.

It was this last act which had convinced Arkhan that Gurm was a sickness which needed purging. The tree-kin of the Dreadmere had long cared for the dead who sheltered beneath their roots, and it was they who had guarded one of the secret routes between the realms of life and death. To see them bound in such a manner infuriated him to a degree that he found surprising. They did not deserve such torment. The birth of one of the Nine Gates below the Shivering

Sea had given him the opportunity to avenge the insult and shake Nagash from his stupor.

It had been a simple enough matter to let the daemon discover the existence of the gate, and to leave the Rictus Lands relatively undefended by any save mortal forces. All to lure Gurm in, and deal with him, permanently. As the first rank of daemons reached him, Arkhan traced a spiteful gesture on the air, and the disgusting creatures crumbled to dust. Their dissolution opened a path to their master, revealing the Herald of Nurgle in all his foul glory.

Arkhan motioned, and amethyst lightning crackled from his palm. The tortured shapes of the sylvaneth which formed the daemon's palanquin twitched and screamed as their diseased bark began to crack and crumble. Their newly freed spirits whispered in gratitude as the palanquin tipped, toppling its rider to the ice. Gurm fell with a cry of frustration, and his honour guard surged forwards with a droning howl.

The mortarch set himself and swept his staff out, setting the ice aflame. The daemons' howls turned to agonized squeals as the fire devoured their putrid flesh. One by one, they were reduced to greasy motes of ash. Gurm pushed himself to his feet and leapt, springing high over the flames. The Herald of Nurgle crashed down on the other side of the fire, cracking the ice and knocking Arkhan back a step. Arkhan began to chant another incantation, but Gurm lurched after him, sword tearing a ragged hole in the liche's robes.

'A pretty song, bag o' bones, but it ends here,' Gurm cackled. The daemon swept his balesword out, but Arkhan caught the blow on his staff.

'I have not yet begun to sing, pus-belly.' Arkhan twisted his staff, driving the tip of Gurm's sword into the cracking ice. The liche drew his sword with his free hand and opened a steaming wound in the daemon's side. 'How do you like the melody now?'

Gurm shrieked and yanked his sword free in a spray of slurry. Their blades crashed together with a dolorous clang. Arkhan's feet slid back as Gurm leaned into the blow. Inhuman muscle squirmed like worms beneath his flesh, and the daemon's single eye blazed with fury. 'I will derive great pleasure from using your bones to stir my plagues, liche.'

'I would settle for seeing you cease to be,' Arkhan said, locking his feet. 'Care to wager odds on which is more likely?'

Gurm roared and forced Arkhan's sword down. The daemon lunged, jaws wide. Arkhan jerked forwards, slamming his skull into the daemon's maw. Rotting fangs splintered, and Gurm staggered back, clutching at his mouth.



‘Bit off more than you could chew, eh maggot?’ Arkhan said, bits of daemonic dentition dotting the front of his skull. He paced after his foe. ‘I know you, Dolorous Gurm. Boastful daemon, slave of an idle god. You might have found Ghyran to be easy pickings, but this is Shyish, and we are stronger than that.’

‘Life or death, beast or metal, it does not matter. All things rot, and Nurgle is rot made manifest,’ Gurm gurgled, brushing ichor from his face with a knobbly knuckle. ‘I will warm these frigid waters and stretch a bridge of decay down into their heart. Nurgle’s children will walk a road of my making into the unblemished depths, and they will spread his foetid word through the guts of your realm...’

‘Not while I stand,’ Arkhan said.

‘Then fall,’ Gurm said, darting forwards. Their blades connected again and again as they spun in place, stamping and cursing. The ice, already weakened by Arkhan’s sorcery and the weight of the battle taking place across its surface, ruptured with a sudden thunderous scream. Spars, prows and shattered masts thrust upwards, piercing the air. A blow from Gurm knocked Arkhan back against the splintered remains of a galley’s prow.

The liche murmured a single word, and the waterlogged wood twisted, wrenching itself into a new, more monstrous shape. The spirits of Gurm’s enslaved sylvaneth rejoiced fiercely as Arkhan gave them the chance they’d been longing for. The wood exploded into splintery tendrils which snared the Herald of Nurgle, savaging his rubbery flesh. Gurm howled in pain and hacked wildly at the twisting serpentine shapes. Before Arkhan could aid the spectral sylvaneth, the surviving plaguebearers closed in on him, baleswords hissing out.

He parried a blow with his staff, and removed a horned head with his tomb-blade. The liche twisted out of the path of a bone-shattering blow and spat a spell. A plaguebearer wailed as it was reduced to ash by the force of Arkhan’s magic. But for every daemon that fell, two more rose to replace it. Arkhan was alone against an army. They clambered gracelessly through the newly sprouted forest of wrecked vessels, their hooves skidding on the ice.

He heard a rasping scream, and saw Gurm chop his way free of the possessed wood. The agonised spirits of the sylvaneth fled at last, unable to bear the touch of Gurm’s blade for a moment longer. The Herald chortled, despite the bubbling wounds which marked his hide.

‘A pretty trick, that, but ultimately useless, bag o’ bones. You stand alone. Your god has abandoned you. Nagash is nowhere to be seen, and Nurgle is with me.’

‘I am used to solitude,’ Arkhan said. ‘Even alone, I am more than a match for

every daemon in your pestilential horde. Summon more, if you will. Call up flies and beasts by the score, I will outlast them all.' He set his staff and extended his tomb-blade towards the ranks of plaguebearers which surrounded him. 'I am the right hand of death, little pus-bag. Test me at your peril.'

Gurm raised his sword in a mocking salute. 'Have at thee, then.'

At his signal, the plaguebearers lunged forwards in a stinking mass. Arkhan backed away, fending them off with spell, staff and blade. From above, he heard the screech of Razarak, and knew that his steed was equally beset. The creature would have to fend for itself. Daemons pressed close, and baleswords darted in at him from every direction.

As he countered a blow, he felt the familiar hum of ancient spells suddenly rise to a strident screech. He turned, eyes fixed on the distant shape of the Wailing Peaks. To his eyes, the crags glowed with an unnatural light. He felt a pulse of sympathy for Tamra ven-Drak. She had made her choice; only time would tell whether it had been the correct one.

Arkhan staggered suddenly. He heard the furious scream of Nagash roar through him, curdling the marrow in his bones. If the Undying King hadn't been paying attention before, he certainly was now. Gurm gave a shout and lunged through the press, seeking to take advantage of the mortarch's moment of distraction. His blade pierced Arkhan's robes and slipped between his ribs. Arkhan stumbled back, the enraged cries of Nagash still pounding in his skull.

'Where are your boasts now, liche? Your defiance is as hollow as your head.' Gurm twisted his blade, causing it to grate against bone. Arkhan shuddered. Beneath his feet, the ice did likewise, but more violently than before. Even Gurm noticed, and his gloating laughter trailed off as he realised that something had changed. He looked down, his single eye narrowing in confusion. 'What is making that infernal racket?'

'Nagash,' Arkhan said, simply.

Gurm looked sharply at him, eye widening. But whatever he'd been planning to say was lost in the roar of bursting ice. A tangle of drowned corpses heaved to the surface, arms flailing, their hands grabbing at the Herald of Nurgle and dozens of his fellows, pulling them down into the frozen waters with a single, convulsive jerk. Gurm screamed as he vanished beneath the water, his lanky frame pulped by a hundred fists, his flesh gnawed by a hundred mouths.

A second mass of bodies rose, dripping. It rose up, up, like some hideous column of rotting meat. The remains of wrecked ships were fused with the dead flesh of the drowned, and the eyes of every tangled corpse glowed with an

unholy radiance. A hundred mouths moved as one.

‘The law of Nagash has been broken, my servant. Is this your doing?’

‘No, my lord,’ Arkhan said. The quagmire of bodies continued to rise, until it towered over the ice and its shadow stretched to the Mandible itself. Slowly, it split, resolving itself into a vaguely humanoid shape. Nagash had done more than raise the dead – he had used them as raw materials to craft himself a new body. A body held together by blackest sorcery and the iron will of the Undying King.

‘I will find the one who has broken my law. None may defy the will of Nagash. Even the stars themselves are slaves to my will.’ A skull made of squirming corpses and shattered ships’ hulls gazed down at the army of daemons spilling across the ice, as if noticing them for the first time. ‘But first... an example must be made.’

Nagash spoke, and the world shook.

‘Hear me, bringers of rot. Hearken, servants of a lesser god. Heed the words of He-Who-Is-Death. I am come round at last, and all thy souls are forfeit.’ The great voice boomed out over the ice, drowning out the sounds of battle and the clatter of bones and wood. ‘I am Nagash. Bow down and weep. Thy hour of doom has arrived at last.’

Wolgus could only stare upwards in horror as the typhoon of corpses and wreckage continued to swirl and swell. Threads of amethyst lightning shot through it, and the tumbling bodies clambered towards one another. Massive cracks shot through the ice, and water roared upwards, consuming unlucky warriors.

‘What... what...?’ Wolgus croaked.

‘Behold, the Undying King in all his hideous strength,’ Neferata hissed, dragging the sword free of her chest. Wolgus whirled about, but he was too slow. She lunged, driving his own blade into him. She forced him back, pinning him to a spar. Wolgus howled and slapped her aside. He clawed at the sword, trying to pull it free.

‘No,’ he gurgled. ‘A trick – it is a trick. Gurm said...’

‘Did you honestly think that you could kill death itself, little man?’ Neferata wiped blood from her mouth as she rose slowly to her feet. ‘Let alone in this realm?’ She laughed and leaned forwards, pressing her palm against the pommel of the sword. She began to push against it. Wolgus writhed in pain. The blade sawed through his hands as he fought against her. ‘You lost the moment you set

foot in Shyish. The only garden which will grow here is one of bone.'

'G-Grandfather...' Wolgus moaned.

'Shhh. Rest now.' Neferata leaned her full weight against the blade, thrusting it all of the way through him. Wolgus stiffened. Black ichor spilled from his mouth and splashed steaming to the ice. Neferata stepped back, smiling slightly. 'You are done.'

She looked up. Nagash had crafted himself a body from the corpses of the drowned and the wreckage of the larger ships. The ice shuddered as he waded through it, striking out at the horde of daemons and rotbringers with a thousand hands. A purple radiance blazed within him, and his voice shook the air. Hundreds of shrieking spirits swarmed around him, bound by chains of crackling power, and these malignant souls swarmed eagerly over daemon and mortal alike as Nagash advanced towards the shore.

'I told you that he would aid us.'

'So you did,' Neferata said, turning. Arkhan's robes were blackened and torn, revealing his scarred bones. He sat slumped atop his dread abyssal, leaning wearily against his staff.

'The daemon?' she asked.

Arkhan chuckled harshly. 'Nagash has it in hand.' He looked at Wolgus, hanging slumped on the spar. 'The warlord?'

Neferata glanced lazily at the body and brushed her fingers against the rapidly healing wound in her chest.

'He fought like it.'

She turned as Nagadron landed nearby, splintering the ice beneath its paws. The dread abyssal padded towards her, grumbling in a satisfied manner. Ichor stained its talons and jaws. She swung herself into the saddle in a single, smooth motion.

'Well then. Shall we join our lord and master in advancing upon the enemy?'

Arkhan gestured. 'Lead on, O Queen of Blood.'

'My thanks, O Prince of Bones.'

The two dread abyssals loped forwards and, as one, launched themselves into the air, carrying their mortarchs into battle.



# TWELVE

## THE LAW OF NAGASH

*I have pulled down the sun.*

*I have cracked the seals of the underworld.*

*I have dried the seas and burned the grasses.*

*I have humbled my enemies and cast the earth into the sky.*

*I have been walking to and fro in the deep places, and I gather my strength anew.*

*Listen.*

*Understand.*

*I will return.*

*I cannot die.*

*Nagash will rise.*

*– The Epistle of Bone*

Nagash rose.

The battle ended soon thereafter. Caught between the dead on the shoreline and the towering abomination stalking inland from the sea, the warriors of the Order of the Fly made their final, fatal stand in the shallows, amongst the wreckage of the docks. As certain as their victory had seemed, now their defeat was a foregone conclusion.

Rotting claws reached from beneath the water to drag down the unwary as those who sought safety in the ruins of the docklands were pounced on by packs

of ghouls. The few who fought their way to shore were met by the silent armies of the Broken Kings, arrayed for war with a discipline no living warrior could match. The deathrattle legions advanced slowly, grinding their enemies beneath them inexorably. Skeletal horsemen ran down fleeing rotbringers, and heavily armoured skeleton warriors slew any who tried to make a stand.

The Broken Kings themselves marched at the head of their armies beneath tattered banners, surrounded by desiccated warriors. Their ragged standards were so badly faded that it was hard to tell one king from another. All were clad in furs and iron war-plate, tarnished by the silent centuries spent buried in the depths of the mountains. Black-bladed axes and swords licked out, stealing the life from floundering rotbringers as the armies of the dead marched on.

All of this Tamra watched from her perch on the ruined deck of a frozen galley, Rikan standing protectively at her side. Some few survivors had gathered around her, seeking the protection of her magic and the swords of Adhema's remaining blood knights. Several galleys had escaped, carving their way across the cracking ice and into the mists of the Shivering Sea. She hoped that they made it to safety, if such a thing existed anymore.

Others had not been so lucky. At her command, spirits guided those who survived the overtaken galleys to her. Men, women and children trudged hurriedly across the splintering floes, weeping with relief and fear in equal measure. It was no pleasant thing to see one's god.

'He is as monstrous as I remember,' Rikan said, staring at the titanic horror. 'The dead are but tools to him, to be used and discarded.'

Nagash carved a path through the ice, wrecked vessels rising in his wake – the sea was giving up its dead as the Undying King made his way to land. His voice boomed out, shaking the frost from the rigging above her head, and cold fires swept through the remaining daemons, reducing them to motes of greasy ash. His vast hundredfold hands reached out, scattering the swarms of plague drones and crushing them. The quivering souls of the mortal rotbringers were torn from their savaged flesh and drawn irresistibly into the maelstrom of Nagash. She turned away, unable to stand their screams any longer.

Adhema smiled at her. 'You should be proud, poppet. This is your victory, as much as his.' The kastellan leaned close. 'How do you like being a deathlord, eh?'

'I am not,' Tamra said hollowly. 'I am my people's voivode. Nothing more.'

As she said it, she cursed the uncertainty in her voice. She hugged herself, trying to squeeze some warmth into her flesh. She had been cold since she'd

freed the Broken Kings, since she'd heard Nagash's scream of rage. She risked a glance at the Great Necromancer. She flinched as the monstrous visage turned briefly in her direction. The glow within the twisted eye sockets grew brighter for a moment, and she stumbled back. Rikan reached out to steady her.

'Isa... look. Our father comes.'

She shoved the ghou-king's claw away and looked over the rail. Six figures strode across the shattered ice towards their refuge, only vaguely distinct in their panoply. Whatever differences they'd had in life had been worn away by death and captivity. Now they walked as one, fought as one and spoke as one. The Broken Kings gave no notice to the shifting of the floes or the surging waters in their approach. Their voices pulsed in her ears.

*'Daughter of our daughter... You called and we have come.'*

Even now, they spoke as one, with a dissonant merging of voices. She swallowed a rush of bile. There was none of Sarpa's kindness in these revenants. They were harsh things, cold and sharp as blades. The fire of their souls was black, and it hurt her to see them so close.

'I... thank you, fathers of my father,' she said.

Six fleshless skulls turned upwards, studying her with witchfire eyes.

*'You have freed us from an eternity in the dark, daughter. We stand in the open air because of you. And so, we shall serve you, until the end of all days.'*

'No, I do not want that,' she said. 'No, please...' She stretched out a hand, but it was too late. As one, the ancient kings of the Rictus drew their blades and presented them up to her, hilt first, as they knelt. 'No, I did not free you for this... I just wanted to save my people.'

'And so you have,' Neferata called out, as her dread abyssal dropped to the deck. Survivors scattered as the great beast let out a screech. Neferata slid from the saddle as Arkhan's mount slammed into the mast. The liche's dread abyssal clutched the frost-coated wood with its talons, as Arkhan dropped to the deck with surprising grace.

Neferata stalked towards Tamra, arms spread. 'Look – see! Your people live, sister. Some of them, at least. All because you had the courage to make the right choice.'

Tamra stepped back out of reach as Neferata drew close. The mortarch stopped, frowning.

'What is it? Are you not pleased?'

*'Neferata. Queen of Lies. Schemer,'* the Broken Kings whispered.

Rikan stepped between Tamra and the mortarch.

‘You hear, witch? They know what you did to them. To us.’ The ghoul-king shook his head. ‘I may be mad, but I recognise that much.’

‘And what did I do?’ Neferata asked. She peered at Tamra. ‘What am I guilty of, save aiding you in your time of need?’ She stretched out her hand. ‘Come, sister. Take my hand and all will be well. I will teach you to be a queen, to better rule your people.’

Tamra hesitated. She looked around, at the frightened faces which stared at her. There was fear in their eyes, but also... hope. She thought of the ice-galleys, speeding towards the Rime Isles. The clansfolk on those ships would need her, if they were to survive. Her people – what few of them remained – needed her. She lifted her hand.

Rikan caught her wrist. ‘No. You do not need her, Isa. Please...’

‘Silence,’ Neferata snarled.

Tamra looked at the ghoul-king. She stroked his gore-stained cheek. ‘My name is Tamra. Isa is long dead. But I am alive. And our people live.’ The monstrous vampire closed his eyes and shuddered. He released her and stepped back.

Tamra looked at Neferata. ‘You used me, didn’t you?’

Neferata inclined her head. ‘Of course. I use all of the tools fate supplies me. The foundations of the realm crumble, and someone must keep them suspended. But I promised you that I would raise you up, and so I have.’ She twitched her fingers. ‘Take my hand, sister.’

‘Neferata... be silent.’ Arkhan’s voice rolled across the toll of a bell. Neferata glanced at her fellow mortarch. Tamra felt the galley shudder down to its frozen roots, and she turned.

Nagash was approaching.

‘We will tell him it was the only way,’ Neferata said, and there was something that might have been frustration in her voice. ‘Surely he will realise...’

‘He realises, but he does not care. Such is the way of Nagash.’

Arkhan looked at Tamra, and the fire in his sockets flickered. She wondered if that was pity in his eyes. The cold inside her was worse. It clung to her bones, and she felt her soul curdle within her. She felt the faint stirring of what might have been trepidation from the Broken Kings.

‘Tamra ven-Drak.’

Tamra turned. Her folk were weeping, praying, whimpering. The face of the Undying King was not pleasant to look upon. She flinched back from the blazing, hellish gaze.

‘Do you know me, woman?’



‘I know you, oh Undying King. I am your servant, in life and death.’ She sank to her knees and lifted her sword on her palms.

‘Then why have you defied me, my servant?’ A great hand gestured and the Broken Kings screamed as one. The wight kings were drawn into the air by chains of crackling amethyst light. They writhed in Nagash’s grip, and the echoes of their agony made her gasp. She crumpled to her hands and knees. ‘Why have you freed these treacherous souls from their prison?’

‘M-my people... I had to save my people,’ Tamra gasped.

‘Your people? You have no people. All souls, living or dead, belong to me.’

The glowing chains flared. The wights screamed more loudly, and Tamra screamed with them. She fell to the deck in agony. She felt as if she were being eaten away, from the inside out.

‘And so, mighty Nagash, she has preserved what is yours from those who would take it,’ Arkhan said, as he strode to her side. ‘She serves you, even in her defiance. Will you punish her for seeking to do your will?’

‘Yes. None may defy death. Death is inevitable.’

‘Better a death in your service, than death at the hands of your enemies,’ Neferata cried. ‘I will teach her, oh Great Necromancer. I shall make this land a bastion in your name. She shall be a weapon, wielded in your name. Spare her, I beg thee.’

‘You... *beg?*’

Tamra raised her head and saw Neferata sink to one knee beside her. ‘I beg. Spare her, forgive her, as you have forgiven me, and Mannfred in his turn. Forgive her sins, and she shall serve you as a deathlord. She is strong in the ways of death.’

Nagash was silent. For long moments, all Tamra could hear was the thudding of her heart and the scream of splitting ice. Then, the Undying King said, ‘Yes. Look at me, Tamra ven-Drak. Look at me, Queen of the North.’

Tamra struggled to meet the infernal gaze. The heat of it beat at her mind and burned away the cold, filling her with fire instead. Her blood boiled in her veins, and her muscles cramped painfully. The thunder of his voice soured the marrow in her bones.

‘You say you broke my law to save your people. But they are my people, to save or abandon as it pleases me.’

‘I-I merely wished to keep them safe,’ she whispered.

‘And so they shall be. For forever and a day. Behold.’

As one, every living Rictus aboard the galley – man, woman and child alike –

screamed, as did those still on the ice. An arc of amethyst lightning leapt from person to person, growing brighter with every addition. Their screams rose, spiralling up, higher and higher. The lightning streaked out and away, across the ice. Somehow, Tamra knew it was heading for the ice-galleys which had escaped. She wanted to cry out, to beg the Undying King to stop, but all that came out was a groan. She had broken the law of Nagash. And now, despite Neferata's promises, her people would pay for her crime. Nagash looked down at her. One great claw rose, wreathed in a blinding light. She cowered back, unable to bear it.

'I hold your people's lives in my hand. Do you see?'

'Please,' she cried. 'Punish me, not them. It was my crime... my weakness... not theirs!'

'Punish them? I do not punish them. I am saving them, as you wished. I give their lives to you, to protect for all your days, unto the sinking of these lands. Rejoice, child. Nagash has answered thy prayers.'

Nagash stretched his claw out over her. The light blazed brighter and brighter, until she could see and feel nothing save the unendurable heat of it. The screams of her people roared through her head, until she thought she would go mad from the sound. And then, just as suddenly as it began, it was done. The old familiar cold flooded through her, worse than ever. She felt hollowed out and scraped empty, save for the voices of the dead which echoed through her more strongly than ever before.

To her horror, she saw that the deck and the ice were littered with smoking skeletons. On their pale bones were etched deep runes. Not the familiar sigils of her clan, but older bindings, ancient and unbreakable.

'Rise, my people,' Nagash said. The bones of the Rictus rose with a whispery sigh. 'And rise, deathlord. Rise and greet your people. They await your command, as they did in life.'

Tamra rose, wishing to weep but unable to do so. Her mind felt as if it were full of ashes, and her heart hung frozen in her chest. The dead looked at her without recognition, without hope or fear or anything save dull obedience.

'Why...?' she whispered.

'You wanted them to be safe, and so they are.' Nagash stared down at her. 'You sought to usurp my dominion. But I am a merciful god. Now, you will protect them, and lead them into battle in my name. You will serve me in life and in death, as you proclaimed.'

Tamra looked up, unable to comprehend what had occurred. After everything

they had endured, this was to be their reward? She stumbled, and sank to her hands and knees again, clutching her chest. She wanted to scream, to howl her disbelief to the skies, but no sound came. Grief, like joy, was now denied to her. Nagash had hollowed her out and filled her with his power. She could feel it burning away all that she had been. What would be left of her, when it was done?

‘Yes. Now you understand. Such is the mercy of Nagash. Remember, and learn what it means... to... defy... death...’ As he spoke, his conglomerate form began to come apart, body by body. The corpses thumped to the deck or smashed on the ice as the amethyst glow faded. Soon the echoes of his voice faded as well, leaving only a terrible silence in its wake.

‘He returns to Stygxx, to the slumber of ages,’ Arkhan said.

Tamra barely heard him. She knelt on the deck, hunched over, a scream stuck in her throat. She felt it would stay there forever. She flinched as a bony hand touched her shoulder. She could feel the power of him, more than ever before. It sparked against something inside her, as if she and Arkhan and even Neferata were part of the same great flame.

Arkhan looked down at her. ‘Stand, deathlord. The chosen of Nagash do not kneel, save in the presence of Death himself.’

Tamra rose awkwardly. She stared blindly at the remains of her people, still trying to understand. ‘Why?’ She turned to Neferata. ‘You told me they would be safe.’

‘And so they are, sister. Safer now than ever before. I told you that I would make you a queen, and I have done so.’ Neferata looked around. ‘Perhaps not in the way I intended, but a small price to pay.’

‘They are dead.’

‘As am I. As are we all. The dead are strong. Why else would the Rictus have worshipped them? And now, thanks to you, they are one with them. Why do you not thank me, sister? Are you not pleased?’

Tamra stared at the Mortarch of Blood. ‘Thank you?’ she said. She raised her barrowblade. The remains of her people stiffened at her gesture, their empty eye sockets turning towards Neferata and her followers. Tamra felt the Broken Kings as they gathered about her, their ancient souls flickering with an old hate, a hate that she now truly understood. ‘They were right about you. I thought you came to help us, but you sought to help only yourself. You are no longer welcome in these lands.’

Neferata laughed. Tamra made to raise her blade, but found it blocked by

Arkhan's own. The Mortarch of Sacrament shook his head.

'No,' he said. He looked at Neferata. 'Leave. Now.'

'Who are you to tell me when I must leave?'

'I am the right hand of Nagash. Your game here is done. Go find a new one.'

Neferata smiled mockingly, and gave an elegant bow. 'If such is the command of the right hand of Nagash, I must obey.' She looked at Tamra. 'In time, sister, you will understand what I have done for you. You will see that it was for the best. And perhaps then I will return, and together we will lead your people to war.'

The mortarch turned away and went to her dread abyssal. She climbed into the saddle and the beast leapt into the air with a shriek. Neferata sped away. Adhema and her knights followed in the direction of their mistress, their steeds galloping across the broken ice. Tamra watched them go. She looked up at Arkhan, a question on her lips.

'We serve him in life and in death,' he said, before she could speak. 'Such has it always been, child. Your people look to you for reassurance.' He pointed, and she could see the shapes of galleys approaching, through the ice. There was nothing living aboard those ships, nothing left of all that she had fought so hard to preserve. Only bone and ashes.

'She used me,' she said. 'I knew... I thought...' She thrust her fists against her eyes, fighting to regain control. She longed to lash out, to use her newfound strength. She shuddered and dropped her hands. She looked at Arkhan. 'I thought he would forgive me.'

'He did,' Arkhan said. 'His mercy is a poison few can stomach. But you are strong. And your people still need you, Tamra ven-Drak. Perhaps now more than ever.'

She turned and the dead knelt as one. 'No,' she said, softly. 'No, do not kneel.'

At her words, the dead rose. She felt a flicker of something in them. An ember of what had once been. It was small, but it was there. And perhaps, with time, it might flourish again. She felt the murmur of the Broken Kings brush comfortingly across her mind. They would serve her, as they had promised. Together, they might even rebuild a simulacrum of what had been lost. She looked around.

Rikan met her eyes and inclined his brutish head, his gaze unreadable. 'You are High-Queen now, sister.'

'Yes,' she said, and knew that it was true.

Arkhan was right. Dead or alive, her people needed her. She would serve them,

as she had in life. What was left of them, what she had, she would hold.  
She was a daughter of the Drak, and could do no less.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Reynolds** is the author of the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Lukas the Trickster*, *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor*, *Fabius Bile: Clonelord* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Master of the Hunt*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written the novels *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden*, *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He has also written many stories set in the Warhammer Old World, including the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

An extract from *Spear of Shadows*.



Somewhere in the mortal realms, the smith raised his hammer. He brought it down, striking the white-hot length of metal he held pinned against the anvil with one fire-blackened hand. He rotated it and delivered a second strike. A third, a fourth, until the smoky air of the cavernous forge resonated with the sound of raw creation.

It was the first smithy, long forgotten save in the dreams of those who worked with iron and flame. It was a place of stone and wood and steel, at once a grand temple and a brute cave, its dimensions and shape changing with every twitch of the smoke that inundated it. It was nowhere and everywhere, existing only in the hollows of ancestral memory, or in the stories of the oldest mortal smiths. Racks of weapons such as had never been wielded by mortals gleamed in the light of the forge, their killing edges honed and impatient to perform their function. Beneath them were less murderous tools, though no less necessary.

The smith made little distinction between them – weapons were tools, and tools were weapons. War was no less a labour than ploughing the soil, and hewing down a forest was no less a slaughter, though the victims could not, save in rare instances, scream.

The smith was impossibly broad and powerful, for all that his shape was crooked, and bent strangely, as if succumbing to unseen pressures. His thick limbs moved with a surety of purpose that no mechanism could replicate. He wore a pair of oft-patched trousers and a battered apron, his bare arms and back glistening with sweat where it wasn't stained with tattoo-like whorls of soot or marked with runic scars. Boots of crimson dragon-hide protected his feet, the iridescent scales glinting in the firelight, and tools of all shapes and sizes hung from the wide leather belt strapped about his waist.

A spade-shaped beard, composed of swirling ash, and moustaches of flowing smoke covered the lower half of his lumpen features. A thick mane of fiery hair cascaded down his scalp, spilling over his shoulders and crackling against his



flesh. Eyes like molten metal were fixed on his task with a calm that came only with age.

The smith was older than the realms. A breaker of stars, and a maker of suns. He had forged weapons without number, and no two were the same – a fact he took no small amount of pride in. He was a craftsman, and he put a bit of himself into the metal, even as he hammered it into shape. This one needed a little more hammering than most. He raised it from the anvil and studied it. ‘Bit more heat,’ he murmured. His voice at its quietest was like the rumble of an avalanche.

He shoved the length of smouldering iron into the maw of the forge. Flames crawled up his sinewy arm, and the metal twisted in his grip as it grew hot once more, but he did not flinch. The fire held no terrors for one such as him. Tongs and gloves were for lesser smiths. Besides, there was much to be seen in the fire, if you weren’t afraid of getting close. He peered into the dancing hues of red and orange, wondering what they would show him this time. Shapes began to take form, indistinct and uncertain. He stirred the embers.

As the flames roared up anew, clawing greedily at the metal, he felt his students shy back. He chuckled. ‘What sort of smiths are afraid of a bit of fire?’

He glanced at them, head tilted. Vague dream-shapes huddled in the smoke. Small and large, broad and gossamer-thin. Hundreds of them – duardin, human, aelf, even a few ogors – crowded the ever-shifting confines of the smithy, watching as he plied his trade. All who sought to shape metal were welcome in this forge, barring an obvious few.

There were always some who made themselves unwelcome. Those who’d failed to learn the most important lessons, and used what he’d taught them for bitter ends. Not many, thankfully, but some. They hid from his gaze, even as they sought to emulate his skill. But he would find them eventually, and cast their works into the fire.

The voices of his students rose in sudden warning. The smith turned, eyes narrowing in consternation. Talons of fire emerged from the forge, gripping either side of the hearth. Bestial features, composed of crackling flame and swirling ash, congealed. Teeth made from cinders gnashed in a paroxysm of fury. A molten claw caught at his arm, and his thick hide blackened at its touch. The smith grunted and jerked his arm back. The daemon lunged after him with a hot roar, its shape expanding as if to fill the smithy. Great wings of ash stretched, and a horned head emerged from within the hearth.

‘No,’ the smith said, simply, as his students scattered. He dropped the metal he’d been heating and caught the twisting flame shape before it could grow any

larger. He had to be quick. It shrieked as he dragged it around and slammed it down onto the anvil. Burning claws gouged his bare arms and tore his apron to ribbons, as flapping wings battered against his shoulders, but the smith's grip was unbreakable. He raised his hammer. The intruder's eyes widened in realisation. It warbled a protest.

The hammer rang down. Then again and again, flattening and shaping the flame into a more agreeable form. The daemon screamed in protest as its essence was reduced with every blow. All of its arrogance and malice fled, leaving behind only fear, and soon, not even that.

The smith lifted what was left of the weakly struggling daemon. He recognised the signature on its soul-bindings as easily as if he'd carved them himself. Daemons were like any other raw material, in that they required careful shaping by their summoner to make them fit for purpose. This one had been made for strength and speed and not much else.

'Crude, always so crude,' he said. 'No pride in his work, that one. No artistry. I tried to teach him, but – ah well. We'll make something of you, though, never fear. I've made better from worse materials, in my time.'

So saying, he plunged the daemon into the slack tub beside the anvil. Water hissed into vapour as parts of the creature sloughed away into motes of cinder, swirling upwards to float above the anvil. What was left in the tub was only a bit of blackened iron, pitted and veined an angry crimson, the barest hint of a snarling face scraped into its surface. The smith bounced it on his palm until it cooled, and then dropped it into the pocket of his apron.

'Now, I wonder what that was all about.'

It had been some time since he had been attacked in this place, in such a way. That it had happened at all spoke of desperation on someone's part. As if they'd hoped to prevent him from seeing something. He looked up at the cloud of floating cinders and reached to grasp a handful. He set aside his hammer and ran a thick finger through them, reading them as a mortal might read a book.

With a grunt, he cast them back into the forge and gave the coals a stir with his hand. An indistinct image took shape in the flames. Moments later, it split into eight, these clearer – a sword, a mace, a spear... eight weapons.

The smith frowned and stirred the coals fiercely, calling up more images. He needed to be certain of what he saw. In the flames, a woman clad in crystalline armour drew one of the eight – a howling daemon-sword – from its cage of meat, and traded thunderous blows with a Stormcast Eternal clad in bruise-coloured armour. She shattered her opponent's runeblade, and the smith winced

to see one of his most potent works so easily destroyed. He waved a hand, conjuring more pictures out of the wavering flames.

A bloated pox-warrior, one side of his body eaten away and replaced by the thrashing shape of a monstrous kraken, wrapped slimy tendrils about the haft of a great mace, banded in runic iron, and tore it from the hands of a dying ogor. An aelf swordsman, eyes hidden beneath a cerulean blindfold, ducked beneath the sweeping bite of an obsidian axe that pulsed with volcanic hunger, and backed away from the hulking orruk who clutched it.

Angrily, the smith swept out a hand, summoning more images. They came faster and faster, dancing about his hand like the fragments of a half-remembered dream – he saw wars yet unwaged and the deaths yet to come, and felt his temper fray. The images moved so fast that even he couldn't keep track of them all. Frustrated, he caught those he could, holding them tight, only for them to slip between his fingers and rejoin the flames. The time had come around at last. He would need to make ready.

He ran his wide hands through his fiery hair and growled softly. 'Best get to work.' He turned and fixed several of his students with a glare. 'You there – stop skulking and find something to write with. Be quick, now!'

His students hurried to obey. When they returned, bearing chisels and heavy tomes of stone and iron, he began to speak. 'In the beginning, there was fire. And from fire came heat. From heat, shape. And that shape split into eight. The eight were the raw stuff of Chaos, hammered and sculpted to a killing edge by the sworn forgemasters of the dread Soulmau, the chosen weaponsmiths of Khorne.'

He paused a moment, before continuing. 'But as the realms shuddered and the Age of Chaos gave way to the Age of Blood, the weapons known as the Eight Lamentations were thought lost.' In the fire, scenes of death and madness played themselves out, over and over again, a cycle without end.

Grungni, Lord of all Forges and Master-Smith, sighed.

'Until now.'

Elsewhere. Another forge, cruder than Grungni's. A cavern, ripped open and hewn from volcanic stone by the bleeding hands of many slaves. Fire pits and cooling basins occupied the wide, flat floor. Racks decorated the uneven walls, and hackblades, wrath-hammers, weapons of all shapes and sizes, hung from them in disorganised fashion.

At the heart of the forge, within a circle of fire pits, sat a huge anvil. And upon

the anvil, a hulking figure leaned, head bowed. Sweat rolled down his muscular arms to splatter with a hiss upon the anvil. His crimson and brass armour was blackened in places, as if it had been exposed to an impossible heat. He inhaled deeply, trying to ignore the weakness that crept through him. He had infused the daemon with some of his own strength, in the hopes that it would prove a match for the Lord of all Forges. Or at least last longer than a handful of moments. He consoled himself with the thought that it was not every man who could match wills with a god and survive.

‘Then, I am no mere man,’ Volundr of Hesphtut murmured to himself. ‘I am Forgemaster of Aqshy.’ A warrior-smith of Khorne. Skullgrinder of the Soulmau. He had forged weapons without number, as well as the wars in which they were wielded. He had raised up thousands of heroes, and cracked the skulls of thousands more.

But for the moment, he was simply tired.

‘Well?’

The voice, cold and soft, echoed from the shadows of the forge. Volundr straightened, skull-faced helm turning towards the speaker who sat in the darkness, wrapped in concealing robes the colour of cooling ashes. Qyat of the Folded Soul, Forgemaster of Ulgu, was more smoke than fire, and his shape was seemingly without substance beneath his voluminous attire. ‘He saw,’ Volundr rumbled. ‘As I predicted, Qyat.’

A second voice, harsh and sharp like shattering iron, intruded. ‘You seek to excuse your own failure, Skull-Cracker.’

Volundr snorted. ‘Excuse? No. I merely explain, Wolant.’ He turned, pointing a blunt finger at the second speaker, who stood beyond the glare of the fire pits, his profusion of muscular arms crossed over his massive barrel chest.

Wolant Sevenhand, Forgemaster of Chamon, was a brass-skinned, eight-armed abomination, clad in armour of gold. Seven of his arms ended in sinewy, fire-toughened hands. The eighth ended in the blunt shape of a hammer, strapped to a mangled wrist in an effort to correct a long-ago injury. ‘If you think you can succeed where I failed, then try your luck by all means,’ Volundr continued.

‘You dare—?’ Wolant growled, reaching for one of the many hammers that hung from his belt. Before he could grab it, Volundr snatched up his own from the floor and slammed it down on the anvil, filling the smithy with a hollow, booming echo. Wolant staggered, clasp his hands to the side of his head.

Volundr pointed his hammer at the other skullgrinder. ‘Remember whose smithy you stand in, Sevenhand. I’ll not suffer your bluster here.’

‘I’m sure our bellicose brother meant no harm, Volundr. He is a choleric, self-important creature, as you well know, and prone to rash action.’ Qyat unfolded himself and stood. He loomed over the other two skullgrinders, a tower of lean, pale muscle, clad in black iron. ‘Even so, if he is so rude as to threaten you again, I shall lop off another of his hands.’

‘My thanks, brother,’ Volundr said.

‘Even as I will pluck out your eye, if you continue to stare at me so balefully,’ Qyat added, mildly. He spread his thin hands. ‘Respect costs men like us so little, my brothers. Why be miserly?’

Volundr bowed his head. ‘Forgive me, brother,’ he said. Weak as he was, he was in no shape for a confrontation with a creature as deadly as the Folded Soul. Wolant was bad enough, for all that he was a brute. He set the head of his hammer down on the anvil and leaned forwards, bracing himself on the haft. ‘Wolant is right. I failed. The master-smith knows. And now he is aware that we know, as well.’

Wolant growled. ‘If you had not failed—’

‘But he did, and so new stratagems must be forged in the fires of adversity.’ Qyat pressed his hands together, as if in prayer. ‘The Crippled God cannot be allowed to take from us that which is ours.’

Wolant laughed. ‘Ours, Folded Soul?’ He spread his arms. ‘Mine, you mean. Perhaps yours, if I am unlucky. Or someone else entirely, for we three are not alone in our quest. Our brother forgemasters begin their own hunts. The Eight Lamentations call to we who forged them, ready to spill blood once more.’ Seven fists shook in a gesture of challenge and defiance. ‘Only one of us may earn Khorne’s favour by recovering them. Or had you forgotten?’

‘None of us have forgotten,’ Volundr said. ‘We have each chosen our champions, and cast them into the realms to seek the Eight. But that does not mean we cannot work together against those outside our fraternity.’ He shook his head. ‘Grungni is not our only foe in this endeavour. Others seek the Eight as well. If we do not work together, we will—’

Wolant clapped four of his hands together, interrupting. ‘Nonsense. The greater the obstacle, the greater the glory. I came only out of respect for the Folded Soul’s cunning. Not to join my fate to yours. My champion will acquire the Eight Lamentations for me, and the skulls of your servants as well, if they get in his way.’ He laughed again, and turned away. Volundr watched him stride towards one of the great archways that lined the cavern wall, and wondered whether he could split the other smith’s skull while his back was turned.

Qyat chuckled softly, as if reading his thoughts. 'Would that you could crack his thick skull on your anvil. Though I would be forced to slay you in turn, brother, should you choose to break the iron-oath in such a way.'

Volundr grunted. The iron-oath was the only thing keeping the remaining forgemasters from each other's throats. The truce was a tenuous thing, but it had held for three centuries. And he would not be the one to break it. He gestured dismissively. 'It will be more satisfying to snatch victory from him. My champion is most determined.'

'As is mine.'

Volundr nodded. 'Then may the best champion win.' He turned his attentions to the fire pits and gestured, drawing up the cinders and sparks into the air. He stirred the smoke, casting his gaze across the mortal realms, seeking a singular ember of Aqshy's fire. When he found it, he cast his words into the fire, knowing that they would be heard.

'Ahazian Kel. Last of the Ekran. Deathbringer. Heed your master's voice.'

In a land where the moon burned cold, and the dead walked freely, Ahazian Kel heard Volundr's voice. Though it was like heated nails digging into his mind, he decided to ignore it. Given the situation, he thought Volundr would forgive him. Then again, perhaps not. In any event, it was done and Ahazian gave it no more thought.

Instead, he concentrated on the dead men trying to kill him. Deathrattle warriors, animated skeletons still wearing the tattered remnants of the armour that had failed them in life, emerged from the shadows of the great stone pillars extending to either side of him. They pressed close in the moonlight, crowding the wide stone avenue. Rusted blades dug for his flesh, as corroded shields slammed into the ranks of his followers, bowling several of them over.

Ahazian gave little thought to the bloodreavers' plight. The living were a means to an end, and the dead merely one more obstacle between him and that which he sought. Ahead of them, past the ranks of the dead, at the end of the pillar-lined avenue, were the open gates of the mausoleum-citadel. Two skeletal giants, carved from stone, knelt to either side of that immense aperture, their skulls bowed over the pommels of their swords. Somewhere, a funerary bell tolled, rousing the dead from their slumber of ages.

Deathrattle warriors flooded the avenue. They marched out between the shadowed pillars, or from within the mausoleum-citadel, singly and in groups. Not just the dead native to this place, but even those who'd been slain here more

recently heeded the tolling of the unseen bell. Though their bones had been picked clean by the jackals and birds that haunted the ruins, he still recognised the sigils that adorned their ruptured armour – the runes of Khorne and Slaanesh, the baleful glyphs of a thousand lesser gods, all were in evidence among the silent ranks of the enemy.

In Shyish, there was only one certainty. One the gods themselves could not defy. It was a land of endings, where even the strongest would eventually falter. There could be no true victory over that which conquered all. That didn't stop some from trying.

But conquest was not Ahazian's goal. Not today.

He stood head and shoulders taller than even the tallest of the tribesmen who fought alongside him. His broad frame was hidden beneath razor-edged plates of crimson and brass armour, and the skull-visage of his helmet curved upwards, coalescing into the rune of Khorne, clearly marking his allegiances. Heavy chains draped his form, their links decorated with barbs, hooks and the occasional scalp.

He was surrounded by a phalanx of savage tribesmen, culled from the lowlands of this region. The heads of their former chieftains slapped against his thigh, their scalps knotted to his belt. If there were a simpler way of making others do what you wished, he hadn't yet found it. The bloodreavers wore rattletrap armour scavenged from a thousand killing fields. It was decorated with totems meant to ward off the dead, even as their flesh was painted with ashes and bone dust, to make them invisible to ghosts. None of these protections seemed to be working particularly well at the moment. They didn't appear to mind.

The bulk of the bloodreavers fought fiercely to either side of him, hacking and stabbing at the silent dead. Ahazian held the vanguard, as was his right, and pleasure. The Deathbringer surged forwards like the tip of the spear, his goreaxe in one hand, skullaxe in the other. Both weapons thirsted for something this enemy could not provide, and their frustration pulsed through him. The thorns of metal set into their hafts dug painfully into his palms, opening old wounds, so that his fingers were soon slick with blood. He didn't care – let them drink, if they would. So long as they served him faithfully and well, it was the least he could do. Blood must be spilled, even if that blood was his own.

He chopped down through a shield marked with the face of a leering corpse, and splintered the bones huddling beneath. Brute strength was enough to win him some breathing room, but it wouldn't last for long. What the dead claimed, they held with a cold ferocity that awed even some servants of the Blood God.

One of the many lessons his time in Shyish had taught him. ‘Onward,’ he snarled, trusting in his voice to carry. ‘Khorne claim him who first dares to cry hold.’

The bloodreavers closest to him gave a shout and redoubled their efforts. He growled in satisfaction and drove his head into the rictus grin of a skeleton, shattering its skull. He swept the twitching remains aside and bulled on, dragging his followers along in his wake. A spear struck his shoulder-plate and shattered to fragments, even as he crushed the spine of its wielder. Fallen skeletons groped for his legs, and he trampled them into the dust. Nothing would be allowed to stand between him and his goal.

What lay beyond the gateway was his destiny. Khorne had set his feet upon the path, and Ahazian Kel had walked it willingly. For what else could he do? For a kel, there was only battle. War was – had been – the truest art of the Ekran. Its reasons did not matter. Causes were but distractions to the purity of war waged well.

Ahazian Kel, last hero of the Ekran, had sought to become as one with war itself. And so he had given himself up to Khorne. He had offered the blood of his fellow kels in sacrifice, including that of Prince Cadacus. He cherished that memory above all others, for Cadacus, of all his cousins, had come the closest to killing him.

Now, here, was simply the next step in his journey along the Eightfold Path. He had followed that path from the Felstone Plains of Aqshy to the Ashen Lowlands of Shyish, and he would not stop now. Not until he had claimed his prize.

Ahazian let the rhythm of war carry him forwards, into the midst of the dead. Slowly but steadily, he carved himself a path towards the gateway. Broken, twitching skeletons littered the ground behind him. His followers shielded him from the worst blows, buying his life with their own. He hoped they found some satisfaction in that – it was an honour to die for one of Khorne’s chosen. To grease the wheels of battle with their blood, so that a true warrior could meet his fate in a more suitable fashion.

He swept his skullhammer out, smashing a skeleton to flinders, and suddenly found himself clear of the enemy. A few dozen bloodreavers, stronger than the rest, or simply faster, stumbled free of the press alongside him. He did not pause, but forged on, running now. The bloodreavers followed him, with barely a backwards glance between them. Those who were still locked in combat with the dead would have to fend for themselves.

The forecourt of the mausoleum-citadel was lit by amethyst will o’ the wisps,



which swum languidly through the dusty air. By their glow, he could make out strange mosaics on the walls and floor, depicting scenes of war and progress. Statues, weathered by time and neglect, lurked in the corners, their unseeing eyes aimed eternally upwards.

Ahazian led his remaining warriors through the silent halls. The bloodreavers huddled together, muttering among themselves. In battle, they were courageous beyond all measure. But here, in the dark and quiet, old fears were quick to reassert themselves. Night-terrors, whispered of around tribal fires, loomed close in this place. Every shadow seemed to hold a legion of wolf-fanged ghosts, ready to spring and rip the tribesmen apart.

Ahazian said nothing to calm them. Fear would keep them alert. Besides, it was not his duty to keep their feet to the Eightfold Path – he was no slaughterpriest. If they wished to cower or flee, Khorne would punish them as he saw fit.

The sounds of the battle outside had faded into a dim murmur. Shafts of cold light fell from great holes torn in the roof above, and the amethyst wisps swirled thickly about them, lighting the path ahead. Ahazian swept aside curtains of cobwebs with his axe, and smashed apart toppled columns and piles of obstructing debris with his hammer, clearing the way.

The spirits of the dead clustered thick the deeper they went. Silent phantoms, ragged and barely visible, wandered to and fro. Lost souls, following the paths of fading memory. The ghosts displayed no hostility, lost as they were in their own miseries. But their barely intelligible whispers intruded on his thoughts with irritating frequency, and he swiped at them in frustration whenever one got too close. They paid him no mind, which only added to his annoyance.

When they at last reached the inner chambers, his temper had frayed considerably, and his followers kept their distance. He found himself hoping for an enemy to appear. An ambush, perhaps. Anything to soothe his frustrations.

The throne room of the mausoleum-citadel was a circular chamber, its rounded walls rising to a high dome, shattered in some long-forgotten cataclysm. Shafts of moonlight draped the ruined chamber, illuminating the fallen remains of broken statues, and glinting among the thick shrouds of cobwebs and dust that clung to every surface.

‘Spread out,’ Ahazian said. His voice boomed, shattering the stillness. His warriors shuffled to obey. He stalked towards the wide dais that occupied the centre of the chamber. It was topped by a massive throne of basalt. And upon the throne, a hulking shape sat slumped. Broken skeletons littered the floor around the dais and upon the steps, the scattered bones glowing faintly of witch fire.

Ahazian climbed the dais warily. It was almost a given in this realm that a silent corpse was a dangerous one. But the broken form slumped on its throne didn't so much as twitch. The heavy armour was covered so thickly in cobwebs that its crimson hue, as well as the bat-winged skulls that decorated it, were all but invisible. As he drew closer, he felt a touch of awe at the sheer size of the deceased potentate. The being had been massive, as was the great, black-bladed axe that hung loosely from one fleshless hand, its edge resting on the ground. The corpse wore a heavy, horned helm, topped by a frayed crest.

He scraped away some of the cobwebs with the edge of his axe, revealing a long, gaping rent in the filthy chest-plate, as if some wide, impossibly sharp blade had passed through the metal and into whatever passed for the dead man's heart. 'Ha,' Ahazian murmured, pleased. At last, he'd found it. He buried his goreaxe in the armrest of the throne and thrust his hand into the wound. Spiders spilled out, crawling up his arm, or tumbling to the floor. He ignored the panicked arachnids and continued to root through the mouldering chest cavity, until his fingers at last closed on that which he'd fought so long to find.

He ripped the sliver of black steel free of the husk, and there was a sound halfway between a moan and a sigh. He held his prize up to the dim light. A splinter, torn free in the death-strike. It was a fragment from a weapon – and not just any weapon, but one forged in the shadow-fires of Ulgu. One of eight.

'Gung,' Ahazian said, softly. The Spear of Shadows. Called the Huntsman by some, and the Far-Killer by others. Once hurled, Gung would always find its prey, no matter how far they fled, or the distance between caster and target. Not even the veil that separated the mortal realms could prevent the Far-Killer from slaying its quarry.

The metal sliver seemed to tremble in his grip, as if eager to return to its nest within the corpse. 'No, little fang, the time has come for you to awaken and lead me to that which I desire.' He dropped the fragment into a pouch on his belt. If Volundr were right, the sliver would lead him to the Huntsman. The piece was sympathetic to the whole, and one called out to the other. All he had to do was get it away from the remains of its victim.

As he made to descend the dais, he heard a sudden thunder. It lengthened into a drumming pulse, and he realised that it was the sound of hooves on a stone floor. His men turned towards the doors as they were smashed open, and a wedge of mounted warriors crashed into the chamber. Coal-black steeds snorted and screeched as they galloped towards the startled bloodreavers. Their riders wore obsidian armour and carried long spears and swords. Pale, feminine faces glared

out from within several of the baroque, high-crested helmets, while the faces of the others were hidden behind bestial visors. The horsewomen had isolated and hacked apart most of his surviving men before Ahazian could do more than shout a warning.

As the butchery continued, one horsewoman broke away from the rest and urged her steed towards the dais. Ahazian waited. He was confident in his ability to hack his way free, if necessary, but his curiosity had got the better of him. The rider slipped from the saddle in a clatter of mail, and strode towards the dais. As she drew close, Ahazian caught a whiff of old blood. He chuckled. 'I did not expect to see one of your sort here.'

'My sort are everywhere. This land belongs to us, after all.' She spun, hacking through the upraised arm of a bloodreaver as he rushed towards her. She swatted the dying man aside, and gutted a second, as he sought to capitalise on her seeming distraction. She turned back to him. 'However many of you creatures infest it currently.'

Ahazian shrugged. 'I am merely a pilgrim.'

'A loud one. You Bloodbound make quite a racket, when you're of a mind.' The vampire smiled, exposing a fang. 'Then, I've never been against a bit of noise from time to time.' She swept her sword out in a casual gesture, removing a bloodreaver's head as the wounded man staggered towards her. 'Screams, for instance.'

Ahazian rolled his neck and loosened his shoulders. He was looking forwards to matching blades with her. The thirsty dead were known to be competent warriors, if nothing else. 'Are you the queen of this bone pile, then? Have I offended you with my presence?' He took a step down the dais. His weapons twitched in his hands, eager to bite unliving flesh.

'I am not a queen, but I do serve one. And she requests that which you've come to pilfer.' She extended her sword. 'Hand it over, and I may let you depart with all of your limbs intact.' She smiled. 'Then again, maybe not.'

'Tell your queen that she can have from me what she can seize, and nothing more.'

The vampire nodded, as if she had expected as much. 'If that is your wish, I shall simply have to take it from you.'

'You think to kill me, pretty one?' Ahazian gestured welcomingly with his axe. 'Come, step up. Let us see if you are as eager to lose blood as to drink it.'

The vampire sprang up the dais, quicker than he'd expected. She moved with deadly grace, despite her armour. Her sword scratched a line across his chest-

plate, knocking him back a step. Annoyed, he swatted at her with his skullhammer. She eeled away, her blade licking out across his bare bicep, and sprang back as his axe chopped down, splintering the surface of the dais.

‘Fast,’ he murmured, approvingly.

‘Faster than you.’

‘We’ll see.’ He spun his axe lazily. As her eyes flicked instinctively to follow it, he struck at her with the hammer. She twisted, catching the blow on her palm. His axe bit at her thigh, and she was forced to retreat.

Her followers slid towards him, black steel shadows, quicksilver swift. His warriors were all dead, or dying. He was alone. He smiled, pleased. There wasn’t enough battle for everyone. Their blades darted at him from a dozen directions, and he was hard-pressed to deflect them. Some slid past his guard, to score his armour or pink his flesh.

He roared in anger and swept his goreaxe out in a wide arc. One blood knight, slower than the rest, screamed as his blow caught her in the side. She whirled away, armour crumpled and the ribs beneath caved in.

He pursued the wounded vampire as she rolled down the steps. The others followed him, as he’d hoped. He turned, catching one in the face with his hammer. She collapsed, head reduced to ruin. A second shrieked as his axe tore across her arm. The force of the blow pitched her across the chamber.

‘Is that all you’ve got?’ he laughed. ‘I am a Kel of the Ekran, leeches. I was weaned on blood, and my lullaby was the clash of swords. I am war itself, and no creature, dead or alive, can stand against me.’

‘Too much talking,’ the first vampire said, as she rose up behind him. Her sword slid easily between the plates of his armour and into his back. Ahazian bellowed and lurched forwards, ripping the weapon from her grip. His axe slipped from his hand. A blessed agony ripsawed through him, setting his nerves alight. Pain was a warrior’s reward, and he welcomed it. He turned, hammer raised.

The weapon crashed down, narrowly missing her. She leapt onto his back, her weight causing him to stagger. She clawed for the hilt of her sword. He twisted, snatching her from her perch and slamming her flat against the floor. Holding her pinned with his hammer, he groped awkwardly for the blade. ‘Tracherous leech,’ he grunted.

‘All’s fair in war,’ she hissed. Her fist cracked across his jaw, knocking him sideways. Her strength, while not equal to his, was still impressive. As he staggered, she lunged to her feet, set a boot against his back, caught the hilt of

her sword and ripped it free in a spray of blood. He howled in agony. Breathing heavily, he cast about for his axe.

Spotting it, Ahazian snatched it up just in time to block a slash from her sword. The other vampires circled them, waiting for an opening. Every fibre of his being demanded that he stay and fight – that he prove his superiority, or die in the attempt. But what was the point of such a small death? Khorne would barely notice. No, better to quit the field and seek a more glorious destruction. One worth his time.

He rose to his feet, and they edged away. The wound in his back had already clotted and begun to scab over. It would take more than that to seriously injure a warrior of his pedigree. He laughed, low and long. ‘This has been amusing, pretty one. But I have more important matters to attend to than this dance of yours.’

Ahazian jerked forwards, towards the closest of the blood knights. The vampire, unprepared, fell beneath a flurry of savage blows, and then he was past them. Before they could stop him, he caught one of the coal-black steeds by its rough mane and hauled himself into the saddle, thrusting his hammer through his belt as he did so. The animal twisted, trying to bite him, but a swift blow made it think twice. He jerked the reins, and slammed his heels into its flanks. The animal leapt forwards with a despairing shriek. He leaned low over its neck, urging it on to greater speed.

He burst from the mausoleum-citadel, riding hard. The dead waited for him, in the moonlit silence beyond. The bodies of his bloodreavers lay scattered about, in heaps and piles. Soon, they would rise and join their slayers, to fight eternally – a fitting reward for them. Ahazian Kel laughed as he readied his axe. He would chop a path to freedom, before the vampires could follow. Let them pursue him, if they would. Let all of the dead souls in this realm muster against him. It did not matter.

One way or another, the Spear of Shadows would be his.

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*For Sylvie, who keeps me going.*

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