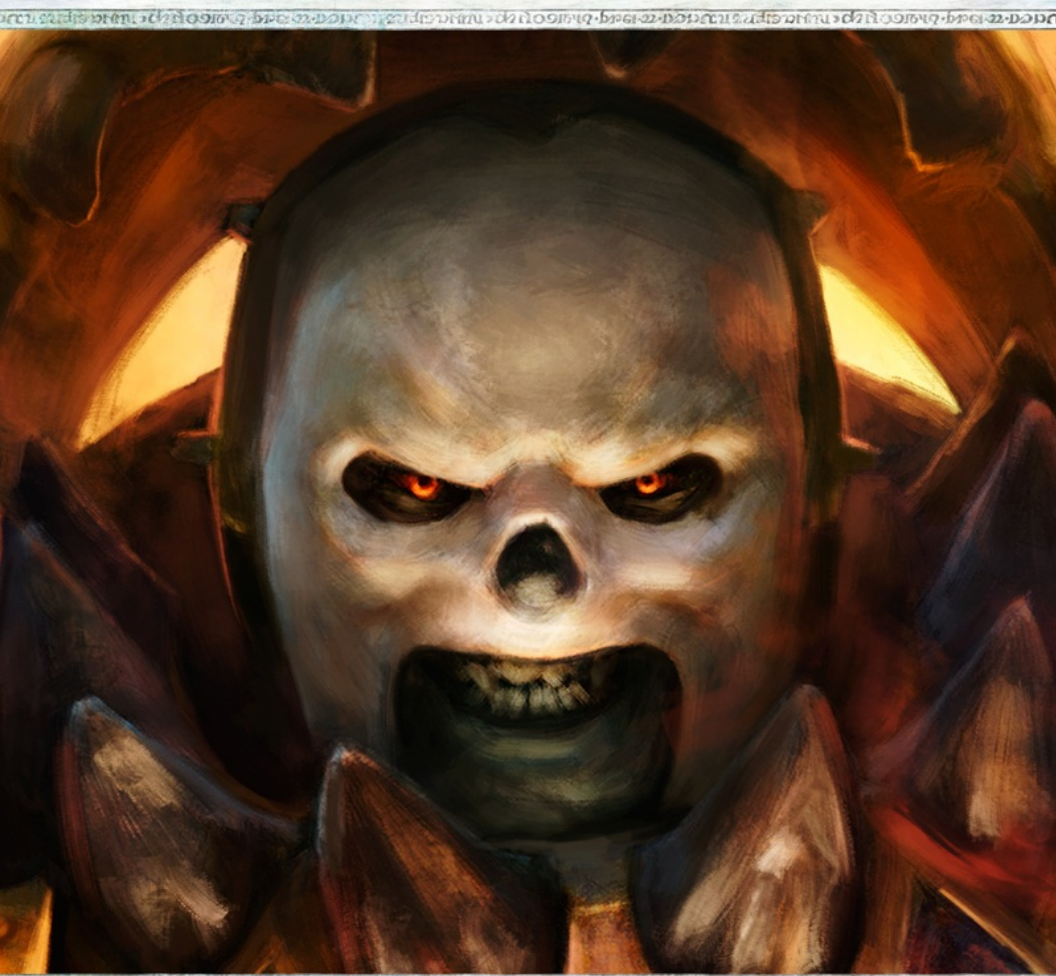


WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR



THE REALMGATE WARS

WAR STORM

WARHAMMER

AGE OF SIGMAR



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WAR STORM





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 creations.

The Age of Sigmar had begun.

BORNE BY THE STORM

Nick Kyme

CHAPTER ONE

God-forged

The bolt struck Vandus Hammerhand like a spear flung from the heavens. First there was light, a searing luminescence so bright it eclipsed all sense of being and self. Then pain brought him back with white daggers of pure agony. Heat, fury, and the drumbeat of immortal vigour rushing through his veins reached a crescendo so loud it turned into deafening silence.

Then peace, a feeling of true solace and quietude.

Vandus would come to learn it was always this way. This is what it meant to be born of the storm and borne *by* the storm.

Reforged, wrought anew. Brought back. This is what it was to be eternal. But as with all such godlike deeds, this apotheosis did not come without a price.

Before...

After defeating Korghos Khul, the Hammerhands went north.

Though the Goretide were scattered, their ranks would swell again. The war against the dominion of Chaos was far from over, but Sigmar's Stormcasts had won a great victory at the Gate of Azyr. Now that momentum had to be seized upon were it to mean anything.

And so the Hammerhands went northward.

Thousands clad in unalloyed sigmarite crossed the Igneous Delta. Liberators bloodstained and begrimed by war marched with grandhammers slung across the burnished plate of their shoulder guards. Dour Retributors strode in grim silence, their massive lightning hammers held firm across their chests. Above

the infantry, retinues of unearthly Prosecutors had taken wing and soared across the blighted sky. At the clarion sound of the warrior-heralds' war horns, their masked brethren below would close ranks and raise shields, knowing an enemy horde approached.

There had been many enemies, for the Igneous Delta and its surrounding lands were overrun by those bound in blood to Khorne.

It would fall to other Stormcast Eternals to hold the realmgate they had opened to Azyr. At least now they had a foothold at the Brimstone Peninsula, something to defend. But the vanguard could not rest. They had to forge on, despite the lead in their limbs.

Only when night had fallen and they reached the crags did they stop to make camp on a sheltered plateau of rock. Here the army had mustered, whilst a few of its leaders had walked up the shallow incline to a second smaller plateau from which they might gauge the best route onwards.

'This is a strange land,' murmured Dacanthos as he regarded the rime of frost around the fingers of his gauntlet. He clenched it in a mailed fist, shattering the ice that had formed.

'Agreed,' said Sagus, leaning on the head of his lightning hammer as the caustic wind of the delta tried to sear his armour. The air was rank with the stench of blood and cinder. It carried a foul cawing, like the mockery of crows, only deeper, as if uttered from the throat of a larger beast. Several carrion-creatures had already been seen.

The Hammers of Sigmar had left the scorched desert behind them. Here, on the rugged crags and low hills, a deep winter prevailed.

Snow hid some of the land's deformity, its hillocks like the petrified claws of some ancient leviathan, a golem trapped forever in its final moments of agony. Eight stunted crests rose up from the smothering tundra like horns, and there were hollow cavities where eyes might once have been.

'It is a grim place, enslaved to darkness,' uttered Vandus, his voice deep, his distaste unmasked. From the edge of a rocky promontory, he looked out across the Igneous Delta and beyond. Swaths of forest colonised much of the eastern lands, but the trees looked unnatural, bent and tortured, their limbs petrified.

The Lord-Celestant's eyes narrowed. He could have sworn he saw something stir within the dark heart of the forest. His gaze went skyward to an even greater and larger mountain fastness than the one his warriors had camped on. Clad in ice, it appeared more like a glacier. Oily mists crept from its footings, lathering the earth below in a foul tar.

Further north, Vandus discerned the forbidding silhouette of an immense tower, obscured behind scads of pyroclastic cloud. It was one of eight brass towers that surrounded Khul's domain. Here then was their god-given mission, though he knew his own destiny lay elsewhere.

'Rank indeed,' snarled Vandus as he turned away to speak to his men. 'But there is worse below...' He gestured for Dacanthos and Sagus to join him at the cliff edge, certain those below them would not notice three figures watching from on high.

Sagus's gauntlets cracked loudly as he clenched the haft of his hammer, and

when the Retributor spoke it was with barely restrained anger.

‘Wretched filth... I would see them seared from this land, scraped away like dirt from a boot.’

Dacanthos had no words. He merely stared through the lifeless eyes of his mask, his body trembling with righteous anger.

Far below in a smoke-choked basin of tar-black rock, shawled by drifts of ash and snow, were mortal followers of Khorne known as the Bloodbound.

Hordes of the warriors had gathered to rest, after a long march. A great fire burned, spilling a column of smoke that almost reached the promontory where the Stormcasts were watching. Garbed in spiked leather and furs matted with dried blood, the tribesmen left their arms and torsos exposed. These Vandus and his men had come to know as bloodreavers. The lesser of the vast and mighty Goretide, they were nonetheless brawny and muscular fighters. What they lacked in skill, they made up for in aggression and devotion to Khorne.

Bellowing and fighting, they revelled around the fire. Long shadows cast by their bodies contorted in the fell light, transformed into an echo of what they might become should they live long and worship with enough devotion. A bloodreaver’s altar was the battlefield, his offerings slaughter and death.

They were a rabble, but a dangerous one. Their blades were thick and sharp, notched by battle and stained black with the blood of innocents. But of late they had grown arrogant and complacent.

‘When do we bring the storm’s wrath, my Lord-Celestant?’ Dacanthos said at last.

‘Soon,’ said Vandus, half-turning as he felt the presence of eyes upon them. ‘After I have consulted with our Lord-Relictor.’

All three warriors turned as one to face Ionus Cryptborn. The Lord-Relictor emerged from the shadows, as if he were a part of them and they him. Morbidity clung to Ionus like a curse, and his skull-helmed visage gave him a grim aspect that was entirely in keeping with his demeanor.

Ionus gave a shallow bow, disturbing the oath scrolls attached to his golden war-plate. He rasped, his voice like the last stirrings of a disquiet spirit.

‘I crave your ear, Lord Hammerhand.’

Hanging his tempestos hammer, Heldensen, on his belt, Vandus nodded at the other two warriors, who departed with muttered reverence to the relic-keeper.

Only once they were gone, back down to the plateau where the army mustered, did Vandus speak further.

‘I shall not be dissuaded, Ionus,’ he warned.

‘You have spoken to me of the Red Pyramid of skulls, and I now understand that is not something you can ignore,’ said Ionus, slowly taking off his helm to reveal a gaunt, sinister-looking face. ‘I only wish our paths were conjoined. That you, like I, were headed to the brass towers as Sigmar has ordered.’

There was rebuke in Ionus’s tone, regret that they would be parted for the battles to come. It sat ill with him, but his Lord-Celestant had fixed his gaze on thwarting Korghos Khul and destroying the dread Gate of Wrath.

‘But I know your purpose is unwavering, my friend,’ Ionus concluded.

Vandus nodded. He was smiling as he turned towards Ionus and removed his war-helm, holding it in the crook of his arm. In sharp contrast to the Lord-Relictor, Vandus had a noble face and the clean, chiselled features often represented in the statues of heroes. Those monuments to old glories, to an age torn down, were gone but Vandus would see them rise again. He extended a hand to Ionus.

‘Fate shall see us together again, brother.’

The corners of the Lord-Relictor’s mouth only curved up a little, but he clasped his Lord-Celestant’s forearm in the manner of warriors.

‘Aye. The tower shall fall and I’ll make for your brotherhood. United, we shall triumph against any fell beings who claim lordship over these lands. The domination of Chaos is at an end.’

Vandus’s good humour faded, as he was reminded of what he had seen and the desperate battle they had fought and won at the Gate of Azyr.

‘It is possible he survived?’ Vandus asked.

‘Khul?’

‘Who else?’

‘He lives.’

Vandus raised an eyebrow. ‘You sound certain, brother.’

‘It is a feeling. Nothing more.’

Vandus caught an inkling that it was *much* more, but kept his silence for now. The ways of the Relictor were veiled to him, and perhaps that was for the best. But if Khul did yet live, as Ionus professed, then that meant the vision could still be proven true.

Vandus’s head, cut off and brandished aloft by Khul, exulting as he capped his dread pyramid.

‘I saw my own demise, Ionus,’ said Vandus, after a moment.

‘The vision we spoke of, the one that is leading you to the Red Pyramid?’

Vandus nodded.

‘And you would still step into Khul’s domain, knowing it means your death?’

‘I would.’

Ionus frowned. ‘But why? Unless you believe you can defy prophecy.’

‘Have you not said before that we are architects of our own destiny?’

Ionus gave a curt laugh. ‘I say a great many things, but not all are intended to be heeded on face value alone.’

‘I follow this path because I must, my friend. If I do not stop Khul then who else will?’

‘And if you challenge him, you may end up fulfilling his prophecy for him.’

‘Then that is a chance I have to take.’

Ionus regarded the Lord-Celestant for a moment, and not for the first time was reminded why Sigmar chose Vandus to be the vanguard of his storm.

‘Yes, I believe it is. Still, I hope he does not kill you, Vandus.’

It was meant in humour, but Vandus grew serious.

‘Are we *truly* immortal? If fated to die, can we?’

‘We are as immortal as Sigmar’s will, but even the God-King does not

always get his way.’ Ionus gestured to the Bloodbound they had come to vanquish, then to the land beyond and all its perfidy both seen and unseen.

They stared at the revelling hordes below, and after a brief silence had passed Ionus said, ‘They think they are the death of these lands. They think they have already won.’

Vandus laughed. ‘They are not death, brother. *We* are death.’

He slammed his helm back on, demonstrably belligerent, and turned at last to the Lord-Relictor. ‘And it’s past time that we dealt our gift to those heathens beneath us.’

He raised Heldensen aloft, so the warriors amassing on the plateau would see it, and cried out in a clarion voice. ‘Stormcasts, to arms! This night, we mete out death and Sigmar’s judgement!’

A great cheer rose up from the golden throng, loud enough that the hordes below heard it. Some of the wretched tribesmen began to look up at the Stormcasts who now emerged above them, others scrambled for blades, a few even began barking orders.

‘Vermin,’ snarled Vandus, as he felt the armoured tread of an entire chamber of Hammers of Sigmar gather at his back. Ionus was at his side, skull-faced once more. It would be their last battle together for a while. If Sigmar willed it, their paths would cross again.

‘Scurry all you like, it will avail you nothing.’

Heldensen flashed like a golden flame against the darkness. This time, more than a thousand hammers joined it in salute.

Ionus roared, unable to hold his righteous fury at bay a moment longer.

‘Smite them and cleanse this land!’

And the storm descended on burnished wings and in a crushing tide of gold.

CHAPTER TWO

Raw wounds

Like a red-raw wound, dawn broke over the heaped and tangled corpses left in the tar valley. Their skin was blackened, as if scorched by lightning.

Vandus and his Hammerhands left the bodies of the bloodreavers behind to rot in the sun. They had destroyed them, leaving none alive. They had also left Ionus and his Thunderstrike Brotherhood and headed for the southernmost brass tower, one of eight, and symbolic of Khorne's domination of the Brimstone Peninsula.

It was no mere thing to deny his duty to the God-King, but Vandus knew he had been shown Khul and his pyramid of skulls for a reason. This vision had to come from Sigmar himself; he was convinced of it.

At the head of the column of Stormcast Eternals, Vandus peered through the narrow eye slits of his mask at the shimmering heat haze that had fallen upon the land like a veil. The ice-clad mountains were long behind them now and the desert reigned once again. A lava plain surrounded them, choked by poisonous fumes and drifts of ash.

A ridge began to form through this miasma, stained a sickly yellow from vents of sulphurous gas eking through fissures in the rock.

'Volatus Ridge,' murmured Vandus, recognising the region. His gaze strayed upwards, and he called out into the clouded sky.

'Kyrus!'

First came the beating of wings and then, from out of blood-red sunlight and gangrenous smoke, came one of the warrior-heralds.

As the Prosecutor landed, he folded back his lightning wings and bowed.

‘The skies are clear of foes but wretched with filth, my lord. What is your bidding?’

Kyrus was a dutiful warrior, but his mood was akin to a tempest and ever turbulent. He had raged at the death of his former leader, Anactos Skyhelm, swearing vengeance. Now Prime until Skyhelm returned, Kyrus was determined to be worthy of the honour.

‘Take your warriors and fly beyond that ridge,’ said Vandus. ‘I want to know what lies ahead, beyond this foetid pall.’

Nodding curtly, Kyrus took flight, celestial corposant dissipating in his wake. Vandus watched as a retinue of gilded Prosecutors soared alongside their leader, resplendent on the wing, before he ordered the column to march on.

Where the others went on foot, Vandus rode the back of Calanax. The dracoth snarled at the stench of the air as if it were a foe that could be cowed by its wrath. Vandus quickly soothed the beast by patting the back of its scaled neck.

‘Easy, my friend. This land has us all disquieted.’

Calanax growled in acquiescence but kept a mindful eye, as did they all. Arching his serpentine neck, the dracoth watched the rapidly disappearing Prosecutors and gave a muted cry as the heralds were lost from sight.

As the Hammerhands trudged towards the Volatus Ridge, a bile-hued fog rose up around them. It stank of sulphur, but gathered too fast and moved too insidiously to be natural. Nothing in this land was natural – all had been warped by ruin.

The pall thickened, and for the Stormcasts it became impossible to see much farther than their outstretched gauntlets. Vandus wasted no time in slowing the advance, wary as they delved deeper and grew blinder with every step.

‘Sagus,’ Vandus summoned the Retributor, whose armoured paladins had been guarding the rear flanks of the column. ‘Your warriors are to take the core as we take the Sigmarund formation. Dacanthos,’ he called. ‘Liberators to encircle. Malactus’s Judicators will form the inner ring, behind a wall of shields. Both of you, be wary.’

The two warriors made the sigil of the hammer across their breasts and went to their duty. Heraldor Laudus Skythunder sounded the orders, and the formation of the column changed rapidly and efficiently into a walking circle of sigmarite.

Vandus took position behind the Liberators’ shieldwall, ahead of the Judicators with their skybolt bows and at the foremost part of the circle that faced towards the ridge.

‘Onward,’ he called, and the clank of god-forged steel resounded.

By now, the yellow cloud had completely engulfed them and the Stormcasts could not even see their feet or the heads of their weapons. Something was coming, Vandus could feel it.

‘Hammerhands,’ his voice rang out like a pealing bell, almost enough to cleanse the spiritual fog that he knew burdened the hearts of his men. ‘Hold true, hold together, and we shall triumph.’

A trumpet clarioned, and Calanax echoed it with a shrilling cry of its own,

but even the usually strident notes of the Hammerhand heraldor were robbed of clarity by the miasma.

'My lord...' muttered a Stormcast, Baered, shoulder to shoulder with his brothers in the shieldwall and advancing slowly. 'Do you see that?'

Vandus saw it well enough, and nodded grimly. Apparitions had begun to coalesce in the fog. At first they were indistinct, mere wisps of cloud that struggled to hold their corporeality, but they quickly changed, anthropomorphising into souls long dead and cruelly brought back.

Every man beheld a different form: a wife, a daughter, a son. The only thing the apparitions had in common were that they were dead, nothing more than revenants whose only purpose was to torment.

And they were not silent.

Centuries ago, Vandus had been Vendell Blackfist, a blacksmith chief and tribesman. He had lost everything to Chaos, his entire people. Every one of them returned to haunt him now, their bile-yellow figures made manifest in the fog. Though he knew them all, these were not the men and women of his former life but spirits formed from bitter memory who meant to harm.

Help us...

Kill us...

Betray us...

Vandus quickly shut his mind to them, and urged his warriors to do the same. 'Have the courage to banish these unquiet devils.'

The shieldwall clenched closer, as if withered by the onslaught of the spirit host.

How Vandus wished Ionus Cryptborn were with them now.

A spectral hand reached for him... his dead wife, with the ghostly figures of his sons cowering at her feet. The mask held his emotions firm, but he wept behind the cold metal.

'Begone...' he rasped, voice trembling, but found his resolve. As he lashed out at the spirit forms, their aspect changed.

Talons grew in place of fingers, and the eyes of the once beloved became hollows in hundreds of fleshless skulls. As one, the spectral figures shrieked their final death cry and the shieldwall buckled as men fell to their knees or chased after illusory versions of their loved ones.

'Hold firm!' Vandus roared, reaching down from the back of Calanax to seize Baered by his gorget and haul him into formation. 'Dacanthos,' he cried, hoping his Prime could help restore order, but it was already too late.

The stench of blood rose in Vandus's throat. The Bloodbound were here, warriors of the Goretide.

A guttural war cry ululated through the murk, echoing wildly so Vandus could not tell where it originated from. He barely parried the blow aimed at his neck, before Heldensen's haft came to his rescue. The grunting brute, a bloodreaver, snarled at him and tried to carve through the hammer with his axe. Vandus kicked him hard to the ground. Then Calanax lurched forward and took off the bloodreaver's head as he was still sprawled on his back.

Another ran in from the right and this time Vandus caught sight of the

warrior and turned, crashing Heldensen down into the bloodreaver's shoulder. Bone shattered as the hammer drove on into the warrior's chest, spraying Vandus's armour with gore.

More attacks flew in, not just against the Lord-Celestant but against all the Liberators in the broken shieldwall. It began sporadically at first, isolated clashes of blades, but grew in intensity.

Soon, a surge of brawny warriors in bloodstained metal and furs charge into the gilded throng of beleaguered Stormcasts. Some made it through the gaps in the Liberators' line and began to cut down the Judicators. A few of Malactus's men panicked, unleashing their skybolt bows heedlessly. Their Prime bellowed for them to cease as fellow Stormcasts were struck in error.

'Dacanthos, reforge the shieldwall and protect Malactus's retinue,' said Vandus, as the Liberator-Prime appeared through the fog.

His armour rent and battered already, Dacanthos nodded wearily and ran back into the fight, hurling orders like they were spears to unite his warriors again.

Hundreds of skirmishes unfolded at once as Vandus fought in a sea of indistinct figures. Bellowing until he was hoarse, he managed to corral a small host together. They locked shields, an island of gold amidst an ocean of bloody red.

Vandus rode on into the miasma with Calanax, the beast clawing as his rider swung left and right with his hammer.

Hauling himself in with the reins, he drew close to the dracoth's neck. 'We must break up this assault, old friend, and give our comrades time to reorganise,' Vandus told him, receiving a growl in reply. His eyes went skyward as he prayed for some sign of the returning Prosecutors, but the vile fog was too thick.

As he looked down again, something lumpen and horrific loomed out of the miasma. A khorgorath. It savaged a band of Liberators who had strayed away from their brothers, tearing down their defence as if it were parchment and not god-forged sigmarite. One of the warriors shuddered as the khorgorath's bone tentacles impaled him. Another lost his head, swallowed down the beast's grotesque gullet. Two more lost limbs, dying in crumpled heaps of blood-flecked gold before the storm reclaimed them.

The khorgorath bellowed in exultation.

Vandus had fought these beasts before. This one was as wretched as the others. Incarnadine skin wrapped around a muscular body. Its legs were thick and ended in hooves. Its arms ended in claws. The tiny eyes set in its tusked and horned skull betrayed the malice which drove the beast.

The filthy cloud seemed to retreat in the khorgorath's presence, as if fearful to approach, or perhaps it parted so the beast could hunt all the easier. The thought that the fog might be sentient brought a tremor of unease to the Lord-Celestant, as did the sight of his warriors being slain so easily. It took an act from his dauntless mount to overcome it.

Calanax knew these abominations too. He spewed forth a gout of crackling storm breath at the khorgorath. The beast howled, engulfed by lightning.

Calanax did not relent. Pulling against the reins, he galloped towards the khorgorath, his rage unceasing until the monster was nothing but charred meat.

It was only once the carcass had shrivelled to a blackened mess that Vandus realised his mistake. The dracoth's unruly zeal had separated the Lord-Celestant from the rest of his chamber and now they were too far away. Silhouettes of his men were barely visible and, worse, they were dying. Lightning flashes broke amidst the fog, searing the image of the dead in frozen memorial before vanishing with an echoing crack.

Thunder rolled above, the God-King's anger made manifest.

Knots of warriors were managing to band together; Vandus saw some lumbering blindly as they got close to him. Others fought alone. As the shieldwall broke apart, so did the martial coherency of the entire chamber. Heraldor Skythunder attempted to restore some order but a thrown axe struck his neck and he fell.

'Mercy of Sigmar,' Vandus breathed. And the thunder boomed in answer.

They were being slaughtered. Above the din of battle, he heard another sound like a fell humming. Belatedly, as he was about to turn Calanax around, he realised what it was.

Chanting.

Something else loomed from the sulphur fog, dredged from the hellish depths of the Realm of Chaos. A host of red-skinned daemons, snorting and spitting as they loped towards the Lord-Celestant on bent-back limbs.

Vandus felt the furnace heat coming off their bodies as the bloodletters closed, a ring of eight with black blades clenched in their wiry fists.

As the daemons bore down on him, Vandus heard the chanting intensify, coming not just from one throat but many. A ritual was taking place, a dark sacrifice that had brought these creatures into existence.

As the daemons sprang at him, Vandus swung Heldensen in a wide, looping arc. Three of the bloodletters were smashed back and disincorporated in welters of dark ash before they could hit the ground. Calanax caught a fourth in his jaws and snapped its body clean in two. The dracoth reared up, trapping a fifth under his claws, then bellowed in pain as a hellblade bit through his scaled hide.

Vandus fended off a blow against his vambrace, but felt searing in his side as one of the bloodletters breached his armour. He crushed both their misshapen skulls with his hammer, before Calanax gored the last of the daemons with his horns.

But obscured by the fog, a second summoning of the bloodletters fell upon them, this time in droves.

'Back, Calanax!' Vandus cried urgently, realising, isolated as they were, that they would be overwhelmed.

The dracoth growled his agreement and retreated. All too quickly, the onrushing daemons that had been nought but shadows in the fog began to take form as they got close.

Their loping gait was unearthly fast, and Vandus realised with a sick feeling in his gut that he and Calanax would not escape the trap.

But they would die with honour.

The dracoth held its ground as Vandus bellowed his defiance at the daemon horde.

‘Sigmar! Glory to the God-King of Azyr!’

None knew what truly happened when a Stormcast died. Whatever his fate, Vandus resolved to meet it with fierce courage in his heart.

Dacanthos and a host of Liberators rushed to their Lord-Celestant’s side. Their shields locked just as the daemon horde reached them. Hell-wrought steel met Azyr-forged sigmarite and failed to breach it.

‘Part! Part the line, now!’

The Liberators responded at once to Dacanthos’s order, the shieldwall folding back in an inverted spearhead to let the daemons in.

Sagus and his waiting Retributors were arrayed behind the wall. They fell upon the bloodletters as the daemons barrelled through, and utterly destroyed them with their lightning hammers.

Overhead, Vandus heard flights of skybolts as the Judicators let loose.

Partial order had been restored. Under the leadership of its captains, the chamber had alloyed together again and forged towards their leader.

‘How, brother?’ Vandus asked Dacanthos in a brief moment of respite.

‘Your armour, Lord-Celestant,’ replied the Liberator-Prime. ‘It was our beacon.’

Only now did Vandus realise his war-plate had taken on a refulgent glow, as celestial light poured forth from every piece of it. The glory was fading now, but it had been enough to anchor his men and bring them back together.

Vandus raised Haldensen aloft in salute.

Thank you, Sigmar...

For who else could have intervened on his behalf?

With the daemons vanquished, the Sigmarund could be reformed. This time, Vandus took his place in the shieldwall with Calanax.

Despite the turn in fortune, the Bloodbound did not relent. Nor did the hellish fog lessen.

‘We are still fighting blind,’ said Sagus from the rear ranks.

‘Aye, and if anything, their numbers have swelled.’

A great broiling clash had erupted, hordes of bloodreavers and blood warriors driven to frenzy and hurling every ounce of fury they had against the Stormcast Eternals. Time and again, the shieldwall would fold, and the Retributors would attack and the Judicators let fly.

All the while, the chanting persisted, growing louder and more urgent with every passing moment. No further bloodletters came, but Vandus felt the oppression on his soul as he had in the Igneous Delta when the blood priest had called forth the Realm of Blood and Brass.

But this was something different, some manifestation that came from the very twisted nature of the land and how Chaos had corrupted it with its malign presence.

Something else was coming, invigorated by the slaughter.

Vandus knew he had to end the battle swiftly. His warriors needed to attack,

but the blinding fog would render such a move suicide as they would be cut apart piecemeal again. Maintaining formation would ensure survival – but not if the Bloodbound sacrificed enough to Khorne to bring forth some hell-beast from the red pit.

Death or damnation lay in either choice.

As a blast of clarion trumpets broke through the clamour of battle, Vandus realised it was not his decision to make.

Kyrus had returned.

From the high vantage above the cloud, Prosecutors swept down in small flocks to unleash their celestial hammers against the Bloodbound.

As his warriors continued their harrying attacks, having cut a small swathe of open ground between the Bloodbound and their other Stormcast brothers, Kyrus landed nearby to speak to his lord.

‘Lord Hammerhand, it seems we have arrived back just in time.’

A pair of crackling hammers materialised in Kyrus’s gauntleted fists and he flung them at a clutch of bloodreavers who had tried to resume the close quarter crush.

Kyrus was joined by a host of his brethren who interceded against the Chaos horde so he could give his report.

‘I saw the miasma overhead as we returned. It clouds only you and your chamber, Lord Hammerhand.’

‘It follows us?’

‘Akin to a cloud of sulphurous flies, yes. I also saw something beyond the ridge, another Warrior Chamber.’ He turned as a trumpet sounded, the signal to take wing.

Lightning crackled across Kyrus’s gilded pinions as he arched his neck to the heavens.

‘Prosecutor,’ Vandus said quickly, knowing the prospect of reinforcement close by meant nothing if they failed here. ‘Fly high and turn back this cloud for us. Once our sight is returned, I shall order the attack and crush this vermin.’

Kyrus nodded curtly, leaving with his warriors and soaring aloft with peals of thunder.

As the Prosecutors departed, the Bloodbound rushed in again and the press of battle resumed. It did so only for a short while longer. Above, the storm rumbled and thunder broke heavily across the sky.

A tempest was born in the heavens, and it drove the poisonous fog away.

Above, Kyrus’s retinue were beating their celestial wings in concert. And as soon as Vandus could see the warrior-heralds through the rapidly dissipating sulphur cloud, he knew it was time.

‘Break ranks and attack!’ he yelled, Calanax rearing up in belligerent abandon.

The shieldwall split as the Liberators allowed the heavier armoured Retributors to come forth. Well-drilled Judicators moved to the flanks and loosed an endless enfilading arrow storm into the scattered rear ranks of the Bloodbound horde.

With the Retributors unleashed, the Liberators broke up into smaller warrior-bands and struck down any who had escaped the wrath of their brothers' lightning hammers.

Riding at the spearpoint of the attack, Vandus spurred Calanax into a loping run. The dracoth's ground-eating strides soon had them leading the charge. The Goretide warriors were still numerous but had been scattered by the sudden attack and disorientated by the disappearance of the fog.

Vandus saw the bodies of their dead, men he knew the Stormcasts could not have slain, and balked at the blood price Khorne's worshippers were willing to pay for their lord's favour.

One of the Skull Lord's chieftains still clung to the hope that his dark master would avail them. But the shadow of the Realm of Chaos was fading, just as the sulphur clouds receded into nothing. Towers of brass and pyramids of skulls, the crimson rain of fury unbound and the brazen bellowing of daemons from beyond the veil; all became as smoke and echoes.

It had felt different to when the bloodsecurator had unleashed hell before the Gate of Azyr, but no less disturbing. Vandus would be glad to burn this patina of blood and violence from his armour.

He would begin with the chieftain.

From the back of Calanax, Vandus levelled his hammer at the brutal-looking warrior.

The dracoth quickly despatched the few followers the chieftain had left. Vandus then dismounted, his eyes never leaving his prey. Bellowing with fury, the chieftain came at the Lord-Celestant with a flanged maul.

Vandus parried his reckless attacks, before crushing the chieftain's shoulder and disarming him. Calanax pounced, pinning him down.

'Is this the graven image of your lord?' asked Vandus with disgust, regarding a sigil burned into the chieftain's chest. Tattered remnants of images persisted in the wake of the blood sacrifice, and Vandus found it hard to keep a rein on his anger. In his mind, he saw himself crushing the chieftain to pulp, grinding his bones and devouring his heart, rending his limbs and...

Vandus slowly closed his eyes and made his heart still. When he looked out again, he was calm and the blood rage had passed.

'It is fell, indeed, isn't it,' spat the chieftain through red-rimed teeth. He rasped, finding it hard to breathe with his chest crushed beneath the dracoth's claw. 'Khorne cares not from whence the blood flows...' he murmured, as a horrible gargle rose up from his throat.

Vandus glared at him. 'Your warlord, the one known as Korghos Khul – does he yet live?'

Despite his fatal injuries, the chieftain laughed.

'One such as he is not so easily killed,' he said. 'You seek a reckoning? He said you would.'

'He is here?' asked Vandus, his voice suddenly agitated. 'Where?'

The chieftain laughed again, coughing up gouts of blood before he continued.

'At the Red Pyramid, you will meet again,' he said, growing more animated

with every word. 'Your severed head in his hands...' blood foamed and frothed in his mouth, '...held aloft for the glory of-'

Calanax tore off his head and swallowed it down.

Vandus released the grip he had on Heldensen. His body trembled with anger, and he had not realised how tightly he was clenching the hammer's haft.

Sack the Red Pyramid, and then defeat Khul. End him this time. It was as he had said to Ionus Cryptborn, and so it must be.

'Gratitude, my friend,' Vandus murmured, stroking the scales on the dracoth's back and eliciting a rumbling growl from the beast.

With the death of the chieftain, the battle was all but over.

Throngs of Liberators struck down blood warriors and bloodreavers, their zeal for carnage much diminished.

Volley of skybolts from disciplined firing lines of Judicators took down packs of khorgoraths, who fell, pinioned by lightning-wreathed shafts.

Prosecutors ranged the flanks to destroy any who fled or had been spared annihilation by the vengeful Retributors. The armoured paladins were relentless, and crushed almost everything in sight.

In short order the Chaos war host was vanquished utterly. Not a soul remained.

Vandus played his part, he and Calanax hunting for khorgoraths. Heldensen sang a litany of purification as it smashed skulls and broke limbs.

It was Kyrus who interrupted his leader, gently coming down from on high to stand before Vandus and his steed.

'Lord-Celestant...' Always so dutiful, so dignified, yet the tumult of righteous fury still raged in his eyes and radiated off his blazing wings.

'The other Warrior Chamber you spoke of?' asked Vandus, as Calanax gored the last of the blood warriors they had been fighting.

Kyrus nodded. 'I will lead you, my lord.' He gestured towards the distant ridge line with one of his crackling hammers. 'Over there.'

'Dacanthos,' Vandus called, 'finish up these scum and meet us at the edge of the ridge.'

The Liberator-Prime crashed his gauntlet to his chest in salute and affirmation.

Vandus had already reined Calanax in, turning the dracoth's head in the direction his Prosecutor had pointed. 'Lead us then, brother.'

Leaping skyward, Kyrus flew low and steady so his Lord-Celestant could keep up. He need not have bothered, for Calanax was preternaturally fast and the three of them reached the Volatus Ridge swiftly.

The sight beyond the edge of the ridge and into the valley below was a welcome one. After several days of unremitting battle against a seemingly endless tide of foes, the possibility of reinforcement was at hand.

'Stormcasts,' said Vandus, as Calanax perched at the very edge of the ridge. The relief in the Lord-Celestant's voice was almost palpable. 'We are not alone, after all.'

'It is the Goldenmanes,' uttered Kyrus, his sight keen and far reaching enough to discern the precise nature of their allies.

Vandus could see the blue and gold of the Hammers of Sigmar, but not who led the warriors. Despite that fact, he knew the leader of the Goldenmanes well.

‘Lord-Celestant Jactos. Hunting down Goretide stragglers.’

Though the battle was distant, Vandus could see that the chamber chased down a beaten foe. Their pursuit looked a little unruly. The Goldenmanes’ heraldor was already sounding the victory.

‘As bold and headstrong as ever, it would seem.’

Vandus smiled at the irony of Kyrus’s words, eyes narrowing as he tried to find Jactos Goldenmane in the throng below. His good humour quickly turned to horror as he saw a second enemy force had amassed, hidden in the crags on either side of Jactos’s triumphant scrum of warriors.

‘They haven’t seen them,’ muttered Kyrus grimly.

Vandus scowled, and lifted Heldensen.

‘Hammerhands, to me!’

The others were coming. They needed to move quickly.

CHAPTER THREE

Blooded

Victory was near. Jactos could feel it, and revelled in exultation. His warriors had attacked a large warband of the debased wretches claiming dominion over this land, and defeated them in short order. The remnants had fled and now, led by the Prosecutors, the Stormcasts gave chase, determined to run the barbarians down.

‘Glory to the God-King!’ roared Jactos, fighting alongside his Lord-Castellant, Neros, and a retinue of paladins.

Jactos watched his Prosecutors soar after the fleeing bloodreavers, ruthlessly casting down their hammer bolts. The warrior-heralds were the only retinue capable of outpacing the zealous Lord-Celestant, who cut down his foes with runeblade and warhammer.

Jactos was a peerless swordsman, and had a quickness of thought and reaction even before he had become Eternal. Now, he put his god-forged talents to use destroying the Chaos worshippers. A thrust through the heart of a blood warrior had the man spitting gore. As Jactos pulled the blade free, he advanced, turning on his heel and slashing the next foe’s midriff. His warhammer came down in the same movement, cracking skulls, and his warcloak spun around as he sundered a host of bloodreavers.

‘Hunt well, Eriad,’ he murmured, smiling ferally behind his gilded mask as he watched the Prosecutors arc through the sky like spears. He could almost imagine the destruction they would reap. How Sigmar would exult at this triumph.

The voice of Neros arrested his reverie. ‘Our forces are spread thin, my lord.

Should we slow and consolidate?’

Jactos glanced over his shoulder. They had left the Judicators behind and even his Liberators were struggling to hold the pace. Only at the Lord-Celestant’s urging had the hulking Retributors managed to keep up.

‘I want this victory, Neros. Our foe is nigh on defeated. Let us revel in it and show the Chaos gods that Sigmar has returned, and that he means to take these lands back.’

Jactos’s zeal was infectious. The Lord-Castellant nodded, brandishing his halberd.

‘In Sigmar’s name, destroy them all!’

Jactos laughed. So full of belligerent joy was he that he failed to notice how the valley had narrowed into a ravine, or that the Prosecutors had not returned from their sortie.

Oblivious to all but his imminent triumph, Jactos drove on.

It was only when he saw that the crags had taken on the aspect of skulls and the fell wind whispered his name that he realised something bad was about to happen.

On foot, it took some time to reach where the Prosecutors had harried their enemies, and the narrowness of the ravine had obscured the end of it from sight. Until now.

A deep basin of rock awaited the chamber of Jactos Goldenmane, and the slope that led to it was thick with ash. But what caught his eye first was what lay at the base of the sheer-faced cliff.

A golden Prosecutor and half of his retinue, impaled on claws of iron thrust out of the very earth like talons, dying like spitted boar. It must have happened quickly.

The cry of anguish from Jactos was louder than a death knell. ‘Brothers!’

Neros was about to raise his warding lantern to call the other Stormcasts to their side when something whipped down from out of the crags. The Lord-Castellant jerked and grunted, an axe protruding from his chest. He sank to one knee, blood spoiling the front of his golden war-plate as it flowed from a terrible wound.

A second axe hurtled down at them. Then came a third. A deluge of black iron followed.

Jactos parried the blades out of the air, coming to Neros’s side, but many of the Retributors were not so swift.

Lightning flashes lit up the crags as a thunderhead of desolation erupted amongst the Stormcasts. Sigmar was reclaiming the souls of his warriors. As the flares died down and the fallen were cast heavenward, the macabre skulls in the rock appeared to be grinning wider than before.

‘Stormcasts, to me! To me!’ Jactos bellowed, hearing the urgent clarion of his heraldor.

The tumultuous roar from the crags swallowed the trumpet calls and obliterated them.

Droves of Bloodbound warriors spilled like vermin from hidden caves and fissures missed by Eriad’s Prosecutors.

The other retainers hurried urgently to their Lord-Celestant's side, but were strung out across the valley. As they entered the mouth of the narrow ravine, Jactos realised his second fatal error.

'Wait! Hold fast, hold fast! Don't—'

Too late. Another horde emerged from their hiding places to engulf the Stormcast rearguard. Khorgoraths held back by the whip of a bloodstoker were unleashed to reap heads. Running at the very back of the warriors, the Judicators turned too late. They had barely unleashed a single skybolt when the Chaos monstrosities fell upon them.

Jactos faltered, caught halfway between Neros and where his much-depleted Retributors prepared to meet the charge of a vastly larger force.

The Lord-Castellant yet lived, but waved Jactos away.

'Leave me. Marshal *them!* Bring the host together or it won't matter either way.'

A gryph-hound seized Neros's shoulder in its powerful beak and began to drag the Lord-Castellant towards the waiting Retributors. Neros had dropped his halberd, but still had the warding lantern. With the other hand, he grabbed his loyal beast's harness and held on as it took him, trying to keep them both alive a little longer.

What had begun as certain victory had cruelly turned to abject annihilation.

Jactos saw his chance at glory fading, his opportunity to show his worthiness to his God-King. How deeply he had wanted to be first, how much he had envied Vandus Hammerhand for the honour that had been bestowed upon him. Jactos knew his fellow Lord-Celestant warranted such a boon, for there was something about Vandus, something fated and undeniable. But if the honour of leading the vanguard was not to be his, then at least Jactos could forge his own glory elsewhere.

Now all of his ambitions were ashes, and he tasted the bitterness of that failure as if choking on them.

'Shieldwall!' he cried, trying to wrench something back from this debacle, but the Liberators were too far away and some had rightly gone to the aid of their beleaguered comrades in the Judicators.

Thinking fast, he turned to Priandus, the leader of his Retributors. He had only moments, for soon they would be engulfed by the warriors rushing down to meet them. As he spared a glance at their killers, Jactos saw another army silhouetted on the ridge line, and knew that their doom was assured.

'Priandus...'

Priandus had clenched his two-handed lightning hammer across his chest. His gaze was unwavering as he regarded the foes that would surely end him. A handful of Retributors stood with him, shoulder to shoulder.

'Go,' Priandus uttered, grimly. 'They won't come for you until all of us are dead. Our sacrifice will mean something, at least.'

Jactos led the bulk of the Retributors off at a pace towards his Liberators, hoping to bring his scattered forces together.

At Jactos's command, one of the hulking warriors hauled Neros to his feet and half-carried the Lord-Castellant as the gryph-hound loped along after them.

Through sheer desperation, Jactos brought the disparate factions of what was left of his men together. As they formed ranks, locking shields and standing side by side, the Lord-Celestant spared a last glance for Priandus. But the Retributor-Prime was lost from sight, swallowed by a barbaric host of blood-sworn warriors.

‘Make them pay,’ he bellowed to his men, the rancour he felt filling his heart until it overflowed. What few Judicators remained let fly. Retributors and Liberators stood beside each other to meet the charge that would surely end them all.

The Bloodbound army met them. *Both* of its armies, twin bloody mauls of seething violence and unfettered destruction.

Caught in the middle, the Stormcasts’ defence shuddered, but held, a circle of gold that defied the darkness. Jactos fought hard, determined to be the exemplar for his men. The act of bravura was a pointless one, but he sought to make amends anyway. At least Neros was alive, protected by the Judicators and around them the Liberators and Retributors. At least, for now.

Jactos began to despair as he saw the third host descend, the one shown in silhouette on the ridge line.

His despair quickly turned to hope, then joy, as golden war-plate, not the blood-red of Khorne’s disciples, shone in the blazing sun over the Volatus Ridge. Seeing reinforcement, his warriors fought even harder. They shouted their defiance and roared in exultation of their saviour.

‘Vandus! Vandus! Vandus!’

Their cry became a mantra, and it armoured them better than a thousand sigmarite shields.

Hammerhand he was called, and he led his Stormcasts down the ridge with cloak flapping and a call to arms upon his lips.

‘Hold fast, Jactos!’

Vandus rode a dracoth as he spearheaded the vanguard, and in his wake he brought death.

The battle did not last much longer after that. Between the Hammerhands and the Goldenmanes, the Bloodbound were crushed. Ground down beneath armoured boots, pinioned by skybolts or smote by the celestial hammers of winged avengers, the slain were many.

It was over. Jactos lived, as did his shame.

Vandus approached him during the aftermath, as the Prosecutors chased down the few survivors.

‘Well met, Jactos,’ said Vandus, offering his hand.

Jactos nodded, grateful but weary.

‘Your arrival was timely, Lord-Celestant.’ He regarded Vandus with a deep sense of respect, taking off his war-helm before he shook the other warrior’s hand. Long, golden hair flowed from beneath, making it obvious how Jactos’s honorific came to be. He had a noble bearing, so very different from the barbarian blacksmith lord who looked back at him.

‘I watched you from the ridge,’ Vandus said, his dark eyes honest and hard. ‘You overreached, Jactos, and spread your warriors too thinly. Remember, we

are outnumbered in this land and know not of all its perils.'

Jactos stiffened a little, chastened. 'Is that the wisdom of Sigmar talking?'

Vandus held up his hand. 'No, just the words of a smith who knows something of the ways of war.'

'You are as much a blacksmith as I am an orruk,' Jactos replied, clapping Vandus on the shoulder, 'but I heed the wisdom, nonetheless.'

All amongst the Stormcast force sought to further Sigmar's glory and exact vengeance against those creatures who had put the realms asunder, but Jactos wanted it more than most.

A cry from across the bloody field of battle interrupted them.

It was Neros, his warding lantern held aloft and his gryph-hound by his side. Warriors who basked in the glow of the lantern saw their armour restored, the deep axe grooves and clefts melding together with the power of celestial magic.

No such balm could cure Eriad though, still impaled on the iron talon.

Jactos rushed over to the stricken Prosecutor, with Vandus not far behind him.

'We cannot remove it,' uttered Neros in a low voice, his back to Eriad who twisted in pain, 'not without killing him. Even the lantern cannot save him.'

Jactos looked upon his Prosecutor grim-faced. The spike driven through his body should have killed him, but something about the metal was refusing to let Eriad die. Jactos saw tendrils of it had split off from the shaft and wormed their way into Eriad's skin.

'It... burns... my lord...' rasped Eriad, his every breath an agony.

Jactos drew his runeblade, and the star-sigils upon the steel shone brightly.

'Sigmar awaits you, brother,' he told the Prosecutor solemnly. 'He calls you back unto his halls as a hero.'

About to enact this mercy, Eriad's outstretched hand stopped the Lord-Celestant.

'W-wait... Will I die...? What will... become of me?'

Jactos faltered. He had no answer. None knew what it meant to be Eternal.

'Let the storm carry him, brother.' Vandus's voice came from behind him, reassuring yet urgent.

'Close your eyes, Eriad,' said Jactos, after a moment. The Prosecutor had barely lowered his eyelids when Jactos thrust the runeblade up into Eriad's chest, piercing his heart and ending his torment.

Above, a thunderhead had gathered and from its tumultuous depths came a single arcing bolt of lightning that struck Eriad and engulfed him in a glowing coruscation. With the thunder of a tempest unleashed, the bolt turned Eriad's corporeal body into blinding light and carried him back into the heavens on the fury of the storm.

All who saw felt the awe and disquiet of witnessing a miracle.

'Is this the fate of every man wrought on the Anvil of Apotheosis?' murmured Jactos. 'Are we destined to ascend back unto the stars when we are slain? And what then?'

He felt a strong, reassuring hand upon his shoulder and knew then why

Vandus had been chosen above all others. He heard it in his voice and felt it in his words.

‘Fear not the storm, Jactos. For it is both life and death to us. Ours is not to question. It is but to do our duty and, when the time comes, to die well in Sigmar’s name. It is why we were forged, it is a hope for all mankind and there is no greater honour than that.’

Jactos nodded slowly, and reached for his war-helm again.

‘I hear the call to arms, Vandus.’

‘As do I, brother.’

‘I hear it calls to you from across the wastes and the Red Pyramid.’

‘I beheld a vision,’ Vandus told him. ‘A warlord, the slayer of the Direbrands, climbing a red pyramid fashioned of bloody skulls. A gate lay beyond it, a portal to the Realm of Chaos itself.’

‘Such a gate would spew forth hellspawn beyond count.’

‘Aye, and I must close it. Even now, my Lord-Relictor seeks out the brass towers from which the gate yokes its power.’

Jactos turned, and there was lightning in his eyes through the slits in his mask.

‘I pledge my sword to this task, Vandus. The Goldenmanes will stand with the Hammerhands and consider it a great honour.’

Vandus smiled behind the implacable face of his war-helm, his voice conveying his emotion.

‘It is I that is honoured, brother. Let us stand together then, and crush the Goretide.’

‘The warlord in your vision, Vandus, he yet lives?’

Vandus’s mood turned bleak and wrathful. ‘If he does, then it is he we must overcome. His will, his dominance is *everything*. Break that, and we break his warband.’

‘With hammer and blade, then,’ uttered Jactos, as a cry of ‘Sigmar!’ echoed around the gathered chambers.

Jactos revelled in it, just as he rejoiced that in Korghos Khul he saw a chance to restore his tarnished honour.

CHAPTER FOUR

Taker of skulls

Korghos Khul lived. He was lying on his back, dimly remembering the moment his own warriors had trampled him in their zeal to get to the Stormcasts.

He had fought the golden warrior, the one who had once been Vendell Blackfist. Khul had the better of him, and yet the wretch had escaped death a second time. Even in his stuporous state, the warlord of Khorne vowed there would not be a third.

And as he lay there, plotting vengeance even as he stirred from unconsciousness, he came to a realisation.

In spite of his survival, something had changed. He felt it in the shimmering heat of the air, heard it in the deep rumble of thunder overhead and beheld it in those who had come with the lightning, cast upon the storm.

For a time, after the battle, he had drifted in and out of a black daze in which his dreams were dark. Far from being restful, his torpor was a fitful sleep and wracked by paroxysms. His eyes opened, flickering in palsy against the sun, as something he had not felt in many years formed into being.

Defeat.

And with that realisation came the Blood God's rage, urging Khul to his feet and fuelling limbs driven to the brink of exhaustion by the one known as the Hammerhand, a man resurrected, reborn, a man Khul should have killed decades before...

'Vendell Blackfist... Vandus...'

As he muttered the name of his nemesis, he became aware of scavengers

rummaging through the corpses, taking their fill of flesh, and soon they became aware of him.

The Igneous Delta looked as it had when Khul had fallen, a stinking, lava-strewn plain of scorched black rock. Only now it was his fellow Goretide that were coming for him, not the golden warriors from before.

Far from being cowed by Khul's revival, the bloody chieftains and champions who prowled the dead saw a unique opportunity.

It was the way of the Bloodbound. The only road to Khome's throne was to climb a pyre of skulls.

Five warriors surrounded Khul, each with an axe or blade. They circled slowly, murderous ambition in their eyes, especially when they saw Khul was unarmed.

Khul grinned, exposing sharp, angular teeth. Through the eyeholes of his skull-faced helm, the world had turned a visceral red. He clenched his fists until the knuckles cracked.

'Come then, take your chance and let's see who Khome favours.'

With a roar, the scavenging chieftains attacked.

A bearded brute of a warrior went first, swinging wildly with his axe. Khul deftly caught the chieftain's wrist, fending off an overhead blow before pulling the warrior down, wrapping a muscular arm around his neck and snapping it. Before the chieftain hit the ground, Khul had taken his axe and embedded it in the chest of the second warrior. In a welter of gore, Khul wrenched the blade loose and flung it into a third aggressor, pitching him off his feet, the axe haft protruding from his face.

Three slain in as many breaths gave the other two pause. It was a momentary hesitation, yet ultimately fatal. Khul bellowed and charged, and the fourth chieftain hacked at him, but his sword only ate into the meat of Khul's forearm, shearing through the armour and holding fast. Seizing the champion's ruddy beard, Khul head-butted him until his faceplate cracked and then the bone beneath. The chieftains' body capitulated, his legs buckling like broken reeds. Khul snatched up his sword.

As the champion fell, Khul was left facing the last attacker.

'You're thinking this was a mistake,' Khul told him, his chest heaving up and down with barely restrained fury, his skin drenched in blood. 'It was, but if you bare your neck I will make it fast.'

Eyes wide and suddenly unsure, the chieftain adjusted the grip on his axe and then looked to the weapon Khul had taken from one of the others. Blood dripped off the blade.

With a sudden movement, Khul lunged forwards and cut off the chieftain's head. Then he butchered his flesh until nothing remained but a red ruin.

'No place for the weak,' he slurred, half drunk on rage, 'at the foot of Khome's throne.'

Slamming the sword into the ground, he went to retrieve his axe. Its voice echoed in his skull, drawing his attention as it demanded for its bloodlust to be slaked.

'Aye,' Khul muttered to the axe, wrapping his meaty fist around the leather

haft, 'you'll have your fill.'

He regarded the five corpses and began the grisly work of taking the heads and flensing them of all flesh and muscle.

After a short while, five bloody skulls stared at him through hollow eyes, their rictus grins suggesting they were much happier in death than they had ever been in life. Khul stacked them one atop the other, erecting a slaughter shrine so he might convene with his god.

As he ate the defeated chieftains' flesh, he grinned, as if listening to words only he could hear, for the plains were almost silent. Then he heard a sound, one that emanated from the corporeal world. Strips of skin and sinew hanging from his teeth, Khul looked up sharply.

His axe was already in his hand as a daemonic hound sloped out from amongst the bodies.

'Grizzlemaw...' uttered Khul, both greeting and curse at the same time.

The beast had gorged itself, its mouth a ruby red from the feast. It was looking intently at Khul, deciding whether it should attack. Scenting Khorne's favour, it relented and padded to its master's side.

Khul seized it by the neck, despite the hound's monstrous size.

For a moment the beast resisted, but Khul would not be denied and it heeled before his dominance.

'You are mine, creature,' he hissed to the beast, and heard it growl in acquiescence.

In the distance, Khul heard chanting. He smelled roasting flesh and saw the glow of immense fires on the horizon. A gathering of his warriors.

'The feast is over,' Khul murmured to his hound as he released it. 'War calls.'

He snarled, his rage still molten at his defeat, but smiled through his clenched teeth at the prospect of a fight and an adversary most worthy.

The stronghold was close.

'I shall take your skull, Vendell Blackfist,' Khul whispered as he headed northward, 'and then... ascend.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Bringers of the storm

Ithar cried out in agony. Ionus Cryptborn carefully but firmly placed his hand over the stricken warrior's forehead to stifle his anguish. A mote of healing celestial magic entered the Retributor, but did little more than ease his pain. It would take more than this to sustain his life.

'Be still, brother,' Ionus whispered, one eye on the skies in the hope of seeing Sturmannon's Prosecutors return.

Ithar's heavy sigmarite armour was badly torn and rent. Huge grooves had been carved through the gilded breastplate and into his flesh. Bones had been shattered, organs pierced. In places, the flesh was burned. Though paladins were the hardest of the Stormcast, they were not invulnerable. Ithar teetered on the brink, his stony-faced Retributor-Prime looking on.

'Will he live?' asked Theodrus, hefting his lightning hammer meaningfully. 'Or is mercy all we have left to give him?'

Ionus raised his hand for calm.

'I need a moment longer, Theodrus,' he told him, returning to his ministrations.

It had been an ambush. Eighteen souls badly bloodied by a hunting pack of khgoraths.

Ever since parting ways with the Lord-Celestant, Ionus's chamber had been attacked at every turn. Monsters and peril were ubiquitous in these lands, it seemed. After a hard march, they had reached sight of their objective, a looming tower of brass. As the paladins had led the column through a narrow defile in a forest which bore blades instead of leaves on its trees, the

khorgoraths had struck.

The four warriors who had lost their heads to the beasts were gone, with only ribbons of corposant to mark their passing. The rest had lived, but were brutally wounded. Now, Ionus had to try and keep them alive. They would need every hammer in the battle to come.

So far, he had managed to save all but two. Ithar was the last.

‘Sigmar...’ he intoned in a sepulchral voice. ‘O Lord of Azyr, Master of the Storm...’ Ionus clenched the relic hammer, holding it aloft as he let go of Ithar’s mouth with his other hand and gently placed it upon the warrior’s chest. His reliquary-icon stood nearby, driven into the earth. The skeletal totem bound to it, a sword in its bony fingers as it hung in silent repose, looked on as if in judgement. Ithar’s golden mask was lying next to it, split from crown to chin.

‘Heed my prayers and bestow your grace upon this paladin so he might rise to fight again in your name. Heed me, Sigmar!’ Ionus cried aloud, as black clouds began to gather overhead. ‘Grant us your glory. Bring forth the storm!’

A lightning bolt arced down from the heavens and struck Cryptborn’s hammer. He shuddered as the immortal god-power went through him and into Ithar. Slowly, a cerulean glow began to suffuse the fallen paladin, reknitting the wounds in his flesh.

In moments it was over and Ithar was restored.

Ionus sagged, the effort draining, and glanced at the hourglass he had set down the moment he began. The last few grains trickled down its neck as Ithar sat up.

‘Rise,’ said Ionus, standing himself.

‘Praise the God-King,’ Theodrus murmured, and held his hammer to his chest to venerate the Lord of Storms.

‘We are whole again,’ Ionus told him, although he sounded weary. ‘The tower awaits.’ He spoke to his entire Exemplar Chamber, who had been silently looking on. As if the Lord-Relictor had summoned them, Sturmannon’s Prosecutors swept in from the north.

The gathered paladins made room for them to land. Ionus held his ground, but stood ready to receive them.

‘I bear tidings, Lord-Relictor,’ said Sturmannon.

‘The tower’s garrison?’

‘Is nothing we cannot overcome, but there is something... *unnatural* about it. This is no mere keep, wrought of stone and metal.’

‘It’s a temple, Sturmannon,’ Ionus told him, in a voice as deathly as the grave, ‘pure and simple. A monument to war, and it must be cast down.’

‘I saw a priest upon the parapet, one who bore a totem that was utterly unlike your reliquary.’

Ionus knew of whom Sturmannon spoke. Ever since they had won the battle on the Igneous Delta, Ionus had wondered what had happened to the blood-priest. Now he knew, and it was ill news indeed.

The brass tower was close. Ionus could feel it, and strove to marshal his violent thoughts, for he knew they were not entirely his own. As he pushed the

urge for blood from his mind, as he saw his fellow Stormcast Eternals do, another thought intruded. It slipped in like a shadow, at first unseen but chill as the grave.

A cold, ancient voice echoed in the Lord-Relictor's skull and the sound of it froze his very marrow.

A tithe is owed. A tithe shall be given.

A soul for a soul.

A hand on Ionus's shoulder brought him around. At first he thought its fingers were made of bone...

'Lord-Relictor?' asked Theodrus, his concern obvious even behind the gold mask he wore.

'All is well,' Ionus lied, clapping the Retributor-Prime on his back. 'All is well. We march. With all haste, brothers.'

CHAPTER SIX

The Red Pyramid

Khul reached his lair on the third day. Grim menhirs stood at the edge of his domain, guarding a red-stained path that fed into an immense flagstoned courtyard. A great archway of stone sat in the middle of it, surrounded by warriors and raised up on a black dais. Beyond that was the Red Pyramid, its great shadow eclipsing all.

There was no fortress, no stronghold as such. Khul had no need for one, such was his dominance of these lands. He had all but conquered the Brimstone Peninsula, but his throne room was little more than a stone chair and the wealth of trophies that surrounded it.

Hordes thronged the courtyard, though they were wise enough to give Khul's throne a wide berth. They were some of the many warbands he had brought together to form his Goretide. The bloodreavers and Chaos warriors present were but a portion of the martial strength of Khul's armies.

Blood soaked the warlord's skin, hair and armour. His skull-mask was flecked with arterial spray. Khul had carved a red ruin across the Brimstone Peninsula, severing heads to satisfy his blinding rages and slake his thirst for retribution.

Throughout this bloody fugue, barely realising the carnage he was reaping, a vision struck Khul over and over like a hammer blow to the skull. More than once, it had staggered the warlord, a bestial roar so powerful it had made his ears bleed and his teeth tremble. It was his god speaking to him. Khul's head echoed with the promises of Khorne, bellowed from atop the mountain of skulls where the Blood God had fashioned his throne.

Khul saw himself, astride the lofty peak of the Red Pyramid. He had become a true champion of Chaos, axe brandished at the hellish sky, where clouds churned in torment and a crimson rain drenched the land. Khul too was painted red – red with the endless slaughter he had committed in Khorne's name and red with the Eye of the Gods upon him.

Chosen.

Exalted.

In his mind's eye, Khul saw himself changed, his human body becoming but a shell for what lurked within. He grew, his flesh stretching and blackening with the hellfire of metamorphosis. Armour plate buckled and then split as a grotesquely enlarged musculature broke through.

Pain.

He gritted his teeth, lurching onto his knees. Hugging his chest, he bent over as two immense wings, black and glossy as obsidian, pierced through the skin of his back and unfurled. Horns sprouted from the bony growths in his temples. Hooves tore his boots to shreds.

When he arose again, he was no longer a man. A dark aura wreathed his iron-hard flesh, and a rugged mane as black as night trailed from his immense head and neck. A giant stood upon the Red Pyramid, and mortals wept at the sight. Khul had ascended to claim a daemonic crown and war by his master's side forever as a prince of slaughter. Craning back his head, Khul bellowed, and his cry of exultation and fury echoed across the vastness of Aqshy...

Abruptly, Khul's thoughts returned to what was, not what would be if he were to raise his pyramid of skulls and claim his reward. As he walked the red-stained path, Khul would not forget his promise, nor what had been promised in return.

'An immortal to crown my tribute, lord...' he murmured, stepping upon the bone-wrought flagstones of the courtyard.

Grizzlemaw snarled in agreement, as if it had somehow been privy to Khul's thoughts of ascension. It loped behind the warlord at a short distance, its muzzle and fangs red from feasting. It halted as its master did.

Khul had stopped to regard the gate. It was hard not to, such was its presence, even with the looming Red Pyramid behind it.

The Gate of Wrath was immense, a great and powerful edifice that had stood through the ages and endured wars of conquest. Even from a distance, Khul felt the anger and hatred emanating off the ancient structure. Though carved of stone, it was no mundane ruin. Khorne had whispered to him of its raising. It had been anointed with blood, and its very mortar was human bone meal and ground viscera. The archway held within it a portal. Light bled from it and shadows roamed within this churning miasma of blood, held in place by the confines of the arch. It was a doorway to the Realm of Chaos, and the Blood God's throne of skulls.

Warriors flocked to this place of loathing and destruction, drawn by its evil, overwhelmed by the bloodlust it evoked.

Hundreds gathered in the shadow of the gate, devouring the battlefield slain, cannibalising hearts torn from the chests of the fallen. Drums fashioned from

hollowed-out skulls beat a raucous tattoo in time with the blare of thigh-bone horns. Some danced, a crude and belligerent performance intended to please the Dark Gods and bring their gaze upon the performer. Others fought for favour. Many just took their fill of flesh.

It was ritualistic. Shamanistic.

Even above the manic fervour of these men, Khul could hear the clangour of industry, the sound carrying across many leagues: the towers.

Forged of hell-brass and studded with the skulls of the unworthy, there were eight of these grim monuments. Each marked a point in the star of Chaos, the eightfold path upon which all worshippers of Khorne trod. And in the middle of that star was the Gate of Wrath.

Daemon blacksmiths and slaves in their thousands had toiled to raise the towers that stretched far across the Brimstone Peninsula. And though they were distant, nearly lost in the palls of unearthly smoke that blighted the sky, Khul felt their malign presence.

Chains that no mortal eye could perceive held the gate in thrall. Each was made not from metal, but from deeds. To the far south lay carnage, conquest, massacre and destruction, and to the north, fratricide, dismemberment, cannibalism and butchery.

A slaughterer's oath, carved out in death and blood, bound each metaphysical chain to one of the eight towers and together kept the Gate of Wrath open.

Even then it struggled against its bondage.

Though he was still mortal, Khul had sight beyond the corporeal realm. He saw how the chains strained to hold their quarry. The tempest, the one creeping across the heavens in brooding thunderheads, the storm that had brought the golden warriors was the cause.

A threat manifested in Khul's mind. They would come for the gate.

As he stepped into the maddening light emanating from the Gate of Wrath, Khul felt an unquenchable desire surge up from within.

For the first time since he had arrived, he noticed that the bodies being feasted upon were not just the Goretide's fallen enemies. Many were warriors of Khul's warband, feeding on their own instead of waging war against the golden warriors.

Khul saw Hrulkar the slaver-king, Goreklad the torturer-lord, Fenskar the skull-collector, Agrik the beast-master... Chieftains and champions all.

'Weak... wretched...'

A tremor afflicted Khul's hands. It grew into a tremble that ran up his entire arm. Then he was shaking, every bone wracked by a delirious frenzy that had froth spewing from his mouth.

Through a cage of clenched teeth, Khul spat to his flesh hound, 'Slake your thirst.'

Several of the bloodreavers closest to their warlord looked up from their revels, their mouths and jerkins spattered and bloody.

'Behold, Lord of Skulls,' roared Khul, his voice ululating across the encampment until all had stopped what they were doing to look upon him. 'A

red dawn!’

The first bloodreaver barely had time to cry out as Grizzlemaw leapt and tore out his throat.

Others raised their weapons, at last realising their lord’s madness.

It would not save them. Screaming in rage, Khul tore into the throng with an unstoppable fervour.

The sun blazed overhead like a baleful eye observing the slaughter.

Two against hundreds, but Khul and his hound would not be denied. His savagery caused some to flee. Those who stood their ground were cut down, their heads cleaved. A great many heads, sacrificed unto the altar of Khorne from which all violent acts ultimately stemmed.

And throughout the carnage, the Blood God spoke to his chosen vassal, his voice the roar of endless destruction and the screaming of the damned. Khul gritted his teeth, but his agony was soon usurped by blinding, all-consuming murderlust.

It was a day of blood, a red dawn as Khul had prophesied.

The sun had dipped and grown cold in the black night by the time the massacre was done.

Khul sank to his knees. He shuddered with every laboured breath, driven to the brink of exhaustion by his reaping. Razors, not air, sawed in and out of his lungs. His heart thundered in a raging tattoo. And though his muscles burned and his limbs ached from the immense tally of the dead, he stood and found himself surrounded by a lake of blood.

Countless barbarian heads floated amidst the gore, but it was the reflection of the portal that caught Khul’s attention.

It began innocuously enough, a bubbling foam that rose to the surface of the crimson pool as the foul slick began to boil. Then there was intense heat and the stench of dying things, of burned metal and offal, the reek of a furnace.

Something stirred within the miasma of blood, a disturbance that formed ripples across the lake. Slowly, inexorably, a horn jutted forth from the congealed blood. It curved into a hook, black as sackcloth and wet like oil.

Khorne’s foot soldier blinked as it became corporeal, rising slowly. Khul saw the chain it had used to gain passage into this realm, and he heard snapping bone as the daemon’s hooves crushed the skulls from the Blood God’s endless battlefield underfoot.

To those untouched by Chaos, the bloodletter would have simply appeared to rise as if the lake was as deep as an ocean. Khul knew it was fathomless and he also knew that no daemon of Khorne could ever manifest in so gentle a fashion. As the summoning required blood and violence, so too did manifestation, and a host of bloodletters had vied for the right to enter the mortal realm. Daemon fought daemon, ensuring a slaughter from which only the strongest could emerge triumphant.

The one before Khul now was the first, therefore it was the mightiest.

The bloodletter was an exemplar of violence given form: bent-back limbed with an elongated snout, and red and iron-hard skin shimmering with heat haze. It bowed, horns dipped in respect but not acquiescence, as its black and

hateful eyes regarded the warlord.

‘Are you the one who summoned me?’ it asked in both question and challenge, its resonant voice like metal scraping bone.

Khul nodded, his axe held loosely in his hand.

The bloodletter carried its own weapon. It was forged of no metal known to man or any creature of the Mortal Realms. A hellblade.

‘Then...’ uttered the daemon, as it drank in the slaughter arrayed around it and the offering in blood, ‘...we shall serve.’

The aetheric chains dangling in the pool had no anchor above, but went taut as a horde of bloodletters pulled their bodies forth into reality. Blinking and scenting, their long pink tongues tasted the air. They were not alone.

Hulking metal beasts emerged with them – bloodcrushers, the brass steeds of Khorne. They were no mere mounts; they were monsters. Far larger than any horse, there was something distinctly bullish about them but clad in armour plate stained with the blood of a thousand slain foes. The beasts bayed and growled, smoke exuding from their nostrils, their fell noises metallic and oddly discordant. Even for Khul, it grated on his senses and filled his mind with visions of conquest.

It took only moments for the warlord to have a legion of daemon riders at his command, their dread banners swaying with chained skulls and strips of leathery flesh.

As one, they raised their weapons.

Their leader, one of Khorne’s heralds, saluted with its sword.

‘Name the ones we are to murder,’ it rasped, its blood-cinder breath tainting the breeze.

‘Vendell Blackfist,’ Khul replied, for Khorne had shown him the army that marched on his towers and the one who was leading it. ‘Devour his vassals, but bring him to me so I can cut off his craven head.’

The herald bowed once more, and the bloodcrushers surged southwards. The earth trembled under the stampede of their mounts and red lightning cut ragged strips into the heavens.

‘Now you shall face a storm, Blackfist,’ said Khul.

His deep laughter boomed louder than the thunder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Towers of brass

‘How do we breach the tower?’ asked Theodrus, the Retributor’s eagerness for battle obvious. ‘What are your orders, my lord?’

Ionus Cryptborn had mustered his army in a massive gorge, veined with thin streams of lava. The darkness of the night, alloyed to the sulphurous smoke rising from the basin of the flume, was enough to conceal their ranks, but not caustic enough to trouble a Stormcast.

The reflected glow of the lava gave their armour a lambent shine, though not bright enough to give away their position.

‘Patience, paladin,’ Ionus uttered. ‘I learned long ago it pays to be wary when attacking your enemy’s stronghold. And we are not so unscathed as to throw our caution aside.’

A dread aura bled off the brass tower.

Its armaments were clad in metal and shimmered with heat. Skulls had been hammered into the sides and piled up at the base like macabre footings. Foul, daemonic gargoyles leered down from the battlements. Spikes, thick chains of iron and a heavy, barbed portcullis kept aggressors at bay, though who would challenge the might of the Goretide in these lands was beyond the Relictor.

No archers or war engines defended it, but the walls were thick and its vantage high.

Evidence of a forest surrounded the tower, but its trunks had been cut down. The stumps remained, oozing red sap that looked uncomfortably like blood. The gruesome sight of it put Ionus in mind of severed necks, rather than trees, as if an army had been sunk deep into the earth surrounding the tower and

decapitated one by one as they struggled helplessly.

Perhaps they had been, but he had no desire to find out.

Either way, the garrison would see them coming and send out an army before Sigmar's chosen could even reach the outer border. If they were trammelled it would give the warriors inside time to organise a defence or summon further reinforcements.

The attack had to be swift and decisive. It was bad enough he had parted ways with Vandus and left the Lord-Celestant unsupported; he could not fail in this also.

'If we could move unseen...' Ionus murmured, and eyed the tumultuous sky and burgeoning clouds overhead.

Behind the grim facade of his skull mask, Ionus smiled.

'I know what must be done.'

Rthoth slumped against the battlements, gorged on flesh and drunk on the ale his kind fermented in vats of black iron. A heady brew, it brought blinding anger to the fore at first before surging through the body like a fever and leaving behind a burning need for more.

'Empty...' he slurred to Gannon, another of the bloodreaver garrison.

Rthoth reached for his axe, grabbing the haft on his third attempt.

'Eh, swine. I am speaking to you.'

But Gannon wasn't listening, nor were the other warriors standing watch on the parapet. Instead, they were looking and pointing.

Heaving up his body to peer through the brass spikes that crowned the edge of the tower, Rthoth saw what had caught the attention of his fellow tribesmen.

'What is that?' he asked, briefly wondering if his hallucinations from imbibing the dark ale had yet to abate.

A storm rolled towards them – a massive belt of cloud. Howling gales raced along with it, and thunder boiled around it as lightning flashes lit up the dark hollows within.

'Like nothing I have ever seen,' uttered Gannon, as the half-chewed femur dropped from his meaty grasp.

The storm was not of sky, but surged across the ground like a carpet of fog.

Rthoth shook his head, to try and shake off his torpor. 'How is that possible?'

Inside the storm, all was calm as the Stormcasts doggedly advanced. Even the lofty Prosecutors were concealed by the rolling thunderhead their Lord-Relictor had summoned. The slow beats of their wings crackled in time with the dolorous footfalls of the heavily armoured paladins.

Ionus led them, his icon held before him like a guiding beacon.

'Make ready,' he told his warriors, scarcely needing to raise his voice such was his mastery of the storm. 'When we reach the threshold, they will be undone.'

'I will strike for the tower's summit,' said Sturmannon, flying by the Lord-Relictor's side.

'Be careful, we know not what horrors it might yet possess.'

Again, Ionus's mind went back to the blood-priest, the one he knew lurked somewhere within the tower. Once more, he thought of Vandus fighting alone, against Khul and against prophecy.

There was no time left for regret; the gatehouse now loomed before them. An iron portcullis barred the way, threaded with skulls and studded with spikes. But as the storm veil parted and revealed the warriors within, no foes came out to meet them. The gate remained shut.

Instead the bloodreavers on the parapet hurled insult and obscenity, believing themselves safe behind their walls of brass. A few threw axes between jeers or tossed rocks, remaining steady.

None of the Stormcasts fell, their armour fending off the desultory efforts of the garrison.

Theodrus mustered the Retributors, preparing to rip the tower down a piece at a time if necessary.

'We can batter those gates into submission,' he told his Lord-Relictor belligerently, 'and then the curs within...'

'Hold,' Ionus ordered, though he knew the Retributors were eager to be unleashed. Sturmannon's Prosecutors were the same, held aloft on their wings of light, beyond the reach of a hurled axe. Insults bit deeper and spurred the herald to want to act.

'I can sweep them off that parapet, Lord-Relictor.'

'No, wait...' Something felt wrong, but Ionus had yet to identify his worry.

The cut-down trees, a buried army with heads cut from the bodies of its soldiers, the deep red soil and the apparent reluctance of the garrison...

'When have you known a servant of Khorne to ever refuse a fight?' he asked.

'Lord-Relictor, we cannot delay,' Theodrus replied, and signalled the attack.

Ionus let it happen, having no good reason to stop it. But when the Retributors had passed into the decapitated grove, and the gargoyles crouched atop the tower began to speak, he realised his concerns had been justified.

By then, it was already too late.

In the dark keep of the brass tower, a hulking figure regarded the army outside the gates through a murder slit in the wall.

He smiled as the Stormcasts came closer, urged by the murderous desire the tower evoked in all warriors.

'You have come for blood,' Threx Skullbrand whispered to the darkness. 'And you shall have it.'

Their voices were iron, the grinding of metal against metal. Far from being grotesque statues, the gargoyles had another purpose than mere macabre decoration.

Ionus saw the danger, but his warning cry was stolen by the deep chanting of the statues.

'Stand fast,' he cried, 'and defend yourselves!'

The cut-down trees... they were a trap. Not necks or trunks, but vents.

The ground underfoot began to tremble, before a fount of scalding blood

burst from the red soil and took a piece of the vanguard with it. Retributors flailed, catapulted skyward.

Armour was scorched, flesh burned, and warriors came down to earth thunderously. Lightning flashes lit up the night as Sigmar reclaimed his own and the strength of Ionus's chamber was eroded.

He heard shouting, confusion, and fought to restore order.

A second eruption of blood followed swiftly, and the air was filled with the death cries of Azyr's paladins. Some tried to brace against the blood plumes but were torn off their feet anyway. No sigmarite plate nor lightning hammer would avail them.

Two further eruptions burst forth, spattering Cryptborn's armour with hissing gobbets as he took what shelter he could. He grimaced as the blood crept inside the aegis of his plate and scalded the flesh beneath.

'Enough,' he snarled, watching Sturmannon's Prosecutors whirling and diving to try to avoid the horrific blood rain.

Muttering words of power, Ionus called upon the Lord of Storms and unleashed lightning from the heavens.

A cerulean bolt arced from the clouds, as straight and pure as a spear. It struck the summit of the tower, lighting up the darkness. It utterly destroyed one of the gargoyles and silenced the rest. The blood-rain ebbed and no more lightning flashes split the night.

Ionus heard the jeering of the bloodreavers anew, and turned his grim visage upon them.

'So the Bloodbound are craven!' he bellowed like a clarion horn. 'I thought as much. Those who skulk are unworthy to hold a blade!'

The howls of laughter coming from the parapet turned to shouts of belligerence. A moment later, the portecullis began to rise.

'Dolts and simpletons,' Ionus muttered, 'easily goaded.' He nodded to Theodrus to lead the attack. 'Vanquish them. Leave none alive.'

Baying and snarling, a horde screamed out from the mouth of the tower. Bearded warriors, clad in blood-red plate and hefting thick blades, crashed into a wall of charging Retributors. The gilded paladins bore the brunt of the blood warriors' fury and blunted it against their iron-hard resolve and formidable armour. The garrison of the brass tower had never fought such a foe as these, led by a warrior for whom death was preferred to failure.

Anger drove Theodrus. Anger, and guilt.

Memories of his former existence, before his Reforging, were vague and fleeting. For some it was this way, while others remembered more. No one knew why or needed to ask. But in the surge of battle, when his blood was up and righteous words upon his lips, Theodrus remembered.

He remembered the temple on the hill. He remembered the old man and the day he staggered into his village speaking of horrors. Raiders had come to the temple, intent on defiling it.

All knew the dangers beyond the walls of the village, how remote the temple was, but Theodrus could not let this sacrilege stand. He had been Thaed back

then, though the name meant little now. Thaed had taken most of the village warriors and ridden hard for the temple. But when he arrived, he saw it was empty, there were no raiders in sight. What he did see was a great flame light the sky, glowing ominously from the direction of the village. The old man had lied to them, for he was not old and not even a man, not really. Without warriors to protect it, the village burned along with all in it, including Thaed's own kin.

He merely existed for a time afterwards, wandering the wilds until the raiders returned. But they were not just raiders anymore. They were conquerors now, their ranks swollen with monsters. Thaed stood no chance as their onslaught swept the land, but he stood anyway and begged for death with a blade in his hand. The light came swiftly after that, and the memory of his pain faded until the day he raised a weapon in anger again.

As he fought, Theodrus spoke the names of his kith and kin, every man, woman and child amongst them. He let it steel him, his desire to avenge them keener than any sword, harder than any hammer. Lightning struck, evil men fell dead and Theodrus led the line.

'Avenge them!' he cried, tears of grief and hate filling his eyes, unseen behind his impassive mask. 'Avenge them!'

No amount of retribution would ever be enough, but on he slew.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dark tithes

In the shadow of the tower's grim walls, the swell of battle was intense. Ionus rejoiced grimly as he fought shoulder to shoulder beside the Retributors.

At the front of the line, the struggle was at its fiercest. Axe blows rained in from the blood warriors, the air shimmering with the heat of their rage as they cut through even god-forged sigmarite.

Several Stormcasts lost limbs, great gouts of crimson ejected across their gilded plate. One was impaled on the blade of a serrated sword. His mask drooled red as its wearer coughed up blood. Another died instantly, head severed from body, and disappeared in a blazing coruscation of light a moment later. Across the line, flashes lit up the dark as a hellish frenzy of hacking goreaxes took their inevitable toll.

It became a scrum, brutal and attritional. The front ranks on each side quickly enmeshed as vigour and momentum took individual combatants deeper into their enemy's formation. In truth, the Bloodbound had none, just a mob of bellowing and frenzied killers.

Whereas the blood warriors fought with fury and abandon, the Retributors embraced discipline and determination, fighting as one. Their lightning hammers rose and fell with relentless efficiency, crushing skulls and splitting the hefty war-plate of their enemies. Even as the barbarians died, they fought on, driven by rage, but the paladins were thorough and smote their enemies until there was little left but mangled remains.

Slowly, painstakingly, the Retributors reformed their ranks and began to push towards the tower.

'Into them!' roared Cryptborn, smashing a blood warrior aside with his relic hammer. 'Do not relent!'

He raised his reliquary staff and a bolt of lightning crackled forth, destroying a slew of enemies.

'As one, as one!' cried Cryptborn, a wash of gore spraying across his skull-mask. He briefly caught sight of Theodrus urging his retinue forward. 'Theodrus! Hold them. Hold them back.'

Pausing between hammer swings, Theodrus turned at the sound of his name, nodded and brought his men into order.

His paladins slowly formed the hammer, an offensive formation intended to blunt an opponent's attack against a wedge of armour, many ranks thick, before pushing through with a narrow but even deeper column. To the Prosecutors whirling and pitching above, it would resemble a hammer, hence the name.

At the thought of the heralds, Ionus looked up.

Sturmannon's retinue harried the tower ramparts, darting beneath hurled blades and spears, before sweeping in to unleash their celestial hammers. As agile as they were, not all the Prosecutors succeeded and heralds fell from the sky, burning like comets with wings ablaze.

Spears of light arced heavenward before they even struck the ground.

Scowling, Cryptborn pushed on into the fray. His eyes met those of Theodrus.

Pure as pools of azure, they shone with devotion but burned with vengeance. Theodrus raised his hammer aloft.

'For Sigmar and Azyr!'

A roar came in answer from the swell of sweating, grunting, blood-slick warriors. A huge figure barrelled into the fight. He was more of a beast than a man, with a thick neck and broad shoulders. In one meaty fist he clenched a jagged-bladed axe, notched from splitting bone. In the other hand, he had an immense totem, pulsing with evil light. Furnace heat bled from the icon, the skull-image of Khorne resplendent in its anti-glory. He was the demagogue, a chain of skulls festooned about his neck denoting his rank, and crimson war-plate crested with spikes – the rage-maker.

'Bloodseccator...' breathed Ionus Cryptborn.

He was the one from the battle for the Gates of Azyr. He had proclaimed his name to his Blood God, beseeching his favour. And he had received it, a most terrible boon that brought a rain of blood and blinding fury to anyone it touched: Khorne's realm, manifest in reality.

'Threx Skullbrand,' said Cryptborn.

Heaving his own warriors aside, Skullbrand buried his axe in a Prosecutor who had swooped in to engage him.

The herald's breastplate split, a ragged red cleft between the parted metal. He gaped, clutching crackling air before his hammers could form. Skullbrand finished him with a savage headbutt and grimaced as another flash of light soared heavenward.

'Kill him!' shouted Cryptborn, knowing what would happen next as he

battered through the throng to reach the bloodseccator. 'Bring him down!'

Another Prosecutor arced towards the bloodseccator, angling sharply, intent on avenging his comrade. A third flew swiftly after him, clenching a pair of crackling hammers.

The first died when he was caught by the throat. With the Prosecutor choking in his grasp, Skullbrand ripped off the gilded arch of his wings. Each crackled before its light ebbed to shivering composant. The herald's neck was broken with a savage twist, his lifeless body like a hurled spear as it struck his chasing comrade. He fell.

Skullbrand slew this one too, slamming a hobnailed boot on the Prosecutor's chest to hold him down before an axe in the warrior's emotionless mask ended his suffering.

Theodrus and his paladins had smashed a path clear, and Ionus burst through the enemy ranks and charged.

As Skullbrand met the eye of the Lord-Relictor, the bloodseccator grinned. He knew it was too late for anyone to stop him.

With a triumphant roar, he rammed the icon of Khorne into the blood-soaked earth.

The stench of foetid blood rose high in the gorge, tainting the air. A storm of wrath burst from the icon, throwing Ionus off his feet.

A knot of paladins rushed to their Lord-Relictor, as a horde of Khornate bloodreavers spilled into the gap between the bloodseccator and his foes.

Ionus cursed as he got to his feet.

'Close ranks,' he snarled, and could only glare at the hulking blood-priest.

You and I shall meet soon, he promised.

For now, the battle continued. The Stormcasts were in the ascendancy but it was far from over.

The crimson rain began again, driving the Bloodbound into fits of apoplexy. Soon the paladins were hard-pressed again, and the baleful roar of distant daemons in a realm of carnage seemed close and at hand.

The unsettling taint of Khorne's own domain and the frenzy it evoked in his followers were merely opening acts to what followed...

It began as thunder, a deep rumble that came through the earth, rather than the sky.

A cloud of dust arose, barely visible in the darkness... Then an army resolved, roving along the night-black horizon. Moonlight glinted off their armoured barding.

'Cavalry?' growled Theodrus, in a brief moment's respite.

Around him, the two forces clashed fiercely.

'No mortal kind,' rasped Ionus. 'Those aren't horses, nor are their riders knights. At least, not of flesh and blood. I-' he began, before violently convulsing. At first, he thought it might be the effects of the icon, trying to turn his mind to reckless hate. But as the chill swept through his marrow, turning his bones to ice, he knew it was something else.

Something old, and from the past. From before, when he had been someone else.

The brass tower faded, becoming as incorporeal as smoke. The faces of his fellow Stormcasts froze in dark ice.

‘No, not now. Not this!’

Even as his mind was wrenched away, Ionus could hear the oncoming stampede of the bloodcrushers until even that bled away to sepulchral silence.

He opened his eyes, not realising he had closed them, and found he was standing in a long hall of cold, grey stone. Dust motes trickled from the ceiling in an endless, sad rain.

Darkness, abject and all pervasive, blinded Ionus to much of his surroundings. He imagined mausoleums, the slow creak of rotting wood, bones and earth as chill as winter frost.

He knew this place, for he had been here before in another life. The Deep Barrows – one of the many underworlds of Shyish, the Realm of Death.

‘Why am I here?’ he asked of the dark.

His own voice echoed back like a taunt.

‘Answer me!’

A tithe is owed. A tithe shall be given.

The same words returned, haunting and ageless as before.

A soul for a soul.

A malign intelligence regarded Ionus from the shadows, though he could scarcely perceive it. The only thing he could discern was a vague silhouette, and two piercing orbs of baleful green. Neither leavened the dark. Instead, they drank in the light.

You defied me once before, Eonid ven Denst, uttered the voice. It was the sound of depthless winter, of ancient wisdom beyond comprehension. It was entropy and the slow return to order. It was death incarnate.

Ionus’s reply carried some steel. ‘It has been a long time since I was known as Eonid ven Denst.’

A dry rasp like the whispering of thousands of corpses issued from the darkness.

Laughter, Ionus realised. He was being mocked.

A tithe is owed. A tithe shall be given, the voice repeated, though the shadow of its owner remained unmoving.

A soul for a soul.

Eldritch light flared into being, sculpted into the resemblance of a woman.

The shadow moved, leaning forward on its throne as Ionus cried out and reached for his wife. His sigmarite-clad fingers began to erode and rust before he could touch her, the grace Sigmar had given him undone in an instant.

It took just moments to reduce Ionus Cryptborn, Lord-Relictor and Stormcast Eternal to Eonid ven Denst, Amethyst Prince.

The simulacrum of ven Denst’s wife writhed in agony, her mouth open in a silent scream that he could only hear in his memories.

‘Please!’ begged ven Denst, his pale face awash with tears. He could feel her now, but as his skin gently brushed against hers she began to wither and decay. ‘Please...’ His voice, once so strong and formidable, became a whimper. ‘Please...’

Ven Denst sank to his knees, with only a pile of ashen remains in his grasp. He looked up to face his tormenter. Only darkness looked back, but it was well beyond pity or compassion.

'You promised me that you would keep her. That we would be reunited in death.'

With eternal life comes eternal pain. You should not have defied me. I remember everything. I remember the Days of Shattered Bone.

Ven Denst let the ash fall and rose to stand before his accuser. He felt his former strength returning. A gauntleted fist, not the hand of an Amethyst Prince, clutched his relic-hammer. He was Ionus Cryptborn again.

A last thought struck Ionus, of Vandus on his knees, besieged by Chaos, and a dark champion looming over him with a ready axe. It was the prophecy as Vandus had described it.

A tithe is owed. A tithe shall be given.

A soul for a soul.

'Release me,' uttered Cryptborn, then bellowed when no answer came. 'Release me!'

He slammed down his reliquary staff and a great flash of light blinded him.

As it faded, he heard voices and smelled blood, the reek of hot metal and sulphur.

A retinue of paladins surrounded Ionus, fending off a horde of attackers. Theodrus led them, an unyielding bulwark of sigmarite against an ocean of fury.

'Lord-Relictor...' His mask could not hide the concern in his voice.

Ionus raised a hand to show he was all right. 'Where are the daemons?' he asked, still groggy but rising to his feet.

Theodrus did not need to answer, as the thunderous charge of the bloodcrushers hit.

A spearthrust of daemonic cavalry burst right into the heart of the Stormcasts' ranks. Ionus could only watch as his battle formation was breached in several places at once. The beasts the daemons rode were truly monstrous. Warriors were crushed under iron hooves, gored by horns or torn apart with savage teeth.

Lightning cracks tore apart the darkness.

'Hold them!' roared Ionus as he felt the line roll and turn as men were slain. 'Reform as one!'

A Retributor flailed, spitted. A knot of his comrades rushed in and smashed the steed apart with their hammers, but it was hard going. As well as proving incredibly strong, the daemonic beasts were nearly impermeable to all but the most determined of attacks.

After being so close to victory, now the Stormcast Eternals were firmly on the back foot and assailed from all sides.

As their numbers diminished, the Prosecutors could only harry the edges of the enemy's ranks. Any that came too close to the bloodcrushers were cut down, Ionus ordered them back so as not to sell their lives cheaply.

The hammer formation of the paladins had become a circle, with all its

warriors facing outwards and fighting almost innumerable foes. It was the task for which Sigmar had made them, but Ionus knew his chamber's martial strength was finite. He began to see the wisdom of striking for the Gate of Wrath and denying Chaos its endless hosts.

'Together,' he roared again. 'As one, brothers. As one!'

Theodrus bellowed in unison with his Lord-Relictor, chanting the names of the fallen and hurling them like curses at his enemies. He dragged a red-skinned daemon off its steed, first pummelling the rider and then breaking the beast apart.

Others were not so successful.

Ionus saw a clutch of Retributors brought down by half a dozen of the daemons. Some were cut apart by hell-forged blades, others were simply crushed to death. None survived, and the line shrank further.

Inwardly, Ionus groaned. They had been winning. Now it was beginning to unravel. He had lost sight of Skullbrand, but still felt the presence of the bloodsecurator. The red rain stained his armour, and robbed it of its lustre. Thunder rolled across the heavens again, but it was the voice of the Blood God, not the Lord of Storms. It began to wear upon him, slowly eroding his will.

A clutch of Stormcasts, Theodrus amongst them, flew back into the rear ranks. A massive daemonic steed and its rider ploughed in after them. The head of the beast snapped left and right, reaping limbs.

Only Ionus stood before it as it reared up onto its hindquarters.

As it crashed down, the sheer force of it almost took Ionus off his feet. In the end, he staggered, and barely parried a blow that rang against the haft of his relic-hammer. He felt his shoulder jar painfully, and grimaced behind his skull-mask.

Summoning the storm, he sent a bolt of arc lightning into the beast. Fearsome tendrils of crackling celestial magic coursed over its metal hide, but did little more than enrage it.

The rider swung again, and Ionus batted the blow away with his hammer. He countered by smashing the beast's foreleg and, with some relief, saw the armour crack and its ichorous essence flow from the wound.

Stamping and snorting, the frenzied beast tried to crush him, but another paladin got in its way and fell instead. Ionus quickly moved closer so he was harder for it to see. Snarling and baying on the beast's haunches, the rider had to fight to stay mounted.

Ionus struck again, another blow against the foreleg. This time the armour split apart, and viscous black lifeblood gushed forth as the daemon steed bellowed in pain. A third blow crippled it and the beast sank down sharply, pitching its rider forward and onto the ground where Theodrus crushed it with his hammer.

At the same time, Ionus rammed the hilt of his reliquary staff into the beast's eye and drove it deep. He called upon the storm again, the bolt lancing down from a blood-red sky. No armour could protect the daemon steed now, sundered by Sigmar's holy wrath.

'We are failing, Lord-Relictor,' uttered Theodrus breathlessly.

Blood warriors and bloodreavers clamoured for battle, hacking with furious abandon. Scattered amongst their swollen ranks were khorgoraths and even larger beasts now that the tower had given up its entire garrison.

‘Don’t give in to despair, Theodrus,’ Ionus told him.

But as the blood-rain anointed the Stormcasts in hellish red, Ionus knew they could not last much longer. He felt the presence of the tower sapping his strength as more fell beneath the armies of the Blood God.

A long shadow stretched out from the unholy tower. It fell across the Khornate host as if their lord had his eye upon them and granted them his favour.

Ionus looked to the tower, then to his foes. He saw a chance for salvation.

‘Praise Sigmar...’ he whispered, before he spoke to his brothers.

‘Theodrus, hold them off. Keep them at bay for as long as you can.’

Ionus left the fighting rank, the others closing the gap as he retreated into the depths of the Stormcasts’ slowly diminishing throng. Once there, the paladins encircled him and forged a small patch of earth in which the Lord-Relictor could pray.

On his knees, the reliquary staff in both hands, Ionus beseeched the Lord of Storms. His voice was a mere rasp in the tumult, but he fought to make it heard. Again, he invoked Sigmar and closed his mind to the savage imprecations trying to unnerve him.

He clutched the staff tighter, and shut out the din of battle around him.

‘Lord Sigmar, hear me...’ he prayed. ‘Bring forth your lightning, and allow me to be its vessel.’

A low rumble broke across the sky, not the hollow clamouring of daemons this time but the righteous voice of a God-King stirred to anger. It began slow, a distant flash to part the blood-red cloud, the wind rising to cleanse the air.

Ionus prayed harder, his fingers clenched so ardently that his knuckles ached.

‘Sigmar...’ he rasped, and felt another presence upon his shoulder – one that gave him strength. ‘*Sigmar!*’

A column of coruscating lightning roared from the heavens, so pure and bright that no servant of Chaos could bear look upon it. Daemons screamed in agony, whilst the mortal followers shielded their eyes. It hit the ground at the tower’s footings, blackening the earth. Not even a god-sent bolt could have smote Khorne’s monument outright, but Ionus had discerned its weakness. Where the lightning struck, fissures tore through the ground until it was wrenched apart.

An ominous cracking sounded, emanating from the tower. Brass squealed as it lurched against its own weight, leaning ponderously towards the chasm that had now formed beneath it. Seizing the chance, Theodrus and the Retributors who had fought through the throng of enemies slammed their hammers into the lurching footings of the tower.

Still blinded from the god-lightning, the host of Khorne was slow to react as the tower capitulated and came crashing down on them.

A huge pall of dirt and debris spilled up and outwards, as a great clangour of sundered metal resounded across the battlefield. In a single stroke, Ionus had

tipped the scales of the fight. Bodies of mortals and daemons alike were crushed by the cursed stone of the tower, their limbs reduced to a mangled ruin. The foul stink of sulphur tainted the air as the bloodcrushers were banished, but it was the screams of the Bloodbound that lingered longest. Those that were left looked on aghast at what had become of their warhost and the magic of the storm-priest who had struck down the tower.

With the cheers of the Stormcasts ringing in his eyes, Ionus roared for them to attack.

Everything had turned. Even the dread rain had abated as a cool twilight, presaging the dawn, pierced the veil of ruddy cloud that had so besieged Sigmar's chosen.

As the Retributors fell upon the survivors, they smashed what remained of the tower, breaking it apart with their hammers until it was shards and dust.

The surviving daemons fought on until even their fell lord deserted them and they dissolved back into the blood of the fallen. Many of the mortal followers fled, their will to live greater than their desire to fight and die for Khorne.

After a few hours it was done and there were none left to vanquish. A heavy toll had been paid for the victory, though, as nearly half of Cryptborn's men had fallen.

If Threx Skullbrand lived, Ionus could find no sign of him. He was still searching through the rubble and the corpses when Theodrus approached him.

'I witnessed the miraculous this night,' said the Retributor-Prime, humbly kneeling before his Lord-Relictor.

As Ionus looked around, he saw they all were. Even the Prosecutors had taken a knee, their heads bowed in reverence.

'We have triumphed,' he said, raising his voice so all could hear. 'And in so doing averted a great evil. But our task is hardly done and I shall ask more of you before the end.'

'I speak for the chamber when I say we are yours to command, my lord,' said a vehement Theodrus, 'into the Realm of Chaos and back if so needed.'

Ionus put a hand on the paladin's shoulder in comradeship. 'It may yet be, brother. For we are not attacking another tower. Instead we go north. Now rise.'

With the clanking of sigmarite armour, the chamber got to its feet.

'East?' asked Theodrus, and Ionus could hear him frowning by the tone of his voice.

'To Vandus, and the Gate of Wrath. Our brothers will not be alone when they face Korghos Khul.'

The Retributors saluted as one. Ionus knew it had hurt them to abandon the Lord-Celestant.

This is Sigmar's will, thought Ionus, but he heard the voice of another, gnawing at the edges of his mind. It was one whom he owed a debt, one who was determined that debt would be fulfilled, a creature so ancient and powerful it would not be denied.

CHAPTER NINE

Wrath unbound

Vandus stood upon the hill and looked out across the ashen expanse of the Brimstone Peninsula. In the distance, he could still make out the banners of Jactos Goldenmane as his fellow Lord-Celestant forged farther west.

Looming over them was the monolithic Red Pyramid of Korghos Khul and standing in its shadow, the Gate of Wrath itself. It was little more than a vast courtyard of stone, but thronged with warriors.

‘Two prongs, my lord,’ said Dacanthos. ‘We will trap the Goretide and crush them.’

After their reunion in the shadow of the Volatus Ridge, the Lord-Celestants had formed a plan that would see Jactos attack from the far west and Vandus from further east on either side of one of Khul’s brass towers. Both armies avoided its garrison. Bitter fighting against the warbands that currently held sway over the Brimstone Peninsula had seen both armies pushed farther apart than Vandus would have liked, but their strategy could still work.

Khul’s hordes, his Goretide and the lesser warbands that paid him fealty, were in disarray. They had responded to the incursion by Sigmar’s warriors with aggression but without strategy, attacking the many Thunderstrike Brotherhoods alighting on the Brimstone Peninsula. It had left Khul’s stronghold vulnerable, along with the Gate of Wrath.

Vandus meant to take full advantage of the warlord’s lack of foresight. He and Jactos would take the stronghold together and destroy the realmgate. Bereft of reinforcement, Khul’s martial strength would suffer a major blow.

It was a sound plan, but Vandus still frowned. At the parting of their

chambers, Jactos had seemed ever eager in spite of the near annihilation his warriors had faced.

'He overreaches,' said Vandus, eyes narrowed.

'Lord Goldenmane will rein them in.'

'No, he won't.'

Cursing Jactos's recklessness under his breath, Vandus took up Heldensen from where he had thrust it down and went to where his Warrior Chamber waited below.

'It seems our fellow Hammers of Sigmar have set a fast pace,' he declared loudly to his throng. 'Who here thinks we can match it?'

Every Stormcast shouted in affirmation. 'Aye!'

'I thought so,' Vandus told them, hiding his irritation at Jactos and determined to reach the Goldenmanes quickly. 'Onward then... To glory!'

As Laudus Skythunder urged the Hammerhands forward with blasts of his clarion horn, Vandus lingered to watch the Red Pyramid.

'He is up there now,' he said to Calanax who was waiting for his lord nearby, growling in sympathetic ire.

'Khul's reign must end,' swore Vandus, reminded of the vision that prophesied his death, 'and I shall be the one to do it.'

The courtyard echoed to the metallic ring of an axe being sharpened.

Khul was alone and seated upon a throne, his legs apart with an orruk's skull at his feet. It had been a brutish creature whose iron-hard bone made for a serviceable whetstone. It was a needless task, for the edge of his Khornate axe would never blunt. So sharp was it, and such was the potency of the dark sorcery bound into the blade, that it could cut the very fabric of reality itself.

As he carved into the orruk's skull, Khul regarded the ragged banners hanging from the racks arrayed about him and the many trophies of conquest he had won.

Nothing had stood in his path, no king or rival warlord.

'Was I not honourable?' he asked of the revenants of foes long dead. 'Were you not beaten by the stronger opponent?'

He had won every battle, though not always according to his twisted sense of martial pride. Sometimes his desire for glory had forced his hand towards less than honourable deeds. It rankled Khul, though he could attest that every challenge he had ever been given had been accepted, fearlessly and without doubt. And there had been many. He had never known defeat. Now it was different though. Despite his savage joy at such worthy foes to fight, he felt the threat to his dominance posed by the golden warriors. Surely, it was a sign from Khorne that Vendell Blackfist led them. Khul believed it was more than fate that this had happened.

'Destiny brought you to my domain,' he said to the piled skulls around him. They stared at him with hollow eyes, the unworthy, the weak and the craven. There was no place for them upon the Red Pyramid. Khul would not insult his lord with such tawdry offerings.

No, only kings and chieftains would suffice, and they were all dead in these

lands. Khul had slain them. Except for Vendell Blackfist, an immortal to crown his glory and ensure his ascension to daemonhood.

Clenching the orruk skull in one mighty fist he crushed it into bone splinters, discarding what was left.

Rising from his throne, he went and tore down every banner.

‘Nothing!’ he bellowed, smashing his trophies underfoot.

At the foot of the throne, Grizzlemaw stirred from its slumber but did little more.

Khul seethed.

He knew the bloodcrushers had failed, that Threx had been defeated and one of the brass towers had been cast down. He felt it in his blood, in the way it boiled and how Khorne’s anger pained him. The chains fettering the Gate of Wrath strained and twisted, and Khul heard them scream for release.

His gaze strayed beyond the borders of his lair to where he knew his prey watched him.

‘Soon, Vendell Blackfist,’ Khul promised, barely heeding the massive war host gathering and awaiting his command. ‘You and I, to the death.’

He was about to turn away when something else caught his attention on the horizon. An army, distant but still discernible.

‘Not you, Blackfist...’ Khul whispered, then smiled. ‘He brings another to fight his battles for him, the craven.’ He shrugged, laughing. ‘Then let the blood flow.’

A bloody mist had risen from the ground to envelop Jactos and his warriors, not enough to cloud the way ahead but disconcerting all the same. It stuck to the Stormcasts’ armour, robbing it of its sheen and fouling the joints.

‘This war-plate feels like lead,’ groaned Lord-Castellant Neros, trying to scrape the worst of it off.

Jactos felt the unnatural weight of the blood too, but chose not to answer. He was intent on what lay ahead.

They had battled hard and through seemingly numberless warbands to reach so far into Khul’s domain, and the intense fighting had driven a wedge between the Hammerhands and the Goldenmanes, forcing them apart and onto separate paths. Though he would only admit such vainglory to himself, Jactos welcomed it. He wanted this, without any other Warrior Chamber from any Stormhost to intervene. Now he was determined he would face the warlord before Vandus. Though it hurt his pride to confess it, he had failed in the shadow of Volatus Ridge. Now he would make amends and show Sigmar he was worthy of his glory.

He grinned as the pyramid emerged from above the mist, hazy but recognisable. But still there was more.

Great menhirs, carved into the likeness of daemon kings, marked the threshold of Khul’s domain. The stone obelisks were huge and towered above the crimson mist. Their bestial features were contorted in snarls of rage and unfettered wrath. A killing urge bled off them, like sweat off a mortal man, and they clenched whips, maces and axes in their clawed fists.

'Bloodthirsters...' uttered Neros, recognising the image of the foul greater daemons wrought into the stone.

If Khul's domain was protected by such beasts then the task before the Stormcast Eternals was great indeed. Even with the other Stormhosts, like the Anvils of the Heldenhammer and the Lions of the Sigmar, Bloodthirsters would pose a significant threat.

It did little to sour Jactos's ebullient mood.

'Have heart, brothers,' he said, gesturing with his runeblade to the lair that lay beyond the menhirs. 'Our quarry is near.'

Neros hefted his halberd as he thrust the light of his warding lantern forth.

'It is not all that is near, my lord.'

The Bloodbound hordes came swiftly from the mist. They always did, ubiquitous as bones in this parched land. Their war cries split the air – not an ambush this time, but a pitched battle.

'It seems Khul has not left his borders unprotected after all,' said Jactos as he drew his hammer.

Glory beckoned. He had but to dispatch these wretches first.

'Stormcasts!' he cried. 'To arms!'

Elsewhere, others fought with equal fervour and conviction.

Vandus and his Warrior Chamber would not be outdone by the Goldenmanes.

A ragged throng of warriors charged at them across the ash plain, kicking up clods of burning dust and cinder.

The Hammerhands met them in serried ranks, Liberators to the fore with shields upraised and, behind them, the Judicators. Malactus held his arm aloft to halt his retinue.

Every warrior armed with a skybolt bow turned it heavenward as one.

'Release!'

Malactus's voice carried far. It even reached the blood-soaked tribesmen barrelling across the plain. Some faltered as they heard it, wondering what it portended. The answer came swiftly on the lightning shafts of hundreds of skybolt arrows.

Evil men fell in their droves, scythed down by the deadly accuracy of the Judicators. Driven by their bloodlust and momentum, bloodreavers tripped and scrambled as they struck falling bodies. Heavily armoured blood warriors crumpled with arrows in their gullets or eye sockets. The Bloodbound battle line, such as it was, fragmented and scattered. The Liberators did not hesitate, and swept into them with their shields, battering warriors aside or crushing them underfoot. Any who had fight left in them were swiftly dealt with by hammer and blade.

The massacre was quick, but not painless. Not for the Bloodbound.

Vandus had been at the core of the fighting, letting Calanax have his rein as he stood with his retinue. It had felt good to be an integral part of the brotherhood.

In spite of this, Vandus's mood soured when he saw how far Jactos had

gone. The Lord-Celestant himself was somewhere amidst the distant scrum that Vandus now saw.

Decanthos joined him at the front. 'They're closing on the Red Pyramid.'

Vandus nodded, and the scowl he wore behind his mask was obvious from his voice.

'Swifter than us. At this pace, our chambers will not breach the threshold to Khul's domain at the same time.'

The massive Chaos idols that led to where Khul had made his lair appeared to mock them. Each depicted a different greater daemon of Khorne, a dread pantheon of bloodthirsters. Vandus saw one with ragged wings clutching a pair of axes. Another had a whip coiled around its wrist. A third hefted a double-bladed axe.

Looming above all was the Red Pyramid and, in front of that, the Gate of Wrath itself. An archway not unlike the one they had seized on the Igneous Delta, except this one was bent to darkness, a portal to the Realm of Chaos. With it under their control, Khul's warhorde would be unstoppable.

'We should make haste,' said Decanthos, 'and hope these fell creatures are not also in service to Korghos Khul.'

Banners and totems swayed on the horizon as more Bloodbound hordes clamoured for war. The lands around the Brimstone Peninsula were choked with them.

Vandus bellowed for his dracoth and Calanax came running.

As he mounted the saddle, he turned to the Liberator-Prime.

'The Gate of Azyr was a mere prelude compared to this, Decanthos.' Seeing others had gathered and were listening, Vandus raised his voice to address them all. 'We stand at the threshold of hell. Know this is why we were forged. Here is our chance to turn back the tide of evil that has swept across these lands and enslaved them. I shall not falter as I face Chaos, nor will I blink before the daemon. I will stand and declare I am Stormcast Eternal, chosen of Sigmar! Will you declare the same?'

The affirmation from his warriors was deafening. It drowned out the war cries of the tribesmen in the distance, and stunned them into silence.

'Azyr!' bellowed Vandus.

'Azyr!' came the thunderous reply.

'Bring. Them. Death!'

The tide was endless.

Scores of bloodreavers, daemons and monsters died beneath sigmarite hammers, and yet still they came, undaunted, unceasing.

Jactos and his warriors were deep into Khul's lair now, far beyond the snarling faces of its stone guardians. Vandus had covered much ground, but it would be the Goldenmanes and not the Hammerhands who would claim this victory for Sigmar.

Barely a hundred of his brave Stormcasts remained, as the azure flashes that followed every death and return to Azyr became all too common.

He had lost sight of Neros, cut off during the last push, though he thought he

still could hear the strident defiance of his Lord-Castellant. Jactos's retainers still cleaved to him, though, his paladins and a clutch of battered Liberators. None faltered, and they fought without fear, plumbing depths of endurance that would have killed lesser men.

Unlike the servants of Khorne, though, the Stormcasts' ranks were not without limit. Hard as it was for him to admit, Jactos knew they were waning.

Assailed on all sides by lumbering khorgoraths, hell-spawned slaughterbrutes and swathes of mortal Bloodbound, the Goldenmanes were beleaguered when Jactos at last reached the foot of the Red Pyramid.

His intent had been to make for the Gate of Wrath, to confront and defeat Khul on its very steps and thus earn eternal glory for Sigmar. But instead, he had been driven here. And though he was but a few more strides from the gate, his path was severely impeded by enemies. Not until Jactos saw who descended from the Red Pyramid did he understand why he had been driven there.

A deep thrust with his runeblade disembowelled a khorgorath and it fell to the hot earth, blood steaming on the foetid air.

'To me, Liberators!' shouted Jactos to his men. 'To me, Retributors!'

No rallying note sounded from his heraldor this time. Ulius Stormcry had fallen, his voice now silent.

Jactos fought on as if he had heard the clarion call anyway, and came face to face with the one he guessed was the warlord Korghos Khul.

A brute, clad in blood-red armour and with a skull-helm masking the upper half of his face, strode down the Red Pyramid. Bone crunched beneath his heavy tread, skulls splitting and spilling their teeth. Khul appeared not to notice. As his gaze fell upon the Lord-Celestant, his eyes narrowed.

A creature padded around the feet of the warlord, a monstrous red-skinned hound with a brass collar and a flanged crest of skin under its gullet. As Khul gripped the back of its neck, the hound snarled in hatred for the Stormcasts.

'Grizzlemaw can smell fear,' said the warlord, casually stepping off the pyramid and standing before Jactos. His gauntleted fist was wrapped around a double-bladed axe that exuded deathly potency. Khul sneered. 'You already look defeated.'

Undaunted, Jactos levelled his runeblade at the warlord.

'It shall be your head, not my Lord Hammerhand's, that adorns your Red Pyramid,' he declared. 'Then I will see it sundered into nought but bone and ash!'

'Ah...' remarked Khul, 'so you have come to save Vendell Blackfist from my blade. Brave, but misguided. You must realise, whelp,' he said, hefting his axe in both hands as he advanced, 'that prophecies are seldom wholly accurate.'

As if sensing what was about to take place, the retainers of both champions stepped back and an arena in the dirt formed.

With a roar, Khul leapt at Jactos and battle was joined.

Neros finally caught sight of Jactos through the fray, and saw his Lord-

Celestant assailed on all sides.

‘He fights the Lord of Khorne,’ he rasped, powerless to intervene.

Even from a distance, the duel looked fearsome. Khul’s sheer aggression and apparent strength would test any Stormcast, but Jactos weathered and parried every attack. His riposte was lightning fast and telling. Khul took a hard hammer blow against his chest and fell back.

Jactos was winning... and Neros dared to hope, wishing he were by his Lord-Celestant’s side.

But as he battled alongside his comrades in a sea of foes, all the Lord-Castellant could do was watch.

An ever diminishing circle of warriors fought beside Jactos. Only a few Liberators and Retributors from those Stormcasts separated off from Neros’s men remained. And though they battled like the heroes Sigmar had reforged them to be, they were not inviolate.

A Liberator fell, his shield split in two, his armour the same. A paladin crushed a khorgorath’s skull, only to be hacked apart by a dozen axe blows. It became an attritional grind, one the Stormcasts were destined to lose.

As the last of his men died, Jactos knew he fought alone. His world had shrunk down through the eye slits of his mask to focus on the brutal warlord trying to kill him and the scrap of earth upon which they fought.

He weaved aside as the axe came close, tearing sparks from his sigmarite armour, then replied with a thrust that Khul could barely turn away.

A hefty punch almost staggered him, and black slashes flared behind Jactos’s eyes. Ears ringing, he placed a kick into Khul’s guts and sent the warlord sprawling. He recovered quickly, on his feet before Jactos had a chance to kill him with a single decapitating blow. A clear note of sigmarite against daemon-forged metal rang discordantly as runeblade met axe of Khorne.

Jactos’s hammer struck armour, putting a crack in Khul’s pauldron and sending the warlord to his knees. Blood welled into the gap as Khul bellowed in pain and threw the Lord-Celestant back.

‘You cannot prevail,’ uttered Jactos, defiant despite being surrounded. ‘Sigmar will reclaim the Mortal Realms from tyranny.’

Rising to his feet, Khul laughed and spat up a goblet of blood.

‘Look around. It’s already over, fool.’

Though Khul’s followers could have overwhelmed Jactos in moments, they were held back by the warlord’s will to meet the challenge alone. Even the hound was kept at bay. It had become a duel, one that Jactos realised he would likely not survive even if he did best Khul, a contest of arms pervaded by a strange sense of honour.

Then I shall return again, reforged to enact my vengeance, he vowed.

‘You’re wrong, scum,’ he told Khul. ‘It has only just begun!’

Jactos unleashed a hail of blows with blade and hammer against Khul, who still wielded his brutal axe in two hands. The warlord used the haft like a pole arm, warding off the Lord-Celestant’s attacks with surprising speed and restraint.

The might of Sigmar flowed through Jactos's veins, and no Khornate tyrant could hope to match that. These Bloodbound curs had spent too long fighting emaciated tribesmen and harrying slaves; they had not fought warriors like the Stormcasts before.

'Your reckoning has come!' spat Jactos, hammering Khul's defence as the warlord backed off.

A wild swing from the warlord was met with a deft parry against the haft of Jactos's hammer. The Lord-Celestant then lunged with his runeblade, driving it into the meat of Khul's thigh.

'Not so easy to slay true warriors, is it, warmonger?'

Khul shook his head, staggering from the wound in his leg.

'Know when you are beaten,' Jactos declared, revelling now. He hacked down with hammer and blade as one, putting the warlord back on his knees again as he threw up a desperate defence.

Jactos should have finished his opponent, but instead kicked him away. Like most of the Stormcasts, he could remember parts of his past, the person he used to be and the life he had led. Those memories grew sharper during battle, and Jactos's mind flooded with images of his burning village and the grinning barbarians who had tortured and goaded his kin.

He had a chance to redress the scales, and mete out punishment in kind for what was inflicted upon him and his own.

Another reckless swing by Khul was deflected with ease, as Jactos prepared to end it.

'I prove your prophecy false, warlord,' he said. 'I have saved Vandus Hammerhand and thwarted you.'

The warhammer came down, but Khul caught it. With a savage snap, he broke the Lord-Celestant's wrist and threw away the hammer.

Jactos tried to counter with his runeblade, but Khul attacked too quickly, inhumanly so, and cleaved his arm at the elbow. A golden forearm, the hand still gripping the sword, fell in front of Jactos who had trouble comprehending what had just happened. He could not stop staring at his severed limb, until the iron vice of Khul's gauntleted hand wrapped around his throat.

'There is something you should know about prophecies,' Khul told him, heedless of the Lord-Celestant's choking. 'The beholder sees what they want to see, what they believe in their hearts to be true. I do not need the skull of Vendell Blackfist to crown my ascension. Yours will serve just as well.'

Khul released his grip, and the axe blade fell.

Neros cried out when he saw Jactos fall, head cut clean from his noble shoulders. His anguish turned to dismay when there was no lightning flash, no return to the heavens. No resurrection.

'He is truly dead...' the Lord-Castellant whispered, scarcely able to believe it.

It was an honourable end, but a permanent one. A death without hope.

Neros fought on, his voice hoarse from bellowing orders and urging his warriors to never surrender.

Only when he heard the trumpet call of Laudus Skythunder did he take heart and find reserves of strength he did not know he possessed.

‘Fight them!’ he roared. ‘To your very last. Hold on, brothers, for the Hammerhands are with us! The Hammerhands are with us!’

Oblivious to the ongoing battle around him, Khul stooped to retrieve the immortal’s head. Part of the dead warrior’s helm had been smashed apart by the killing blow, and through the broken mask Khul saw the fear and confusion writ upon dead features.

‘Such arrogance,’ he murmured. ‘The cur expected to beat me.’

A shallow cleft had been left behind where the axe had cut reality itself. It soon closed, but within the sliver Khul saw the realm beyond, the realm of his master he so desired to ascend to. And that was not all. A remnant, little more than a vague shadow and a near-silent scream, persisted where the warrior had stood before his death. The blade had cleaved his soul as well as his body, cutting the tether between Aqshy and the celestial heavens from where he had been cast.

‘Damnation and horror are yours to endure for eternity,’ he whispered calmly to the shade of Jactos Goldenmane as it bled away into the Realm of Chaos.

Khul then stood, turning as he hefted his axe on to his shoulder, and began to climb the Red Pyramid. He clenched an immortal skull in his fist. It was the last skull he needed for his ascension.

CHAPTER TEN

The deepening storm

By the time the Hammerhands reached Neros, the Goldenmanes were reeling and would have been destroyed were it not for the other chamber's arrival. Hordes of khorgoraths surrounded them, tearing off heads as a veritable lightning storm raged above the battle with the discorporating bodies of the Stormcast Eternals.

Bellowing to Sigmar and Azyr, Vandus charged into the frenzied ranks of the beasts on the back of Calanax. His Warrior Chamber was hard on his heels, led by a spearhead of Liberators wielding twin blades and hammers. In their wake came the shield-bearers, acting as a protective vanguard for Malactus's Judicators.

The storm deepened as the skybolts took flight, arcing down in crackling volleys. Chained lightning wreaked havoc as shock bolts were unleashed. Boltstorm crossbowmen took to the flanks, killing khorgorath with intense, destructive fusillades. A booming rumble amidst the tumult presaged the unleashing of a thunderbolt crossbow as one of the Chaos monstrosities was blasted apart with a single deadly quarrel.

With the khorgoraths' ranks so depleted, the Liberators fell upon them with disciplined fury and cut them down.

It was nothing compared to the fury of the Lord-Celestant.

Vandus reaped a brutal tally with Heldensen. By his hand, khorgoraths died by the score. His mount was also deadly, and together they hewed a red path to Neros.

'Your arrival is timely, Lord Hammerhand,' said the venerable Lord-

Castellant, 'but I fear you are too late.'

From his vantage in the dracoth's saddle, Vandus saw over the thronging Bloodbound to where a single gold-armoured body lay headless in the dirt.

'And we are still beleaguered,' said Neros.

'Not for long,' Vandus replied grimly, gesturing to the south where a golden phalanx of warriors had already entered the fray and was advancing fast.

An Exemplar Chamber, led by a Lord-Relictor.

'Ionus Cryptborn has arrived.'

Ionus smashed through the unruly ranks of the Bloodbound, his skull-mask spattered with gore. Bloodreavers and blood warriors died swiftly and painfully to his hammer blows as he led one phalanx of Retributors into the fray.

Noble Theodrus led the second phalanx, each cohort of paladins arranged on either flank of the battlefield. Two hammers of unrelenting, righteous might swept into the mortal worshippers of Khorne and destroyed them as the Stormcasts met in the middle.

Prosecutors flocked overhead, under the keen command of Kyrus. Ionus called to him as he flew by.

'Thin the herd,' Ionus told him. 'Forge me a path to Lord Vandus.'

Nodding curtly, Kyrus went about his mission. He swiftly mustered his warriors into a thin lance and drove them ruthlessly down into the heart of the Chaos army.

Ionus clapped Theodrus on the shoulder, who was busy crushing the last few remnants of the horde they had just vanquished. 'There, Theodrus...' Ionus pointed to the bloody havoc being wreaked by the Prosecutors, '...our path to the others.'

About to lead the Retributors out, Ionus stopped short as crippling pain seized him. He clenched his shoulder beneath the pauldron, and felt the chill of the grave fall upon him like a deadly mantle.

'Lord-Relictor!'

Ionus felt Theodrus's hand supporting him, but the Retributor's words were lost to him as another voice took hold.

A tithe is owed. A tithe shall be given.

A soul for a soul.

'There... is... nothing for you...' spat Ionus, gritting his teeth. The strength of Sigmar filled him, warming his frozen bones and restoring the vitality his old foe had sought to take from him. 'I defy you,' he declared. 'I defy you!'

The chill faded, and the dread presence that had enveloped Ionus dissipated. A fell reminder was left in its wake.

I shall remember this. His soul or yours, Eonid. The tithe will be paid. It will be paid...

'Aye, but not this day.'

Theodrus heard everything, and leaned in close to his Lord-Relictor as he helped him stand straight.

'What plagues you, my lord?'

‘An old menace, brother. One I believed gone. Pay it no mind,’ said Ionus, seeing the Chaos hordes amassing again. ‘And reunite us with Vandus. Be quick, as the lightning from which you were wrought.’

Theodrus obeyed. With the Retributor-Prime at the fore, the paladins rushed into the furrow being cut by the Prosecutors. None would stay their wrath.

At last, they were closing but the distance to the Gate of Wrath was swarming with the followers of Chaos both mortal and daemon alike. Just beyond the gate itself was the Red Pyramid, as forbidding as any monolith Vandus had seen in these benighted lands.

The light was fading as the sun began to dip. He hoped it did not bode ill. It mattered little now. They would succeed here, now, or they would perish. There was no retreat, not for any of them.

Spurring Calanax, Vandus charged into the warbands that Khul had allied against them. He struck down a red-skinned daemon that had leapt to tear out his throat. Another bloodletter disappeared beneath Calanax’s claws. A third was ripped in half by the dracoth’s jaws.

Vandus whirled Heldensen around his head in a punishing arc. In the hands of the Lord-Celestant, it was a twin-tailed comet smiting everything that dared to step into its path. As gout of lightning spewed from Calanax’s mouth and Heldensen slew without cessation, Vandus began to feel invincible.

Ever since his vision, the one where Khul had placed his head upon the pyre of skulls, Vandus had felt a power growing within him. Destiny had brought him to this place, to this moment. It was a fate determined not just by gods, but by his own indomitable will and sense of purpose. It stretched back through time, to before all of this, to before the Direbrand tribe and the dreaded age of Chaos. It went further and further, a legacy that began before time itself.

Vandus knew not how this was possible, or even what it meant, but he was certain it would be he who ended Khul’s reign. At last, he realised why Sigmar had chosen him, why he had been the vanguard.

This knowledge filled him with glorious purpose.

‘We are the storm!’ he roared, Heldensen held aloft and crackling with power. ‘Bringers of retribution and light. Reforged by Sigmar to reclaim these lands in his name and restore order. I am the lightning!’

The Hammerhands roared in answer. ‘Azyr!’

But the road to the Gate of Wrath was long and choked with the lost and the damned, an unholy Chaos warhorde without end.

‘Righteousness versus damnation,’ Vandus murmured to himself, his gaze alighting on the grim archway that led to Khorne’s own realm. ‘One must break before the end.’

Vandus had not seen the danger. So intent was the Lord-Celestant on reaching the Gate of Wrath that he had become oblivious to the true threat in their midst. But Ionus saw it, and he knew what it portended.

As he began to marshal his powers, he cried out and let the magic of the celestial carry the strength of his voice like a thunderhead.

'Lord Vandus!' he cried, his deathly voice echoing across the battlefield so that all in gold turned to heed him. Ionus gestured with his hammer. 'Atop the pyramid!'

The beast's skull exploded against Heldensen's might, and as its lumbering body fell Vandus looked up to see the Red Pyramid. Close now, it throbbed like an angry wound and stirred feelings of wrath in the Lord-Celestant. Between it and the Gate of Wrath, he felt the unholy presence of Khorne.

But it wasn't this that had caused the Lord-Relictor to cry out. Vandus saw it now, through the battling warriors – he saw the figure clambering up the rugged flank of the pyramid, a mountain of skulls dedicated to Khorne. The daemonic hound scrambling by Khul's side was but one of the gifts the Lord of Skulls had bestowed upon his champion. The dread axe he bore was another. At least one further boon remained but it was neither beast nor blade, Vandus realised. No trinket, but metamorphosis.

Ascension.

As Khul climbed, moving with certain strength and an eager fervour, Vandus saw the offering the warlord planned to give.

A golden helm, blood still drooling from the severed neck of the head inside it.

'Jactos...'

Grief and anger struck Vandus like a double-edged sword.

The vision disproven, but the prophecy about to be fulfilled.

'I must stop him *now*.'

But an endless swathe of red stood in Vandus's way and he had not the lightning forged wings of a Prosecutor to bear him over it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Servants of the gods

Hell and fury raged across the Brimstone Peninsula as two gods fought for supremacy. Their struggle rent the land and sky as blood boiled up from the earth and lightning struck down from the heavens.

Wading through the hosts of Chaos, ever closing on his Lord-Celestant's side, Ionus Cryptborn had never seen such destruction. As well as the Hammers of Sigmar, he saw the distant banners of the Lions of Sigmar and the Anvils of the Heldenhammer. Truly, this was a conflict like no other.

Despite the presence of the other chambers, all hope rested with Vandus. He was the one, chosen by Sigmar to launch his crusade of liberation. It *had* to be him. But even the Hammerhand himself, with all the gifts that Sigmar had bestowed upon him, could not reach Khul in time.

As if the mindless beasts and frenzied tribesmen who had allied themselves to the warlord's banner knew of the import of this moment, a vast horde impeded Vandus.

A retinue of Prosecutors had seen the danger, but as they flew towards the grim ziggurat of skulls beyond it, gouts of scalding steam engulfed them, spewing from the maw of the gate and sending the heralds tumbling earthward. They crashed to the foot of the Red Pyramid, where an eager rabble of bloodreavers cut them down before they could rise.

As he watched the distant slaughter, Ionus knew it would be up to him to turn the scales back into Sigmar's favour and so he beseeched the Lord of Storms again. As he gathered the lightning unto his hammer and prepared to channel it through his reliquary staff, the old wintry chill returned for one final

attempt.

A tithe is owed.

With a fierce effort of will, Ionus shut out the ancient voice that plagued him and unleashed his power. Cold light played about his eyes.

‘Sigmar speed you!’

A coruscating bolt of lightning leapt from the reliquary staff to strike Vandus and Calanax. As one, rider and mount disappeared into the azure light, which arced a second time and earthed itself violently into the foot of the Red Pyramid.

As the lightning flash diminished, it left behind a scorched ruin of skulls and something else.

Vandus rode the lightning and for a moment became engulfed by an all-consuming storm. It ended swiftly, the brief lightness of his being soon growing heavy again as his body returned to flesh and blood.

Calanax was with him, no stranger to the storm path, and bellowed a warning as he looked up towards the summit of the pyramid.

Vandus followed his gaze, and saw Khul poised to claim right of ascension.

Memories were fleeting of the old life, of the man he had been before the apotheosis, but even when he had fought Khul as Vendell Blackfist, the warlord of Khorne had been prideful. He had honour of a kind. Vandus would use it against him.

‘Khul!’ He bellowed above the tumult and the din of war unbound. ‘Korghos Khul! Slayer of the Direbrand tribe! Face me now, or I name you coward!’

So close...

Gripping the immortal’s head in one hand, Khul reached out with the other to clamber the last few steps to the summit when he heard the challenge.

He could almost taste the promise of daemonhood in the sulphurous air and the taint of blood on the breeze. Khorne would deny him if he turned his back now. No exalted champion could refuse a challenge and still believe himself worthy of the Skull Throne’s greatest honour.

Khul slowly turned to face his accuser. His gaze met that of the golden warrior, and for the first time he saw Vandus Hammerhand and not the blacksmith chief who had escaped death by luck.

‘You have no true understanding of what it means to be chosen,’ Khul whispered through clenched teeth. ‘Of *my* sacrifice.’

Anger rose up within him, volcanic and incendiary. He looked to the blackening skies, pride and ambition clashing violently within him.

Khul screamed with insensate rage and vaulted from the side of the pyramid.

Shimmering, azure rain pelted from the sky. As it met the smouldering earth of the Brimstone Peninsula, it turned into a vaporous mist that clouded the battlefield in an eldritch gloaming.

Lightning struck, cascading in a barrage from the storm-wracked vaults

above. Ionus smiled grimly as it sheared loose an avalanche of skulls from the side of the pyramid and buried the bloodreavers below. One macabre feast was usurped by another as the skulls gnawed and snapped at the tribesmen drowning amongst them. Ionus saw one of the bloodreavers attempt to surface before being dragged under by a mass of bony teeth.

His attention turned to the Lord-Celestant.

'It's just you and him now,' Ionus whispered, as Vandus spurred Calanax through the deluge of skulls to meet Khul.

'Die, fool!' roared Khul, his axe promising eternal damnation as the raw magic of Chaos bled from its blade.

Too late, Vandus saw the momentum was with the warlord as Khul leapt down upon him, and though he tilted in the saddle to prevent himself from being cut apart, the fight had really begun.

The whispered screams of the souls claimed by Khul's axe filled Vandus's ears, and for a moment he thought he could hear Jactos's voice amongst them. Another cry drowned them out, that of Calanax.

Khul's axe was embedded in the dracoth's flank, but not deep enough to kill him. Through godly intervention or simple fortune, Calanax was spared his soul being wrenched into the Realm of Chaos but was still badly wounded. As Khul wrenched the axe loose, the beast sagged and fell onto its side, almost taking Vandus with it.

Crying out in anger, the Lord-Celestant leapt from the saddle and came at Khul with Heldensen.

By now, the two were fighting on the red earth at the foot of the broken pyramid and Khul wrong-footed Vandus to sidestep the crushing blow. Viperously, he swung the cleaved head of Jactos into Vandus's face, making his helm ring with the impact.

Vandus gagged as blood splattered his gilded mask, finding its way into his eyes, nose and mouth. He tried to recover, but the daemon-hound was upon him before he could raise Heldensen. He stumbled, and for a brief moment felt doubt. Khul was a warrior-king, a warlord who had enslaved an entire region to his Goretide. He had fought countless battles, slain numberless enemies. He was unbeatable...

'No. I am the lightning. Sigmar's storm manifest.'

A bolt arced down from the heavens and Vandus knew what he must do.

As the flesh hound lunged at him, Vandus smashed his vambrace into its snarling mouth. As it clamped down, he threw his arm out and the hound with it, smashing it into a welter of skulls.

But Khul was already on him, axe swinging as Vandus stepped back again. He felt heat at his shoulder and realised that he had been herded to within a few paces of the Gate of Wrath.

'Your skull will be mine after all,' the warlord growled.

The haft of Heldensen rang as Vandus desperately parried the blow. He lashed out, finding strength from anger, but Khul was swift and already within the Lord-Celestant's guard.

'You are nothing without your drake,' Khul sneered, his unbreakable grip around Heldensen's haft.

Vandus roared, unable to wrench the hammer free. He lunged instead, smashing his head against Khul's face and splitting the skull mask in two. He saw a glaring, angry visage beneath.

With a sharp twist, Khul disarmed Vandus and threw the hammer aside.

'I was wrong about you,' he said, spitting blood and teeth. 'You are still Vendell Blackfist, doomed to fall by my blade. Die now!'

I am the lightning. The words came back to Vandus, as did the image of the bolt striking down from above. Before Khul could end him and condemn his soul to torment, Vandus leapt from the killing blow to land crouched within a handspan of the Gate of Wrath.

As he rose up, Vandus reached out and gripped the edge of one of the pillars of the gate.

Khul was close, blood-crazed and frothing...

'I am the lightning,' whispered Vandus, as he closed his eyes. 'I am Vandus Hammerhand.'

A crash of thunder sounded overhead.

'Lord Sigmar, strike thy servant now!'

God-lightning seared from the turbulent sky, an arcing blast so powerful that it shook the earth.

Vandus saw light: a blinding, searing luminescence so bright it eclipsed all sense of being and self. Then he was gone.

Now...

Ionus unshielded his eyes to see the Gate of Wrath utterly destroyed. Nothing remained but steaming, molten rock.

All around it for a hundred paces or more, both Stormcasts and Bloodbound had been thrown off their feet. Tendrils of corposant writhed across their bodies as the storm bolt was slow to dissipate.

There was no sign of Vandus Hammerhand or Calanax. Sigmar had reclaimed them, and in so doing vanquished the realmgate to Khorne's domain.

A great cheer rose up from the Stormcast Eternals.

'Azyr! Azyr!'

Only Ionus did not raise his voice. Instead, he watched Khul as he beheld the ruination of his plans. The Red Pyramid collapsed, skulls tumbling from its flanks in an avalanche that spilled amongst the Bloodbound in a flood. In moments it was nothing but a swathe of shattered bone, destroyed, its power broken.

As the warlord bellowed his impotent wrath to the uncaring night, Ionus knew they had struck a telling blow, but the war was not over.

'Not yet...' he whispered, as the victorious Stormcasts swept down upon the remnants of the Goretide like a living tempest.

STORM OF BLADES

Guy Haley

CHAPTER ONE

The death of a prince

The guilt Thostos Bladestorm felt for spending the last days of his mortal life away from home had never left him. Not through his first Reforging, nor through his second. No number of rebirths could purge such regret from a man's soul. When the cause was lost to him, the guilt stayed, a distillate of pain. Forever it was his spur, his strength and his weakness.

One last time Thostos relived the moments of his first death as Prince Caeran, in light and pain, when he was reborn at the God-King's behest.

This is how he remembered it.

Then...

Warm wind sang through the pass of Unnumbered Birds. Scent is the key to memory, and the smell of the place was the last thing that Thostos forgot. In later days, when many lifetimes had passed him by, he would catch a reminder of it and search his broken memories for a full recollection. Alas, he would always be frustrated.

The strongest above all was the sharp smell of the birds themselves. Many nests crowded the cliffs either side of the narrow road, their guano streaking the rocks. There were other, subtler smells beneath that rich stink. The wind ran over the plains to the mountains, all the way from the distant sea. Even in the high mountains there was saltiness upon the wind still. This too Thostos remembered, and the blood and the ash that had come to taint it.

On that last day, the mountains preserved the semblance of peace. There the

land seemed as it always had, as wild and free as any place in Amcarsh before the coming of Chaos.

To return to the mountains from the hell of the lowlands lifted the heart, even that of Prince Caeran, who would be Thostos, for he was burdened with many worries. But on that day, he breathed free, clean air, and returned home in victory. Secured to the flank of his horse was a bloody sack. Within languished the head of Sur Jactyr, Great Lord of Chaos and Reaver of the Sixteen Cities. His sharpened teeth would never again bite into flesh, and his golden eyes would see no more atrocity wrought in his name. Silver thread bound the sack shut, keeping the dead lord's evil from corrupting the one who carried it. It was a successful hunt, enough to make Caeran forget for a moment the horrors of the world.

He was accompanied by Tarm, his childhood friend. No matter what evil they faced together, always they came back side by side. As was Tarm's habit, he goaded his prince for sport as they rode.

'My father says to me that the duty of an heir is to remain at home and learn the ways of governance. And yet here you are riding out on the hunt.'

Caeran laughed, though there was annoyance in it. 'And what would your father have me do, work the fields and build terraces?'

'That he would,' said Tarm.

The pass was narrow, little more than a gully, and their voices echoed from the sides. Sunlight cut down from blue skies that were still untouched by the bruises of Chaos. The shadows of crags divided the rocky landscape into patches of delicious heat and pleasing cool.

'Ask your father how I can remain at home, when evil brings all good things low and every month sees another city razed to the ground? Ten years ago, my father said that we would be safe within our valley, that the Warding Hounds of Garma would keep us safe, that Chaos—'

'Hssh!' Tarm said.

Caeran dropped his voice. 'What?'

Tarm's eyes were fixed upon the sky. Caeran raised his own gaze.

'I see no birds,' said Tarm.

The skies were empty. There was no sign of any birds at all.

Without exchanging a word, the warriors spurred their horses into a gallop. Their steeds were born for the rough terrain of the mountains and picked their path without faltering, haring along the rough road as sure-footed as goats. Soon enough, they rounded the kink in the valley where it opened onto the Great Glen of the Wolf.

'Smoke!' called Tarm. He slowed and stood in his stirrups for a better view.

Caeran thundered past him.

'Wait, Caeran!' Tarm shouted. 'Be careful!'

But Caeran did not heed him. His stomach churned with sickening dread, an utter conviction that the worst had happened, and that his life was over.

The mountainside curved away, the glen broadened, and Wolf Keep, seat of Guild-King Glothian's power, came into view. The keep was set high on the mountain, backed onto a soaring crag so that it looked out over the wide

grazing lands of the glen. The Woolguild's isolation had been its salvation. The mountain walls that yielded such meagre crops barred the advance of Chaos, and Glothian had kept the clans of his guild safe; once from the great and terrible beasts of Amcarsh and later against the depredations of hell-spawned monsters.

That is until then.

Caeran galloped past a burning cottage. The corpses of the farmers were pegged outside its blackened walls, cruelly mutilated. Hayricks blazed. Smoke rose from every building in the valley, thick over the four villages and thickest over Wolf Keep.

Fire licked from the windows of his home, black fumes pouring from the roof. He did not need to ride any closer to be able to see what the pale bundles hanging from the walls were.

'No!' screamed Caeran. He spurred his horse harder, foam frothing at its mouth. The steed's flanks were lathered with sweat, but he did not relent.

The sky rumbled. A thunderhead was building over the mountains, black and heavy as an anvil.

He came across the first warband minutes later, a motley collection of beastfolk and savage tribesmen. They sat in the ruins of a hamlet around a fire of broken timbers, gorging on the flesh of innocents. The beastfolk were drunk, butting bloodied horns with each other. The men laughed bitter, empty laughs. The humour of the desperate and the insane. Without thinking, Caeran drew his sword and rode at them.

The first man turned at the thunder of his approach, only to die with his skull split open. Another pair were barged aside by the weight of Caeran's horse, weapons falling from limp fingers. Others flung themselves aside. A beastman lunged for his reins. Caeran reared his horse, its hooves crushing the head of the creature. A second beastman ran at him, head bowed to impale his horse upon sharp horns, but Caeran cut it down and it died with a gurgling bleat.

Caeran wheeled his horse round and lashed out at another of the children of Chaos, but the impetus of his charge was spent, and the creature parried his blow with a maul of bloody iron. His horse's breath came raggedly, exhausted; the animal was close to blown. The men and beastmen were gathering around him, a circle of brutal, shouting faces that kept out of the reach of his sword.

A huge muscled creature with the head of a goat pushed its way forward and thrust its spear deep into the horse's breast. With a scream the horse reared up and toppled over, and Caeran was thrown free. He rolled, and an axe buried itself into the ground where his head had been. He sprang to his feet, driving his blade up to the hilt in a beastman's gut. It screamed in Caeran's face as it died, and he snatched out his sword before the creature fell down. Its fellows hesitated; Caeran did not.

'Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!' he cried, and leapt among them, slaying all who came close. The sky was clouding over rapidly, pregnant with the promise of rain.

Then Tarm was there, bursting through the crowd on his horse and sending them down hard. He cut at the warband with his sword, slaying two and

scattering the rest, then brought his horse to a staggering halt and held out his hand.

‘Get up behind me. There are hundreds coming!’

The beastmen and tribesmen lay dead or dying. One man pawed ineffectually at his ruined throat, attempting to stem the flood of blood. Caeran scanned the destruction, everywhere he looked revealing a new horror. He screwed his eyes shut at the sight of the torn corpses. Thunder sounded closer.

‘It’s going to rain,’ Caeran said.

‘Get up!’ shouted Tarm, looking behind his friend and beckoning again frantically. An awful, bleating roar brought Caeran out of his fugue.

Through the burning cottages of the hamlet strode a great beastlord, half as tall as Caeran again. In clumsy fingers it gripped an axe shaft as thick as Caeran’s thigh, the blunt head atop it dark with gore. It wore a mask of pale leather over its animal face, and a shallow helm covered its low skull. A dirty black and white crest rose from this between two pairs of horns. The first pair curved around its cheeks like a ram’s horns, while the second pair stood upright. These were sharp as scimitars, and dripped with blood. Crude mail studded with roundels and square plates protected its torso. Its hooves were shod with spiked iron, but its arms and the legs were unprotected, a sign of its confidence in its own might, perhaps. There were few who could hope to survive its ire.

‘Caeran!’ shouted Tarm.

‘No, no!’ said Caeran. ‘I will not run while our kinsfolk lie dead and defiled.’ He raised his sword in a double-handed grip, and prepared to meet the creature’s charge.

Tarm swore and charged past his friend, his horse leaping over the corpses of the fallen. His sword sang through the air, but the beastlord was swift. It stepped aside, punching Tarm’s steed with a huge fist. Hefting its axe, it swung hard at the reeling horse, a woodsman’s chop that half-severed the head. A tremendous spray of blood fountained from the horse’s neck and it fell sideways heavily, trapping Tarm beneath.

The beastlord raised its axe again, aiming for Tarm’s head. Caeran screamed and ran, swinging his sword with all his strength at the creature’s unprotected thigh. His blade bit deep, but the creature did not appear to feel the wound, and twisted its massive body to intercept the prince. A swipe from its arm caught him in the chest and knocked him back six feet to crash into a cart. He flipped over the back, landing in the offal of slaughtered farmers. Caeran scrambled to his feet, barely keeping his revulsion in check. His sword he held ready. The beastlord only smiled, thick lips parting around the flat, square teeth of a grazing animal stained pink with blood. It blew out a steaming huff of breath. Red eyes glowed with menace, and it laughed: a bleating corruption of human joy.

But the beast-thing was mistaken if it thought to kill another brave guildsman defending his home from the tide of Chaos. This was a prince before him, a mighty warrior sworn to protect his father’s people to the last, and he was wild with vengeance.

Lightning flashed, whiting out the valley. The beast lifted its axe and charged at Caeran. The prince waited for his moment, stepping aside and backward at the last possible second, and extended his sword to take the creature in the chest. The momentum of the beast forced the weapon's point through its armour and deep into its chest just below the heart. Caeran's sword was wrenched painfully from his hand as the beastlord stumbled past him, its axe biting into a splintered timber. It shook its head, and turned again, unaware that it was already dead. One step it came on, then another. The beastlord groggily raised its axe. Dark blood pumped from the wound. The creature never made the blow, but fell forward dead.

Caeran ran to Tarm. His friend was badly hurt. Blood leaked from the corner of his mouth.

'You killed it?' he croaked.

'It is dead,' said Caeran. 'If it weren't for you, I'd be dead.'

'As always,' said Tarm. The blood coming from his mouth was pink and bubbled, his breath was short, and he struggled to speak. 'But no more, my friend. Crushed by my own horse. Not the heroic end I had intended.'

'I'll get you out from under him,' said Caeran, trying to reassure his companion, but he could see no way to move the horse pinning Tarm.

'You'll do no such thing. Get out of here! Get away now! If Wolf Keep has fallen, it will not be long until all of Amcarsh is overrun. Live as long as you can. Make them pay for their crimes.'

A fat drop of rain fell onto the back of Caeran's hand. Then another, and another. They spattered all over Tarm's face. He closed his eyes and smiled.

'See, Caeran! There is some purity left. For once, the water is sweet.'

Caeran stood. Rain sheeted down. A blazing bolt of lightning cracked the sky. Thunder boomed. Shouts and the gruntings of beastmen came through the downpour. They approached him from all sides. He stood over the body of his friend, and shouted out a challenge.

'If I am to die, let it be well!'

The foes of all that was good and right drew around, none daring to be the first. Caeran stared at them, smiling wildly. 'Give me strength, great Sigmar!' There was more lightning and another peal of thunder, deafening now. The storm was directly overhead.

'Lend me your might! If you can still hear me, if you care still for the lives and deeds of mortal men, then grant me as much of your power as you might spare, so that I may be avenged upon the slayers of my folk, that I might kill them and kill them and never rest, not until every last drop of Chaos-ruined blood has been spilt and washed away from the soil of Amcarsh by clean rains. I do not ask to be saved. I do not plead for my life. I ask only for strength. I ask only to be avenged!'

He raised his bloodied sword to the sky, kissed the guard, and prepared to die.

The horde of men and twisted monsters charged as one. A blazing spear of light lanced down from the sky, pure and dazzling. It connected with the tip of Caeran's sword, bathing the youth in a stark radiance that cut him into shapes

of white and hard black shadow. The followers of Chaos were flung back by the blast, shrieking at the pain of the light.

When they recovered themselves, they stood in amazement. A depression was smote into the land, charcoal black and steaming. Around it, twists of grass smoked in the rain.

Of the prince, there was no sign.

CHAPTER TWO

To Chamon

Caeran of Wolf Keep was no more. He had been snatched from the jaws of death and made anew. In his stead stood Thostos Bladestorm, a Lord-Celestant of the Stormhosts of Azyr. The man had ceased to be, but from his unmaking a Stormcast Eternal had been forged. Stronger, taller, faster, imbued with a fragment of a god's potency; that of Sigmar Heldenhammer, last of the old pantheon to stand in opposition to the four great powers.

That first time, Thostos's memory did not die. During his remaking his mind was unmade and refashioned many times upon the anvil of Sigmar's art. Yet he remembered the smell of blood, and the stink of smoke. He remembered white shapes dangling from the walls of his burning home. He remembered a dead friend, and he remembered his oath.

The need for vengeance coursed through his every vein as surely as the magic of Azyr.

'Stand tall, Thostos Bladestorm, and face your benefactor!'

The Lord-Heraldor's voice resonated throughout the Celestine Vault with the force of a trumpet fanfare, snatching Thostos back from the past. Vengeance. Yes. It was coming after centuries of waiting. It was his due. On the great ring of the Sigmarabulum the bells of war tolled.

Thostos Bladestorm rose from his knees and opened his eyes upon his master. Sigmar stood upon the balcony, the God-King, lord of the last free mortal realm. The Celestial Vindicators were gathered in glorious array, panoplied for war in armour of purest sigmarite coloured a rich turquoise. They stood in ranks in a vault of gold and smooth stone, topped by a dome of

sapphire carved with the twin-tailed comet – Sigmar’s sigil.

The vaults were glorious, but Sigmar’s perfection made all appear dull and lustreless. Mightier than the Stormcast Eternals, this was the god who had answered Thostos’s prayers – the survivor of a ruined world and the near ruin of another.

Pure of feature, every line of Sigmar’s face radiated grace. His poise was beyond compare, and his armour shone brighter than the sun, with gold and sigmarite studded with sapphires. Long hair cascaded down his back, mingling with the gryphon feathers of his cloak. The aura of power around him was staggering, but there was no arrogance inherent to it.

Confidence, yes – a rectitude and surety of purpose that suffused all who came near him with righteousness. There was humility there, and patience. There was kindness and humour to temper his sternness, wisdom to rein in his belligerence. His anguish at the fates of those he left behind drove his will to conquer. He was the epitome of humanity, the very acme of what it meant to be of the race of man. However, he represented an ideal that Thostos and the others could aspire to, for each Stormcast Eternal knew that in untold ages past, in another world, it was said that Sigmar had been a man.

Only a man. Such a thing was incredible to Thostos, though he had faith that it was true. Thostos’s legs trembled at the sight of his lord. The urge to kneel again before this paragon was overwhelming and took all his might to resist. Sigmar had been only a man, he repeated this to himself over and over. Only a man, this living beacon of hope, this reminder that there were powers in the realms greater and better than all those of Chaos.

Behind Thostos the men of his Warrior Chamber remained kneeling. Two hundred and eighty of them, the Bladestorms of the Celestial Vindicators Stormhost.

Sigmar bestowed a proud smile upon Thostos as he joined those lords already called, and he thought that he might weep.

The Lord-Heraldor summoned the remainder of the leaders of the chambers, until eighteen Lord-Celestants stood with Thostos, their leader. Then their Lord-Castellants, Lord-Relictors and Knights-Azyros were called out, before all the rest from the temples of command were brought to assemble behind them. Two hundred demigods to lead thousands more. And Sigmar himself blessed them with his presence.

‘Celestial Vindicators!’ called Sigmar. His voice was gentle thunder. Thostos had never heard him shout, he hoped he never would. A voice like that would shatter stone if raised in anger. ‘To you is given a great and weighty task. This day your wait is over. Hundreds of lifetimes of men have some of you dwelt among us here in the heavens of Azyr. No more!’

Sigmar came down the stairs as he spoke. He walked along the line of lords, grim pride on his face. He stopped where Thostos stood, and placed an armoured hand upon his shoulder. ‘A wait that has been long and chafing for many of you.’ Sigmar passed on, trailing the electric redolence of summer storms in his wake. He went down the aisle between the brotherhoods that made up the Bladestorms. ‘You are my avengers! You are all, each one,

warriors who cursed Chaos with your last breath, who called upon me for strength, not salvation. Strength!’

This last word boomed, although spoken at scarce greater a volume than the rest. Thostos shuddered, and remembered his own oath on that distant battleground.

‘And I answered,’ Sigmar continued. ‘I answered you, my lightnings bringing you here from defeat so that you might be remade and given that strength. That you might take that vengeance. I will not apologise for the ages you have waited through, nor the rage and frustration that built in you as your thirst for revenge went unslaked.’

He walked around the periphery of the room. The majority of the Stormhost remained where they were, in postures of obeisance. Whether they could see the God-King or not, they were aware of where he was at all times, his mere presence was tangible from afar.

‘There are many battles beginning, many campaigns in this war. Would it that I could bid all my sons farewell and wish them victory. I cannot. But for you, my vengeful Celestial Vindicators, I desired to come and tell you that your wait is over. The time of patience is done, and another time begins. The red time, the fire time, the time that the filth of Chaos will be driven away before the winds and rains of you, my avenging tempest!’

As one the Celestial Vindicators stood: the winged Prosecutors; Judicators armed with skybolt bows and other, more potent weapons; the Liberators with their great shields and the Retributors bearing their lightning hammers. A nimbus of power played over the host, sparking from their armour. The magic that made these men warriors that could not die; they would fall, and they would be remade anew. That was Sigmar’s promise to them.

They beat hands upon their breastplates, sigmarite clashing on sigmarite. Softly at first, a clatter that rippled across the room, evoking the shattering of hail upon roofs. Then a single word, the name, repeated over and again, spoken in round by rank after rank so that it sounded akin to a deluge washing over the earth. ‘Sigmar, Sigmar, Sigmar, Sigmar, Sigmar!’ they chanted, louder and louder until surely all of Azyrheim must stop and look up to the floating Sigmarabulum and wonder what occurred there in the sky.

‘To Chamon, to the Realm of Metal! Go forth and bring destruction upon your foe! Seek out the Silverway so that we might rain terror upon the servants of the Dark Gods in every realm. Seek out the duardin so that we might march with vengeful allies!’ cried Sigmar, and his voice was the thunder to the storm conjured by his men. Lightning crackled from his fingertips, lifting his hair and burning in his eyes. Raw power skittered all over the room. The comet in the ceiling blazed and a cold wind lifted up the cloaks of the Stormhost. ‘To Chamon!’

A loud boom shook the vault. Magic flared bright and just as quickly died away. Then the vault was empty of men, leaving the god alone. He looked around and marvelled at his own works.

The quest for vengeance had begun.

CHAPTER THREE

Ephryx the Ninth Disciple

In his bedchamber high in the central tower of the Eldritch Fortress, the sorcerer Ephryx, Ninth Disciple of the Ninth Tower, dreamt of war. He curled in on himself like an infant, a posture his body had never forgotten no matter how much change had been wreaked upon it. The antelope horns that crowned his head pressed into his silk pillows. His eyes twitched beneath thin eyelids veined green.

As Ephryx slept, his dream ceased to be a dream.

Ephryx was in another place. He stood upon a far-reaching and desolate plain. In the distance volcanoes vomited fire. To the south churned a poison sea. Close by, a city from the Age of Myth continued its long crumble into the dust, all save the very centre. There stood a monumental structure, a realmgate. Though caked in centuries of filth it was whole. Sleeping. Locked. The latent magic woven into its fabric sparkled in Ephryx's witch-sight.

A squally wind blew up from nowhere, whipping dust into long sheets that reeked of sulphur, death and tar.

Aqshy. Something occurred in the Realm of Fire.

In his vision-sleep Ephryx beheld a mighty storm. The sky boiled. Black and purple clouds gathered themselves from nowhere, and mounted high into the heavens. The wind blew harder, scented now with coming rain, a fierce smell whose cleanliness burned in Ephryx's nostrils.

Raindrops as large as sling bullets splattered into the earth, scattered forays from the cloud above. These first few rested momentarily upon the hard earth, coated in dust knocked free by their impacts, then were sucked away,

consumed by the great thirst of the land. They appeared to Ephryx like soldiers, a feeble advance party, isolated and overwhelmed by their foe. He paid close attention to this detail. Many things of import had been revealed to him by less.

This vanguard of moisture was soon reinforced. As abruptly as if a bucket were upended, a torrent of rain poured from the sky. It ran down the dream-being of Ephryx, over thin, purple lips that were no longer entirely human, and collected in the corner of his mouth. Ephryx inadvertently tasted it upon his long tongue, and spat violently. The flavour of the rain was anathema to him; pure water, of a kind that existed virtually nowhere within the Mortal Realms any more.

Thunder rumbled. The clouds twisted about a vortex in the sky. The parched scent of the Realm of Fire was completely washed away, replaced with the nose-prickling aroma of rain on dry earth, and the tang of magic.

Lightning stabbed out at the top of the mighty gate three times. Another growl of thunder followed.

Ephryx threw his arm over his eyes as the sky exploded with light.

Lightning bolts came down as thick as trees in a forest, grounding themselves upon the cracked plain in searing battalions. Each blast left behind a glowing dome of energy, until these covered the plain. One by one they faded, exposing ranks of tall warriors clad in gold and wielding hammers. Each one was as mighty as a champion of Chaos, only these were no followers of the Four. They came to wage war upon this landscape of toxic soil and wicked flame.

The vision shimmered, Ephryx's point of view shifted. Time stuttered and hopped, coming to rest some hours later. A great horde of the Blood God filled the horizon from end to end. They fell upon the storm warriors in outrage and flesh greed. The rulers of that place they might have been, but their charge was met by a wall of glittering gold and they died upon it. The storm-born warriors smote the followers of Khorne into the dust. A few of the glistening host fell, but not many, and those who did were snatched from battle by soaring pillars of energy that carried them back from whence they came.

Above the ruined city, winged warriors hurled hammers of blazing light at the closed realmgate. To this Ephryx paid especial interest. The frenzied fools of Khorne did not know the gate for what it was. They focused their unthinking attention upon the thin line of warriors barring the way, crazed by blood and battle. They allowed their foes to continue their bombardment, and so the bonds of the gate strained.

Another shift in time. Ephryx witnessed a great battle between a demigod mounted upon a draconian beast and a twisted creature goaded by a cruel lord. He watched them clash a moment, but did not see the outcome. A further change brought him news of a warrior-priest bearing a reliquary that was radiant with the magic of death. The priest manipulated these fell energies with skill, but he was weak in comparison to the mighty Ephryx. The Chaos sorcerer mocked him, but the priest could not hear his scorn.

The stuff of Chaos pushed its way into the realm. Daemons erupted from the

bloody mire the ground had become. Battle went against the golden stormhost. Angels fell from the skies, but too late. A final lightning strike smashed into the gate. A peal of thunder announced the opening of the way. The realmgate's coating of detritus flaked away to reveal figures of steel and ivory, and runes that burned with reawakened power. Reality snapped and quivered, then split open with a crash. A route long since closed gaped wide. Beyond the gate was a golden host. They poured forth with wrath in their hearts and fell upon the followers of the Blood God.

Now the sorcerer saw through the eyes of the Bloodsworn of Khorne, a member of a band called the Goretide. Korghos Khul was its master. Ephryx knew this and he knew the man's last moment, the sight of a silver warhammer descending upon his head to obliterate all hate, all red thought, along with the tiny remnant of humanity that hid beneath sanguine rage.

Ephryx sat up in his bed with a gasp. Fine silks slid from his wiry body. His long-fingered hand went to his throat, then his head, probing for marks. Although he knew he could not possibly be harmed, the vision's intensity was such he was half-convinced of his own death.

'Sigmar!' he whispered. 'Sigmar has returned!'

Drums boomed outside, a ferocious martial beat.

Ephryx's eyes widened.

Not drums, thunder.

The sorcerer rushed to the window of his chamber. All around his tower was his beloved Eldritch Fortress, his citadel and seat of his power that had been centuries in the making. His eyes were not for its walls and redoubts, though he often spent long hours admiring his craft, or for the city beyond, whose slide into ruin he enjoyed. He instead searched the blocky mountains. There! A stabbing finger of power blasted down from a heaven beyond that of Chamon. Clear, white lightning, unsullied by the magics of his master. Another crack and bang announced a second lightning strike, then a third. On the northern horizon clouds gathered as they had in his dream. But these first lightnings seared down from the clear, predawn sky.

He waited a moment, gripping the chill metal teeth framing the window. No further lightning blasts came. Thunder rumbled from the heavens. Dark clouds began to form out over the southern Vaulten range also, roiling like black ink poured into water. Storms advanced on the great valley of Anvrok from the north and south, framing the gigantic coils of the wyrm Argentine in the far western sky.

Ephryx recalled the drops of rain, so few and easily absorbed. The torrent that followed would not be stemmed.

'Invasion! Strife! War! They are coming here!'

Ephryx hissed in dismay. Why had he not foreseen this? Why had great Tzeentch not warned him?

'So close to my triumph, so close!'

He suspected ill motives on the part of his master. He would have known.

Tzeentch not knowing was impossible. Impossible!

Well, he would not be outmanoeuvred, no! Ephryx gritted pointed teeth and muttered guttural words of power. He passed his hand before his face. A nimbus of magic played around his horns, and he was gone from the room.

Ephryx rematerialised in the summit of his tall tower. He came fully clothed, cleansed and scented. His limbs were clad in robes of deep blue worked with arcane sigils of gold. His horns were painted in lacquer that shifted hue with his every movement. In his left hand he carried an onyx staff topped with an icon of brass. His right unconsciously twitched out magic. And so Ephryx came to his scrying chamber, a vast, lopsided room set into the eye of Tzeentch that crowned his fortress. There was but one window, the pupil of the eye set with amethyst that afforded views towards every point of the compass and wherever Ephryx willed. From that height his beautiful castle appeared small, laid out like a model artfully made in many metals. Ephryx could see every one of the eight points of the castle's walls and the gate there. Little more than building blocks joined by thick lines from his vantage, made of steel and copper, gold and brass. They throbbed with sorcerous energy. Fields invisible to the mortal eye rolled and twisted in multiple colours around the fort, sent into fractal eddies by the thing hidden at the base of the tower, the great artefact he had constructed his domain around.

Ephryx watched the gentler play of the ether over the still, dark valley. There the Silver River glowed softly orange with inner heat in the last dark of the night. Along its dim shores, the shadows danced with the light of Argentine's fire. The metal magic rising from the river twisted as it encountered an opposing force a hundred feet above the molten stream. Something perturbed the currents of energy; he had to hurry.

A platinum pedestal occupied the centre of the room, baroquely cast. Imps and cockatrices wrestled all over it, their writhings perpetually arrested, their moist eyes tracking the sorcerer around the room. Upon the pedestal was a bowl filled with liquid gold, and it was to this that Ephryx went.

The skies were light with the coming sun, but dawn had not yet broken. He looked towards the end of the vale and into the void to the east. Already the first rays shone from beneath the floating land. The great crucible high in the eastern sky was bathed in its light already, and shone like a second sun. The Argent Falls gleamed bright. The scales of Argentine sparkled with orange notes, and the light of his fires were robbed of their brilliance.

Tainted light glanced off the thousands of copper skulls that covered the fortress and lit the grim, bladed facets of the eight great towers and gates. Shadows fell long upon the fortress, shortening as the sick star rose swiftly over the walls. Copper and adamant sparkled. Warmth chased off night's chill. Then the sun shone through the lone window set in the lowermost portion of the tower. By crystals grown from madness, the light was redirected again into the keep entombed within the tower, then to a cairn hidden within the keep. Through one small gap left in a wall of lead blocks, a single ray of light was allowed to pierce and fall upon the artefact.

The effect was instant and potent.

The tower shuddered. A boiling sphere of magic burst from the stolen prize.

The copper skulls drank deeply of the power, their hollow sockets glowing eerily. Ephryx waited in his tower for the bubble to pass through his scrying chamber. The magic arrived from below, passing first over his toes, then up his legs and into his trunk, invigorating his Chaos-twisted flesh and setting his blood racing. The gold in his scrying bowl bubbled, and Ephryx bent eagerly over it. The images presented at the moment of dawn were the clearest, the most truthful.

He was not the only one waiting for the rising sun. In answer to its appearance, light flashed in the sky. Dozens of lightning strikes, thicker than the others, came not from the clouds but through them, stabbing downward from a place that was not of this realm. They emanated from somewhere beyond the Celestial Swirl, that galaxy of lights and stars that turned high in the northern sky. The lightning was white, but Ephryx's witch-sight showed him pulses of azure that accompanied each strike and sent the currents of Chamon into disarray.

The first bolt split the peak of a mountain to the north-east. Many more pounded into the valley at various points to the north of the Silver River. The first left behind an imposing figure in smooth armour surrounded by a small bodyguard of warriors upon the mountain peak. These surveyed the lands revealed to them, then spread broad wings of blazing energy and took to the heavens. The sky blackened above them, and they flew up into a downfall of rain. The other bolts struck domes of force from the ground, all around the dormant Bright Tor Gate.

As in Ephryx's dream, the domes faded to nothing, revealing small armies, although these warriors wore armour of deep turquoise, not the gold of the warriors he had perceived in Aqshy. Then the image in the bowl wavered, and Ephryx drew back from the gold, the play of it illuminating the surprise on his face. His expression hardened. With pinched fingers he clicked out a brief rhythm with his nails upon the platinum of the bowl's stand. He called upon the power of Tzeentch, steadying the image. None could best the arcane power of Ephryx. He willed the minds of these interlopers to open to him; their secrets would be his, their plans laid bare.

He permitted himself a small smile.

The minds of the strangers remained closed. Their images wavered harder.

The sorcerer's smile evaporated quicker than a soul in a spirit forge. Ephryx looked out of the windows with a scowl. The dawn was passing over the fortress and the ruined city it squatted in. Its light now struck off the Vaulten Mountains, dancing from peak to peak of the Bright Tors, lighting the underside of the storm clouds beneath both. Then it slid down rocky bluffs and steep banks into the great valley of Anvrok to light the Silver River, overpowering the dull glow given off by the hot silver.

'No, no! Show me their thoughts, their purpose!' Ephryx made swift gestures over the liquid gold. The surface rippled, breaking the pictures into circular nonsenses. The bowl lost its focus, skipping from one party of the turquoise storm warriors to the next. 'No, no, no, no! Show me, show me! I demand it! By the thousand thousand names of Tzeentch, be revealed!'

The sun ceased shining into the vault of the fortress. Day broke fully across the Hanging Valleys of Anvrok. The sphere of magic collapsed. The skulls that studded the walls of the fortress sighed, and the light in their eyes died.

‘No!’ Ephryx set his will upon the bowl. Every corner of the land, every nook and crevice, every tumbled cottage and fearful tribe scratching an existence from the rock – all was his to see when he chose. But when he turned his eye upon the storm warriors, he saw nothing.

Ephryx hissed like a cat and slapped his hand upon the pedestal. The gold stirred fitfully. He glared at it until his eyes watered.

A draught of spiced air stirred the wizard’s robes. A chuckle emanating from two throats broke the quiet of his sanctum.

His master had arrived.

Ephryx screwed his eyes shut. He muttered a prayer to Tzeentch and smoothed out his features. Composed, he turned to face the source of his power and of his pain.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Great Oracle

A tall being stood to the westward side of the chamber, spindle-limbed but corded with wiry muscle. A daemon of Chaos, a Lord of Change. It grasped a tall staff in both hands, upon which was bound a grimoire that murmured with a voice of its own. The staff's finial was a metal fish of fearsome aspect. Of all the things about his mentor that he loathed, Ephryx hated this fish the most. It grimaced and pulled faces when it thought Ephryx could not see. It was, Ephryx felt, the summation of his master's disdain for him.

The Lord of Change had broad wings. Feathers that were blue only some of the time rippled with arcane energies upon the being's wings and thighs; otherwise, it was bald and dry-skinned. All these things were remarkable, although not so remarkable as the fact of its two avian heads.

The daemon leaned upon its staff and craned both heads forward on long wrinkled necks, the headdresses of each swaying with the movement. One face was creased with benign amusement, the other with disappointment.

The daemon was a being of one mind: one head saw only the past, the other the future. Ephryx noted with alarm that it was the future-seeing face that scowled.

'The Ninth Disciple of the Ninth Tower. Have you proven unworthy at last?' said the amused head.

'Eight others in this place and time we have consumed. Eight towers we have toppled. Perhaps we should dine again?' said the other to the first.

Ephryx bowed so low the tips of his horns tapped the mosaic floor. 'Kairos Fateweaver, oracle of everything, mightiest of all the Lords of Change, I greet

you.'

'Yes, yes,' said the amused head.

'Feeble wizard bows and scrapes, but there is little loyalty beneath his horns,' said the other.

'I have discovered something of great portent-' began Ephryx, but Kairos would not let him finish.

'Why do you, sorcerer... ' said the amused head.

'...believe that what can be hidden from most masterful Tzeentch should be revealed to you?' finished the annoyed one.

Kairos gestured at the molten gold, causing it to bubble and spit. He stepped forward, his staff tapping on the maddening patterns of the floor like the cane of a blind man. Tap-tap this way, tap-tap that way, probing for obstacles Ephryx could not perceive. Kairos stopped a few feet away from Ephryx, leaned upon his staff again and peered at him with two pairs of hard, button-black eyes. The eyes of a carrion bird, examining food not quite dead.

'I have had no warning of this,' said Ephryx. 'As much as I cannot believe it, Tzeentch did not know of these lightning warriors.'

'Ah, ah! The mortal is so cunning.'

'So stupid,' said the other head. 'Has it not occurred to him that Tzeentch did not tell?'

The pages of Kairos's book fluttered.

'But he is right. Our lord is in a rage that his sight was turned elsewhere, the doings in the realm of Azyr hidden from his view.'

'So Tzeentch was blinded.' Ephryx frowned. 'But you, O mighty Kairos, did you know?' he asked suspiciously.

'Know what, small and insignificant weaver of spells?' asked Kairos innocently. One head rose up and peered out of the window. The beak clacked. The attention of both heads returned to the wizard.

'I do not think today is for the playing of games!' implored Ephryx. 'You are given the power to see that which Tzeentch might not. You are the guarantor of his perspicacity.'

'Every day is a day for games,' chided the first head. 'When the game stops, time will end. There is only the game, nothing else.'

'You knew, you did! After all I have done! You knew that this would happen. I am so close to achieving the translocation.'

Ephryx began to pace. Kairos's heads swung heavily to follow him.

'I foresaw,' said one head. 'I have seen into the Well of Eternity into which even Tzeentch might not glance.'

'I did not foresee,' said the other.

'It is not for me to tell,' said the first head.

'It is not for me to know,' said the second.

'I can no more easily keep my mind closed to Tzeentch than you can keep your mind closed to me,' said the first head. 'What makes you think I knew?'

'He knows only what I will tell him, and I did not tell him this,' said the second.

'You obfuscate!' wheedled Ephryx. 'Tell me, O master. If you are aware, it

will affect our plans. My skulls are close to fully charged. I am so close to removing Chamon to the Realm of Chaos. Do you wish me to fail?’

‘Yes,’ said the second head.

‘No,’ said the first.

‘If you will not treat with me honestly, how can I serve you?’ asked Ephryx. Kairos brought out the moaning child in him. For that he would never forgive the Lord of Change.

‘It would have honesty!’ said the first head.

‘Truth from the lord of lies,’ said the second.

Both heads clicked their beaks in laughter.

Ephryx emitted an exasperated noise and turned back to his golden mirror.

‘Why be so irritable, wielder of small magics?’ asked Kairos amicably.

‘Great power, no power, useless, a master,’ muttered the other head.

‘You know better than to expect a straight answer from me. From anything. There are no simple answers, and no simple questions that could be framed to find them, even if they were to exist. Which they do not.’

‘But exist they do!’ croaked the other head. ‘Easy answers, easy questions. You behave as you did when first you came under my tutelage. Disappointing!’

‘Extremely so,’ said the first head sorrowfully.

‘I must know the intent of these warriors.’ Ephryx went back to the gold and stared into it. He saw nothing but the gleaming yellow of the metal. ‘If they come here for the artefact, or only for conquest.’

Kairos shrugged.

‘The secret is done. Why can I not see them now?’

‘None can, little wizard,’ said the first head.

‘None but he who sent them. Great magics shroud them still.’

‘And we do not wish to draw his attention here, not yet, so do not break the shroud. If you *can* break it,’ said the second head.

A thousand plans flickered through Ephryx’s mind, as swift and short-lived as mice. He could not scheme against the unknown.

‘I must know their purpose.’

Kairos stepped forward. He was so huge that two steps carried him across the chamber, his wings scraping the stonework of the ceiling. The daemon prodded Ephryx with a talon that was long and slate-grey, and as hard as slate too; it hurt Ephryx’s chest.

‘Think, little wizard! This is no great war party, but a scouting group. Foresight has made your mind lazy and dull. If you do not know, then extrapolate.’

‘Ruminate,’ said the second head.

‘Think!’

‘If you cannot, you are not fitting to serve our master,’ said the first head. ‘You are not fit to serve me!’

‘So the question is...’ said the second head.

‘...what have they come to scout?’ said the first.

‘That is not the question I had in mind,’ said the second head.

'It will stand,' said the first.

Ephryx looked at the floor. His mind penetrated the fabric of the tower. He looked all the way down, a thousand feet to the lead cairn where his prize was entombed. Within that, he did not look; the sight would blind him. 'How could they know about the hammer? Tzeentch hid it and removed knowledge of it from all the realms.'

Kairos looked at his pupil expectantly, two pairs of beady eyes glittered with the light of dead stars. 'Yes?' he said encouragingly.

'They don't know, do they?' asked Ephryx excitedly. 'They don't know at all!' He pointed a finger at Kairos. 'That's why you've come, to make sure they don't find out.'

'Clever,' said the first head.

'Somewhat,' said the second.

'Then it begs the question, what are they here for?'

'How long have you been master of this vale?' asked Kairos.

'A long time,' said Ephryx.

'And?' prompted the other head.

'I have never found the Silver Road, the great realmgate of the duardin. Is that what they seek? I had a vision, of a realmgate in Aqshy...'

'War has erupted across many of the Mortal Realms. The Powers are in uproar. Everywhere the man-god strikes,' said Kairos.

'The Silverway leads everywhere. It would be of great use to them.' Dismay clouded Ephryx's features again. 'They will search the valley. When they find it, they will come in great numbers and throw up fortresses of their own. Anvrok will become a marshalling yard for the wars of Azyr. They will surely be drawn to this fortress, and sooner rather than later. I cannot hide what I have. And I am so close. Why now?' he demanded angrily. 'Why am I to be tested so by the Great Changer when I am about to deliver him this prize?'

'Ephryx delivers Tzeentch's prize?' asked the first head to the second. 'Not correct.'

'We. We both,' said the second. Both nodded, then peered at the sorcerer.

'Our prize,' they said together. 'Our plan. Our reward.'

'This is news to us all, the work of a rival power. Sigmar of the world gone before.' Kairos's eyes closed, and his necks extended upward, heads shaking sinuously back and forth. 'The godling believes he can oppose Chaos.'

'Defy that which has already been victorious,' said the first head.

'His plans he hid, but his assaults he cannot. He will be challenged soon.'

'I need more time!' snarled Ephryx.

'Ninety-nine more dawns are required to charge the fortress sufficiently to convey it through the Shardgate,' warned Kairos. 'Only then will the metal realm be ours to dispose of as we see fit.'

'They cannot stop the Stormcast Eternals,' added the second.

'That is the name of Sigmar's puppets?' asked the first.

'It is,' said the second.

'What if, what if...' said Ephryx. He rubbed his chin and paced the floor. 'What if it is not more time that I need, but more magic?'

'A thought,' said Kairos.

'But is it a good one?' asked his other head.

'When the warriors of Sigmar were slain in Aqshy, they ascended on reversed lightning,' said Ephryx. His mind was racing. 'They are not men, these creatures. They are infused with magic.'

'Good, good!' said Kairos. 'Little wizard thinks well. And what is your conclusion?'

'I can trap their essence – use the power of Sigmar against him. With the power of the storm mine to command.' Ephryx spread his fingers quickly. 'It is done!' He chuckled, a gurgling growl like that made by a frightened cat. 'Oh, a most delicious irony! Sigmar seeks to take Chamon, but I will use his own weapons to take it from *him*!'

'Your own warriors are not enough to stand against them. When they discover the nature of this fortress, they will come against you in great numbers,' said Kairos. 'Your magic is modest, and your army weak.'

'You are right, of course,' said Ephryx. 'But I will have support, and the location of the Silver Road will buy it. I will call upon Lord Maerac and King Thron. Their armies will keep these warriors at bay. They are bored, and desirous of new lands to conquer. The Silver Road offers them an infinity of nations to despoil. It does not matter if they win or lose, so long as they buy the time we need with their blood. Five hundred years it took for Chaos to subjugate this realm. Sigmar will not win it back in a day. When they come against me, these... Stormcast Eternals?' he asked.

Kairos nodded.

'They will be weakened. No threat. I will siphon off their magic and complete my... *our* plan.'

'You are learning, mortal,' said Kairos's first head.

'Fool,' said the second.

'Agreed,' said the first. 'But the fool learns.'

Ephryx opened his mouth to protest, but the greater daemon was suddenly gone, leaving nothing but a solitary blue feather drifting to the floor, and a harsh, psittacine smell.

The sorcerer waited a moment. He shut his eyes and opened his mind. Through its weirding sight he appraised the room, seeking any trace of the Lord of Change. This allowed him to see the world as it truly was, a warping, dancing confection of magical flame, bound by natural law into the shapes of matter and energy. But those laws had no jurisdiction over him, and such shapes he could easily unpick. Kairos had gone, off to bother another unfortunate on some other plane of reality.

Ephryx grinned to himself. He was no slave. Kairos grossly underestimated him. He walked towards the wall. A door rippled into existence, and he stepped through onto a delicate balcony that leapt into being in time to catch his footfalls. He looked out towards the valley where the foe gathered. Ephryx had told the daemon he would hold off the storm warriors until they were weakened, but he would do exactly the opposite. If he could lure the Stormcasts to his fort sooner rather than later, the prize he sought to bring

before Tzeentch would be his alone to deliver. Let them bring their full strength against him – all the more magic for him to steal. The realm of Chamon would become a part of the Realm of Chaos forever, and he its undisputed king.

There was no need to be modest, thought Ephryx. He was exceedingly clever. He looked across all of Anvrok, Kantrok and Denvrok below. All of this – the sundered lands, the serpents Argentine and Vitryx, the crucible – he would bring before Tzeentch, a gift fit for a god. Then he would be elevated beyond the petty bounds of mortality, made a daemon himself. A gift worthy for one such as he.

Tzeentch would have a new favourite, and Kairos would find out just how weak Ephryx really was.

His fists clenched. The daemon showed him no respect, and for that it would suffer. Always it mocked him, prodded at him, its bored jibes threatening to turn to outright sadism. Yes, Ephryx had had quite enough of Kairos the Oracle.

And he had a plan to humble him.

First, he must call upon his own allies. He lifted one hand to his face and blew upon it. He uncurled his fingers. Upon his palm stood a perfect replica of Kairos, four inches tall. In this replica the eyes of only one head glinted with intelligence. The other head lolled, an idiot expression plastered across its face.

‘Thing,’ said Ephryx, naming the being.

‘Wise Ephryx,’ Thing said. ‘Why must I wear this form?’

‘Because it amuses me,’ said Ephryx.

‘It will amuse you no longer when the lord Kairos sees how you mock him.’

‘I enjoy a little thrill,’ said the sorcerer. ‘You are to fly to Lord Maerac of Manticorea. Bid him come here with all haste and all his host. Inform King Thron of the Crucible to make ready. Tell him of the situation.’

‘Which is?’ asked the daemon.

Ephryx growled dangerously.

Thing held up borrowed hands. ‘Begging your forgiveness! If you let me free of my prison once in a while, lord, then I might know! But Thing has no freedom that is not decreed by his most gracious Ephryx, and I see nothing in my jar. Nothing!’ Thing clapped his hands over his face. His second head stared on stupidly.

‘Stop your wailing, Thing.’

Thing peeked through his fingers. ‘I must trouble you to explain.’

So the sorcerer explained. His dream, the arrival of the Stormcast Eternals. The problem of ninety-nine days, although not the exact problem, not the *real* problem, but some fiction Thing could betray to Maerac and Thron.

‘I see. Is there more I can do for the great master?’ said Thing impertinently. ‘Perhaps to fetch for him refreshment, or a pretty potted fern? This chamber of yours is austere – it lacks a homely touch.’

‘Now it is you that mocks me, imp. And unlike Kairos, I am fully aware of your insolence.’ Fires sprang up from Ephryx’s hand around the daemonling.

‘Very well, very well!’ Thing squealed. ‘Sorry, so sorry.’

Ephryx snorted. The flames went out. Thing's idiot head croaked.

'Fly, Thing, and if you are swift, perhaps I might allow you an hour free from your jar.'

The imp nodded eagerly. 'I am away, away!' It spread its wings, the perfect imitations of Kairos's own, and took flight. 'Ow!' chirruped Thing as its unwanted second head pecked at him. 'Stop that!' It veered sideways in flight as he slapped at it.

'Away, Thing! Swiftly! There is no reward for tardiness,' called Ephryx. Thing levelled out and flapped up and away, borne quickly on winds that blew through no earthly air.

'A new game begins,' said Ephryx, as he watched Thing ascend. He bit his lip with his needle teeth, bringing forth a bright jewel of coppery blood. He licked it away reflexively and chortled to himself, then went to gather his followers. Time to provoke a reaction from the invaders. Time to lure them in.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Silverway

Thostos Bladestorm strode along the edge of a valley, Liberator-Prime Perun Goldhammer following him. Tawny dust hazed the vista, but could not conceal the country's strangeness entirely. To begin with, there was its fragmented nature. The Hanging Valleys of Anvrok was a region of floating landmasses set in an ocean of air. Some, such as this land of Anvrok itself, were as large as continents. Others were only as modest as counties. The smallest grouped in shoals or were isolated rock, bearing lonely spiny trees or rough patchings of scrub that hung in tangles over their sides.

To the west a vast crucible floated in the sky, as expansive as an ocean, filled with inexhaustible molten silver. The silver fell from the lip of the crucible in two streams, the Argent Falls. Where one fall hit Anvrok it became a sluggish river, cutting through the vale of the metal-rich land which defined this country.

Even more awesome than the crucible was the serpent, a twisting behemoth whose silver-scaled coils spiralled away, down and down through the Voids of Chamon, seemingly without end. Over the horizon its vast head gaped, multicoloured flames roaring from jaws whited by distance. The beast shimmered in the heat given off by the falls and flames, giving it an elusive quality. It should have been an illusion. The thing was titanic: it could not possibly be alive, but live it did. The soft roar of its fiery breath was a constant in this odd land. The flames stirred hot winds from the air that scoured the valley from end to end. When the sun passed, there would be no true night. Argentine's breath would not allow darkness.

Yet this bizarre place had once been populous and wealthy. There were signs of habitation everywhere, all long ruined.

A flash from above drew Thostos's attention upwards. A Prosecutor wheeled on perfect wings of energy high overhead.

'This way, Lord-Celestant!'

The warrior-herald pointed towards a slit in the rock. It looked like nothing to Thostos, just a crack.

But the crack was an artifice, stone cleverly fashioned to conceal. This fake outcrop masked a shallow valley, into which Thostos and Perun passed. Much industry had taken place there. Dozens of mine entrances opened in cliff faces that had been created by tools, unnaturally flat-faced and regular. Spoil was heaped in conical piles. No one had disturbed the ground here for many ages. Several of the mines had collapsed. Ancillary buildings stood roofless, their windows empty. The dry air preserved strange machinery, rusted the same colour as the ochre soil. This went on for five miles; Thostos followed the Prosecutor as he flew to the north.

Whole mountains had been cracked and scraped clean of their ore, but despite the staggering scale of the works on show, there were always more natural riches. Thostos and Perun went from the valley into another, untouched by pick or shovel, where there were the hints of yet more ore veins. Rocks that glittered with argentite, galena and haematite. In places nuggets of native copper and gold poked through the dirt, or were strewn on the ground, ready to be picked up.

Such wealth was staggering. Thostos supposed it was indicative of the duardin character that they had chosen to strip each area clean before moving on to the next.

Thostos and Perun went around a brooding mountain of black rock very different to the others. The Prosecutor had stopped, and was swooping back and forth, pointing downwards. The Lord-Celestant and his aide scrambled down a slope, dislodging a tumble of scree.

At the bottom they found themselves suddenly on an unlikely road, well-paved and level. They followed this. Shortly, two rows of Celestial Vindicators came into sight lining the route, cloaks stirring in the metallic breeze.

At the end of the road, Lord-Castellant Eldroc of Thostos's own Warrior Chamber waited at the brink of a cliff. His gryph-hound Redbeak lay at his feet. The eagle-headed beast's tail lashed with impatience.

'Eldroc has been no luckier than we,' said Perun. 'More empty valleys.'

'This one is more important than most,' said Thostos.

'There is nothing to kill,' growled Perun. 'Where is the foe?'

'There will be killing soon enough, my friend.'

'Lord-Celestant.' Eldroc clashed his right hand against his breastplate and dipped his head. 'What news of the duardin?'

'None,' said Thostos. 'Their holds and mines are all about this place. Most are despoiled, others appear to have been abandoned. All are deserted. Of the duardin themselves there is no sign. The heralds search far and wide for them, but this land is deserted.'

'I have found the same,' said Eldroc.

'Nought but dusty valleys and broken towns. No sign of mortal life anywhere,' sighed Thostos.

'You hoped for better, Lord-Celestant? I hear other realms have fared worse under the yoke of Chaos,' said Eldroc.

Thostos grumbled. 'I always hope for better, Lord-Castellant, but I expect the worst.'

'I have reports from the Fireblades and the Storm Masters that they have taken the Bright Tor Gate in the face of minimal resistance. You might wish to revise your expectations.'

'They have at least had the chance to slay,' said Perun.

'Show me what you have discovered,' said Thostos. 'The rest of our chamber search the northern valleys. There are signs of beast-creatures there.'

'If our brothers come upon the enemy, I wish to be at their side,' said Perun.

'Yes,' said Eldroc. 'I wish the same for myself.'

'If you have found the Silverway, you will get your vengeance before me,' said Perun.

'Maybe, Liberator-Prime.' Eldroc took up his halberd and warding lantern from the ground. 'Redbeak! Come.'

Eldroc led Thostos and Perun to the top of a set of stairs carved into the cliff. A crack followed the stairs, allowing in daylight.

'From the outside this crack appears to be a simple fault in the stone, the stairway is artfully concealed,' said Eldroc. 'The duardin were fond of hiding. Most settlements we have approached have grand entrances, but there are many more that are disguised in some way or another.'

'The folk of Grungni ever were secretive,' said Thostos. 'Lord Sigmar warned us of that. It would help if they were not. How are we to bring them to our cause if they cannot be found?'

'I do wonder why we have been given this task,' said Eldroc. 'We, the sons of vengeance, grubbing about in the dirt looking for folk that do not wish to be found. One would think a Stormhost with a less belligerent character might be better suited. I worry the God-King does not trust us.'

'You question Sigmar already, Lord-Castellant?' asked Perun.

'Forgive my impatience.'

'I feel it too. I will explain how I see his strategy,' said Thostos, 'The duardin respect might at arms as much as they do craft. They bear a grudge a long time, and will not let it lie until they feel they have been fairly recompensed. So who better to approach them than those who place revenge upon the Four Powers above all other things?'

Eldroc made a noise of agreement.

'We are all untried in battle, we Stormcasts,' continued Thostos. 'If I were Sigmar, I might send my more restrained warriors in first so I might better judge their virtues. And I might hold back my most ferocious for a time when they were truly needed. Patience, brothers. We have waited for centuries for battle. What does a handful more hours matter? We will all get to blood our hammers soon enough. An eternity of war awaits us. It may come to pass that

we yearn for peace before long.'

'Never,' said Perun firmly. 'I will never yearn for peace again, not until Khorne himself is cast from his iron throne and his collection of skulls smashed to bone meal.'

'Aye to that,' said Eldroc.

The stairs opened to a level place, floored with sand. A cave, were it not for the gap high above that showed the brazen sky. But the way seemed to end in a cul-de-sac. A wall of rock greeted Thostos.

'This is it?'

'Yes, Lord-Celestant. Another trick for the eyes. Follow me.'

Eldroc approached the rear of the cave, his turquoise armour flashing as he stepped through a slash of sunlight. It appeared he had vanished. Thostos and Perun stopped in amazement until Eldroc's arm appeared again and beckoned them. What looked like one sheet of stone was two overlapped with a passage between.

'Another marvel made with simple stone,' said Perun.

They followed Eldroc. Another chasm awaited. The convoluted sides matched one another, so it seemed like the stone had parted like a pair of lips. A sandy path wended its way along the bottom, finally opening out in a large, bell-shaped chamber. Forty Stormcasts guarded the way in. They clashed their hammers on their armour as their officers approached.

'Let's see it then,' said Thostos.

Eldroc pointed to the left. Set into the back wall of the chamber, right into the side of the mountain, was a great portal. Thostos walked to the centre of the chamber so that he might see it more fully. The sun was at exactly the right angle to shine through the small light in the roof of the chamber and play across the huge carvings surrounding it.

The gate was monumental in size, three hundred feet high and one hundred across. Two enormous duardin herms made up the bottom half of each side of the frame. Their heads and backs were bowed with carved effort, long stone beards brushing the sand along the cliff face's foot. They were guarded by friezes of lesser carvings, a row of figures who scowled out at the Stormcasts and pointed with accusing hands. Tall, geometrically patterned pillars carried upon the upturned hands of the herms made up the remainder of the height, and bore the weight of a long lintel artfully fashioned from a single massive piece of stone. An outer band deeply carved with repeating geometric designs made the outer edge. In the flat space of the middle of the frame ran an unbroken run of six-foot-tall runes bordered by perfectly chiselled flora and fauna, thinner against the geometric band and thick around the gaping mouth of the gateway. Thostos had seen none of the things depicted there in the Chaos-tainted wasteland of Anvrok; the world the carvings showed was long gone.

The mountain here was black rock shot through with glittering seams of galena, but the arch was a creamy colour, a different kind of stone. Thostos could see no join to mark the transition between the two sorts – it was as if they had been welded together. Perhaps it had been. The duardin had skills none could match. The gate runes glowed feebly in the sun of Chamon, lambent

with quiet magic that hinted at past power.

Thostos removed his helmet. Underneath was a face framed by blond hair and a beard, square jawed and heavily featured beyond the norms of mortal men. His eyes alone seemed completely human, and only they had remained unchanged during his remaking. They were the same eyes that had once beheld Amcarsh in its dying days. But neither his eyes nor the sweat and dirt streaking his skin could hide the god-gifted power crackling within him.

'The fabled Silverway of the duardin,' Thostos pronounced. With his mask removed, his voice was warm and rich. 'How disappointingly easy to find.'

A few of the men chuckled, pride and frustration both in the sound.

'There was no resistance at all? It was just here, waiting for you in the mountainside?'

'Retributor Eustos found it,' said Eldroc. He held up a hand to indicate a warrior who bowed his head in recognition.

'A blackbird alighted upon a mountain stone,' said Eustos. 'I had seen no other life in this place, and so it drew my eyes. When I looked at the bird, the stair was plain to see, though I would swear to Sigmar himself that there was nothing there before.'

'Plain for you to see.' Thostos took in the clean lines of the carving, unsoftened by time and unmarked by violence. 'There is no taste of Chaos here at all. Even if the damned had not found it, I would have expected this place to be the lair of a beast. But there is no sign, past or present. It is as if it has been hidden for centuries. It is almost as if we were meant to find it.'

'That is what Lord-Relictor Cryden suggests, in fact, my lord. That the duardin hid this place from the enemies of their god Grungni...' began Eldroc.

'But not from his allies,' concluded Thostos. His sigmarite armour rattled quietly as he walked the length of the gate and back.

'There is more, Lord-Celestant.' Eldroc nodded to the men guarding the gate. One went to the far side of the chamber. It was so wide it took him a minute to run the distance. Once there he raised his hammer and tapped at the stone.

'Are we to become miners, Eldroc?' asked Thostos.

'Watch,' said Eldroc. He signalled the men by the gate. They placed their hands into the mouth cavities of two of the smaller figures in the frieze.

The ground rumbled. A low hum followed. The runes upon the gate burned brightly blue.

The rock chamber flickered. One moment the Stormcasts were within a giant cavern, the next they stood upon a platform set into the open mountainside. All around them were stout ruins. Where the far chamber wall had been, a wide road led down from the Silverway, passing over several landings and sweeping flights of stairs as it descended. Then the bare rocky slopes many hundreds of yards in all directions wavered and vanished. In their stead a duardin town followed the road down the mountain. To the left and right, a vista covering all the vale of Anvrok was open to the Stormcast Eternals. Warm sun basked Thostos's face. The only element that remained unchanged was the hidden path by which he had come to the Silverway. It still came out of the stone by the gate, its entrance dark in the sun.

'Now that is impressive,' Thostos said, sweeping his gaze over the view. 'Such art! I have never heard of an illusion so great in scope to hide a whole city, excepting Sigmar's cloak about Azyr.'

'The city is desolate, abandoned like all the rest,' said Perun. 'Disappointingly so.'

'You have a point,' conceded Thostos. The buildings had been hidden from prying eyes, but unlike the gate had suffered the effects of time and weather. Many were surrounded by skirts of detritus cracked by frost and the sun's heat on the walls. Roofs had fallen in. Windows were eyeless holes that the wind blew mournfully through.

'If the duardin intended us to find this, why can we not find them?' asked Eldroc.

The men stared at the gate a moment.

'Does it work?' asked Thostos. 'Is the way still open?'

Lord-Castellant Eldroc raised a hand. A herald of their chamber stepped from the knot of Stormcast Eternals at Eldroc's back, his bearing proud, detached, his heavy helmet tucked under one arm. The mechanisms of his wings were folded, the feathers of light extinguished. He announced himself, his voice sonorous and clean and somewhat hollow behind the warmask, like the voices of all the reformed.

'Prosecutor-Prime Martius the Swift, of the Skyblood Angelos Conclave.'

'Speak, Martius,' said Thostos.

'I have returned to Sigmaron upon this road, my lord. It works exactly as our lord Sigmar said it should. Beyond the arch is a tunnel, fair made and well-dressed in stone. As one follows this, the cold of the utterdark gathers about the traveller, until all is black and freezing as the dark before time. Then there is a second arch, like the gate before us but twice as finely wrought. This entrance here is not the gate, but the path to the Silverway. Blackness and starlight wait beyond, but I trusted the word of our God-King and stepped out into the void, uttering six of the names of Azyr as I did so. And lo! A road of silver rose up beneath my feet, and stretched on, shining as with the light of the pure moons of Azyr. Five steps I took upon this endless road, finding myself in the Gardens of Celerity, nigh to the road leading to Sigmaron. The legends do not speak falsely.'

'There was no way back through the realmgate that you exited?'

'None. It closed behind me without trace. I was taken there, and left. I returned by Sigmar's own hand.'

'And there is nothing untowards upon the road?'

'It is pure and unsullied. No trace of Chaos's mark upon it.'

'Then the key part of our crusade is concluded,' Thostos laughed. In truth, he, Eldroc and the others of the Bladestorms wished for vengeance before success. 'Sigmar will see this as a great triumph.'

'Indeed he does,' said Eldroc. 'A part of the Stormhost has been ordered to return to Azyr.'

Thostos raised his eyebrows at his Lord-Castellant questioningly. 'And?'

'Not us, my lord. Our own Bladestorm is to remain here, as are the

Fireblades and the Doombringers. The Harbingers of Vengeance are to remain on guard upon the Bright Tor Gate under Lord-Castellant Barahan. Others will set out to the west and south, and to Denvrok, to widen the search for the duardin.'

Thostos nodded, visibly relieved. 'That is good. We shall have our vengeance yet.'

'Maybe, maybe not, my lord,' said Perun.

Thostos looked over the officers and champions of Eldroc's cohort. All of them radiated frustration.

'We are all Celestial Vindicators,' he said, raising his voice so that all might hear him. 'Here by dint of our great desire for vengeance. I see much impatience, a desire to close with the foe and smite him hard, to rend and destroy those foul traitors who turned their backs upon the gods and embraced the impure power of Chaos.' His voice boomed from the cliff. 'Fear not, my brothers, we shall have vengeance, each and every one of us, over and over again from now until the close of eternity ushers long night upon the Mortal Realms and all those that lie beyond them. Do not see the ease with which this gate was found as a disappointment, no! For by this road of the duardin our hammers might make their presence felt on a thousand times a thousand battlefields. Better we test our mettle later in many wars than in the single one. Do not despair, O Celestial Vindicators, we shall have the blood of ten thousand enemies in recompense for the lives of our families and the destruction of our nations.'

'Well said, my lord,' said Eldroc.

'You do not appear satisfied, Lord-Castellant.'

'I yearn to fight,' admitted Eldroc.

Thostos clapped his hand upon the arm of his lieutenant. 'As do I, Eldroc, as do I.'

'Others will have their chance sooner than we, I think,' said Eldroc. 'I have the orders for the Bladestorms. I can guess their content.'

A scroll was brought out by Eldroc's aide. Thostos read it quickly. When he was done he rolled it up again, whereupon it burst into flames and went to nothing.

'We are to stay and guard the gate.'

Eldroc nodded. 'Of course.'

'I understand your desire to go out and fight, Lord-Castellant.' Thostos looked upward to the pale sky, as if he might see Sigmar up there, staring back down at him. 'This task of holding the Silverway I would entrust to none other but you, Eldroc,' he said. 'You are among the finest of all Lord-Castellants, a master of defensive warfare.'

'Nevertheless, I do not know whether to be angry or relieved,' said Eldroc. 'The others will be sent on to realms where battle rages already.' He rested his lantern upon the sand and gripped his halberd tightly. 'Their chance at vengeance comes before ours.'

'Or our fellows still present here might find nothing, and those sent home find themselves in reserve in the Golden City,' said Thostos.

‘You don’t believe that, I think, Lord-Celestant.’

‘No,’ snorted Thostos. ‘Not really. But I also do not believe this ease will hold. This land appears empty, but has long been under the dominion of the master schemer. There are beastmen, and others will come once tidings of our arrival spread. Our presence will have been noted. Can the process of concealment be reversed?’

‘Yes, Lord-Celestant.’ Eldroc’s voice was heavy with disappointment. He raised his arm, and his warriors moved back to the gate’s guardian statues.

‘Stay your hand, Lord-Castellant,’ said Thostos. ‘Let us leave the Silverway open to view. Let it be a signal to the forces of Chaos that not all the works of the ancients were cast down, and that we come in open war to reclaim them. We are not skulking whelps. Let them see this and rage. The enemy will come against us soon enough. Of that I have no doubt.’

The posture of the Celestial Vindicators around the gate changed. They stood taller. Whispers passed among them, urgent with the anticipation of battle.

‘Then I await them with eagerness in my heart,’ said Eldroc. ‘I thank you, my lord.’

CHAPTER SIX

The calm before the storm

With the haunting call of trumpets, three chambers of Celestial Vindicators marched up through the revealed city of the duardin and into the tunnel of the Silverway.

They came up the road five abreast, the tramp of their feet and rattle of their armour echoing from the mountainsides and their songs soaring to the peaks.

The remainder of the Bladestorms came first, joining with Eldroc's cohort, and stood aside to let their brothers by. Warrior after warrior marched on, their Celestants, Castellants, Vexillors and Relictors leading. Dracoths huffed and growled, reluctant to leave Chamon. There were ranks of bow-carrying Judicators, hammer-wielding Retributors, winged Prosecutors and grim Liberators, their wargear gleaming and standards waving.

Thostos saluted his brother commanders as they went past. Such was their presence that it seemed their passage would never end, a turquoise stream of thwarted avengers doomed to pass through the gate over and over.

But it did end. As the day darkened into night and the Alchemist's Moon made itself known in the sky, the last of the departing warriors went into the tunnel. The sound of their march persisted long after the final few ranks had vanished into the dark, until the sound stopped suddenly.

'They have passed onto the Silver Road and out of Chamon,' said Eldroc.

'A sight to move the heart, the warriors of Sigmar marching openly in Chamon,' said Thostos. He took in his Warrior Chamber, standing in ranks, cloaks stirring in the warm wind. The entirety of the Bladestorms now guarded the Silverway. Most were arrayed before the entrance – all but fifty, who kept

watch on the entrance to the canyon approach.

‘And yet Sigmar has us waiting here, in this wasteland,’ said Eldroc.

Redbeak woke from his slumber, and with head cocked he fixed a keen eye upon a spot in the sky over the desolate city. A star winked there in the evening, and came nearer. A moment later a winged figure became apparent, a Prosecutor messenger. He flew in and alighted before the gate.

‘Any news?’ asked Thostos.

‘Little, Lord-Celestant. We have found scattered signs of mortal settlement, and the refuse of beastherds. There is a great fortress to the south, in the ruins of the city Elixia. Otherwise, this land is empty of inhabitants.’

‘That is valuable news,’ said Thostos. ‘Tomorrow we shall send more scouts to look upon it. If it is a great redoubt of the enemy, there we will find our first chance at vengeance.’

The Prosecutor bowed his head.

‘What of the area hereabouts?’ asked Eldroc.

‘Nothing, my lord. Dead as it was before. Nothing comes or goes.’

‘And the duardin?’

‘The Knights-Azyros seek them still, and have gone into the higher peaks. The Fireblades Chamber have crossed the Silver River and make for the cliffs of the Vaulten Range. They have seen no further sign of habitation there, old or new. Lord-Celestant Cumulos of the Harbingers of Vengeance bid me inform you that his men have uncovered workings of the duardin near to the river. There are manufactories, but they are ruinous and devoid of life, and have been so for a long time. He and that portion of his brotherhood not with Barahan proceed westwards, towards the great silver sky wyrm, in the hope of some more recent sign of them.’

‘Then here was where they dwelt. This was their capital. It is as we feared,’ said Eldroc.

‘These mountains are riddled with their workings. This is no outlying region, but the centre of their country,’ said Thostos.

‘It appears so, my lord. Further out, the cities are those of men, not Grungni’s folk,’ said the herald.

‘Very well. Return to your patrolling, Prosecutor. Bring any news, any at all, as soon as you have it.’

‘Yes, Lord-Celestant.’ The Prosecutor leaped skywards, his wings bearing him up in a blaze of light. Eldroc envied him his freedom.

‘He flies, we wait,’ said Thostos, echoing Eldroc’s thoughts.

‘I am bound to the path of defender, my lord. Sigmar remade me to keep his fortresses and guard places such as this. I do his bidding gladly.’

‘And yet you still envy our Prosecutor brother,’ said Thostos.

Eldroc did not reply, but could not help looking south towards the location of the fortress. There was no sign of the enemy yet, and the night was deepening.

CHAPTER SEVEN

First blood

‘Fire! Blue fire comes!’ The shout echoing from the watch upon the clifftop was urgent and joyful. ‘The enemy shows himself!’ A Celestial Vindicator pointed southward, to where a flickering ball of blue light danced across the early morning sky.

‘To arms! To arms!’ shouted Thostos eagerly. ‘Finally, my brothers, we shall have the vengeance we so crave! To arms! To arms! Eldroc, hold the eastern end of the platform. I shall take the west.’

‘Aye, my lord,’ said Eldroc, and went to do his lord’s bidding, Redbeak screeching at his heels.

Horns blasted, calling the Stormcast Eternals to order. With a rattle of armour, they readied themselves in front of the duardin gate. A semicircle of Liberators stood shoulder to shoulder and locked their shields. In front of them went a line of Judicators, their skybolt bows crackling into life.

‘Ware! Ware!’ a shout came down from above. ‘The fire has gone!’

All eyes went to the horizon. Eldroc swept his gaze over the early morning sky.

Then it was upon them.

The ball of witchfire burst from nowhere opposite the realmgate, expanding from a sphere no larger than a shield to create a crackling wave fifty yards or more across. Blue flame tips flared magenta and orange, green and violet. Howling, laughing faces appeared in the fire, snatched away only to be replaced by more horrors. The glare of it was harsh, searing as lightning but loaded with dark magics. It hurt the eyes and the soul to look upon.

'Judicators, loose!' shouted Eldroc.

Lightning flared, pitting its purer light against the dark radiance of the fire. Methodically the Judicators sent volley after volley of stormbolts into the approaching firewall. But they clanged against the flames with the sound of struck metal. Their lightning went out, and they fell to the ground.

'Loose!' ordered Eldroc.

The Judicators' aim was true. Not a bolt missed its mark, but every missile was stopped as surely as an axe blow is turned by sigmarite. The flames grew to encompass the breadth of the platform. The runes of the duardin gate spat sparks as they were caressed by unclean light. There was no heat from the flames, but they radiated a dull prickliness that set Eldroc's teeth on edge. The energies contained within his body reacted, writhing across his war harness in a series of short, hopping sparks. Smoke that smelled of brimstone and flowers rose from the armour joints of the Stormcasts.

The fire drew closer until it was thirty yards from the Judicators. Eldroc held up his hand to shield his eyes. Behind the fire he discerned dark shapes. Silhouettes wavered in the flame, warriors joined into one long, spiked profile. They were as tall as his own Stormcast Eternals, decked in heavy plate armour, helms crowned with horns and strange crests. Cavalry rode in the centre upon massive horses. Infantry were to the flanks, carrying huge, cruel-bladed axes. There was something else, a large shape that hovered behind and above the warriors of Chaos, but the nature of that was obscured by the fire, which seemed to gather itself more thickly and fluidly there, protective of its secret.

'Sound the horns! Order the cliff guard down to the gate!' shouted Eldroc.

Silver horns blared, the purity of their notes dispelling some of the odd sensation projected by the fire.

The firewall dissipated, revealing the Chaos host behind: at least two hundred of them, armoured in blue and yellow, bright steel and bronze, vile decorations upon their plate. The Chaos warriors and Stormcasts were opposite sides of the same coin, both kinds energised by divine will, but whereas the Stormcasts had had their souls uplifted by Sigmar, here were men who had sacrificed theirs for power.

The ranks of Liberators fluidly parted, allowing the Judicators to retreat and take refuge behind them. They locked shields again at the exact moment the warriors of Tzeentch roared and charged.

The flanks came in first, smashing into the outer limbs of the Bladestorms' own formation. At that moment, Eldroc lost sight of Thostos, and his view of the battle drew in.

The crash of the meeting lines was deafening, a sound out of the ages of myth when the gods themselves clashed weapon on weapon. The Stormcasts raised their shields, taking blows that would have cut an ogor in half. Hammers descended in reply, battering Chaos armour to shards and pulverising the flesh beneath. Both sides exhorted their divine masters to bring them victory. Prayers to the Lord of Change were matched by Sigmarite hymns of war, and the very air boiled where they met in contest.

As the fire went out, Eldroc saw the shape it had concealed. Upon a spinning

disk of purest gold rode a tall man in dark robes with long, pointed horns. A gangrel sorcerer, a disciple of change. He plucked at the air with long fingers, dragging power from the stuff of creation and hurling it at the centre of the Bladestorms' line. These flickering bolts of multicoloured magic transmuted themselves into spears of burning quicksilver as they flew. One burst through the Stormcasts to Eldroc's left. With a peal of thunder, the warrior disincorporated and a flash of light raced upwards, back to the Reforging chambers of the Sigmarabulum. The warriors of Chaos were mighty foes, and there were more of these departures. But the Bladestorms would not yield. With each death, the Liberators bunched tighter, allowing no gap in their shieldwall. Skybolts arced over the front ranks, blasting Chaos warriors from their feet. The Chaos infantry were fully invested in the fight, but as yet the knights of Chaos had not engaged. They stood ready, mutant horses snorting, but they remained unmoving.

'Stand ready, my brothers!' yelled Eldroc. The footmen were attempting to pin the Stormcasts' flanks in place, pressuring them so that more Stormcasts were drawn from the centre while it was further weakened by the magic of their leader. To the west, the Lord-Castellant caught sight of Thostos embattled, but lost him in the press of warriors gathering there again. Eldroc judged that the knights were waiting until the line's middle was sufficiently depleted so that they could burst it asunder with their charge.

If that were the foe's plan, it was failing. The Stormcasts did not weaken. The line remained tight; no gap opened up.

The sorcerer hunched forward. He licked his lips with his long purple tongue and cast a wary glance to the narrow valley leading to the platform. There the others of the Bladestorms were mustering. Already they had abandoned their watch on the mountain way and thundered down the stairs to join their brothers. In moments they would be upon the Chaos flank. Running out of time, the sorcerer paused in his bombardment and raised a long finger. Red light burst from it. At this signal the cavalry reared up. Their mounts screeched with hellish voices and they plunged forward, lances dropping into position. The knights clashed into the centre of the Stormcast Eternal line. Few lance points found their way past the sigmarite armour, but the warriors of Azyr were bowed by the sheer impact of the mass of twisted horseflesh, steel and Chaos-swollen men coming at them. Armoured feet squealed on rock as they were forced backward.

Eldroc's armour sparked with fury. He stepped outside a lance's thrust, and welcomed his attackers.

'Vengeance!' he called. 'Vengeance!'

With a terrible joy he sang his battlesong, and laid about him with his halberd, spearing one giant with the tip and throwing him from his horse. A snarl announced the attack of Redbeak. The gryph-hound leapt from Eldroc's side and bore a second Chaos knight backwards off his mount. His halberd whistled overhead and Eldroc's heart swelled. This was what he had been made for, this was his gift from Sigmar. In another time and another place there had been another man. The life of that man had been destroyed to the

sound of evil laughter – his wife, his children, his family and his tribe, all slain with wanton cruelty. He had fought, aye, but he had been bested and taken to their torture tables. As his own life was about to end he had prayed to Sigmar. He had asked not for salvation, but that he be permitted revenge. As his blood mingled with his tears, he had shouted his hatred of Chaos. He had shouted to the skies for the strength to bring down the minions of the great powers as they had hewn down his tribe and trampled their flesh into the dirt.

A vain plea, but of utmost sincerity. His prayers had been answered. Flashes of memory, long dormant, flickered through his mind. Every crushing blow sparked a recollection of pain and dread. These nightmares from the past lent greater strength to his arm. Far from tiring, he became stronger, his need for vengeance impelling his arm as much as Sigmar's powers. Hell-forged armour cracked and shattered, and the steel-clad heads of horses were cloven through. Many great champions of Tzeentch came against him, but none could stand before his wrath. He was vengeance incarnate. His song became a wordless cry of rage and he pressed on, heedless of the danger. The line of Liberators behind him forced themselves forward against the press of the foe, following their leader into the heart of the force. Gore splashed over them as Eldroc's halberd did its deadly work. He hacked with the axe blade and stabbed with its spear tip, smashing apart dark armour and tainted flesh alike.

A massive brute of a man clad in brass fell to the ground and Eldroc drove the spike of his halberd through his stomach with a feral cry. He drew the weapon out and swung it in a blurring arc that had the enemy's horses rearing in fear; one could not control his steed, and Eldroc decapitated him in a spray of gore. He roared at the sight.

A gap opened around him, as the minions of Tzeentch dared not chance their skill against his. Eldroc's rage lifted. He panted hard. For the first time since his transformation he felt the ache of exertion trouble his muscles. He yearned to leap forward and slay, but as much as he desired to let his fury take him, he could not allow it. He must lead. Berserk rage was the way of Chaos; he was a servant of Order. With a shuddering breath he willed his heart to slow and climbed atop a dead steed. From there he surveyed the battle.

The remaining Bladestorms were coming to Lord Thostos's aid through the defile from the mountainside, and their arrival pressed the Chaos warriors there hard. In return, the Chaos worshippers moved more of their number to bolster their efforts, so that only a small knot remained embattled to Eldroc's left. The Stormcasts were moments away from being able to turn the line. Now the Chaos army risked losing its centre.

The sorcerer had come off his platform and was calling the powers of Chaos to aid him. Magic flowed into the armour of the dead, bringing the wargear unnatural life. Animated suits lurched forward, carrying the corpses of their wearers back into battle. On those still living, broken armour flowed together. The weapons of the sorcerer's men glowed potently.

Eldroc laughed. 'Are such magics intended to intimidate me, mage? See here the power of Sigmar Heldenhammer manifest!' He held aloft his warding lantern, the seat of his power and symbol of his office. Brilliant light blazed

forth. Where it lit upon the Celestial Vindicators' sigmarite, dents popped out of scarred metal, and gashes in flesh knitted themselves shut. The Stormcasts were invigorated by the light of their God-King, and redoubled their attack. But where it touched upon the scions of Chaos they reeled back. Wounds closed by the sorcerer burst open once more, and the suits of armour brought to life fell back to the ground.

The charge of the Chaos knights had been broken. The last was brought down, his steed letting out a grating, reptilian whinny as it was tripped and pushed over. Both rider and steed were obscured by hammers rising and falling.

Only the sorcerer's bodyguard remained in the centre of the enemy line, a grim company of wicked murderers dressed like kings and armed with a daemon's plunder. Dangerous, but few in number.

The tide was turning. It was time to press the advantage.

'Judicators, protect the flanks!' yelled Eldroc. His battle shout pierced the tumult of battle. The irregular rain of stormbolts ceased and two distinct barrages set up. Two-thirds of the gleaming bolts fell on the greater numbers of Chaos warriors by the entrance to the mountain path, while the other third speared down onto the small knot by the eastern flank. The stormbolts there did swift work, breaking up the formation of the warriors and leaving them at the mercy of the Eternals' hammers and swords.

'Liberators, to me!' Eldroc called. Without waiting for his men, he ran across the narrow gap and plunged into the sorcerer's bodyguard. Halberds with gibbering faces flowing over molten surfaces rose to greet him, but he smashed them aside. Screaming his oath to Sigmar over and again, he hacked his way deep into the enemy's ranks. A solid crash came behind him as the Liberators' shieldwall impacted the foe. He was impetuous, carving a passage alone towards the sorcerer. He spun his weapon, whirling it round his head and turning his body about to maintain its momentum. Redbeak came at his side, ripping at those few who evaded Eldroc's wrath.

With a final crash Eldroc put down his last foe. It took him a moment to realise he had burst right through the dread regiment. The sorcerer stood just a few yards from him. They locked eyes a moment, then the sorcerer turned and fell back towards his golden platform.

Redbeak leapt after him, but the sorcerer waved a hand at the gryph-hound, sending it spinning aside.

'Judicators, bring down the curse caster!' roared Eldroc.

The disc bobbed in the air, rotating at stately speed until the sorcerer approached, whereupon it stopped and sank low to the ground. With a single bound, the sorcerer jumped upon it. The disc's revolutions restarted and quickened as it rose up, bearing the sorcerer over the heads of the combatants. A hail of stormbolts came at the sorcerer. None hit their target. A fresh wall of blue fire erupted around the disc, and the bolts clashed off it harmlessly. Shrinking rapidly in on itself, the ball of fire darted up and away, heading off over the duardin ruins and then to the south.

Eldroc noted its direction, but could spare little time in consideration of

pursuit. The damned warriors, seeing their master gone, were fighting all the harder, and Thostos's flank was being pushed back before their fury.

'Slay them! Slay them all!' called Eldroc. He and his men laid low the remainder of the wizard's bodyguard, then turned to the mountain path entrance to fall upon the rear of the Chaos warriors fighting there.

Minutes later it was all over. Stormcast Eternals stood, hammers suddenly heavy in their hands, chests heaving. The broken bodies of Chaos slaves lay on the sand and rock of the platform floor. The statues of the duardin on either side of the arch looked on impassively. Eldroc let the haft of his halberd thump to the floor as Thostos came to join him.

'Finally,' he said. 'Vengeance begins.'

'And it is a beginning only. Did you see the way the sorcerer fled?'

'To the south.'

'Aye,' said Thostos, and there was grim pleasure in his voice. 'Towards the ruined city of Elixia. Towards the great fortress.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Glimmerlands

Once the battle at the platform was done, the wounded ministered to and the tally of those returned to Sigmaron calculated, Thostos elected to take fully two-thirds of the Bladestorms off the mountain by the stairs in pursuit of the horned sorcerer, leaving Eldroc to his duty as guardian of the Silverway.

As they descended, it became apparent that the ruins were even more expansive than they had originally thought. They marvelled that such a site could have been hidden from view for so long, for the tumbled buildings stretched down to the lowlands and there were many shafts and hewn caves visible in the rock of the mountain besides.

They left the ruins of the duardin behind and headed south, following the directions of Prosecutor scouts towards the other city and the fortress that filled its centre.

By the end of evening they had reached the edge of the Glimmerlands. Thostos ordered a halt, and his men set up camp within a ruin upon a low hill. Once a palace, its walls were cast down and towers broken, so that no portion stood taller than a man.

Thostos watched strange night fall over Anvrok for the fifth time. The sun went into the rippling fires of the great wyrm Argentine. A long shadow fell on the valley as the wyrm obscured the light, only for the sun to return a quarter of an hour later an exhausted red. The sun had fought its daily battle with the wyrm's jaws and it had lost, as it did every day.

Argentine's coils filled the western sky. Through the day its vast bulk was pale as the daytime moon, but night lent it solidity and it became ominous.

Towards the lands of the deepest east, a haze of metallic dust tinted the air the colour of brass, purple beyond where night marshalled itself in the void, ready to march on Anvrok. From the west, a new light came to conquer the sun's dominion. In the valley of Anvrok, the land danced already to the endless writhing of Argentine's fire. Shadows leaped around rocks frantically, as if seeking to avoid being seen. The Silver River lost its sheen and glowed, the intense heat it harboured revealed by the gloaming. And so the battlefield was set, dark night against the Chaos-tinged fire of the wyrm.

Liberator-Prime Perun came to stand beside his lord. He rocked a loose stone in the wall. The mortar was dry dust and frittered away to nothing on the hot breeze. He grunted, hollow behind his helm, and reseated the stone. 'Better than nothing, I suppose,' he said.

Thostos made no indication he had heard. He did not take his eyes from the great wyrm. 'I grew to manhood in Amcarsh, before the God-King took me to his side and made me anew. In that realm were creatures as tall as towers, and fiercer than the storm. Only in a few places fenced in by sea or mountain could we make our homes, so mighty were they. But I look at that wyrm in astonishment. I have never seen anything like it.'

Perun nodded. 'It defies belief, Lord-Celestant. I see that and the crucible it warms. But I cannot credit it a rightful part of this realm. It seems more a whim of Chaos than a thing of Order.'

'But it is a thing of Order, or was,' Thostos turned away from the dancing fires of the creature and looked Perun in the eyes. 'I am told that it was a celestial dragon, a creature as noble as our dracoths, but turned to fell purpose by the great changer. It gives me hope.'

'How so?' Perun removed his helmet and shook out a mane of dreadlocks. His skin was dark brown, eyes a piercing green. A native of some desert land, overthrown like all the others.

'Because if Lord Sigmar believes that we are mighty enough to challenge the likes of that serpent, perhaps rid it of its taint, then truly we can accomplish anything. We shall be victorious, Perun.'

At night the land changed. The mark of Chaos upon the Hanging Valleys became more evident. The Alchemist's Moon clambered high up the ladders of heaven, its lowering face crisscrossed with strange patterns. Weird fires sprang up from nowhere, pillars of multicoloured flame that twisted their way across the slopes with sinister purpose. Perhaps they sought to taunt the Bladestorms, but the Stormcasts of Sigmar paid these sprites no attention. They did not run from their camp nor loose shots, but watched carefully, hands close to their weapons. Odd noises sounded out in the dark, and the bleating calls of beast-folk echoed from the crags. But the creatures were craven, and none dared approach the camp of such mighty warriors.

The Celestial Vindicators were therefore disappointed until the following day, when they encountered their next resistance.

With a cry of pure fury, Thostos swept aside the Chaos knight's sword with his

runesblade and slammed his hammer into the warrior's chest. Armour cracked under the weapon's heavy head, pulverising the flesh underneath. Blood spurted from the rents in the metal. The knight slumped sideways drunkenly, and Thostos finished him with a blow to the chest that stove in his ribs. He whirled his sword around his head, reversing the point and driving it through the steel hide of the strange beast the knight rode. Despite its bizarre appearance, it had a heart, for it collapsed and died. 'Sigmar!' called Thostos, holding his hammer aloft. 'Vengeance!'

All around him his men were slaughtering the Chaos warband. The Chaos warriors had approached confidently, almost eagerly, seeing the Stormcasts as worthy foes. Little did they realise how outmatched they were.

The clash of arms and shouts lessened, until all the warriors lay dead.

'We have finished them, my lord. Victory!' called Perun.

'Victory! Victory!' chanted the Bladestorms.

Thostos looked down at the man he had killed. The knight had been huge, granted great strength and size by his patron. The fashioning of his armour would have bankrupted a good-sized kingdom of the old realms, being set with precious stones and rare metals. Thostos cleaned his weapons with a thought, the magic of them boiling off the blood from hammerhead and sword edge. He sheathed his runesblade and bent down, reaching for the knight's helmet with his free hand.

'What are you doing, Lord-Celestant?' asked Perun.

'I would look upon this man that I have slain.'

The helm slid free. Unlike some they had slaughtered, the armour had not fused itself to the man's flesh, and the face beneath was untouched by the warping power of Tzeentch. His eyes were closed, his face slack.

'Look at him. In death there is no emotion, no wickedness. He seems to sleep, and his face could be that of any man.'

'Aye, but it is not any man,' said Perun. 'He is a follower of Chaos, a traitor to all mortal kindreds. He bartered his soul away for power.'

'He did,' said Thostos. His gaze remained fixed upon the dead man's face. 'But I wonder how much choice he had in the matter. Did he take the road willingly, or was he forced down it at sword point, for fear of his family's fate?'

'We all had our choices, lord,' said Perun angrily. 'And we took a different way.'

'Those were different times,' said Thostos. 'In those days men threw in their lot with the Dark Powers for gain, that is true. But to be born into this.' He extended a hand and swept it around the barren mountainsides, the bare valley cloaked in thorny scrub. 'What choice would he have?'

'They die. We have our vengeance, that is what matters.'

'Perhaps,' said Thostos. He cast the helm aside. 'But our anger might be better spared for the masters, and not the slaves.'

Already carrion birds were alighting upon the slain with a clatter of bronze feathers. Two spread their wings and darted their heads at one another. They hissed puffs of steam from pistons in their wings as they contested for the

choicest scraps. A third hopped onto the chest of a fallen follower of Tzeentch and began nipping through the breastplate with a serrated beak of steel more akin to forge shears than the mouth of a living creature.

Thostos looked to the plateau in the west. The shapes of ruined buildings crazed the horizon. Behind them something massive shimmered, part obscured by distance and magic.

‘We draw close to the fortress,’ said Thostos. ‘The mightiest redoubt in this region. There we will find the lords of these lands, and we shall kill them.’

‘A worthy target for my hammer,’ said Perun.

As they proceeded west the sky cleared, and the land grew hotter the closer they drew to the city. The sun beat down on them as it crawled overhead, heating their sigmarite armour intolerably. The rocks and gritty soil of the region glinted with innumerable mineral fragments, a scintillation that was as disorienting as it was beautiful. The city wavered in the heat, parts of it vanishing in the haze so that it appeared the great tower at its heart floated on the air.

As they drew closer, the jagged shapes upon the cliff resolved themselves into a vast, eight-towered castle, far larger than they had anticipated. The fortress dominated the centre of Elixia, a plateau dense with metal ruins. Sharply angled walls of metal and stone rose high over the wreckage of the city, studded with long spikes and covered with thousands of glinting copper skulls. The castle’s heart was wholly of metal – an enormous tower, impossibly high. No mortal construction could have been made so tall.

Thostos raised his hand and the column of Bladestorms came to a halt.

‘This fortress is too great for us alone. Prosecutors!’

A group of winged warriors hurried to the head of the column. Thostos addressed them.

‘Fly with word to Lord-Celestant Cumulos, Lord-Celestant Vard and Lord-Castellant Barahan at the Bright Tor Gate. Tell them to send as many of our brothers as they can spare. After you have informed Eldroc, take the Silverway to Sigmaron. I will provide a message to our lord Sigmar, asking that he return the rest of the Celestial Vindicators to Anvrok. This realm will not be so easily won after all.’

CHAPTER NINE

Lord Maerac

From the balcony of his tower, Ephryx watched the Stormcast Eternals make camp. The bowl of gold showed him nothing useful at all, and he was forced to rely on a telescope. It was not as efficacious, of course, but through its crystal lenses he could at least count the men waiting on the plain. ‘Two hundred and seven,’ he said. He included in that number the winged figures looping around the fort at a safe distance.

‘And more on the way.’ Lord Maerac of Manticorea stood by the sorcerer, eating delicacies from a wide silver platter. He spat pips from his mouth over the side of the balcony and took up the leg of a fowl. With it he pointed to the northwest and the south west. ‘There, I count two more forces coming for you up the Silver River.’

Ephryx swung his telescope to the points Maerac indicated. Sure enough, heavy plumes of dust rose high into the orange sky. To make matters worse, a fresh storm gathered over the Bright Tor range. Thunder growled in the distance.

‘You say they arrive by lightning?’ said Maerac. ‘Oh my, you are in a difficult place, my friend.’ He laughed.

Ephryx looked up from his telescope. Maerac was a huge, broad-shouldered man, with a heavyset face beneath his bald scalp. The sorcerer wrinkled his nose and bared his teeth. Ephryx wisely hid his irritation from Kairos, but he had no qualms at all at displaying his anger to the likes of Maerac.

‘That may be, but it is they who are in a difficult place, not I.’

‘How so?’ asked Maerac. His tone made Ephryx’s skin crawl.

'They have no idea of the might of this fortress.'

'That's why you need me,' interjected Maerac.

'And they have led us right to the Silverway!' concluded Ephryx irritably.

'Have they now?' Maerac raised his eyebrows. 'Is the Silverway outside your gates then, Mage Ephryx, because that is where our enemy appears to be.'

'Do you doubt my word, lord? Look through this telescope and you will see the gate yourself. The illusion has been lowered.' Ephryx swung the telescope around to point to the revealed duardin city, hazy with great distance, but visible if you knew where to look.

Maerac pointedly refused to take the telescope. 'I always doubt your word, sorcerer. You are bent-minded. I'd no more trust a word you said than I would believe the whispered promises of Tzeentch himself. I see what you claim to be the Silverway all right, but I will not believe it to be so until you take me there and step through it with me.'

'It is no illusion! It is as plain as the nose on your face!'

'In that case, how very embarrassing that it was upon your doorstep all this time,' said Maerac mildly. 'When did you take up residence here again?'

'You provide your service to me, and I will pay you as we discussed,' said Ephryx.

'Yes, I am sure I will, only to find that King Thrond is already on his way to the gate. That would make you clap, seeing us at open war.'

'If he is, he will not break through until we have slain the Sigmarites upon the walls of this fortress. Do you really believe Thrond is mighty enough to better this army? You do not, otherwise you would go there yourself this moment. Do not play the fool with me, Maerac.' Ephryx waved his hand. 'I have no need to trick you. What do I care if you have the Silverway or not? It has never been my intention to leave this place. I remain only to perfect my fortress.'

'They would tear it down if I were not here,' said the lord. 'Having seen this enemy, I should press you for greater payment. You are rich enough in gold and magic.'

'You shall have the Silverway, be grateful of that. I shall be content with my buildings of flesh, steel and stone while you rampage across the eight realms.'

'That I will. It has been too long since my warriors were tested. This moulding of worlds holds no interest for me,' said Maerac. 'It is tedious.'

'Then it is for the good that our interests diverge,' snapped Ephryx, 'or we should forever be at each other's throats.'

Maerac laughed. With his teeth he tore the flesh from the bird leg, exposing a bone made of a light, silvery metal. He leaned out of the window and tossed it upwards. There was a loud snap as something on the roof caught it. 'Very good, Ephryx. But I cannot help but feel that you are hiding something from me.'

Ephryx affected to look guilty. 'Nonsense.'

'Go on, tell me. Let us while away the time until these warriors come to fight. Amuse me with your convoluted schemes.'

'There is no scheme.'

Maerac slapped Ephryx on the back. 'There is always a scheme, sorcerer.'
'Oh, very well! For long years I have sought to perfect the defences of this fortress.'

Maerac smirked. 'I know that.'

'To which end I have transmuted the many skulls you have provided me into copper.'

'I know this too. Did you think I was unaware what you did with them? You really do have a low opinion of me.'

'You are better informed than you suggest!' said Ephryx. 'Into these skulls, a measure of the power of the sun and the ether are funnelled at daybreak.'

'And all this I know too,' said Maerac smugly. 'And I know of the thing you keep below, this artefact of Order you parasite upon and pretend is not there. I know of the slave army you gathered to build this place, the ogors you blinded who fashioned a cairn of lead around the item. Why would you need to do that?' he asked with mock thoughtfulness.

'But you do not know what it is,' said Ephryx. It was his turn to be superior.

'I do not, I admit. None who have seen it kept their sight or sanity, and most have been dead for hundreds of years. However,' he looked out at the warriors marshalling in the vale, 'I can hazard a guess. I may be a dullard compared to you, Ephryx, or so you seem to so fondly think, but I am possessed of a modicum of wit.'

'Well then!' snarled the sorcerer. 'Then you will know also that once this energy reaches a critical mass, this fortress will never fall.'

'That I did not know either, but have long suspected,' said Maerac. He popped a mewling blood grape into his mouth, and bit down with relish. 'It is only because you show no interest in expanding your holdings that I allow you to pursue this aim, you realise.'

Oh, he is so satisfied with himself, thought Ephryx. I will see him choke upon his own tongue! Maerac was ignorant of the skulls' true purpose. If he was aware of Ephryx's plan to annex Chamon to the Realm of Chaos and gift the entire realm to Tzeentch, then Maerac would certainly not be here. As devoted to Tzeentch as Maerac insisted he was, he had little desire to take up residence in Tzeentch's crystal labyrinth personally.

Ephryx's agile mind considered that Maerac might in fact be bluffing, and that he knew what the artefact was. If that were so, the chances were high that Maerac had come here to assassinate him at his moment of triumph. Ephryx discounted the notion just as quickly as it had formed and revealed none of this through word or gesture or mien. He spoke conspiratorially instead, as if he were sharing his deepest secrets with the Lord of Manticorea.

'These beings are all of magic. I could taste it when I fought them myself at the Silverway gate. I have seen them die, their bodies streaking away to wherever they came from when they fall. That I can exploit. We shall slaughter them, and I shall capture their essences in my vessels of copper. The Eldritch Fortress will become charged with their magic until no creature of any plane will be able to breach my defences, thus keeping all our lands safe, Lord Maerac. If I am successful, the gods themselves would not be able to cast down

this castle.'

Maerac's eyes narrowed. He shook a six-fingered fist at the sorcerer. 'You are wrong there, Ephryx.'

Ephryx's heart skipped a beat. Could it be now that this prince of dullards would cast aside his mask of idiocy and strike him down? Ephryx brought a spell to the forefront of his mind, ready to turn the lord's brain to lead.

'Really, my Lord Maerac. How so?'

'It will be I that does the slaughtering while you cower in your keep. I will not allow you to forget that.' Maerac stepped up to the edge of the balcony and climbed upon the balustrade. He balanced there a moment. 'Remember, sorcerer, when you perfect your fortress of flesh, stone and steel, that you are able to only because I, Lord Maerac of Manticorea, permit it!'

Maerac leapt from the balustrade, his clothes snapping in the wind. A piercing shriek rippled the gold in Ephryx's scrying bowl. A huge manticore leapt after its master with a crack of leathery wings. A moment later it laboured upwards with Maerac in the saddle.

'A modicum of wit you say? Evidently not,' whispered Ephryx nastily.

Clouds scudded across the sun, the forerunners of a storm. Ephryx shivered. War was coming to the Eldritch Fortress.

He went to prepare his magics.

CHAPTER TEN

Assault on the Eldritch Fortress

Elixia was before them, a labyrinth of dereliction, the Eldritch Fortress lurking in the centre. Eight tall towers were linked by a wall bristling with spikes and set with thousands of coppery skulls. From the centre rose an enormous keep, the top twisted into the blasphemous emblem of Tzeentch – a great eye, gleaming purple, set into blued steel and surrounded by curving tendrils of metal.

The Bladestorms came south along a road that led out of the Glimmerlands. Outlying districts of Elixia lay in ruination either side. The remains of fortifications edged the bluff, the majority of which Elixia occupied, but the extent of settlement outside the walls suggested to Thostos that Elixia had enjoyed a long period of peace before it fell.

The Bladestorms marched alone, the majority of the Fireblades and the Harbingers of Vengeance. They approached up the main highway from the west, their Lord-Celestants Cumulos and Harekuthos leading them. Further Warrior Chambers came from deeper within Anvrok, but would be a while in arriving. Thostos hoped he had enough men.

The Stormcast Eternals passed through the devastated gates of Elixia. The towers had wilted, the metal sagging from the effects of some great heat. Slicks of solidified metal still puddled the floor under coatings of dirt. The highway past the gates was increasingly choked with debris. The destruction was random. Entire buildings stood untouched next to piles of scrap creaking in the wind. Everywhere the transmuting effects of Tzeentch's magic could be seen.

They passed a street where every building had been upended and set upon its

roof, then another where the buildings had been miniaturised, and sat in the centre of a field of glass under whose clouded surface strange shapes swam. One street had been peeled up from its foundations, the materials fashioned into hideous and giant figures whose static postures silently changed when unobserved. There was a square full of statues of salt, whose lumpen nature could not hide the fact that they were citizens of the city transformed as they fled. Immobile faces screamed from walls. A fountain ran incongruously in a dry plaza, spurting out a mixture of quicksilver and blood. Hysterical voices sounded from empty halls.

The Stormcasts ignored it all. They had been made to fight Chaos, and Chaos held no fear for them. They spoke little as they entered the city, and were entirely silent as they penetrated deep within and approached the dread fortress. Their hands gripped weapons tightly, eager for vengeance. Wordlessly they reached the inner boulevard of the city and split, Thostos heading straight forward, the other Lord-Celestants heading right and left. The rumble of their footsteps was the only sound they made.

The Celestial Vindicators converged on the fortress. Thostos looked to the clouds racing overhead and prayed silently to Sigmar that he would intercede in time.

And then, suddenly, the city stopped.

‘Halt!’ Thostos called. A lone trumpet winded in the desolation, a lonely, sorrowful sound.

Before them was a wide space from which the buildings had been cleared, three bow shots across, a deadly, open ground that had no scrap of shelter to offer besiegers. Doubtless the metal there had been scavenged and had helped create the monstrous fort, but more than a simple razing had taken place. The surface was smooth, covered in rippled swirls. In the pattern were shadowy outlines suggestive of foundations. On the other side of this killing zone of pure metal was Thostos’s goal, the eastern gate of the fortress. It reared high, the foot of the wall blending with the ground as if grown from it. Spikes covering huge metal plates wrought with icons of Tzeentch and Chaos studded the walls, every angle reinforced with brass and steel. The walls came to a point, one of eight triangles, the east gate a massive gaping maw of bronze set into the base of the tower that rose from the angle of the walls. But it was the skulls that arrested the sight. Hundreds of thousands of them covered the surface of the fortifications. In the shadows cast by the clouds they appeared to shift their gaze, looking about them.

More trumpets sounded. Other brotherhoods emerged from the jagged line delimiting the city ruins from the killing space.

‘I see no one, Lord-Celestant,’ said Perun. ‘Atop the walls there is not a single defender. None moved to intercept us while we were vulnerable in the ruins. Perhaps it is deserted?’

Thostos scanned the parapet. He could see no sign of defenders himself. No sound came from within. Silk pennants on the battlements moved in the wind and the place was quiet enough so that their rippling was clearly audible.

‘They are there. They wait for us. We will smite them, but we must be wary,

lest this is some trick of the Great Changer's.'

'And if it is, my lord?'

'We will smite them anyway.'

Sunlight glinted from the fort's metals one last time. A storm darkness fell. Black clouds gathered over the castle.

Thunder rumbled. Drops of rain plinked off Thostos's armour.

'Charge!' he roared.

At the command of the Lord-Celestant Thostos Bladestorm, the Stormcast Eternals ran from the shattered city that surrounded the castle with a mighty roar.

Thunder joined its voice to the blowing of trumpets and demands for vengeance. Hundreds of armoured feet made a rumble that outmatched the storm. Ruined buildings shook. Streets that had been silent for centuries echoed to the pounding of feet.

The first lightning strike smashed down.

'Stand ready!' shouted Thostos. 'Form battle lines. Heraldors, call down our brothers!'

The first ranks of Liberators slammed their shields down a stone's throw away from the walls, locking them to one another to make a metal fortress of their own. Judicators ranged themselves behind them, raising their bows in the shelter of the shieldwall. 'Take aim!' yelled Thostos.

On top of the wall, horned helmets appeared, in pairs and handfuls then by the dozen, until the whole rampart was a mass of Chaos warriors. But the Judicators did not shoot at them.

Cerulean skybolts slammed into gargoyles and the ensorcelled skulls of the castle. They exploded violently, erupting with flashes of trapped magic.

In response the warriors atop the walls began to cast down missiles, darts of black iron and balls of lead spiked with steel. The Liberators hunkered down and angled their shields higher.

Lightning blasted from the sky, pricking domes of force from the ground. When they blinked out, Stormcasts armed with thunderbolt crossbows stood in long lines. They immediately set to work. Titanic discharges of lightning erupted from their magical weapons, and were joined by celestial bolts raining from the sky. The city shook to the fury of the bombardment. The copper skulls on the walls exploded as they were hit or overloaded by the sheer power they attempted to absorb. A long section of parapet slid free from the wall top and crashed down, spilling the warriors atop it to skid across the metal surface of the castle plaza. Incredibly, a number survived, but they were quickly spotted by the Liberators, who smashed them down whether they fought or ran.

More thick columns of light hit the open ground, depositing warrior brotherhoods who joined the shieldwalls of the others. Soon there were thousands of Stormcast Eternals gouging at the Eldritch Fortress with destructive magics. The men of the Celestial Vindicators sang songs of vengeance and ruination, and their fervour added power to the barrage.

Rain pounded from the sky, rattling from armour and shield. Thostos raised his hammer and his sword, and roared out his joy.

‘You cannot stop the oncoming storm!’

‘This battle is not going according to your plan, sorcerer,’ growled Maerac. His manticore growled and shook its mane, agitated by the scent of blood.

‘Nonsense,’ said Ephryx distractedly. He was intent on the conflict below. ‘This fortress is more than capable of absorbing the worst they can muster. They will be the ones to suffer.’

No sooner had Ephryx spoken than a section of the ramparts was brought down, struck by a bolt of lightning that speared from the boiling black clouds over the fortress. Ephryx could not suppress a flinch as he looked into the maelstrom.

‘Is that so?’ bellowed Maerac. ‘It may soon become moot whether your fortress is up to the task or not. Such things stir the hearts of my warriors. Do you think they will stand idle as our foes attack without hindrance? It will not be long before they cannot stand by any longer, and sally out to meet the foe face to face.’ Maerac glared at the enemy warriors, so small far below. It was evident he was speaking of his own desire. ‘They are the chosen of Tzeentch, and would prove their superiority against a worthy foe.’

‘They would be foolish to do so,’ said Ephryx.

A series of monstrous booms shook the fortress. There were more of the Stormcasts arriving at every moment.

‘Do something, Ephryx! I cannot make promises for the actions of my men!’

Ephryx nodded. With a hurried wave he summoned his disc into existence beneath his feet, a twinkle of gold that bore him up into the air.

‘Very well! I shall unleash the defences of the Eldritch Fortress, though it is a waste of magic.’ He shot downwards, leaving Maerac to follow cursing in his wake.

Wind streamed over Ephryx as he leaned into the rain. His disc took him into position over the east gate, the focus of the enemy’s attack. He brought it to a halt, and held high his arms.

‘Come silver blades! Come silver hounds! Defend your master, defend your lord!’ In a tongue thick with blasphemous sounds he chanted, drawing upon the disturbances in the ether that roared all throughout the realm. Power burst from his hands.

Maerac flew around him in broad loops. ‘Hold!’ he shouted at his followers. ‘Stand your ground! Let the sorcerer do his work! Hold your positions, Tzeentch damn you! Hold!’

Ephryx was lost to the flood of magic. It burned through his body and soul. Such exquisite delight there was in power, which too rarely did he exercise himself. Too rarely did he remind himself why he had pledged himself to Tzeentch. Maerac’s voice became the annoying whine of an insect. A fitting voice for such an insignificant man, he thought. The eyes of Tzeentch were upon him, and they glimmered with approval.

With a hellish cry, Ephryx brought his hands together, and a new thunder joined the symphony of battle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Second death

Thostos watched the sorcerer descend from his tower and work his spell. 'Beware,' he shouted. 'Beware!'

All along the line, Lord-Relictors chanted out their own incantations. Glittering waves of magic pulsed over the Celestial Vindicators, healing and empowering them.

The walls of the castle twitched. Patches of decoration whirled in on themselves to be replaced by blank, featureless silver, and from this shining blades leapt. Trailing pink fire, they shot towards the shieldwall. The Liberators raised their shields in response, but the blades did not impact and came to an abrupt stop before them. In perfect step with one another, as if they were wielded by a line of warriors, the swords hacked at the shields. Blades sliced down with supernatural might, rending sigmarite in two, forcing the warriors to discard their protection, which drew additional weapons to them from the magically charged air.

The line of Liberators disrupted, the swords broke formation, picked out a target each and duelled with them. Sigmarite blade rang on magical weapons, the blades which came in greater numbers. Along the front, Liberators began to fall, their ascension marked by skyward-leaping energies. But they did not return to Azyr. Shouts of horror went up along the line as the Stormcasts saw their comrades' essence drawn off course and sucked into the copper skulls of the fort.

A terrible howling came from the city then. Thostos saw silver-skinned hounds pounding down narrow alleyways, eyes afire with forge flame. Molten

metal streamed from their jaws like drool.

They galloped across the metal plaza, claws skidding on the smooth surfaces. They plunged into the lines of Judicators, their dagger teeth closing around helmets. Men wrestled with the beasts, their bodies vanishing in flashes only to be taken into the skulls of the castle. In the wake of the hounds staggered ancient suits of armour, woken by magic, their dull blades clutched in empty gauntlets.

Cries of mirth and exultation came from the top of the walls as the sorcerous things attacked, but once their element of surprise was exhausted, they died quickly. Judicators shot the blades down with unerring skill, and the shieldwall reformed. Reserves of Liberators turned about and met the hounds. Hammers and blades fell on them, cutting through gleaming hides to bring forth floods of silver viscera. Thostos felled two himself, smashing the head cleanly from one with a hammer strike. Bright metallic blood splattered his body and he screamed his anger, the same words over and over again.

‘Vengeance, vengeance, vengeance!’

He broke the hip of the last hound, and it yelped as pitifully as any mortal cur. A reverse thrust stopped the noise.

Then Thostos was into the creaking army of animate armour. Empty suits exploded under his hammer, the bones of their long-dead occupants shattering into dust. He chanted the names of his mother, father and sisters – words from another life and time. His blood surged as he said each.

He and his men destroyed the last of the armour, and the castle shuddered under the bombardment. For every skull that glowed with stolen power, another melted or fell free.

‘Is that the best you can do?’ Thostos shouted, and raised his weapons again. ‘Sigmar! Vengeance! Sigmar!’

His men followed his example. ‘Sigmar! Vengeance! Sigmar!’

And then the gates creaked open, slamming hard against the wall, and the forces of hell-twisted Anvrok poured out to face the army of Sigmar in open battle. Heavily armoured warriors screamed the names of Tzeentch as they crashed into the battle line. The Celestial Vindicators shouted back.

‘Sigmar! Vengeance! Sigmar!’

Thostos ran back to the line of battle, silver blood and rain streaming from his armour. The lead warriors of Chaos used long, hooked halberds to yank away the shields of the Celestial Vindicators. The shieldwall wavered, then broke apart, the warriors in it overcome by the furious need for revenge. The battle line became a series of individual combats, and everywhere the slaves of Chaos were being bested. Fearless men all, heartless tyrants, were shocked by the fury of their foe. None such as the Stormcasts had ever been seen in Chamon.

A dark shadow swept over the fight. A manticores flew overhead: its body that of a lion, tawny and powerful. A snarling face set with dimly intelligent eyes craned and snapped from a huge scarlet mane.

Thostos watched it, momentarily transfixed. Not since his days in Amcarsh had he seen such a creature, when Chaos magic had changed the beasts of the

land and made them savage, and its ilk had become common. The champion riding the manticore came shrieking through the air on his mount, swooping upon Prosecutors like a hawk and dashing their broken bodies upon the ground. His beast reared, all four claws out to slash and rend, and others fell. 'Form up!' he was screaming. 'Make line! Make line!'

The wind from the manticore's flight buffeted Thostos as it swooped low. The heavy paws of the monster struck a furrow through the Celestial Vindicators, killing some and scattering many more. Stormbolts chased the flying creature of Chaos. One struck home, causing the beast to howl in rage, but the lord was a skilful rider, and he swept his beast from side to side, dodging all the fire but that single bolt.

Thostos barged his way to the front. As commanded, the Chaos warriors were reforming their own lines, and now the Celestial Vindicators found themselves in isolated groups against a well-organised foe.

'Match them. Match them! Shieldwall to shieldwall!' Thostos cried. 'Shieldwall, then for the gate!'

The Celestial Vindicators locked shields for the third time with supreme discipline, and marched in unison, but a wall of fire sprang up in front of the Chaos warriors, and the Tzeentchian soldiery attacked without fear of reprisal. The flickering pink and golden flames turned hammer and sword, but their own blades stabbed out without hindrance. The manticore swooped overhead again, the sword of its rider taking heads to the left and right. He laughed as he slew. The energies of slain Stormcasts shot upwards, only to be sucked into the castle. Stormbolts burst apart on the firewall, and the Chaos warriors killed and killed.

'Back, back! Retreat twenty paces. Move!' called Thostos.

Flawlessly, the Stormcast Eternals went backwards, shields still to their fore, opening a space between themselves and the Chaos warriors. The Tzeentchian host paused for a moment. It was enough.

'Judicators, aim for the ground!' shouted Thostos.

As soon as he had spoken, a rain of hissing bolts rose up and fell down. Half fizzed out or exploded upon the magical shield protecting the warriors, while the rest slammed into the metal ground before them. A crackling storm of energy arced across the front of the Chaos warriors' company, creeping under the fire shield and coursing through the metal-clad warriors behind. They jerked and danced, before collapsing dead and smoking.

The fires guttered out. The laughter of the manticore's rider turned to screams of anger, and the Stormcast Eternals charged back into their enemy, striking down the few who had survived.

The gates swung shut, but Thostos saw his opening. The walls for a hundred yards either side of the gate had been cleared of warriors. Thostos grinned. The problem with studding a castle wall with skulls, he thought, is that it makes it very easy to climb.

'To the walls,' he cried. 'To the walls!'

Thostos and his followers made a quick ascent, fingers digging into the soft

copper of the skulls adorning the walls. Below, more Stormcast Eternals hacked at the walls directly, caving in the skulls that had consumed their comrades, burying their swords into them or ripping them from the walls. Each one destroyed burst with a flash of released magic.

All along the defences the same thing was happening. Thunderbolt crossbows burned whole stretches of the wall bare. Judicators and Prosecutors covered their comrades as they hacked at the fabric of the fortress. Where a skull was ruptured that imprisoned the essence of a Stormcast Eternal, the energy roared upwards, booming with the joy of release.

Thostos hauled himself up the last few feet of the wall, the power invested in his limbs by Sigmar allowing him to climb quickly even in his heavy armour. He vaulted over the crenellations, drawing his weapons again as he landed. Chaos warriors were running along the wallwalk, but too late to stop him. His men were already over, and the clamour of battle erupted along a section of the wall.

‘Force them back!’ he roared. ‘Make room for our brothers!’ Thostos growled with the fierce joy of vengeance. He broke a savage’s jaw with the hilt of his sword and kicked another over the battlements.

Shouts, grunts and the clang of metal. He revelled in it, in the blood, in the struggle and the burn in his muscles. A flash transmuted a Stormcast next to him to a guttering puddle of thick liquid. Two more stopped dead, frozen in place, then melted like hot wax. Another turned into a crystal statue in a puff of purple smoke. Transformed mid run, he toppled from the battlement and shattered on the flagstones of the bailey. Flashes of departing magic struggled for the sky, but the fortress was still consuming the essence of the Bladestorms. Thostos smashed down another warrior, and searched for his quarry.

The sorcerer floated ten yards out from the wall on his golden disc; a tall, gaunt man with long horns. He was much altered from a man’s usual form, a long-serving servant of Chaos. He was chanting wildly, hurling magic that killed Thostos’s warriors. ‘Bring him down!’ he shouted. ‘Kill the sorcerer!’

A group of Prosecutors heard his order and swooped upward over the wall. They circled past the sorcerer, pelting him with their celestial hammers. The sorcerer knocked half of the hammers from the sky with a sweep of his staff, but the Prosecutors’ aim was good, and their own magic powerful. Three bolts of energy hammered into his golden disc, causing it to slew around and slam into the wall walk. The disc sparked and died, and the sorcerer was sent sprawling.

Dozens of Liberators and Judicators were now on the wall. ‘Kill him! Kill the sorcerer and we win the battle!’ Thostos bellowed. A trio of Judicators raised their bows, but the sorcerer knocked their missiles aside with blurred swipes of his staff. The men jerkily rose into the air, raking at their throats. The sorcerer closed his fist and they went limp, and he threw them down.

‘I will finish this myself,’ growled Thostos. ‘With me!’

The sorcerer was only yards away. Thostos howled with righteous fury as he closed on him. A look of dismay crossed the twisted daemon-worshipper’s face, one that turned swiftly to hatred. He made a series of complicated passes

in the air very quickly. A bang sounded from the courtyard, a rush of displaced air. An unearthly roar wounded Thostos's ears, a hideous, mewling howl that should never be heard in the mortal world. His men cried out and stumbled, but he went on, hammer ready to deliver the final blow.

The battlement transformed into a flood of boiling gold beneath his feet, and he fell, half a dozen of his men plummeting into the courtyard with him. He struggled up, ignoring the burn of the molten metal as it seeped through the gaps in his armour. All around his feet were flapping, cog-scaled fish, gasping for gold and dying as their clockwork ran out.

A rich perfume hung on the air, and a troubling shimmer distorted all sight. From the heart of this haze reared a creature whose very appearance was anathema to sanity. It shifted and changed constantly, seeming not to be wholly of one world or realm – the impression Thostos had was of a house-sized creature steeped in madness and pain. From its back erupted an array of crystalline bones in the shape of the blasphemous wheel of Chaos. At the centre turned a weeping hole in space, a gateway to the realm of the four powers.

One of his men looked into it and screamed. Blue flames jetted from the joints in his armour and he imploded with a bang.

'Avert your eyes!' Thostos shouted. But it was no use. Writhing bolts of plasma erupted from the portal, screaming around the beast like the shades of the tormented dead. They shrieked through the air, plunging into the Stormcasts. All around Thostos his warriors were transformed by wild magic. One split down the middle into two identical, half-sized replicas of himself, one black, one white, who immediately started fighting each other. Another turned into a cloud of moths that burst apart and scattered to the four winds. A third became a porcelain vase that fell to the ground with a dull clunk.

Thostos could barely contain the horror the thing evoked in him. The magic in his body could feel the tug of the vortex of wild energy that roared around it, as if it would tear out his soul.

Lord Sigmar, hear my prayer, he thought. You answered me once before. I ask you again, lend me strength.

He raised his sword and hammer for what was sure to be the final time.

'Vengeance,' he hissed. He charged.

A spasming tendril of energy caressed his helm as he closed upon the creature. A spike of pain ripped through him, down every nerve ending. He dropped his weapons and staggered back in horror. Something was happening to him, some fundamental and terrifying change. He howled in pain, and went down onto one knee. He closed his eyes and awaited his death. He had failed.

The pain stopped. He still lived. But he was not the same. His body, his flesh. It felt different, heavier, harder.

His gauntlet dropped from his arm. He raised his hand before his face. Metal gleamed in place of skin. Flesh and blood had been transformed into living sigmarite! Another bolt of change slammed into him, and did not perturb him. He laughed, a triumphant, disbelieving bark of mirth. He stood, stepped forward calmly, and plucked up his weapons from the ground. The beast

whuffled and whooped, multiple discordant animal voices blending into a hellish gurgle of frustration.

Magic rained down upon Thostos as he strode confidently at the monster, all of its sorceries running without harm from his transformed body. The creature reared up, tentacles spearing forth from its mouth. Thostos slashed them with his sword, severing them and stepping through as they turned to shreds of multicoloured magic. He leapt up, swinging his hammer over his head and down, burying it in the small head hidden behind the nest of tentacles. The creature's skull gave in with an audible crack and, with a sigh that seemed to be of relief to the Lord-Celestant, the beast collapsed to the floor.

The gateway upon the beast's back blinked, and winked out. The creature heaved one last breath and died, its flesh shrivelling in on itself, becoming black ash.

Thostos turned back to where the sorcerer stood and raised his hammer in a gleaming metal hand.

Ephryx ran back and forth on the wall. His perfect kingdom, laboured over so long and so lovingly, was being smashed to pieces around him. Blazing jags of lightning burned down from the sky, slamming into the walls. He flung up his arms as celestial energy played about the northeast tower, exploding in an outwards fountain of molten copper. The warriors of the God-King hacked and smashed at his magical receptacles, spilling his carefully husbanded power back into the ether. Shooting bolts raced upwards as the essences of Stormcasts were set free to ride the storm.

'No! No!' screamed Ephryx in anguish. The warriors on the walls had been overwhelmed, and the lackeys of Sigmar were coming through the part of the wall transformed by the mutalith. They were pouring into the courtyard, destroying his life's work without a thought for his efforts.

A billow of rain-filled air battered him in the face as Lord Maerac alighted on the parapet.

'See, sorcerer! This is true Chaos! Not your pedantic constructions. The fortress is lost! Your own pet has let them in!' Maerac was laughing, a hard mix of despair, anger, and glee.

'Coward!' screamed Ephryx. 'I will not abandon my work!'

He turned upon the men on the walls and the metal plaza outside, sending gales of billowing fire into the ranks of his foes, transmuting Stormcast Eternals into all manner of hideous forms. A volley of bolts arced towards him. He waved a hand and they fizzed into nothingness even as his other throttled the Judicators that had fired them.

'It is lost!' repeated Maerac. 'Flee.'

A terrible howl drew Ephryx's attention to the courtyard. The mutalith slumped to the floor. Its vanquisher turned and raised his hammer at the mage in defiant challenge.

Ephryx fixed Maerac with a doleful stare.

'What are you doing?' demanded Maerac. 'No, Ephryx!' he said warningly. 'Do not call upon such powers!'

The sorcerer raised his hands, all the while glaring at the lord defiantly. Cursing, Maerac urged his mount into the storm-wracked sky.

Ephryx chanted an arcane phrase three times. Attackers were approaching from the other side of the breached wall. A jagged bolt of lightning slammed into the fort's central tower. The artefact within heard and responded, a secret signal only Ephryx could detect. The calling of the hammer to its master set his teeth hurting, but he would not stop and chanted the phrase over and over again.

Reality screamed. Ephryx channelled as much power as he dared, his soul chilling as he handled the dark energy.

The last syllables left his lips, and he nearly choked upon them. Angrily he drew upon the reservoirs of energy trapped in his fortress, enraged that they must be expended.

A circle of blackness expanded from the sorcerer, slaying every thing that it touched. Chaos warrior and Stormcast Eternal collapsed as the fortress discharged curling arcs of night-purple doom. The skulls clawed at the lives of the Stormcasts killed, but there were so many slain that the castle could not consume them all, and their essences raced home. The earth rebelled at this black work, shuddering in pain. His tower swayed, its walls cracking and revealing the golden light of the artefact within, but it was not enough to hold back the darkness Ephryx had unleashed. For a split second the sorcerer stared into the realms of death. Something ancient and dark gazed back at him with contempt.

The light returned. Ephryx sank to knees, dizzy. All around him were the dead. The Stormcast Eternals had disappeared, carried off by their lord. The ground was carpeted by the bodies of his men and Maerac's followers.

A dry chuckle sounded behind him. Wearily, Ephryx raised his head.

'Master,' he said.

'A clever gambit, mortal,' said Kairos.

'It was idiotic,' said the second head, arching close to the sorcerer. It tilted to one side, its eye filling Ephryx's vision.

'A good play,' disagreed the other. 'Why would I want a dull follower?'

'Perhaps I would,' argued the second head.

The heads spoke together, the menace in Kairos's words unmistakable. 'Now you have had your turn. Let us bring this to a close together.'

'Yes, together,' said one head.

'That is what we always intended, no?' asked the other.

'Y-y-yes!' said Ephryx. 'Of course my lord! Why, I only intended to... There was no time... I had to act quickly, I...'

Kairos leaned heavily on his staff. 'Tut tut tut,' said the first head.

'Do shut up, Ephryx,' said the second.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reforged

Memories bubbled and slipped from Thostos, a fleeting impression of darkness and snatching hands tearing at his spirit. He was moving fast and lost in the light. The pain was so great it overcame the universe. An ocean of agony, deeper than time. He could not recall his name. He remembered... Where? A land of giant beasts, a castle in a country considered civilised. A kind father, a good life.

He remembered its end. Blood and death and pain for those he loved.

He smelled the ruin of it, thick and cloying, and he gasped. No air came into his lungs, only energy, raw and crackling. He had no lungs. Something convulsed. There was no body. Was it his soul?

Caeran. Was that his name?

Something twitched in the stormlight, a zygote that split and divided rapidly.

A woman's face. His mother? An aunt? He did not recognise them, but the sight of them brought the need for vengeance.

A man's face, crowned with a circle of red gold. Dead. Consumed. He raged at the thought, and the need for revenge gripped him more tightly. In the wash of light, delicate bones rapidly thickened, became a hand bare of flesh, a hand that clenched. He felt muscles grow, the strands of their fibres wrapping around one another. More bones erupted from the stuff of magic, caging organs that inflated wetly. A skull crept over a newly sprouted brain.

The pain worsened.

There was another castle, where he had another name. A land of metal. A horned man.

So much pain! He thrashed, trailing streamers of raw nerves that sparked excruciatingly.

The process quickened, but in truth the duration could have been months or seconds. Thostos had no frame of reference for time, only the pain. All he knew was that the sequence of growth increased in pace. Skin, hair, teeth, nails. Or something like them, something that had their semblance, but that lacked their solidity.

Agony seized his skull as a new face grew over it, twin pits of pain where fresh eyes budded.

He could not bear it.

Time ceased. He was elsewhere. A castle of stone, hung with dreadful fruits. A castle of metal, bursting under the strain of stolen magic.

A castle that hid a great prize...

'Thostos!'

His God-King called to him.

'Thostos!'

His king.

'Thostos Bladestorm!'

Thostos, was that his name? Yes. The name given to him by the God-King, the lord of light. Sigmar's gift, a new name for a new life. Had there been another?

A man, a woman. A burning castle. Vengeance. Memories of that time slipped away, became blurred, and were lost to him forever.

He was Thostos. Thostos Bladestorm of the Celestial Vindicators. There was no other, not any longer. Guilt persisted, a leftover of another world, cool and unyielding as a diamond, that was all he had left.

Never again would he fail.

Another light replaced the first, softer, soul-cleansing. It rinsed him through and through, and he let out a sharp breath as the last vestiges of his pain slipped from him.

'Stand, Thostos Bladestorm!'

 Words of gentle thunder. The memory of the pain was wiped away.

The light dimmed, resolving itself into the shape of a great man, a god. Sigmar Heldenhammer, seated in the throne of Azyr. Thostos knew his face better than he knew his own. Tall and regal, majesty manifest, a man clad in the light of godhood. Thostos blinked. He held up his hand in wonder to eyes that smarted in their newness. His hand, armoured in its celestial turquoise, whole and unharmed.

'We shall kneel no more,' said Sigmar. He gestured, encouraging Thostos to rise.

The Lord-Celestant of the Bladestorms stood on legs that felt insubstantial, as if his armour were all that gave them shape. There was strength there; he did not shake or fall, but it did not feel like it was his. It was loaned to him from elsewhere. Or stolen.

'Your Reforging is complete,' said Sigmar.

Thostos recognised where he was: in the throne room of Sigmar, a hall suited

to the God-King's majesty. Others stood behind Thostos, lesser beings than Sigmar though great in their way, the Lord-Celestants of a dozen stormhosts.

How had he come to be there? He had no memory of entering this room, or of kneeling. He remembered... he remembered metal...

'Now tell me of Chamon,' prompted the God-King.

There was an eagerness to Sigmar. He was triumphant. What did he expect Thostos to say? What had he done?

Thostos swallowed. His throat felt different. His limbs buzzed with magic. What had happened to him?

'There was...' he began. His words sounded hollow in his ears. 'There was a fortress of magic. We breached its walls, only to die in a burst of unlight that was fought by a greater light.'

Sigmar leaned forward. 'Speak to me of this greater light.'

There was more, there was... death. Dark lands, a covetous presence thwarted. He had died. There was a chill in his heart that had not been there before. He had lost something. He remembered clawing, skeletal hands and shuddered.

'Golden,' said Thostos. He had to force the word out, like it was a part of himself that had to be chipped painfully free. 'Not the bastard energy of Chaos. Violent, but pure.'

Sigmar tensed. The air of triumph intensified. He nodded, and though he looked at Thostos he saw into another time and place. 'I remember it well,' he said eventually.

He turned abruptly. 'Lord Vandus!'

One of the others stepped forward. Thostos knew him. His memories of this place he retained, faded but clear, like tapestries whose colours have bled away with age. Hammerhand. Vandus Hammerhand. That was him, a fellow Lord-Celestant, and, and a... friend?

The Hammerhand stepped up to Thostos's side.

'Prepare thy warriors,' commanded Sigmar. 'That light is mine.' He sank back into his throne and gripped the metal gryphons that made up each arm of his seat. 'We have found Ghal Maraz.'

Thostos had done that. He remembered, as Sigmar spoke on.

Sigmar finished. The crowd of warriors roared. Some chanted his name. But he could not think.

He had found Sigmar's greatest weapon, but in doing so he had lost himself.

THE GATES OF DAWN

Josh Reynolds

PROLOGUE

The storm arrives

Virulent green mist rose from the damp soil of the Ghyrtract Fen, choking the air and all but blinding those who toiled within its reach. Lord Grelch, master of the Ghyrtribe, scooped an errant tendril of mist towards his disease-ravaged face with bloated paws, inhaling it. It burned pleasingly as it seeped into his lungs and blistered mouth. He gave a sigh of deep satisfaction.

‘Tastes like death,’ he murmured, to no one in particular.

Grelch sat midway up a slabbed pile of stone steps, which climbed upwards to the edge of a steep cliff. The steps ended at an arch shrouded in clinging vines, its capstones cracked and shot through with roots thicker around than his thigh. He shifted the long-hafted plague-axe lying across his lap and turned to eye the archway suspiciously. He had fought long and hard to lay claim to this patch of forest and the archway, but even now he wasn’t entirely sure why. Stories clustered fast and thick about those stones like flies.

The Grandfather’s eye was upon this place though – his great hand had stirred the nearby Rotwater Swamp, casting a dense and foetid fog across the fen, and this part of it in particular. The sky was as black as the boils on his backside, and the once-green leaves of the now-withered trees were covered in sticky, dripping moisture that was not dew. Fertile soil had been reduced to damp sludge by the tread of his warriors, and the waters of the rivers had grown stagnant and pleasingly foul. The men of the Ghyrtribe had long ago given themselves over to the tender mercies of Grandfather Nurgle, and they carried his blessings with them wherever they went. They warped the land about them into more pleasing shapes, reminiscent of the Grandfather’s garden.

Smacking his lips, he gazed down from his perch and watched as his slaves wriggled through the muck and mist, dragging heavy stones towards the points their overseers indicated with lash and blade. The stones were covered in carvings dedicated to the glory of Grandfather Nurgle. Each one was a prayer given physical form, and together they would form a silent chorus calling to the Grandfather in his garden, calling him and his children to the Greenglades. Grelch sighed in satisfaction. From where he sat, the slaves looked like maggots wriggling in spoiled meat.

‘Speaking of which,’ Grelch grunted, inspecting the mottled flesh of his forearm. The cut he’d received a few days earlier had sprouted squirming white shapes, which nibbled enthusiastically at his rotten flesh. He smiled indulgently.

‘Eat hearty, little ones. Soon you’ll be proper flies, and no mistake,’ he crooned as he playfully stirred the maggots with a finger. The wound ached, but it was a small price to pay. Grandfather Nurgle never gave a man more blessings than he could bear, sure as sure, and Grelch was happy to serve in even this smallest of ways. He sat back, feeling cheerful. Yes, he was happy to serve. And why not? After all, it was an honour to be here.

The ragged banners of the blessed and flyblown jutted from every horizon, even as noisome fogs and vast clouds of insects swarmed across the land. The drone of a billion flies accompanied the efforts of Grandfather’s own – the Glottkin, Torglug the Despised, Gutrot Spume, and the mangy Beastlord Gluhak, amongst others – as they strove to bring the bilious blessings of the garden to Ghyran. That wasn’t even taking into account the scuttling servants of the Horned Rat, where they crouched in the Rotwater Blight.

And Grelch as well, most powerful of those born here, in these filthy climes, Grelch thought.

Let the others, like that nitwit Kraderblob or brutes like Torglug and Gutrot Spume, scramble about in the filthy Greenglades, hunting the witch Alarielle and getting themselves ambushed by Nurgle alone knew what. Grandfather had sent three captains to find her, for without her there could be no lasting victory for Nurgle.

He flexed his wounded arm, and remembered the talon-like branch, whipping forward faster than his rheumy eyes could follow to lay open his flesh to the pitted bone. It hadn’t hurt; his sense of pain had been one of his first offerings to the Grandfather. He remembered too the fierce green hatred burning in the eyes of the monstrous bark-creature as it had smashed him back on his heels, before he’d driven the rusty edge of his axe into its creaking maw. They’d used what was left of it and its fellows for kindling the witchfires that now burned about Ghyrtract Fen, providing an eerie light for the slaves to work by.

Let’s see Spume do that, the kraken-bellied oaf, Grelch thought.

A baleful drone suddenly echoed through the trees, causing the foetid air to quiver like a frightened animal. Grelch’s eyes popped open and he turned, all thoughts of gardens forgotten. It was the Dirgehorn, originally hewn from the skull of the great plague-beast Brondtos by Beastlord Gluhak, the Crusted

Blade – a feat it never stopped barking about. The Dirgehorn had been hollowed out and consecrated to Grandfather, and now sat atop Profane Tor. Its whining call, sluggish and flat, could be heard even in the Grandfather's garden.

Someone somewhere in the vast woodlands that stretched from the Shimmertarn to Ghyrtract Fen had found some sign of the radiant queen, Alarielle. Like hounds on the scent, the other disparate warbands, searching for places such as this archway, would follow the winding echo of the Dirgehorn to wherever it led.

At the same moment, the sky darkened, grey turning to black. The snap of whips slowed and fell silent as slaves and slavers alike found their eyes drawn upwards to the roiling clouds. Greloch felt his stomach lurch, and not in the usual pleasing fashion. A moment later, the air was split by a sound greater even than the Dirgehorn – a crack of thunder which reverberated through the trees, and even his bones, deafening him.

He slapped his hands to his ears, teeth gritted against the pain of it. Instinctively he cast his gaze up and saw the black sky rupture, torn apart by fangs of crackling azure light. Bolts of twin-tailed lightning struck the ground again and again, splitting the air and searing the fog away. The ground bucked and heaved, and his warriors and slaves were tossed about like sparks from an anvil as the hammer struck. Trees burst into flame and sluggish rivulets of mud were burned dry. The air tasted of iron and clean winds, and Greloch gagged at the stink of it.

As the smoke cleared, he saw rank upon rank of armoured warriors standing where each sky-borne bolt had struck. Crackling chains of lightning crawled across their masks and the heads of the great warhammers they carried. It danced along the rims of their shields and illuminated the awful sigils which marked their armour.

He felt as if something fearful had come, fiercer even than the bark-beasts, and he shoved himself to his feet, snatching up his helm from where it sat on the steps beside him. His heart thudded in his chest as he began to descend. Few dared defy the Ghyrtribe since he'd earned Grandfather's favour, and fewer still had ever mustered the courage to attack them head on. Whoever they were, they would be good sport, if nothing else.

'And they're all ours, my warriors,' he roared. 'To battle!'

His warriors roared in reply and hurled themselves towards the interlopers, scattering untrampled slaves aside. His chosen warriors, his sons and cousins and brothers, putrid blightkings all, led the way towards the centre of the invaders' battle line. Greloch's heart swelled as the battle was joined. This was the way it was supposed to be. The newcomers had numbers on their side, but his warriors were swollen with the strength of Nurgle.

He'd led his folk into the garden and pledged a glopsome oath to Grandfather Nurgle, offering service and souls in return for protection and power. And he'd fought to earn those protections, fought hard or harder than his rivals, performing deeds of valour. It was Greloch who had tamed the toad-dragon Ga'Blorrhgh, and Greloch who had poisoned the Sweetwater.

You did indeed, my servant, something burred in his head.

The voice was like an itch at the back of his skull. Painful, but welcome, it gurgled and slopped across the surface of his thoughts. As if they too heard it, the maggots in his arm suddenly stiffened and began to move in strange ways, causing his flesh to ripple and pulse. Grelch stopped and looked up, towards his prize. There was an oily sheen in the air at the top of the steps, and he could hear faint buzzing as of thousands of flies.

'Master,' he whispered. 'Are you near?'

The din of the battle below seemed to fade as the voice of his master filled his skull. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his warriors coming to grips with the closest of the newcomers. Fat-bellied blightkings hacked at gleaming shields with notched axes, only to reel back as lightning-wreathed hammers struck them in return. But though they stumbled, his chosen refused to fall. Their seared flesh congealed and repaired itself, as Grandfather willed, and they lurched back into the fight.

Near, yet still sadly far, my servant, his master replied. *My rotguard and I come as fast as the winds of plague can carry me, but you must open the door and let me in. Hurry, Grelch... I would wallow in the murk of the Ghyrtract Fen, taste the sweet heart of the Greenglades, and wade in the Shimmertarn. Hurry, my servant. Pile the stones and spill the blood... Open the gates to Grandfather's garden...*

The voice faded and Grelch let out a shaky breath. The clangour of battle grew loud once more: the air filling with screams and the rattle of weapons. The voice of his master, his mentor, was proof enough of Grandfather's favour. Why else would such an enormity as his master deign to speak with him, and so kindly?

'Don't worry, master, there's plenty of blood to go around,' he said, out loud. He looked out over the Fen, and saw the silver ranks of newcomers stalk forward with ground-shaking strides, their wide shields locked rim to rim. They resembled nothing so much as a gleaming wall, and he felt a hint of unease as they drew closer to the slope and the steps. But their march slowed as his chosen warriors interposed themselves once more, crying out the name of Grandfather Nurgle as they sought to break the shieldwall. Once his warriors had finished off these shiny-skinned interlopers, he'd have them gutted and squeezed to fertilise the stones and open the garden gate.

He closed his eyes, revelling in the thought of it. Long had he yearned to see Grandfather's garden again, in all its pestilential splendour. Now, at last, his chance had come round. A little blood, a little death, and it would be done.

However, his good humour evaporated quickly as he plodded down the steps, axe in hand. His chosen warriors had never before been bested in battle, yet these newcomers smashed them aside more quickly than he'd thought possible. Warriors bloated with the blessings of the Plaguefather were driven to their knees by hammer strikes that crushed armour and tore flesh as easily as any axe or sword. Every blow was accompanied by a snarl of lightning and the thud of a smoking body as it struck the ground.

As Grelch made his way down the last few steps, he saw that his men had

become disorganised, save for a few chieftains around whom the cannier warriors rallied. The rest charged in knots and dribbles, alone or in small packs, and were ground under by the silver-armoured retinues of the newcomers. The latter had formed themselves into an impenetrable shieldwall, rim to rim and edge to edge. Shields dipped and hammers shot out to strike and return as the shields rose once more with a discipline completely alien to Grelch's experience. The silver warriors moved as one, clearing themselves a bloody path towards the stone steps and the arch, and right towards him. He raised his axe in welcome and lumbered to meet them.

Some of his followers rose, even after they had been battered bloody or hacked apart, as the great rents in their obese frames scabbed over and their severed limbs re-grew. But that wasn't enough, and soon they fell a second time. The weapons of the enemy were too deadly, even for those in whose veins the blessings of Nurgle ran.

Grelch moved more quickly now, lumbering towards the forefront of the battle. If he could rally his troops, they might still stand a chance. However, that hope dwindled as he saw the last of his chieftains fall to a great mauling blow from one of those deadly hammers, crushing its horned helm into an unrecognizable mass. The few warriors who remained launched themselves at the enemy, despite his commands, only to be swatted down as if they were of no more importance than flies.

Not a single man of the Ghyrtribe remained standing. Even his fattest warriors lay broken and unmoving on the muddy ground. It had happened so quickly. Behind the ranks of locked shields, he saw warriors wielding two-handed hammers begin to smash down the half-built idols and altar stones. He cried out. Helms turned, and he caught sight of his reflection in their mirror-bright features. The men moved towards him in a tight semicircle, shields at the ready. Though the lightning had faded, its glow yet remained. Grelch could not bear to look at them directly, and was forced to raise an arm over his face. They shone with a light and a heat that seemed to burn the very core of him.

As he did so, the maggots in his flesh shrivelled one by one and fell away from him, and he experienced a wave of fear – an emotion he had not felt in years – wash over him. Were these men the reason that the Dirgehorn had sounded? Were Kraderblob and the other servants of Nurgle now locked in combat with more of these pitiless invaders? What sort of beings were these who could kill so cruelly and swiftly? What sort of beings arrived in a crack of thunder and a flash of lightning?

Enemies, sweet Grelch, and far beyond you, the voice of his master rumbled.

Grelch felt the sadness those words carried. He would join his maggots soon and join his warriors, broken and dead in the mire.

Dead, yes, but not forgotten, my best, brightest bubo, his master gurgled. *Grandfather watches you, Grelch. Show him how brave you are, my servant. Open the way for me, and join Grandfather in the eternal garden, where all is green and growing and life waxes fat. He waits for you, waits to take you in his arms... Hurry, Grelch. Hurry!*

Grelch felt his fears evaporate as the words of his master, his mentor, filled

his skull to bursting. Then he bounded ponderously down the slick stones with axe in hand. Grelch sensed, without knowing how, that only a bit more effort was required. He would show Grandfather how brave he was, and he would dwell in the garden in wonder and glory forevermore. That was all he wanted; all he had ever wanted.

‘I do not know you, murderers, but you will know me,’ he rasped. ‘I am Grelch, lord of the Ghyrtribe, and master of the Ghyrtract Fen. When you go back to whatever place spawned you, tell them it was I who sent you. Tell them that Grandfather Nurgle sends his greetings, sure as sure.’

He lifted his plague-axe in both hands and held it across his body, taking comfort in the weapon’s weight, stepping towards the silvery ranks of the enemy. ‘Come on then. Send me to the garden, if you can,’ he spat. Only a little more blood, he thought. Hadn’t intended it to be mine, but, well, you can’t have everything. Grandfather never asked more than a man could give.

One of the warriors stepped forward. He was tall, taller almost than Grelch, though he lacked the latter’s sheer bulk. His baroque armour shimmered strangely in the light of the witchfires, and he raised the hammer he carried in what Grelch thought must be a salute. In his other hand he carried a sword, its blade etched with sigils that burned Grelch’s eyes. Grelch spat at the warrior’s feet.

‘Tell me your name,’ he demanded. ‘Grandfather likes to know the names of the souls I send him.’

The warrior cocked his head, blue eyes alert behind the unmoving, too-perfect features of his mask. He lowered his weapon.

‘Gardus,’ he said. His voice was like a clear peal from a great bell. It struck Grelch’s belly like a fist, and climbed his spine into his brain where it reverberated, much as the thunder had earlier. Grelch shook his head to clear it.

Grandfather, give me strength, he thought.

‘Gardus,’ he said, chewing over the syllables. ‘Well, Gardus, a pleasure to meet you.’ Then, with a roar, Grelch swung his axe up and around, and launched himself at the warrior.

The Grandfather’s garden awaited.

CHAPTER ONE

Before the Gates of Dawn

Gardus, Lord-Celestant of the Hallowed Knights, looked down at the bloated body at his feet, then at the patina of sour bile clinging to his hammer. The plague warrior had fought bravely for being outmatched. He had hurled himself knowingly into death without hesitation or fear. Gardus wondered how such a debased creature could possess such courage. Then, would I have done any less? he wondered. He swept his hammer out, dislodging the muck which clung to it and banishing the thought in the same motion.

‘Who are the victorious?’ he called out, raising hammer and sigmarite runeblade. His voice boomed out across the clearing, reaching every ear. Some called him the Steel Soul, though he could not say where the name had come from. Regardless of its origins, his Warrior Chamber had taken the name for their own, and they bore it with honour.

‘Only the faithful,’ his warriors roared in reply.

Gardus gazed with no small amount of pride at those who had followed him into battle as they raised their voices in triumph. Liberators, Prosecutors, Judicators and Retributors, all clad in star-forged sigmarite, and bearing weapons crafted from the samen material. Their panoply of war gleamed silver where it was not rich gold. Their shoulder guards were of deepest regal blue, such as the heavens themselves, as were their heavy shields. The weapons they carried shimmered with holy fire.

They were all heroes. Their valour proven in battles all but forgotten in the haze of their Reforging. The Hallowed Knights were the fourth Stormhost to be founded, and the ranks of their Warrior Chambers were filled with the

faithful of the Mortal Realms. Their only commonality was that each had called upon Sigmar's name in battle, and been heard, and that each had shed his mortal flesh in the name of a righteous cause.

Gardus himself could but dimly recall who he had been before he had been made anew in Sigmar's eternal forge. His old identity had been torn away by celestial lightning and replaced by something new and greater. The memories of that time surfaced only rarely, though he thought – he hoped – he was the same man he had been then. The same man whom Sigmar had deemed worthy to give a portion of his power to. Of the time before his Reforging, he remembered only fear, battle, pain and blood and, finally, the lightning which had brought him to Sigmaron amongst the stars.

He could not truly recall the cause he had died for, or the names of those who had fought beside him, in that final battle.

But I remember you nonetheless, my friends, he thought. I remember your faces, and how you died. I remember that we fought in Sigmar's name, against the same evil I face today. I remember, and I will honour you the only way left to me – with sword and celestial fire. He lifted his runeblade and gazed at the sigils etched into its gleaming length. They seemed to glimmer with heat, the repressed fury of a storm. Sigmar himself had blessed the blade, after Gardus had forged it. I will not fail you, he thought, though whether he was speaking to Sigmar or the faded ghost-memories of half-forgotten comrades-in-arms, he could not say.

He looked around, taking stock of the battlefield. What he saw was not pleasant. The churned mud was full of monsters – most dead, some dying – their vile flesh no longer regenerating as it had during the initial moments of battle, twisted shapes whose abominable features were mirrored in the very land itself. Sickened, he smashed aside a looming icon dedicated to the Ruinous Powers. There were hundreds stabbed into the earth throughout the clearing, and they caused his stomach to twist in an instinctual revulsion. A trace of the man he had been, he suspected. Everywhere Gardus looked, disease blossomed.

The very air stank of it, and the nearby waters ran with pox. The ground was covered in a carpet of maggots – and other, unrecognizable, scavenger beasts – as well as a glistening putrescence. The sickly trees fed upon this rich loam of decaying matter, sprouting unnatural growths that resembled struggling insects or wailing faces. Thick creepers, covered in unhealthy looking cilia, sought to strangle what little normal-looking plantlife remained. Even the rocks were covered in pus-filled boils. Gardus was at once repelled and fascinated by it; he had never seen its like before.

He looked around at the crumpled and fly-ridden bodies of the plague-worshippers, and then at the idols, altar stones and obelisks that they had been in the process of erecting when the Steel Souls had arrived. The enemy might have been defeated, but there were still his works to cast down. Every dark monument would be toppled or broken up by the time they were done here. But somehow, he knew that this place would never be entirely free of the contagion that afflicted it.

Even so, that was no reason to tarry.

'Feros, how goes it?' he called out to his Retributor-Prime. Called the Heavy Hand by some, Feros had earned his rank at the Battle of the Celestine Glaciers, where a blow from his hammer had sheared loose the rim of one of the eponymous glaciers, sending the warriors of the Ruinous Powers tumbling into the icy depths. Like his fellow Retributors, Feros was the wrath of the heavens made brooding flesh. He smelled of lightning and rain, and his heavy, ornate armour was marked with the lightning bolt of Sigmar.

'The cleansing of this mire proceeds apace, Steel Soul. My warriors will soon have reduced every standing stone in this fen to dust,' Feros rumbled, his two-handed lightning hammer slamming down on a monstrous effigy and reducing it to shards.

'Good. Tegrus,' Gardus said, calling out to another of his subordinates. The Prosecutor-Prime dropped from the air a moment later to crouch before him with head bowed. Wings edged in the purest gold with feathers of lightning snapped out and folded back behind him with a lingering crackle.

'Speak, and I obey, Lord-Celestant,' Tegrus of the Sainted Eye said. His voice, slipping from the mouth-slit of his silver mask, quavered in the air like the peal of bell. During the cleansing of Azyr it was Tegrus who had scouted out the Chaos warbands infesting the Nihiliad Mountains, raining blazing arrows down upon them in order to expose their positions to Sigmar's armies.

'Take your Prosecutors to the skies above the edges of the fen, and watch for any sign of the enemy. They are thick as fleas in this region, and I would be ready for them when they come. And make no mistake, they *will* come.'

'Perfect,' Tegrus said, spreading his wings. 'Makes it easier to crush them, if we don't have to go chasing after them first.' He took to the air a moment later, hurtling skyward, joined by his winged retinue.

'Such exuberance may be his undoing,' a voice said.

Gardus turned to see Solus, the Judicator-Prime, striding towards him, one hand resting on the storm gladius sheathed on his hip and the bulky shape of his boltstorm crossbow over one shoulder. Solus had no war-name, and to his credit, did not seem to desire one. He was the steadiest of Gardus's subordinates, with a cool mind and a calm hand, regardless of the situation.

'Only if you were not here to watch over us, Solus.'

'As you say, Lord-Celestant. I and my Judicators shall see to it that no enemy shall catch our Warrior Chamber unawares,' Solus said. 'No allies either, more is the pity.'

Gardus nodded, knowing who Solus referred to. They had come here to wage war, but also to rebuild an old alliance. Only the former was his concern, and by extension that of his men. Others were occupied searching for the mysterious queen of this realm. It was Gardus's task to ensure that they had good news to tell her when they found her.

'Our purpose remains the same, regardless. We cleanse this place and hold it until we are ordered to do otherwise. That is what Sigmar has asked of us, and that is what we shall do,' Gardus said. 'Once Feros has finished shattering these stones and we have taken control of the realmgate, Lord-Castellant

Grymn, Lord-Relictor Morbus and the others will be free to join us here. Perhaps once that occurs, the folk of the Jade Kingdoms – human and otherwise – will rise to join us. Until then—

‘Until then, we are to fight their battles for them and die on their behalf?’

Gardus turned to meet the gaze of his Liberator-Prime. ‘Aetius,’ he replied.

‘I do not like this place,’ Aetius Shieldborn said, softly. ‘There is poison in the air, and the ground shudders like a sick animal.’ Aetius was as brave as a gryph-hound, but forever casting a stern eye on his fellows and the world around him. He nodded tersely to Solus, as the latter moved off to see to his task.

‘That is why we are here,’ Gardus said gently. ‘If we fail, this great forest realm might become a sour canker in the flesh of the Jade Kingdoms, a seeping malignance which no fire can cleanse and no magic can exorcise.’ He tapped Aetius’s pauldron with his hammer. ‘Much is demanded...’

‘...of those to whom much has been given,’ Aetius finished, bowing his head. He looked away and asked, ‘What of us, then, Lord-Celestant? What is our task now that the enemy has been broken?’

‘Watch for the foe while Feros and his Retributors finish seeing to these abominable stones. Help where you are needed. The quicker we are finished, the better. Whatever they sought to build here, we must utterly destroy, Aetius,’ Gardus said. ‘Only then can we take the Gates of Dawn for ourselves, and then the Lord-Castellant and the rest of our brothers will be able to march forth from the Gates of Azyr and join us here.’

‘It will be done.’ Aetius saluted crisply, raising his hammer to his brow. Then he turned and began to bellow orders. Stormcast Eternals hastened to obey. Gardus watched the other man go about his duties and shook his head. He knew the source of Aetius’s irritation, or at least suspected he did.

The Hallowed Knights had not been chosen for the spearhead – that honour had gone to the Hammers of Sigmar, as was fitting. Nonetheless, the waiting had been its own burden, and not just for his subordinates. The longer it had continued, the more uncertain Gardus had grown, wondering if their training and discipline would be enough for the conflicts to come. He had been reborn to battle, but it had been so long since he had last tested steel against steel and strength against strength anywhere other than the training fields of Sigmaron.

I wonder what Grymn would say, if he knew, he thought. Gardus had never known the Lord-Castellant of the Steel Souls to show hesitation or doubt. The man was a rock, capable of weathering any storm. Of all those in their Warrior Chamber he alone could match the Lord-Celestant blow for blow, but he was not one to seek reassurance from. Neither could Gardus admit his concerns to his fellow Lord-Celestants, as they readied their own Warrior Chambers for combat.

Gardus had shared his uncertainties with only one other – Zephacleas, Lord-Celestant of the Astral Templars. Gardus smiled as he thought of the other Stormcast commander. Zephacleas had been a big man, even before his Reforging. After it, he had become a veritable giant, standing head and shoulders over Gardus. Clad in armour as dark as Gardus’s was bright,

Zephacleas had seen to the heart of the latter's uncertainties, speaking words of encouragement as they stood together, looking out at the stars in those final hours before he had been called to battle. And true to Zephacleas's assertions, his doubts were all but dispelled now. They had met the enemy, and they had been victorious.

He recalled those first few moments after their arrival, his mind and body invigorated by the celestial lightning that had carried him from Azyr, as well as the fierce joy that had surged within him as he saw the corrupted warriors charging towards him. The Hallowed Knights had fought like warriors born, executing his orders or countering unforeseen threats on their own with a skill far beyond that of any mortal servant of the Dark Gods.

And now, the Gates of Dawn were theirs.

Gardus turned and let his gaze ascend towards the arched realmgate, high up the stone steps that climbed the craggy hillside. It did not look as he imagined it. He had thought that such an artefact would be a massive portal, swirling with powerful energies. Instead, it was an innocuous ruin, covered in creeper vines and sagging slightly, like an old man bent by age. Was this truly a gateway to Aqshy, the Realm of Fire?

He shook his head. It didn't matter. He had been sent to claim it in Sigmar's name, and that was what he had done. From behind him came the sound of cracking stone and the shouts of his warriors at work. There was a friendly rivalry between the different hosts of his Warrior Chamber, seeking to outdo one another on and off the battlefield. Some of his peers frowned on such boisterousness outside of Sigmaron, but Gardus knew that laughter was like sigmarite for the soul.

And in any event, it's a celebration, he thought. Our first battle, our first victory. He looked up, wondering if Sigmar was watching them. We will not fail you, my lord.

A tall obelisk, larger than any three of his men, toppled over after a concentrated effort by Feros and Aetius, eliciting cheers. As their voices rose, a new sound intruded – a droning hum that pierced the jubilant mood of the Stormcast Eternals and swept it away as it grew louder and louder. Men looked around, trying to find the source of the noise. Gardus, closer than the others to the Gates of Dawn, found it first and felt the taste of victory turn to ashes on his tongue.

He felt a chill creep along his spine as he turned to look at the realmgate. His limbs felt leaden and the air grew thick and close. A miasmic fog had risen up from the ground, clinging now to his legs and the edges of his warcloak. A vile stench filled his nose, and he gagged as the sound grew louder, spreading, becoming something else. Something worse.

Laughter.

'Oh no, no, no, my friends. This will simply not do. The game has barely begun, and already you celebrate victory? No, this will not do at all,' a hideous phlegm-roughened voice chortled. It echoed from everywhere and nowhere, slithering across the minds and ears of every man present. It rose from the mud, and pulsed from the festering vines that clung to everything. Gardus

raised his hammer and his men fell instantly into formation, shields raised, weapons ready. Something was coming and they needed to be ready to meet it.

He caught Feros's eye, and the Retributor-Prime nodded grimly. Tegrus's Prosecutors hovered overhead, their weapons ready, and Solus's Judicators had formed up in their firing retinues just behind Aetius and the other Liberators. Eyes sought his, and he stepped forward so all could see him.

'Hold position,' he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. Whatever was coming, whatever had spoken, was unlike anything he had ever encountered before. Its words had squeezed his heart, and nearly stripped his courage from him. If he'd been a normal man, he might have broken in that moment, but he was a Stormcast Eternal – fear had no power over him.

Above him, the Gates of Dawn began to shudder, shedding vegetation and dust, as the ancient stones ground against one another. Something indefinable bubbled beyond the frame of the arch, and a stinking chill rippled through the suddenly cloying air.

'Grelch was loyal and dutiful, and his blood serves as well or better than that of any puling slave,' the horrid, burbling voice continued. 'Blood is the key and it has turned the lock. Knock knock, little storm clouds, *let me in.*' A black void eddied and frothed beyond the arch, like a ragged wound torn into the very air, and Gardus's ears echoed with the buzzing of innumerable flies as a chill rippled through the air. The gate began to shudder and twist, as if the very stones were in agony.

And then, before Gardus's horrified eyes, two immense rotting hands reached out from within the arch. They caught either side of it, and within moments, something abominable began to squeeze its impossible bulk through the Gates of Dawn. Broken, rotting fangs clashed in a bulbous jaw as the monstrous daemon began to chortle with glee. The archway rocked alarmingly as the thing pried itself free and lurched through the realmgate. Those Stormcast closest to the gate rushed forward, as if they might reach the summit in time, but falling rubble from the contorting gate smashed them aside. Those who avoided the debris were caught in the flood of acidic froth that spilled from the now-warped gate. Gardus bellowed for the remainder to fall back.

'Greetings, whelps of a tiny god,' the greater daemon of Nurgle – for such Gardus knew it must be – thundered cheerfully. It slapped its grossly distended belly and leaned forward on crooked legs. 'Allow me to introduce myself... I am Bolathrax. Your souls are mine.'

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond the Gates of Azyr

Zephacleas, Lord-Celestant of the Astral Templars, sat, eyes closed, and listened to the crackle of the storms that raged over the aetherdomes that ran along the great platform of the Sigmarabulum. He thought he could hear the agonized screams of the fallen in each crash of thunder or snap of lightning as their spirits underwent the process of Reforging. Victory at any price, he thought, with a grim smile.

He opened his eyes and leaned forward, head tilted so that the light of the broken world bathed his battered features. Zephacleas gazed up at the great sphere that hung in the heavens above the fabricated ring. It was but a fragment of the world-that-had-been, yet still its iron core was as large as any moon. It gleamed with a strange iridescence, casting long shadows across the vast forges, laboratories, armouries and soul mills of the fabricating ring.

Beautiful, in its own way, Zephacleas thought. Even so, he wished he were elsewhere. His brother Stormcasts were at war in the Mortal Realms, fighting to throw back the servants of the Ruinous Powers. But of the Stormhosts chosen to assail Ghyran, the Astral Templars had been held back in reserve. Soon, though, they would be called forth to wreak Sigmar's vengeance on the Ruinous Powers and all of their twisted followers.

Zephacleas looked forward to it. He had a taste for war and longed for the clangour of battle. It had awoken old memories in him, and stirred the ashes of the man he had once been, before Sigmar had brought him to Azyr. The same had been true of them all, he thought, from the mighty Vandus Hammerhand to the quiet Gardus, Lord-Celestant of the Hallowed Knights.

Gardus, he thought, with a smile. He shook his head. The Steel Soul was the best of them. In him was a devotion to duty that far outstripped that of any other Stormcasts save perhaps that of Ionus Cryptborn himself. He wished him glory wherever Sigmar had chosen to send him.

Gardus had been left out of the assault on Aqshy, much to his disappointment. The Hallowed Knights had yet to be blooded, and when their Warrior Chambers had been selected to take part in the assault on the Jade Kingdoms, Zephacleas had seen the uncertainty in Gardus's eyes. As if he and his men would not live up to Sigmar's trust.

It was an uncertainty that he himself had felt before his first taste of battle. He remembered the moment that silence had fallen across Sigmaron the day the war had begun. The clanging, grinding din that had been so much a part of the daily fabric had stilled, as the great forges and mills had ceased all labour. It had been as though they were holding their breath, waiting for some long and hoped-for moment. And then, into that grim silence, had come a sound. A lone bell tolled. It was a doleful, soul-aching sound, and it had carried the length of every great avenue and into every barracks and vault, reaching every straining ear in the Celestial City. The mournful toll had echoed off each of the vast pillared structures and swelled to fill the empty plazas until it too at last faded into silence.

Then had come the booming clap of thunder that signalled the opening of the Gates of Azyr and the beginning of the war. Zephacleas had his first experience of real fighting – not merely training in the gladiatorium or orruk hunting in the wilds of Azyrheim – in the assault upon the Brimstone Peninsula after the Hammers of Sigmar had taken the Igneous Delta. He found that he had a taste for it.

Zephacleas flexed his hands, clad in their gauntlets of sigmarite. With hammer and sword, he had cut down Chaos-twisted Aqshian tribesmen and lumbering khorgoraths alongside the Stormhosts of his brethren. He and his Warrior Chamber had fought their way across the Brimstone Peninsula before returning to the celestine vaults so his warriors could heal. There, Zephacleas attended a war council with the other chamber leaders of the Stormhosts and learned how the cloying presence of Chaos had twisted many of the realmgates. His fellows had spoken of sentient flames that burned on the Bridge of Fire and the streams of contagion that burst forth from the archway to the five gates of Ghyran. It was as if the very fabric of reality itself were under assault. The Ruinous Powers waged war on the Mortal Realms.

To Zephacleas, all of this was merely proof that Sigmar had been right to cast the Stormhosts into battle when he had. Battle had been joined and would only end in victory or death.

'As it should be,' he said out loud. The Stormcasts had been forged for war, and were ready for whatever awaited them beyond the Gates of Azyr.

The sound of his voice was swallowed by the vastness before him. Stars pinwheeled about the fraying edges of swirling nebulae and shimmering galactic coronas – it was a sea of colour and light, but eerily silent and stretching into an impossible infinity.

He'd never truly understood Gardus's fascination with the precipice of the Sigmarabulum, and what lay beyond, but he had to admit that the sight was soothing in its way. He laughed. Soothing, yes, and also invigorating. Here was the sum totality of existence, wrought upon celestial canvas and laid out for his eyes. There was a chill beauty to it, but also a ferocity – the stars lived and fought and died even as men. Brief flickers of light against the dark, soon forgotten, but always replaced.

And if that does not describe the Stormcast, I do not know what does, he thought.

No, Zephacleas. Never forgotten. Never that, a voice rumbled in his mind. It was a warm voice, but powerful, like a summer storm. Nonetheless, Zephacleas found himself bowing beneath its weight.

'My lord Sigmar – is it time?' he asked, fighting to hide the eagerness in his voice. The question was moot. Sigmar would not have deigned to speak with him unless the need was great. 'Are we to be cast once more into battle?'

Yes, Zephacleas. The Astral Templars are needed.

Sigmar's voice echoed through his skull like the peal of a bell, shaking him down to his marrow. The God-King spoke with the voice of the heavens themselves, and in his words could be heard the roar of comets, the hum of nebulae, and the endless echo of the black between the stars.

'Where, my lord, the Greenglades? The City of Branches?' he asked, wondering which of his brother Stormcasts was in need of aid. Where in the Jade Kingdoms would Sigmar cast his thunderbolt? Wherever it was, it was long past time, Zephacleas thought. He'd had enough of quiet contemplation. Now he wanted a fight.

The Ghyrtract Fen. The Hallowed Knights are beset by an enemy far beyond them.

An image filled Zephacleas's mind – he saw figures in shining armour confronted by something massive and foul, the sight of which filled him with an icy dread. This was no brute monster or champion, swollen by the power of its fell god, but a shard of a god itself. A creature beyond any single Stormcast, Lord-Celestant or not.

'I am on my way, my lord. The Astral Templars shall not fail you,' Zephacleas said, pushing himself to his feet. He rose smoothly, despite the weight of his armour. Helmet under his arm, and hammer in hand, he turned back towards the magnificent halls of Sigmarron. He could smell death in the air, but whose he could not say.

Hold on my friend. I am coming.

CHAPTER THREE

Where strides Bolathrax

Gardus knew what the beast was the moment it revealed its full bulk, though he'd never seen one before. Great Unclean One, he thought. Sigmar guide me, and lend me strength. 'Steady,' he said, glancing to either side. A murmur of uncertainty swept the ranks of the retinue behind him. It fell to him to see that it went no farther. 'Hold your positions.'

The greater daemon of Nurgle was an imposing sight, perched atop the stone steps. Rippling folds of fat marked its wide frame, and its flesh was by turns stretched tight or else torn and oozing, exposing the foulness within. Swollen entrails spilled from these ragged canyons, dripping bile and tarry blood upon the stones. Immense pustules flowered at its joints, and boils shiny with poison decorated its leering countenance and flabby chest like gaudy jewellery. Its sloping head was little more than a lump upon its shoulders, and two great antlers of stained and stinking bone rose from the sides of its skull. Tatters of spoiled meat hung from the horns, flapping like obscene battle standards as the creature swayed and laughed. It wore a rust-pitted pauldron and spaulder on one arm, as well as a ragged hauberk of grimy mail, which gaped over its belly, and it clutched a gigantic, filth-encrusted chain-headed flail in one hand.

'Form up,' Gardus boomed, fighting back a wave of nausea. The thing was every foul thought given form, and he felt sick just being in its vicinity. A nearby Liberator staggered, vomit spewing from the mouthpiece of his mask. Gardus caught him and helped him stand.

'Easy,' he murmured. The man began to speak, to try and explain himself, but Gardus silenced him with a shake of his head. 'There is no shame in it,' he

said softly. 'Take your place in line, Stormcast.' He turned as the reverberations of the word shivered out into a hum. A black cloud rose from the tree line – flies, he realised. More of them spilled out of the archway, and even erupted from the diseased flesh of the daemon.

'By the realm celestial,' he muttered, as the clouds of flies wove together, coalescing about the Great Unclean One's antlered head. 'Form up, on me,' he roared out, striking his weapons together. Lightning snarled at the point of impact. 'Fall back and form up. Hold the line, whatever else comes through that stinking portal.'

Around him, the Steel Souls hastened to obey, pulling back from the corrupted stone idols and the archway. Gardus grunted in satisfaction as he heard his command repeated up and down the line of retinues by his subordinates. Feros and the others could be counted on to do as he ordered, without hesitation.

'Form up, form up... so disciplined,' the daemon rumbled. 'Like a row of children's toys, lined up neatly for Bolathrax's amusement, ready to play.' The great horned head tilted, and the bulging eyes fixed on Gardus. 'But this is not a game you can win, whelp. If I were you, I would run home and tell my god that this place belongs to another.'

The daemon's eyes burned into his own. For a moment, he felt a terrible heat, as if he'd been struck by a fever. Then came a terrible tugging sensation, as if long fingers were stirring through his thoughts, and plucking out those of interest. He *saw the rows of cots, upon which moss-lepers and flux sufferers lay in agony*. He felt weak, and *heard the screams as the invaders crested the wall and entered Demesnus Harbour...* he almost stumbled where he stood, but the strange sensations faded almost as quickly as they'd come. Bolathrax grunted.

'Tough mite, strong... stronger than I expected. The quality of your essence has much improved since last we met.'

'We have never met, beast,' Gardus said. He knew, even as he spoke, that he shouldn't bandy words with the daemon. It was a lie made flesh. But something, some nagging urge, compelled him on. 'I think I would remember one as ugly as you.'

His words echoed across the clearing, and Bolathrax leaned forward, eyes narrowed. A slow smile crept across the daemon's blubbery face as the ranks of Hallowed Knights began to ring with the sound of hammers striking shields. The slow, steady rhythm drowned out the humming buzz of the daemon's arrival, and for a moment, Gardus thought that the noise alone might drive the creature back into whatever hell had spawned it. But instead, it shook its head like a disappointed parent.

'So be it,' Bolathrax said. The daemon raised one fat paw and spoke a single, deplorable word. Gardus felt his teeth rattle in his jaw from the force of the word. The gathering clouds of flies suddenly spilled towards the Stormcast lines.

'Shields up,' Gardus roared, setting his feet as the deluge of insects drew close. Only now they weren't just insects, but other things. Long limbed, bloated-bellied shapes appeared in the cloud, loping towards them, dragging rust-pitted

blades behind them. Plaguebearers, Gardus thought. Similarly with Bolathrax, he had never seen them before, but he knew them all the same. He recognised them in the pit of his stomach and at the base of his mind, as one mortal enemy knows another. One-eyed, their rotten entrails leaking out, the plaguebearers radiated the same *wrongness* as Bolathrax himself, though to a lesser degree... as if they did not belong in the world.

More of them emerged from the cloud of flies. They were on all sides of the Hallowed Knights, and their numbers increased with every moment. So quickly had they formed that the Stormcast Eternals were surrounded within moments, their retinues hemmed in on all sides. The daemons droned monotonously as they advanced, as if in mimicry of the flies that had given birth to them.

'Form up around me,' Gardus bellowed. 'Fall back, circle formation, but keep the line. Make them pay for every step, my brothers.'

Was this how I fell, before? The thought reverberated through his head, like the droning of the daemons. Before Sigmaron, before his Reforging, was this what he had faced? Was this how he had died? He forced the thought aside, trying to focus on the threat before him, rather than one long past, *skinstealers rushed at him, spears wet with the blood of his acolytes. Reaching out for one of the four-foot iron candlesticks, he caught it up and his hammer snapped out to pulp a plaguebearer's skull. He parried a disease-forged blade with his own sword, shattering the daemon weapon. Aetius had moved up beside him, shield raised to cover Gardus's flank. He stepped forward and swung his hammer out in a wide arc, sending daemons reeling.*

'Who will be triumphant?' Gardus shouted, trying to ignore the persistent hum of flies and forgotten voices.

'Only the faithful,' came the response from the throat of every member of his Warrior Chamber. The cry rose above the din of battle, above the sound of hammers cracking bones and the drone of daemons. Gardus smashed a plaguebearer from its feet, splitting its leering features, *the candlestick heavy in his hand as he caught up its twin and stepped out of the hospice.*

'If we should fall, who will be reborn again?' he shouted, shaking his head to clear it.

'Only the faithful!'

'Only the faithful,' Gardus said hoarsely, as he blocked a blow that would have split Aetius's head. He chopped the daemon down and cast a quick glance over the battlefield. The Hallowed Knights were fighting as warriors born, but the foe's numbers were limitless. They needed to counter that advantage. We need room to manoeuvre, he thought. Gardus looked up, and swept his runeblade out, signalling to Tegrus. The Prosecutors dropped from the sky, hurling their celestial hammers. The weapons struck, slamming home into the ranks of the enemy with meteoric force. Dirt, mud and broken bodies were hurled into the air with each impact. For a moment, the enemy's relentless advance stalled.

Gardus seized his chance.

'Aetius, lock shields!' he roared. 'Feros, to me!'

Aetius barked an order, and several retinues of Liberators slammed their shields together, forming a solid wall of gleaming sigmarite. As Gardus had hoped, Solus and his Judicators recognized what was required of them, and they retreated swiftly, collapsing their ranks behind the defensive perimeter provided by the shields of their brethren. Feros and his Retributors moved through the retreating ranks of Liberators and Judicators, their great two-handed lightning hammers clearing away those daemons closest to the Hallowed Knights' lines. Feros laughed as a blow from his hammer reduced a loping daemon to ash.

'Sigmar be praised for this bounty,' the Retributor-Prime bellowed. 'Enemies to smite, and time enough to enjoy it.'

He stepped forward and drove his hammer into the ground. Lightning erupted from the black earth, catching plaguebearers in its crackling embrace. The daemons jittered and burned. Between them, the Prosecutors and Retributors were keeping the enemy at bay, but Gardus knew that it was only a temporary reprieve.

'Aetius, shieldwall,' Gardus said, signalling the Liberator-Prime. Aetius raised his hammer, and the front rank of the shieldwall knelt, planting the bottoms of their shields on the ground. The second rank moved in behind them, slamming their shields atop those of the front rank. Those Liberators not a part of the shieldwall moved forward to join Aetius and Gardus as the first line of defence against the enemy. They broke away, forming themselves up into groups of five or six warriors, and took up positions between the Retributors.

Soon Solus's Judicators were firing from behind the wall of shields, as Gardus and the others tried to hold the plague-ranks back. Thunder rumbled and lightning snarled as Solus and his warriors peppered the enemy. Soon the air was full of smoke and noise, but the daemons continued their droning advance, taking no notice of the punishment inflicted upon them. More and more of them flowed out of the Gates of Dawn to join their vile kin in an unceasing assault upon Gardus's Warrior Chamber. They strode over the charred and broken bodies of their fellows, clambering over heaps of daemoniac corpses in order to reach the Hallowed Knights.

Gardus and Aetius fought back to back.

'We'll be overwhelmed if this keeps up, my lord,' Aetius said, knocking a plaguebearer back with a swat from his shield. As the daemon staggered, he ripped his sword through its midsection, like a woodcutter hewing at a tree. The daemon fell in two squirming halves.

'While one of us yet stands, hope is not lost,' Gardus said. He took in the battle at a glance, seeing the Retributors, like lone islands in a sea of filth, and the Liberators, fighting back to back in small retinues. None of them were doing much to blunt the advance, despite the toll they were extracting from the enemy. Plaguebearers hacked at the shieldwall, occasionally pulling down a Liberator and dragging him out and away from his fellows to be butchered. Gardus felt his heart tighten with every death, a strange sense of having lived through this before, as he *watched his flock fall to the spears of the skinstealers*. He shook off the errant thought. These enemies were not

skinsteaders, whoever they were. He heard Bolathrax's laughter slither over the battlefield, and looked up to see the Great Unclean One squat down on his flabby haunches and lean forward, the very picture of an eager spectator.

'Yes, fight hard,' Bolathrax called out. 'It will not matter in the end. The tallyman will collect his due, no matter how well you swing your little hammers.'

Gardus longed to smash the smirk from the creature's face. Anger boiled up in him, and as he fought, he saw half-remembered faces superimposed over the sigmarite masks his warriors wore. He heard voices he did not recognize, and the green horrors of the Ghyrtract Fen wavered and seemed to give way to another place, another time. *He saw blood spatter white sheets as the skinsteaders howled and tried to shake it off, to banish the clutching fragments of memory, but the hospice was burning and they refused to release him. He slashed at a plaguebearer and the grimacing warrior, clad in crimson and brass armour stumbled back, his scarred skull crushed by the iron candlestick in Garradan's hand.*

'Sigmar,' Gardus roared. *More warriors closed in on him, savage, saw-toothed axes raised and he whirled, runeblade licking out to lop off arms and shatter plague-swords. Those swords, he knew, were stained with the blood of his flock, and it drove him to fury. A plague-sword struck him, causing him to stumble and he felt the spear as it dug through his robes and pierced his vitals, and he fell to one knee. 'Sigmar, give me strength!'*

'My lord... Gardus,' someone shouted. He hesitated. Who is Gardus? My name is Garradan, he thought as a heavy body struck him and knocked him sprawling. Jolted from his memories, he rolled over and saw Aetius stagger as a plague-blade slid under his guard and tore through his belly. Gardus froze in shock, but only for a moment. As Aetius sank down, he surged to his feet, blade in hand. His runeblade sang out, and the plaguebearer lost its hand. It stepped back, its single eye widening in shock. That expression quickly vanished in a spray of pus and bile as Gardus's hammer slammed down on its skull.

Gardus shook his head, clearing it of lingering memories. He'd lost focus, letting his anger overwhelm his discipline. He could not afford such lapses, not now. Aetius was hunched over, his hands clasped to his belly.

'Aetius, can you stand?' he asked.

Aetius grunted and, with Gardus's help, rose to his feet. Blood dripped from between his fingers as he threw an arm over Gardus's shoulders and sagged against the Lord-Celestant. Gardus uprooted his blade and, with one arm around Aetius's waist, he hacked them a path back towards the shieldwall. As he handed Aetius over to a pair of Liberators, he turned back towards the Gates of Dawn.

The Great Unclean One wove his hands in obscene gestures. With every pass of the greater daemon's hands, the archway flexed like a thing in pain, and an ugly light seeped out from between the aged stones. The insect-drone in the air had grown louder, and it was accompanied by a new sound – the stomp of great feet, growing closer.

'I did try and warn you, you can't say I didn't,' Bolathrax croaked, as the archway shuddered down to its keystones. 'I gave you a chance, little pustlings, but you spat upon my kind offer.'

The daemon glanced slyly in Gardus's direction, somehow finding him amidst the confusion of battle. Behind the daemon, the stones of the archway seemed to tremble with the reverberations of whatever monstrosity approached. 'Though, I expected no better from the spawn of Sigmar.'

As the name of his god left the beast's blubbery lips, Gardus hesitated. Bolathrax's smile widened, sensing the reaction his words had caused. 'Yes, I know who you serve. I recognize that sign, on your armour. And I do not fear him, pustule. I withstood his wrath before, and I will withstand it now. I have outlived many gods. Bolathrax was there at the Battle of Black Skies, when the Great Necromancer fell. Bolathrax corrupted the Skyoak and broke the champions of mankind in the Allpoints War. And it was Bolathrax who cracked the City of Branches and made Alarielle weep tears of jade.'

With every boast, the Great Unclean One slapped his rubbery chest.

'Bolathrax, pustule! Bolathrax, blessed above all of Grandfather Nurgle's children. Bolathrax, greatest of all those who dwell in the garden.'

Bolathrax extended one wide paw, as if in command, and roared out, 'Heed me, my sons. Come forth, brothers in bile, come forth my rotguard!'

CHAPTER FOUR

In the halls of Azyr

Zephacleas moved quickly through the celestine vaults. Gardus was his friend – in many ways, his *only* friend – and the thought that he might be in danger was not a pleasant one. Stormcasts could not die, as such, but the Reforging process was not easy. Those who fell and returned were... different. No one could say how or why, but they were, and that thought lent speed to Zephacleas's stride. He did not want Gardus to change, to be something other than the man he was now. He did not want him to endure the agonies of rebirth a second time.

I do not want to lose my friend, he thought. As he passed the Forbidden Vaults, he averted his eyes, as tradition and prudence demanded. He was not the only Stormcast moving through the halls. The turquoise war-plate of the Celestial Vindicators was in evidence, as well as the golden armour of the Hammers of Sigmar. The great mourning bell was ringing steadily, its despairing song echoing everywhere as he made his way to where his Warrior Chamber waited.

He caught the arm of one of the Celestial Vindicators. 'What news, brother? How goes the war for the realmgates of Chamon? What of the Hanging Valleys of Anvrok, of Thostos Bladestorm and Lord-Castellant Eldroc?'

The other Stormcast pulled his arm free of Zephacleas's grip. The Celestial Vindicators were not known for their even temperament, and Zephacleas stepped back, hands raised.

'Peace, brother, I am merely curious.'

'The battle goes well,' the other Stormcast rumbled. 'The Silverway is ours.'

Chamon will follow.' He cocked his head. 'What of Ghyran? Have you heard?'

'Badly,' Zephacleas said, tersely. 'I go now, to see that it fares better. Sigmar be with you, brother,' he added, extending his hand. They clasped forearms, and turned to go their separate ways. Before Zephacleas had made more than a few steps, however, a voice called out to him, stopping him in his tracks.

'Hold, Beast-Bane,' a rough voice said. 'I would have words with you.'

Zephacleas stopped, more out of curiosity than any respect for the speaker's authority. He'd earned his war-name in the wilds of Azyrheim, hunting the monstrous beasts that still lurked in the high crags and deep canyons of the mountains of the Celestial Realm. He'd fought the Black Bull of Nordrath and harried the beast-packs of the Antarktos Ridge to extinction, slaughtering the white-furred goat-headed servants of Chaos to the last ungor. He turned.

'Hail and well met, Lord-Castellant. Shouldn't you be with the remainder of your Warrior Chamber, waiting for the order to march?'

'Who are you to say where I should or should not be?' Lorrus Grymn, Lord-Castellant of the Steel Souls, said.

Squat and built like a low wall, he was accompanied by two other silver-armoured figures. One was Morbus, Lord-Relictor of Gardus's Warrior Chamber. Zephacleas thought he recognized the other as Machus, one of Grymn's paladins and Decimator-Prime. The double-bladed axe he carried was a wicked-looking thing, its edges polished to a blinding gleam. His eyes were unreadable, and his expression was hidden behind his featureless war-helm, but Zephacleas suspected that he was as worried as his superior must be, to accost the Lord-Celestant of another Warrior Chamber.

Zephacleas held up his hands. 'My apologies...' he began.

Grymn cut him off with an impatient gesture.

'You are forgiven. Sigmar calls for you to lend aid to the Steel Soul,' Grymn said, eyeing the Lord-Celestant critically.

'He has,' Zephacleas said. The gryph-hound at the Lord-Castellant's side growled low in its feathered throat, as if it disapproved of his levity. Zephacleas fixed the animal with a cautious look. It was a heavy-bodied creature, with the limbs and torso of a great hunting hound and the head of a bird of prey. It could have the throat out of an unarmoured man in a matter of moments, and could give even a Stormcast a few uncomfortable minutes, if it was of a mind. This one was looking at him as if he were a bit of meat on the end of a stick. But then, so was Grymn, having a reputation for ferocity in word as well as deed. More than one Stormcast had been reduced to spluttering anger by the Lord-Castellant's words.

Grymn patted the creature's head. 'Easy, Tallon,' he murmured. He looked at Zephacleas. 'Gardus is a great fighter, a warrior without peer, but... he is untempered.'

'Yes,' Zephacleas said. 'As are you. As was I, once.'

'It is more than that,' Grymn said insistently. 'Morbus has seen it, in his dreams.'

'He is in danger,' Morbus said. The Lord-Relictor was an imposing figure, his weapons and armour replete with icons of faith. It fell to him to keep the

souls of the Hallowed Knights in his Warrior Chamber from the gloom of the underworld, and Morbus, like Ionus Cryptborn, or even the Astral Templars' own Seker Gravewalker, was too close to that fell realm for Zephacleas's comfort. 'Dark forces gather about him, Lord-Celestant.'

'I am well aware, Lord-Relictor,' Zephacleas gestured for Morbus to move aside. Morbus hesitated, his burning gaze turning to Grymn. Impatient now, Zephacleas made to push past. Every moment he delayed was a moment wasted in aiding Gardus.

Grymn quickly stepped forward, blocking him. His sour face was twisted in an expression so unpleasant that Zephacleas thought at first that he had been done some injury. He appeared to be struggling with his words.

'Say what you wish to say, Lord-Castellant. Some of us have battles to fight,' Zephacleas said.

'I would have you see that he comes to no harm, Lord-Celestant,' Grymn said. 'Whatever else happens, keep him safe.'

Zephacleas blinked. 'What?'

'Gardus,' Grymn said. 'See that he comes to no harm, Astral Templar. Or you shall answer to us.' As he spoke, he poked a finger into Zephacleas's chest, eliciting a dull sound as sigmarite struck sigmarite. Zephacleas smiled.

'You truly fear for him.'

'You will say nothing of this, you great oaf,' Grymn growled, as Zephacleas pushed past him. 'Concentrate on keeping him alive, rather than making mockery of us.'

'As if I would do anything else,' Zephacleas said. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder: Grymn stared at the floor, hands flexing uselessly, Morbus stared at Zephacleas, his expression indecipherable, and Machus leaned on his axe, head bowed.

Ah, my friend, any remaining doubts you might still have would vanish in an instant, if you could but see the way they worry for you, thought Zephacleas. A Lord-Celestant was not simply a leader; he was the heart and soul of his Warrior Chamber, and on his shoulders rode all of the hopes and courage of his warriors.

'Lord-Castellant,' Zephacleas said, loudly.

Grymn's head shot up, and he fixed the Lord-Celestant with a glare. More softly, Zephacleas said, 'I will see him safe, Lord-Castellant. Else my soul join his in Sigmar's forges.'

CHAPTER FIVE

The coming of the rotguard

The archway gaped like a wound pulled wide, and obese shapes shoved and fought their way free of the darkness beyond. Gardus heard the rattle of armour, and the grunting rumble of monstrous voices. Whatever was coming was big.

‘Too late,’ Bolathrax roared, as he slapped his hands together mockingly. ‘Too late, little pustules. Bolathrax’s beloved sons have come – the rotguard march again!’

The archway throbbed as a noxious gas erupted from the dark beyond the stones, and then, one by one, the rotguard stepped into the Realm of Life. Seven Great Unclean Ones, each as big as Bolathrax, and all equally horrible. Each one was armed and armoured in a similar way to their lord and master. They took up positions on the steps, as if awaiting further orders.

‘Sigmar’s hammer,’ Aetius muttered, as two Liberators took his weight and began to pull him to safety, behind the shieldwall. ‘Seven of them.’ The very air seemed to tremble in anticipation of whatever nightmare was preparing to claw its way free of the Gates of Dawn.

‘One was trouble enough,’ Solus said, as he joined them at the break in the shieldwall. The Judicator-Prime sounded tired, and his armour was marked and scored where enemy blades had reached him, despite the shields of the Liberators. ‘We must regroup, Steel Soul.’

‘We can beat them,’ Gardus said. Had he said that before, when Sigmar’s gaze had first fallen on him? He shook his head. He could not afford to become lost in memory again. ‘We must. We will not fail here. We *will not*.’ He raised

his runeblade. 'Retributors, Prosecutors, to me,' he roared. He glanced at Solus. 'Hold the line. Do not let it buckle.'

The Judicator-Prime nodded tersely, and Gardus turned away. As he moved forward, Feros fell in beside him, his armour befouled and covered in daemonic grime.

'Are we making for the big daemon?' the Retributor-Prime growled. At Gardus's nod, he gave a bark of laughter, raising his hammer like a standard.

The other Retributors began to fight their way towards their commander. Overhead, Tegrus and his Prosecutors cut through the air on wings of lightning, clearing a path for Gardus and the others. As the mystical hammers tore explosive furrows in the ground and sent plaguebearers tumbling through the air, Gardus led Feros and his Retributors towards the Gates of Dawn at a run.

If they could interrupt whatever ritual the greater daemon was enacting, they might stand a chance of throwing the enemy back. Gardus bulled aside any daemon foolish enough to attempt to block his path, battering them down with hammer and blade. Lightning sparked and crackled from the hammers of the Retributors as they moved with him, scything daemons from their feet with wide, sweeping blows. From the corner of his eye, he saw Feros knock a plaguebearer with his shoulder, before crushing its skull with his boot. The Prosecutors swooped past, almost at eye-level, and cut through the enemy ranks.

They had almost reached the stone steps when the first Retributor fell, pulled down by a trio of plaguebearers. Azure energy burst from the downed warrior's armour and a bolt of brilliant light speared upwards, piercing the dark clouds. Another for Reforging, Gardus thought grimly.

The Stormcasts had carved a wide path through the daemonic ranks, but now their lack of numbers was beginning to show. The daemons came at them without subtlety, form of discipline or sense of self-preservation, but they were limitless. For every one that fell, two more stepped up to take its place. Plague-swords sought Gardus's belly and he was forced to slow his charge as daemons bounded down the steps towards him. 'Keep going,' he roared, as Feros slowed to help him. 'We must stop the beast.'

He looked up, searching for Tegrus, and saw the Prosecutors soaring upwards, shrouded in a cloud of stinging flies. As he watched, the flies swirling about one of the winged warriors congealed into a plaguebearer. The sudden weight of the daemon, combined with the sword it slid through a gap in the Prosecutor's armour, served to send the latter plummeting to the ground. Daemon and Stormcast struck together, and lay in a broken tangle. Tegrus and the others were soon similarly afflicted, and celestial hammers crashed against plague-swords in a desperate mid-air duel.

Gardus caught a descending blade on his crossed weapons and shattered it with a single motion. The daemon lunged at him, digging for his throat with the stump of its sword. He fell back and twisted around, catching the blow on his pauldron, smashing the daemon to the ground as it staggered past. Whirling back, slashing out with his runeblade as he did so, he cut through the swollen

guts of another plaguebearer. It folded over his blade and caught at his forearm with blackened fingers. Its single eye rolled wildly in its leaking socket as its weight dragged him off-balance. Gardus cursed, and tried to jerk his arm free, but to no avail.

Another daemon leapt onto his back. It clawed at the clasps of his helmet, nearly yanking his head from his shoulders in its frenzy. Blades struck his cuirass, drawing oily sparks. Rotting hands wrapped themselves around his free arm, and he found himself pinned, unable to bring either of his weapons to bear. The foul miasma of his opponents began to fill his nose and mouth, and the droning of flies threatened to deafen him.

Gardus stumbled forward suddenly as the plaguebearer clinging to his back was sent flying from its perch in a flash of lightning. A second blow freed his arm, and he turned to bring his hammer down on the creature that clung to his sword arm. Feros moved up beside him, spinning his hammer about and driving it into the belly of a daemon hard enough to send it bouncing up the stone steps. Gardus gave the Retributor-Prime a weary nod of thanks and looked up towards the Gates of Dawn.

The seven monstrous Great Unclean Ones were ponderously descending the stone steps of the gates. The first in line gave a rumbling laugh and threw itself down, its bloated body rolling down the stone steps like a gelatinous boulder, leaving splotches of bile and pus to mark its descent. Gardus and Feros retreated as the creature struck a landing and flung itself to the ground without grace. It smashed into a fallen tree and shattered it. Gardus turned aside as a rain of splinters pelted his armour.

When he turned back, the greater daemon was up and swinging its flail in a vicious circle. A Prosecutor was knocked from the air, falling at the beast's feet in a heap of ruptured armour and broken limbs. Feros and his Retributors charged towards the daemon. It brought its flail down, driving one Retributor to his knees. Feros drove his hammer into its side, rocking it. Lightning crawled across its form, but it didn't seem to notice. It backhanded Feros, slamming him into the steps, even as it raised one wide foot over the Retributor it had downed. The foot came down with finality, crushing armour and pulping the warrior inside. Light flashed, and the daemon stumbled back with a shriek as the holy radiance of the warrior's passing burned its unseemly flesh.

Gardus caught the edge of his armoured warcloak and swirled it up and out, unleashing the magics bound within. Sorcerous hammers shot forth from its folds, each one burning with the azure light of the heavens. The hammers slammed into the rotguard, denting its armour and tearing its thin flesh, driving the daemon back a half-step.

Before the greater daemon could recover, Feros and his warriors were upon it, lightning hammers striking again and again. Nearby daemons turned away with shrieks and howls, unable to bear the glare of the forces unleashed. The air throbbed with the fury of the Retributors' assault, and he heard a bellicose howl as the rotguard succumbed. It reeled away from the fury of the Stormcast, but Feros gave the daemon no respite, harrying it. His hammer smashed into it again and again, shattering armour and unnatural bone with every blow. Then,

as the greater daemon lurched backwards, pus leaking from its wounds, Feros caught it a massive two-handed blow on the side of the neck, sending its head bouncing away.

The daemon collapsed in on itself like a deflated midden heap. Feros turned to Gardus and lifted his hammer in triumph, but before he could speak, the rest of the rotguard lobbed themselves into battle. Their arrival caused the marshy ground to shudder, and it scattered the Retributors. Feros whirled, hammer raised to defend himself, but his moment of distraction cost him. Before Gardus could shout a warning, the other Stormcasts was rocked from his feet by a blow from the beast he thought he had defeated. The wounded rotguard, flesh steaming, slugged Feros and sent him flying. A second blow, from the flail of another of the rotguard, caught him as he flew through the air and sent him tumbling back to the ground. He landed heavily, and did not move again. The remaining Retributors fell back in disarray as two more of their number returned to Sigmar's forge in bursts of searing light, courtesy of the greater daemons.

'Fall back,' Gardus shouted, sheathing his sword as the rotguard began their ponderous advance. The Retributors hesitated. The source of their concern was obvious; it went against everything a Stormcast was taught in leaving one of their own behind. 'Go,' he yelled again. 'I will see to Feros.'

Even as he spoke, Gardus darted forward, calling out to Tegrus as he ran. 'Keep them back, if you can,' he shouted, ducking low as a monstrous flail swooped over his head. He darted past as the rotguard stumbled, off-balance, and continued running as the daemon was knocked sprawling by the hammer-strikes of the Prosecutors. As he charged through the gauntlet of greater daemons, he did not break his stride towards the limp form of Feros. A flail cut across his path, as its wielder sought to trip him up. Gardus leapt over the chain, hit the ground in a rattle of armour and rolled to his feet, standing over the prone form of the Retributor-Prime. As he rose, he caught the edge of his cloak and swirled it over himself and Feros. A deluge of sorcerous hammers filled the air, driving the rotguard back.

Gardus dropped to one knee to heft Feros's bulk over his shoulder. A flail slammed down, spraying him with muck and tearing his warcloak. He shot to his feet and spun about awkwardly, bashing aside the screeching skull-heads of the daemon-weapon as its owner swung it towards him again. He was rocked back on his heels by the force of the blow. Gardus looked up. Three leering faces, each as wide as a man, stared down at him. The greater daemons closed in with gross chortles.

Tegrus plummeted downwards, his crackling wings carving blazing trails through the flesh of the rotguard as the ground erupted in holy fire. Celestial Hammers tore the ground, blinding the looming daemons.

'Your hand, Gardus!' Tegrus yelled, extending his own.

Gardus switched his hammer to his other hand and reached up. A moment later, he was wrenched from his feet as Tegrus caught his arm and yanked him and Feros out of danger. The other Prosecutors followed,

distracting the rotguard. They spread out around Tegrus in a wide formation as they swooped back towards the shieldwall, hurling their hammers at the surging ranks of the plaguebearers below and smashing a path for the remaining Retributors.

Tegrus released Gardus as they reached the line of Liberators, and the Lord-Celestant dropped to the ground, absorbing the impact easily. Still carrying Feros, he hurried into the protective confines of the Liberators' disciplined ranks, followed a few seconds later by the Retributors.

Feros grunted as Gardus set him down. One eye cracked open. 'Should have left me... Steel Soul,' he wheezed.

'You should know me better than that,' Gardus said tersely as he scanned the shieldwall. Bloody lanes had been hacked into the outer ranks as the plaguebearers continued to advance, as unstoppable and inexorable as death itself. The sound of their phlegm-thickened voices, droning in that same hateful monotone, crowded out all other sound.

The Hallowed Knights were hemmed in, their numbers dwindling before the onslaught. More and more bursts of radiant light speared upwards, attesting to this grim fact. He caught sight of Solus and called to him, 'We need to pull back – reform the line.'

Soon, he knew, there would be nowhere to pull back to. But they would hold the line until the last of them had fallen. They were Stormcast, and they would die as such.

Solus nodded and began to shout orders, as he fired his crossbow. Slowly, steadily, the Hallowed Knights began to give ground. The ranks of Liberators made up the shieldwall, stepping backwards into an ever-tightening circle as the Judicators continued to fire. Gardus looked down at Feros. 'Can you stand?'

'No,' Feros said, softly. He looked up at Gardus, his features twisted in pain. 'It's my back, and my legs. They crushed them with those blasted flails of theirs. Can barely lift my arms. Leave me.'

'No,' Gardus said, shaking his head. They would have to make their stand there.

'Then send me back to Azyr yourself, Steel Soul.' Feros gritted his teeth as a wave of pain swept through him. 'I do not fear Reforging. Let me rise, to serve again when I am worthy.' He caught Gardus's forearm in a feeble grip. Gardus looked down at his friend, and *saw the leper gasping on his cot, his afflicted body convulsing in agony. Great boils erupted on his body, spilling scalding pus over his already tortured flesh.* 'Please,' he wheezed, 'Please, help...' stood, raising his hammer.

'I am sorry,' Gardus whispered.

Feros gave a bloody grin. 'I'm not. It was a good fight, Steel Soul. But my part in it is done.' He closed his eyes. 'Send me home.'

The hammer came down. Thunder rolled.

Gardus turned to see to the retreat, his heart heavy in his chest. Every man he could see was bleeding, his armour battered and filthy. Step by step, they were

driven back. The enemy fell about the battle line of sigmarite. Yet the odds never slackened as more daemons formed out of the fly and fume-filled air marched out of the Gates of Dawn at Bolathrax's bellowed command.

'We are hard-pressed,' Aetius said, as he joined Gardus. The Liberator-Prime held one hand firmly to his side, his breath coming in harsh rasps. Still he held his hammer at the ready. 'They are without number.'

'Then we can take comfort in knowing that we held faith until the last of us fell, Aetius,' Gardus said. 'Who will fight until the last?' he shouted.

'Only the faithful,' came the reply from his exhausted warriors. Lights burned upwards, as Liberators and Judicators fell. Tegrus and his Prosecutors had dropped to the ground, unable to remain in the fly-choked air. The shieldwall shrank another step.

'Who will stand, when all is lost?'

'Only the faithful!' The reply was louder now. Plague-swords smashed down on raised shields. More flashes of light pierced the dark above, as warriors fell.

'Who will be remembered?' he roared, striving to drown out the drone of the fly-blown legions. He drew his runeblade and clashed it against his hammer.

'Only the faithful!'

'Only the faithful!' Gardus cried, clashing his weapons again. As he did so, the sky was split by a crash of thunder. Lightning flashed.

Sigmar had answered their prayers.

CHAPTER SIX

Into the fray

Zephacleas roared in primal joy as he rode the lightning to the ground. It spread through him, body and soul, boiling his blood in his veins, and filling him with Sigmar's divine power. He felt strong, capable of fighting any foe, no matter how monstrous, without the need for rest or sleep. There was no sensation quite like it.

The celestine vaults of Sigmaron had vanished, to be replaced by the muck and mire of the Ghyrtract Fen. He rose from his kneeling position, his armour still crawling with Sigmar's lightning, and swung his weapons at the first enemy to hand. The plaguebearer turned, eye widening in shock as Zephacleas's hammer tore its head from its shoulders.

'No time for speeches,' he roared, as the retinues of the Astral Templars shook off the storm and set themselves to battle. 'We have yet to meet a foe we cannot break on the field, and I don't intend to do so today. Forward!'

His men gave vent to a communal bellow of agreement, and the Liberator, Decimator and Retributor hosts fell into a spearhead formation, as he'd taught them. Such a formation had served them well in the Gnarlwood, when they had earned the right to carry Sigmar's sigil on their shields and, later, in Aqshy as well. They advanced, splitting into three columns. Shields raised, hammers ready, the Liberators bulled forward, charging through the thick mists that rose from the fen.

Zephacleas took the vanguard, as was his right as Lord-Celestant, and he and his Warrior Chamber moved to meet the enemy, who now recognized the sudden arrival of the Astral Templars for what it was. Behind them, Seker

Gravewalker croaked out orders to the Judicators and Prosecutors, directing them in their defence of the spearhead's flanks. Judicators took up positions near the monstrous standing stones that dotted the mire, and Prosecutors swept by on wings of bristling light.

Zephacleas felt no hesitation in leaving the Lord-Relictor in charge of such a task – indeed, he trusted no one else to accomplish it. Gravewalker would keep the Astral Templars in the fight, no matter how fierce the struggle became. He had come from a wild land of high crags and wind-torn veldts and was as implacable as the storm itself.

He swept his weapons out in opposite directions, smashing two daemons from their feet. Bringing his hammer and sword around to cut down a third, he led his warriors into the massed ranks of the plague-horde.

The plan, such as it was, was simple enough. The enemy surrounded Gardus, all attentions bent to overwhelming the Hallowed Knights. Thus, the Astral Templars were free to strike a telling blow. The plague host would be forced to divide its attentions, and Zephacleas intended to make them pay for it.

He chopped a plaguebearer in half. As the daemon fell to pieces, strange shapes sprouted from the ichor in its veins. Tiny, fat shapes bobbed in the flowing bile, then bounded towards Zephacleas, giggling shrilly. He growled in disgust and stamped on the nurglings as they tried to climb his greaves. More of them scuttled across the battlefield, weaving through the feet of his men, distracting them at inopportune moments or swarming them under like ravenous insects.

'Gravewalker, burn them,' he shouted. A moment later, the sky was ripped wide by lightning. Bolts of crackling incandescence surged down, gouging the earth and tearing gaping wounds in the ranks of the enemy. Plaguebearers shivered in the throes of the storm, burning up from the inside out as the lightning danced across their rusty armour and the points of their swords. Those that did not simply burst from the lightning's cleansing touch were reduced to living torches, which flailed about blindly before collapsing into ashes. He raised his sword in a salute as the Lord-Relictor turned his attentions elsewhere.

He could see now why Sigmar had chosen to send them here – not just because Gardus was in danger, but because the realmgate had become corrupted. It led nowhere good, and, like a suppurating wound, it would only get worse. The stones rose from the ground, seeming to vibrate in rhythm with the omnipresent drone of the flies. They spiralled through the stinking miasma and across the blasphemous icons that dotted the field, glowing in a sickly fashion. Strange shadows stretched through the air and crawled across every flat surface. The wind was thick with garbled whispers, made by no human tongue.

Even the air itself had gone sour as he moved forward. This land was dying, he suspected. It was rotting on the vine, and unless they could cauterize the infection here, it would only grow worse and perhaps spread to others parts of Ghyran.

Zephacleas could see the realmgate now, rising into the air above the

battlefield, its stony proportions limned in flickering witchfire. A Great Unclean One squatted at the landing before the great archway, gesticulating and roaring the abominable words to some terrible sorcerous working. Below the greater daemon, several of its kind sat hunched on the steps at intervals – these were clearly an honour guard of some sort, and Zephacleas longed to test his skill against one of the hulking creatures. He had to reach the Hallowed Knights and break the ever-swelling cordon of rotting flesh which surrounded them. Only then could their two hosts secure the Gates of Dawn, as Sigmar had commanded.

An unceasing tide of daemons flowed through the arch and spilled down the steps, without regard for life or limb, many falling from the stones, pushed by overeager companions to splatter on the ground below. But there were always more to replace them, and worse things besides. The power of Nurgle grew with every expulsion of foulness from the realmgate, as daemoniac beasts, nurglings and other monstrosities joined the plaguebearers in battle.

Plague drones buzzed through the fly-filled skies, the rot-fly riders urging their monstrous steeds into aerial battle with the newly arrived Astral Templars' Prosecutors. Blood, and worse, rained down on Zephacleas and his men as they fought their way towards the Hallowed Knights – several of his Stormcasts hesitated.

'Keep moving,' he shouted as he elbowed a plaguebearer out of his path. His hammer came down, crushing another. Ahead, he could see the gleam of silver armour, and urged his men to greater speed as explosions of light hurtled upwards. There were too many of them, he knew. How many of the Hallowed Knights still stood?

Hold on my friend – just a few moments longer... hold on!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Salvation from the sky

Salvation.

The bolts from blackened skies meant salvation for Gardus and his remaining warriors. Sigmar had answered their prayers. Annihilation had seemed inevitable. Now, however, as more lightning strikes speared down, illuminating the cloying darkness of the Fen, the hordes pressing against his dwindling forces lessened. The daemons turned to face the new threat.

Gardus signalled for Tegrus and his small group of Prosecutors to take wing. ‘Clear a corridor in that sea of filth. I would meet our allies face to face,’ he said, as the winged warriors took flight.

Whatever host the other Stormcasts belonged to, he was glad to see them, though he wondered if they had arrived too late. Only a few of Solus’s Judicators still stood, and Aetius’s Liberators were equally hard-pressed – the once impenetrable shieldwall had shattered into a number of smaller retinues, all of which were in danger of being overwhelmed. The few remaining Retributors stood clustered about Gardus, hammers ready despite aching arms. Even so, their duty was clear, and if they had any hope of reaching the Gates of Dawn, now was the time. ‘We cannot waste this opportunity. Aetius, Solus, we must take back the initiative from our foes,’ he said. ‘You know what to do. I will take the lead.’

‘Where you go, we follow,’ Aetius said. He stumbled, but stayed on his feet. Solus caught his arm. The Judicator-Prime had drawn his gladius, the blade wet with daemonic ichor, and gestured towards the realmgate.

‘Though perhaps not very far – look!’

Gardus turned and saw that Bolathrax had at last noticed the new arrivals. The daemon's sneering features had taken on a look of uncertainty, as if he had not factored such an occurrence into his plans. Any hope Gardus felt at that realization died as Bolathrax roared out a command and, as one, the six remaining rotguard lumbered into battle, flails whirling viciously. The skull-headed weapons wreaked havoc as the daemons staved in the thinned ranks of the Hallowed Knights. Liberators were smashed from one realm and sent to the next by great, thundering blows, tossing silver-clad bodies high into the air. Shields did little against the crushing strength of the greater daemons, shattering the swords or hammers which were interposed.

Unstoppable, Gardus thought, they're unstoppable. He pushed the thought away. Nothing was unstoppable. Bigger and stronger maybe, but not unstoppable. 'To me,' he shouted, swinging his hammer towards the creatures. 'Hallowed Knights, to me!' He looked up, and caught Tegrus's eye. The Prosecutor banked smoothly, altering direction with unearthly grace. His warriors followed suit, and the Prosecutors shot towards the rotguard. Gardus followed them at a run, his warriors flowing after him as he led the counterattack. Slowly, but surely, they fought their way through plaguebearers and nurlings.

'We are here, Lord-Celestant,' Solus said, as his gladius took off a plaguebearer's swordhand at the wrist. He punched the befuddled creature off its feet, as it stared dumbly at its stump. He and Aetius moved on either side of Gardus, protecting his flanks.

'We must...' Gardus began. His voice trailed off as several of the vile behemoths halted their onslaught to vomit forth streams of corruption, washing toxic filth over the closest Hallowed Knights. One of the beasts turned with a querulous grunt as it noticed Gardus's counterattack. Knowing what was coming, Gardus quickly raised his hammer and held it parallel to the ground. 'Shields up,' he commanded. As one, the Liberator brotherhoods behind him raised their shields over their heads, in order to protect themselves and the Judicators from the Great Unclean One's vomit. Aetius stepped forward, raising his shield over himself and Gardus as the acidic bile splashed over them. It sizzled where it struck the sigmarite. The smell was horrendous, and nurlings sprouted where the bile struck the ground. The giggling creatures got under their feet and clung to their ankles.

'Foul mites,' Aetius snarled, stamping on the creatures.

'Ignore them,' Gardus said. 'Tegrus!' he shouted. 'Bring that creature to its knees, O Sainted Eye.'

Gardus extended his runeblade towards the rotguard that had vomited on them, and the Prosecutors hurtled forward. Celestial Hammers struck the greater daemon from every direction, filling the air with the stink of burned flesh. The rotguard dropped its flail and howled in anger and pain. Trying to catch its quick-moving attackers, the daemon swiped blindly at the Prosecutors. Tegrus sped down, diving like a bird of prey, and landed atop the creature's helm, his hammers cracking down simultaneously with a sound like thunder to punch a crater in the beast's armour. The greater daemon staggered,

sinking to one knee with a dolorous moan as Tegrus pushed himself back into the air with a single snap of his holy wings.

'Forward,' Gardus growled.

Liberators and Retributors moved forward, and soon lightning-wreathed hammers and blades forged in celestial fires were taking a toll on the rotguard's necrotic flesh. The greater daemon swiped and tore at the Stormcast, but to no avail. Slowly it was brought down to one knee.

'Shields up,' Gardus said, as he strode forward.

Four Liberators formed up in front of him, two kneeling, and two standing. All four raised their shields over their heads at an angle. Gardus took a running leap. Swiftly, he charged up the incline provided by the shields, his hammer held in both hands.

The rotguard sagged forward, its oily flesh torn by wounds and steam and smoke rising from it. Gardus sprang into the air above it, his hammer raised. The creature twisted, goggling up at him as he dropped towards it. Sigmar, guide my hand, for I strike in your name, Gardus prayed in the moment before impact.

He struck with a sound like thunder, his warhammer splitting the Great Unclean One's head like an overripe fruit. Gardus crashed down, landing in a crouch, as the headless body of the daemon fell over. A tarry liquid spilled out of its ruptured neck and crept across the ground around his feet. His men cheered as he stood, swiping his hand out.

'Who will succeed?' he asked. A plaguebearer leapt over the broken husk of the rotguard and slashed at his head. As Gardus defended himself, he saw more plaguebearers climbing over the body, and leaping to the attack.

'Only the faithful,' came the reply, as his men fought back. Gardus backhanded his opponent and looked out over the battlefield. His remaining retinues had engaged the other rotguard to limited success. He'd lost sight of Solus and Aetius, separated in the melee. Tegrus spun through the air above, arrowing towards another of the rotguard with his Prosecutors. Daemons closed in from all sides of Gardus, intent on swarming him under, as they had so many of his warriors.

'Only the faithful,' he roared, lopping off a plaguebearer's arm as it tried to drive its sword into his side. 'Fight, my brothers. Fight and show Sigmar that the faithful yet stand. Show him that whatever else, the faithful yet remain! The faithful still fight in his name. Only the faithful!'

'Only the faithful!' a new voice roared, over the clamour of battle. Gardus turned and saw a flash of amethyst as a blade cleaved a daemon in two. All at once, he knew who had come to their aid.

'Ho, Gardus,' Zephacleas said. 'I see you saved some for me! Always the thoughtful one you are, Steel Soul.'

Laughing, Gardus's fellow Lord-Celestant backhanded a plaguebearer with his hammer, dropping the daemon in mid-lunge. As it tried to squirm to its feet, he drove his blade down into its belly and pinned it to the ground. The daemon stiffened, shrieked and fell silent as Zephacleas ripped his blade free and joined Gardus. The two fought back to back for a moment, as around them

a small detachment of Astral Templars bolstered the dwindling ranks of the Hallowed Knights.

‘Good to see you, my friend,’ Gardus said, as he turned a blow aside with his hammer. ‘Your arrival is timely, to say the least.’

Zephacleas laughed and hacked a plaguebearer’s arm off as its sword skidded across his cuirass, leaving an oily scratch. One of the rotguard waddled towards them, weapon sweeping out to scatter plaguebearers and Stormcasts alike, in order to clear itself a path. Zephacleas struck his weapons together, urging the brute on.

‘It’s already coming this way,’ Gardus said, pointedly.

Zephacleas grinned and readied himself to meet the rotguard’s charge. The rotguard’s flail tore a furrow in the ground, spattering the Lord-Celestant’s armour with muck. Zephacleas’s own blade bit into one the daemon’s tree-trunk legs, releasing a flood of pus and maggots. The rotguard shrieked and uprooted the skull-headed flail. In the same motion, it slashed out, trying to hook its opponent. Zephacleas crossed his weapons and caught the blow, but was driven back by the force of it.

Gardus took advantage of the greater daemon’s distraction, driving his own hammer into one of its knees. Unnatural bone crunched and the great bulk wobbled, suddenly off-balance. The Great Unclean One wailed and lashed out with its hand, knocking Gardus backwards. It had dropped its flail in its attempt to stay upright, and as it groped for the weapon, Zephacleas sprang onto its back and scaled the folds of blubber and boils to reach the daemon’s head. He caught hold of one antler and brought his sword down on the crown of the beast’s sloping skull – a speed born of no small amount of desperation, Gardus suspected.

The rotguard slumped forward, clawing at the ground. It hauled itself towards Gardus, looming over him like a tidal wave of filth and decay. Zephacleas had managed to hold on for the ride, continuing to hew brutally at the daemon’s cranium as it dragged itself towards Gardus.

‘It’s like trying to chop through mud,’ he snarled.

Gardus rose to his feet and met the fell creature’s last lunge. It slammed into him with a sound like a cleaver striking meat and all of the air was driven from his lungs. He was knocked into the ground, the beast’s weight settling on him as its wide paws fumbled for his helmet, as if intending to twist his head from his shoulders. He lashed out with his hammer, snapping its fingers. The rotguard reared back and Gardus followed, lunging to his feet. His hammer smashed upwards, into the bottom of the daemon’s jaw, even as Zephacleas drove his sword down one final time. The two weapons met in the mulch of the daemon’s skull, and there was a crack of thunder. Gardus was flung to the ground. Zephacleas joined him a moment later.

The rotguard’s headless bulk swayed above them for a moment, and then collapsed between them. A tide of squabbling nurglings spilled out of the daemon’s ruptured neck and Gardus squashed a number of them as he forced himself to his feet. He reached out and caught hold of Zephacleas’s forearm, hauling the other Stormcast up.

‘Your warriors – their advance has stalled,’ Gardus said. He gestured towards the ranks of the Astral Templars with his still-smoking hammer. The fury of their initial charge had carried them far into the ranks of the enemy, but not far enough. Now they too were being cut off and surrounded by the plague legions.

‘So I see,’ Zephacleas said, grudgingly. ‘Not enough of us, and more of them with every passing moment. If you’ve got any ideas, now is the time for them.’ He looked at Gardus.

Gardus shook his head. He was tired. More tired than he could ever remember having been. It wasn’t simply the relentless pace of the battle, but as if the land itself were sapping his strength. It had been corrupted by the touch of Nurgle, and was becoming something other, an anathema to all that was pure. Even the strength bestowed upon him by Sigmar had its limits, and he was fast approaching them, as were his men.

Nonetheless, they would persevere. *Much was demanded of those to whom much had been given...* Those were the words by which the Hallowed Knights lived, fought and died. They, and all Stormcast Eternals, owed a debt to the one who had forged them into a force capable of wresting the Mortal Realms from the Ruinous Powers. And Gardus would not be the first to fail in that regard. Not now, not ever, even unto the day of his Reforging.

He quickly surveyed the field, taking in the ebb and flow of the battle in the blink of an eye. Droning ranks of plaguebearers and tumbling tides of nurglings flooded the field, pressing so close to the warriors of the Hallowed Knights and the Astral Templars that the latter could only bring the most basic tactics to bear. Many of his Stormcasts were still locked in combat with the remaining rotguard, unable to bring down the behemoths. He recalled a training bout he had witnessed on the practice fields of Sigmaron... two warriors, on a dais no wider across than his shoulders, punching and kicking until one man fell. A test of endurance, rather than skill. That was what this was. Unfortunately, if there was one thing the servants of Nurgle were known for, it was endurance.

Gardus looked up, towards the Gates of Dawn. Bolathrax still stood in the archway, chanting words of foul summoning, drawing more and more flies out of the pulsing void beyond the stones. As before, at the obese monster’s command, the flies swarmed down and congealed into staggering, cyclopean plaguebearers, who lurched forward into battle. ‘Unless we seal that gate, we’ll drown in a tide of rotting flesh,’ Gardus said. ‘My warriors are too few, and yours are doing all they can to hold their own.’

‘There’s no sign that any more help is coming, either from our own realm, or this one,’ Zephacleas grunted. A plaguebearer bounded towards them, jaw sagging loosely, and pushed Gardus aside as it hacked at them. Zephacleas whipped his sword up and around in a tight pattern, chopping through the daemon in three places. It fell and did not move again. ‘The question is, what do we do about it?’

‘What we must,’ Gardus said. ‘We came to take that gate in Sigmar’s name, and I intend to do just that.’ He started forward, but Zephacleas caught his arm.

'You can't do it alone. We'll rally the others, make a concentrated push,' he said.

Gardus shook him off. 'There's no time for that. Every moment we waste sees the enemy renewed and his number redoubled. I- Look out!' He swung his hammer around and bashed Zephacleas off his feet, knocking the other Stormcast aside, even as the rotguard's flail swung down through the space that the Lord-Celestant had been occupying.

The Astral Templar rolled to his feet, chopping through the haft of the daemon's weapon, even as it tried to draw it back. He backed towards Gardus as the greater daemon tossed the broken weapon aside, and made to pull the heavy blade which hung from a tattered sheath strapped to its gut.

Zephacleas glanced over his shoulder and jerked his head towards Bolathrax. 'Well? What are you waiting for?' he said. 'I'll handle this one. The other one is all yours.'

Gardus nodded, turned and began to run. Shield held before him, he crashed into the masses of plaguebearers, hurling daemons aside or else trampling them underfoot. He was determined that nothing and no one would stop him.

He would reach the Gates of Dawn or die trying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Swarm of contagion

Zephacleas stepped back as the Great Unclean One chopped at him with a wedge-shaped blade that was more rust than iron. The Lord-Celestant slid aside, avoiding the blow. The jagged length of metal slammed down, tearing the murk of the fen. The daemon wrenched its blade free and slashed at him, moving quicker than a beast so bulky ought to. Zephacleas turned the blow aside with his hammer and his arm went numb to the elbow. Behind the creature, he could see a group of his warriors, led by Seker Gravewalker, fighting their way towards him. A plan began to form.

He backed away, teeth bared beneath the expressionless mask of his war-helm, and spread his arms. The greater daemon waddled after him, its sword weaving before it like the tongue of a serpent.

‘Come on then. Come and get me,’ he called.

The daemon-sword tore towards him, and he slammed his weapons together, catching the square tip of the blade. For a moment, the tableau held. Then, little by little, Zephacleas was forced back. The greater daemon lurched forward, its greater weight pushing against him, and loomed over him like a farmer struggling with a stubborn root. It exhaled a stinking mist through its gritted, rotting fangs.

‘Aye,’ Zephacleas grunted. ‘I’m not moving...’ His wrists and shoulders began to ache as he struggled to hold his enemy’s blade at bay. ‘Not yet.’

Flies buzzed around his face, darting for his eyes through the slits in his helm. He saw movement behind the daemon and grinned. ‘Now, Gravewalker!’

Lightning seared down to strike the rotguard. Crackling tendrils crawled across its flabby body and squirmed beneath its armour, setting the daemon alight. Its sword fell from its burning fingers to thump into the mud at Zephacleas's feet. Smoke rose from the daemon as it sank down and toppled forward, consumed by fire. Zephacleas lifted his helm and spat on it.

'Smells like a burning midden heap,' he growled.

'It is,' Gravewalker growled.

The Lord-Relictor was, like all of his kind, a fearsome sight – clad in heavy, ornate armour, marked with sigils of power. The ragged hide of a fire wurm flapped from one shoulder plate, while its skull was set into Gravewalker's reliquary standard. The standard's adornments of gilded bone shimmered in the glow of the lightning that crackled about the head of the warhammer he carried in his other hand. His armour was marked by battle, and his weapon was crusted with filth as he swept it out to smash a tottering column of nurlings into its component parts.

A winged shape dropped from the sky to land amongst the plaguebearers. Zephacleas recognized the Prosecutor-Prime of the Hallowed Knights. His shimmering armour was now dulled by dust and grime, and the once-proud crest of his helm had been reduced to a few tattered feathers. His wings spread with savage speed, the crackling feathers slicing through daemonic matter with ease. Any remaining daemons soon fell to the Prosecutor-Prime's hammers. He moved with such lethal grace that even Zephacleas was hard-pressed to follow.

As the last body fell, mangled and smoking, Tegrus stepped forward, eyes blazing.

'Where is Gardus?' he demanded. 'Where is the Steel Soul? I should be at his side.'

'Making for the Gates of Dawn, which is what we should all be doing,' Zephacleas said.

Around them, the battle had reached new levels of ferocity. Astral Templars and Hallowed Knights fought side by side, integrating their battle tactics with an instinctive ease. Slowly, the two hosts became one, and the isolated retinues of the Hallowed Knights swelled as Astral Templars joined them, taking over for their wounded and exhausted brethren.

But it wasn't enough.

One of the remaining rotguard had taken the offensive. Plaguebearers loped in its wake as the greater daemon crashed through a retinue, scattering Stormcasts with every blow from its flail. The remaining brute was lurching back towards the Gates of Dawn, as if in pursuit of Gardus. Which it could very well be, Zephacleas thought. Gardus was a warrior without peer, but even the Steel Soul couldn't fight two greater daemons by himself.

'We have to clear a path and smash our way through. Gardus needs...' Zephacleas trailed off as a new sound pierced the mist-laden air. A sound like a million scratching claws, scraping across the flesh of the world. The mist rising from the fen stirred, as if something moved beneath it. Then the ground erupted, and reality tore with a sound like a million screams, suddenly silenced. Furry shapes, clad in rotting robes, boiled into sight, rising from beneath the

fen, from *somewhere else*, and launched themselves at the Stormcasts with a hideous chittering war cry. One of the creatures lunged for Tegrus, who flattened it with his hammer.

It resembled a rat, clad in a sickly green tattered, hooded habit, such as a holy man might wear. Foul sores and bony growths wracked the creature's stunted body.

'Skaven,' Zephacleas hissed. 'Where in the name of Sigmar did they come from?'

A large shape, bigger than any skaven or mutant beast and more nimble, sprang over the heads of its followers and bisected an unwary Liberator, tearing the Stormcast apart with the aid of two wickedly curved blades. Zephacleas had fought the skaven before, and he recognized the horned, hairy beast for what it was – the skaven were as much the servants of the Ruinous Powers as any blood-worshipper or rot-lover, and they had their own daemonic patrons to prove it. Verminlord, he thought, watching as the beast killed another Stormcast. That was what they were called, though he'd never seen one in the flesh.

He barrelled towards it with a roar, followed closely by Tegrus and Gravewalker. His hammer whistled through the air and crushed a squealing ratman as the verminlord leapt straight up to avoid the blow. Zephacleas twisted as the creature came down behind him. Its blades tore through his cloak and scraped his armour as he slashed blindly at it with his sword. It chittered mockingly as it dodged his blows and struck sparks off his armour in return. Its cloven feet crunched into his back, knocking him onto his face as it flipped backwards and landed in a crouch. Zephacleas rolled onto his back as it leapt for him again, but a hurled hammer caught it in the side and sent it rolling away.

Tegrus swooped towards it, snatching up his hammer as he flew past. Gravewalker helped Zephacleas to his feet. 'Are you hurt, Lord-Celestant?'

'Only my pride. That beast is mine, Tegrus!' he bellowed, shaking a fist at the Prosecutor-Prime. Whether the other Stormcast heard him, he couldn't say, for the Prosecutor was forced to bank and rise upwards as the verminlord retreated to safety amongst the heaving ranks of its followers.

'Kill-kill for Vermalanx!' the verminlord shrieked as it sprang to the top of one of the few remaining standing stones that occupied the soupy ground before the Gates of Dawn. 'Kill the storm-things!' it shrilled, snapping its yellowing fangs in a show of fury. It gesticulated, urging its followers forward, and they went in scuttling waves, darting between the slower plaguebearers and leaping over the frolicking nurlings to get to the Stormcast.

As the ranks of ratmen went on the attack, squealing bands of skaven slaves scrambled up from the hole the others had emerged from, dragging the rickety shapes of catapults and other, more esoteric, war-engines. These weapons were turned on the Stormcast, and the sky was soon marked by poison contrails and whistling chunks of glowing green rock.

'We must destroy those weapons,' Gravewalker said, swatting a frothing ratman in mid-leap. 'They will pick us apart otherwise.'

He and Zephacleas fought back to back for a moment. The Lord-Celestant saw Tegrus flare his wings and the crackling feathers sliced a ratman in two.

‘Aye, and I know just the Stormcast to see to it. Ho, winged one, make yourself useful... Take out those catapults,’ Zephacleas shouted.

He did not see whether his command was obeyed, for a knot of skaven came at him in a rush, and he was forced to defend himself. He heard men scream and die, and the dull roar of their spirits ascending back to Azyr, bound for Reforging. The black clouds above were struck through with hundreds of pinholes made by these flashes of bright light. How many warriors had already returned to the cosmic forges?

Too many, he thought, as he spitted a skaven on his sword. He turned towards the Gates of Dawn and saw the tiny form of Gardus locked in combat with the bloated nightmare at the top. Hurry, my friend, he thought, before this all becomes for naught – hurry, Gardus. Hurry!

CHAPTER NINE

Duel at the Gates of Dawn

Gardus's lungs burned as he climbed, and his legs soon ached, but he refused to slow. He could hear the rumble of one of the greater daemon's bodyguards pursuing him, but he couldn't afford to stop and confront the creature. The Gates of Dawn had to be closed, one way or another. If he could destroy the realmgate, the battle would be won.

As he reached the uppermost landing, the archway began to tremble, the stones grinding against one another. Bolathrax flung his hands out in a throwing motion, and the darkness beyond the arch suddenly congealed and burst. A dozen monstrous flies – each one larger than a man, and bearing a plaguebearer on its back – exploded out from the archway and shot towards the battle, followed by thousands of their smaller kin.

Gardus stared in shock as the plague drones flew past him. He turned to look at the Gates of Dawn. It had become tainted, he knew – it was now nothing more than a blasphemous canker in the skin of reality, leading to Chaos itself. His heart shuddered in his chest as he stared into the swirling darkness. It pulsed with an unholy rhythm, like a thing alive. I have to destroy it, he thought, hesitation turning to determination.

'Look who it is,' Bolathrax said, as he turned to look down at Gardus. 'Come alone, little boil? I suppose your friends are rather busy, eh?' The Great Unclean One laughed.

'One of me is more than enough to handle the likes of you,' Gardus said, whipping his hammer out and around.

The head punched into Bolathrax's belly, tearing the sagging flesh. Gardus

struck again and again, making great wounds in the daemon's body. Bolathrax sagged back, mouth open in a mocking leer.

'Oh, I don't think so, dear me, no,' the Great Unclean One rumbled. 'I simply cannot abide baseless bravado in one so infinitesimal.' The creature lashed out with his chained flail, shattering stone, and the force of the impact nearly knocked Gardus from the top of the steps. 'You are nothing, mortal. A momentary distraction, a gaseous emission, passed and just as soon forgotten,' Bolathrax continued. 'Just like that frail wretch you call a god. God? Pah! I have met gods and warred with them in Grandfather's name. Your lightning-hurler is no god. Merely an old wound, yet to properly heal.' The flail slammed down again, sending a fusillade of stone fragments bouncing off Gardus's armour. 'We shall deal with him directly, have no fear. The Age of Chaos has only just begun, and it shall last unto eternity.'

Gardus ducked aside as the flail rose for another blow and struck at the hand holding it. Twisted bone cracked and Bolathrax jerked his arm back, opening himself up. Gardus struck again, and foul juices burst from the resulting wound to slop upon the stones. He nearly slipped in the excrescence and fought to maintain his footing. Disgusted, he watched as nurglings sprouted from the spilled blood and began to caper and dance as he and Bolathrax swung and parried, jabbed and blocked beneath the arch.

'That... hurt,' Bolathrax hissed, clutching his wounded limb. With a bone-rattling roar, he drew a rusty blade from its rotting sheath on his hip and hacked at Gardus. 'You hurt me, pustule!'

As they fought, Gardus caught sight of the battle still raging below. From this height, he could just make out his fellow Stormcast, fighting for their lives, even as he fought for his. He saw the writhing ranks of skaven as they scurried forward, and his Prosecutors locked in battle with the plague drones.

The filthy standards of the plaguebearers waved above their ranks as they pressed the Stormcast, and he could hear the clangour of the skaven war-bells. Then bursts of light, rose in the sky, and his eyes were drawn upwards to the black clouds and beyond.

Bolathrax's blade slashed out, carving a gouge in Gardus's shoulder plate and nearly knocking him from his feet. The Great Unclean One lurched forward, blade whipping back with deceptive speed, driving Gardus back across the pus-slick stones. Each blow the daemon landed seemed stronger than the last.

He caught another ringing blow on his hammer, and rolled with it, allowing it to carry him out of the daemon's reach. As he scrambled to his feet, he backed towards the archway. Gardus had allowed Bolathrax to harry him, so that the daemon wouldn't realise his true purpose. Now, the time for manoeuvring was done.

'Determined little flea aren't you?' Bolathrax said, pursuing him.

'Much is demanded of those to whom much is given,' Gardus said, breathing heavily. He could feel blood trickling down beneath his armour, and his limbs trembled with growing fatigue. The Stormcasts were stronger than mortal men, but even they could tire, especially when facing a creature such as this that

knew neither weakness nor hesitation.

‘A worthy sentiment,’ the daemon burbled, lifting its blade. ‘A shame it came from the lips of such frail flesh.’

The blade licked out, drawing sparks from Gardus’s sword. The force of the blow nearly ripped it from his hand. Gardus stumbled back.

‘You are weak, as weak as the godling you serve,’ Bolathrax said. ‘You thought to challenge Grandfather in his garden? For shame.’ The daemon shook its blubbery head in mock-disappointment as it hewed at him. He twisted aside, narrowly avoiding the blow. The sword smashed down and lodged in the stones, giving him a moment’s respite.

The garden, Gardus thought. He glanced towards the archway, and the noisome void beyond. He knew what must be done. Death was a certainty, but failure... Gardus smiled, and spared a glance for the clouds above. Somewhere past them, the wheel of stars would continue to turn. He felt at peace, all doubt and fear gone. Sigmar had commanded him to deny the realmgate to the enemy, and so he would. He met Bolathrax’s gaze, and said, ‘Who will be triumphant?’

Bolathrax hesitated, hideous features twisting into a quizzical expression.

‘Only the faithful,’ Gardus said. Then, he spun, quicker than the daemon could follow, and launched himself through the Gates of Dawn, his hammer raised high.

CHAPTER TEN

The march of the wargroves

Zephacleas chopped down on a plaguebearer's horned skull, and looked up as Bolathrax bellowed in rage and what might have been fear. He saw Gardus lunge for the shimmering aperture. Instinctively he flung out a hand as if to catch hold of the other Stormcast and pull him back from the precipice. 'Gardus – No!' he shouted, but too late. Even as the words left his mouth, Gardus vanished.

Bolathrax threw back its horned head and howled. Then, with a single, awkward motion, the Great Unclean One flung itself after the Lord-Celestant of the Steel Souls in pursuit. It smashed into the Gates of Dawn, squeezing through the archway with a convulsive heave. As the greater daemon passed through, the archway shuddered and swayed on its keystones and then, with a thunderous roar, it crumbled into a pile of broken stone. As the stones fell, the binding magics of the Gates of Dawn were released, resulting in an explosion of eldritch force. Those daemons closest to the portal were incinerated by the wave of destructive magics that escaped. Still there were many, many more, and they attacked the remaining Stormcasts with renewed ferocity.

'He has done it,' Gravewalker said. 'The gate is closed. They will receive no more reinforcements.' Lightning speared down at his gesture, obliterating a knot of plaguebearers.

Zephacleas gave a great cry and smashed a charging daemon aside with his hammer. 'Aye, he's done it,' he said hollowly. All across the battlefield, the few Stormcast Eternals still standing redoubled their own efforts. Weariness and wounds were forgotten as Hallowed Knight and Astral Templar alike

plunged recklessly into the ranks of the foe – all thought of discipline lost in a tide of grief and rage.

Gardus had been respected, loved by his men and those who had known him, and Zephacleas had neither the heart nor the inclination to restrain them. Indeed, he joined them fully, bellowing oaths and curses in equal measure, fighting with a wild abandon.

‘If this be our dying day, let’s make it one to remember,’ he roared.

He hooked a plaguebearer’s horn with his hammer and dragged it forward, so that the sigmarite of his helm crunched against its rotting skull. The daemon reeled and Zephacleas chopped it down, splitting the dazed creature from shoulder to groin with one blow.

‘Fight, for Gardus! For Sigmar! And for the Realm Celestial!’

‘Very stirring,’ Gravewalker said. ‘You might have a future as Lord-Celestant yet, Zephacleas.’

The Lord-Relictor had planted his standard and stood before it, swinging his hammer in quick, precise strikes. Frothing skaven fell with every blow.

‘Cease prattling and fight, Gravewalker,’ Zephacleas snarled. A skaven lunged for him, its pox-ridden blade shattering as it struck his side. He drove his elbow into its skull and pinned it to the ground with his foot. His hammer put an end to its struggles. More skaven pressed in, clambering up the locked shields of his Stormcast, their blades digging for eye-slits and their bludgeons crashing down on war-helms.

Gravewalker extended his free hand towards the Liberators before him and began to murmur harshly. A soft blue glow suffused his dark gauntlet and then spread to encompass the Liberators, who straightened as if his words had purged them of all exhaustion and ills.

Zephacleas pulverised a skaven in mid-leap, and turned to block a daemon’s blade as it dug for his vitals. Caught between rabid vermin and daemons, he thought, shoving a plaguebearer back. It wasn’t exactly the way he had imagined he would meet his end.

He looked around, hunting for the verminlord. If he was bound for Reforging, he wanted a fine memory to carry with him into the fire. He caught sight of the creature, perched on one of the obscene obelisks scattered about the fen. It exhorted its followers shrilly, tail lashing in frustration as the remaining Stormcasts refused to break beneath the unceasing onslaught of the plague legions. The Lord-Celestant smiled and clashed his weapons together. He was determined to come to grips with the rat-daemon.

Before he could take a single step, however, the noisome air was split by the winding call of a hunting horn. Then another, and another, until the surrounding woodland rang with the sound of them. The skaven ranks began to boil with panic as something struck their flank. Zephacleas pulverised a robed ratman, and tried to catch a glimpse of the newcomers. There had been no lightning, no thunder – this was not Sigmar’s doing, he knew.

Zephacleas took advantage of the distraction to charge towards the verminlord. Whoever they were, the newcomers’ sudden arrival had given the Stormcasts a chance of survival and he intended to make the most of it. As he

ran, he heard the sound of wood cracking and popping as a plague-claw catapult was torn apart. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw ratmen flung into the air or snatched from sight.

The verminlord hissed in consternation as it cut its eyes towards the dissolving flank of its forces. Zephacleas reached it a step later and drove his hammer into the menhir it was crouched upon, cracking and toppling it over. Screaming, the verminlord leapt from the falling rock, trailing wisps of stinking smoke, and the curved blades in its paws scythed towards the Lord-Celestant.

But Zephacleas swung his sword up and blocked the downward stroke of the curved blades. Before the full weight of the falling rat-daemon could crash into him, he rammed the head of his hammer into its belly, doubling it over and shoving it backwards. The giant beast chopped at him with its blades, scoring his armour again and again as the Lord-Celestant's momentum carried them into the fallen stone. They staggered back and fell. He landed atop the verminlord and swiftly drove his forearm into its hairy throat, keeping it from biting him. It flung him off, and he landed in a rattle of sigmarite.

Quick as hate, the rat-daemon was on him, blades flashing down towards the joints of his armour. With desperate speed he squirmed backwards through the muck of the fen, blocking the blows as he went. Sigmar, he's a fast one, he thought. The rat-daemon leaned in and struck, its curved blade screeching off his war-helm in a shower of greasy sparks. Zephacleas drove his feet up into its gut and sent it flying over his head. It slammed down a few feet away, its fleshless snout digging a trench in the mire.

Zephacleas rolled to his feet, hammer in hand, narrowly avoiding a flailing kick from the verminlord. It scrambled around on all fours, body contorted in a bestial fashion. Its tail lashed out, and the bladed tip tore the weapon from his hands with stinging force. He flung himself aside as the rat-daemon pounced. Sweat coated his face, and his breath rasped in his lungs as he rose to one knee and clawed for the hilt of his runeblade. He jerked back instinctively as the verminlord's bladed tail skittered off his helm, nearly blinding him. Quickly he reached out and caught the ropy length of the tail as it curled back around. In the same motion, he drew his blade and chopped down, severing the twisting, squirming appendage. The rat-daemon squealed in agony and rage.

Zephacleas flung the still-writhing lump of flesh aside, but the verminlord hissed and charged with arms wide. The creature's blades tore one of Zephacleas's pauldrons loose as he lunged forward. Frantically he twisted, bringing his sword through its chest and out of the rat-daemon's back in a gout of brackish blood and foul-smelling steam. Its weight carried it past him and he ripped his weapon free as it fell, body already beginning to dissolve into clumps of mouldering hair and rotting meat. Hairless, blind rats squirmed out of the sagging mass and scampered away, squealing obscenely.

Zephacleas had little time to see to the vermin. The remaining skaven were fleeing with high-pitched squeals of panic, clawing at one another in their haste to escape the enemy. The daemoniac legions, however, showed no indication that they were at all concerned by the rout of their allies. Plaguebearers lurched

towards the thin line of Astral Templars and Hallowed Knights, as nurglings burbled ahead of them in a cackling wave. He tensed and readied himself to meet their charge, only to be knocked to one knee. The ground suddenly erupted in thrashing tendrils of bark and vine, obliterating daemons on all sides.

They were not alone in their fate.

All around him, great roots burst from the ailing soil as quick as bolts from a Judicator's crossbow. The roots rent and throttled daemons wherever they found them, and those creatures that escaped their deadly grasp were torn apart or stamped flat by the vast talons and crashing feet of the thing storming towards them with earth-shaking strides. To Zephacleas it resembled a tree, but one imbued with hateful purpose and ferocity far beyond any creature of common flesh. It towered over the foe, and pummelled them with heavy fists as it stomped past him.

Treelord, he thought, in horrified wonder. He had never seen such a being, but he had heard the tales – all Stormcasts had: stories of marching forests, and the wrath of the deep woods on any who dared threaten the realms of the mistress of the Sylvaneth.

Behind the bark-born giant came a clattering warglade of Sylvaneth dryads, crooning an eerie song of slaughter. With whipping, vicious talons they stabbed and strangled any daemons that had survived the treelord's initial charge. The Lord-Celestant stepped back as a sharp-limbed dryad bounded past him to pounce upon a plaguebearer. He stepped forward, hammer raised, to help the treekin and the dryad whirled with a hiss.

He lowered his weapon and took a step back. The dryad turned back to its prey and stabbed branch-like fingers into the daemon's one bleary eye. The plaguebearer bucked and kicked as the dryad peeled its skull apart.

After a moment, the dryad rose, hissed at Zephacleas again, and then loped away. He watched it go, uncertain as to whether it was advisable to follow. Had Sigmar's messengers found Alarielle? Or were these treekin acting on their own savage initiative?

A moment later, his question was answered. The last daemon fell, pulled apart by two squabbling dryads. The treelord shoved the two creatures aside and moved ponderously towards the remaining Stormcast. Zephacleas rejoined the others; Gravewalker and the Judicator-Prime of the Hallowed Knights followed him.

'Solus,' Zephacleas murmured. 'Good to see you still breathing.'

'For now, at any rate,' Solus said, wiping pestilential muck from the blade of his gladius. His once-pristine armour was caked in mud and grime. 'Gardus?'

'Gone,' Zephacleas said.

Solus nodded, knowing well enough what that meant. 'Most of us are,' he said softly.

Zephacleas tossed a quick glance behind him. There were fewer than three dozen warriors between their hosts who could stand unassisted. The Hallowed Knights and the Astral Templars had paid a heavy toll to take the Ghyrtract Fen. 'The rest of us might soon be joining them,' Solus continued, jerking his

chin towards the approaching treelord.

‘Well, only one way to find out,’ Zephacleas said. He looked at Gravewalker. ‘You know what to do. If they decide we’re not allies, call down the lightning until there isn’t a tree left standing.’

‘And then what?’ Gravewalker asked, leaning against his standard.

‘Whatever you see fit – I’ll be back in the forges by then,’ Zephacleas shot back, over his shoulder, as he strode to meet the treelord. He turned to face the immense being, and studied it closely, looking for any hint of its intentions.

I wish it was you standing here my friend, rather than me, he thought, glancing at the remains of the realmgate. Gardus would have known what to do, that much he was sure of.

He swung his hammer up onto his shoulder and sheathed his sword as the treelord came to a creaking halt before him. The ancient being stared down at him for a long moment, its green eyes glowing strangely. Zephacleas felt a chill as he met its gaze. There was a power there, unlike anything he had yet encountered. Behind it, dryads prowled and hissed, clattering leafy claws. He had never seen such creatures before, and the way they moved set his teeth on edge. They watched him with what he took to be wariness, and suspected that if he said the wrong thing, the dryads would leap on him and seek to tear him limb from limb.

Zephacleas cleared his throat and hesitated. What was the proper way to address a walking tree? How did one talk to a creature like this? Would it even understand him? ‘We... thank you, forest-lord.’

The treelord stared down at him for long moments. ‘*Weee... haaave... coooome,*’ it said, speaking slowly, as if human speech were difficult for it. Its voice sounded like branches creaking in a wind storm. ‘*Weee... have... come... to... aid... thee,*’ it continued.

‘And we thank thee, mighty one. Your arrival was timely, and much appreciated,’ Zephacleas said. The creature’s voice reverberated through him, and he was suddenly glad that he didn’t have to fight this being. He had no doubt he would be victorious, but it would be a close thing.

The treelord was silent for a time. Then, with a rustling groan, it said, ‘*Aaaazyr... There... is... a... way... baaack... to... Azyr.*’ It turned slightly, following his glance towards the realmgate. A sound like leaves swirling in the wind emerged from the treekin’s bark-covered jaws. ‘*Not... thaaat... way.*’ It turned away. ‘*Weee... will... show... you.*’

Slowly, with great earth-shaking strides, the treelord began to depart. Dryads clustered about it like adoring courtiers. Zephacleas shook his head. A being of few words, he thought. He looked at the smashed and mangled remains of the skaven. Then, who needs words?

‘Thank you,’ he called after the treelord. Turning, he spoke to his brothers. ‘Seker, take Solus and two others – see what our... allies have to show us.’ He still wasn’t certain whether the sudden arrival of the warglades meant that Sigmar’s emissaries had been successful in their task, or that the creatures had come on their own initiative, but it hardly mattered. If they knew of a functioning realmgate, one that could provide a route to Azyr, then it would be

the height of foolishness to ignore it. They needed reinforcements badly, and the Hallowed Knights needed their Lord-Castellant now that their Lord-Celestant had fallen.

Zephacleas looked towards the shattered realmgate. Dust and smoke still rose from the fallen stones, marking the final resting place of the Lord-Celestant of the Hallowed Knights. He could not say whether a soul could find its way back to Azyr from within the Realm of Chaos. Somehow, he didn't think so, else what was all of this for? Why bother to wage war, if the Ruinous Powers could be defeated so easily? Gardus would not reappear in the celestine vaults of far off Sigmaron, hale and hearty.

Grymn will not forgive me, he thought. The Lord-Castellant had asked him to keep Gardus safe, and he had failed. It would not matter that Gardus had chosen his fate as a warrior.

Zephacleas sighed and bowed his head. I am sorry, my friend, he thought.

He slowly sank to one knee, planting his hammer and sword in the earth before him. All around him the remaining Stormcasts followed suit, bowing in silence – Hallowed Knights and Astral Templars alike, offering prayers for Gardus, the Steel Soul.

Zephacleas closed his eyes.

Go in peace, Gardus. Fight well. Wherever you are now, I hope that your faith has not deserted you.

EPILOGUE

Only the faithful

Gardus ran.

His breath burned in his lungs. His heart pounded feverishly. Every step was a titanic struggle, and his limbs felt like weights of pure sigmarite. The weapons in his hands were heavier than he had ever known them to be, but he dared not drop them. Not here.

He ran, pushing himself through thigh-deep muck, and sucking ordure. He knew that, were it not for his faith, he would have been dead a hundred times over.

‘Only the faithful,’ he gasped ‘Only the faithful.’ The words escaped his cracked and bleeding lips over and over again, a mantra against madness, a reminder of who he was. The words kept his limbs moving and his abused lungs snatching in the foul air.

He heard a thunderous splash behind him, but did not dare look back. He would have seen nothing, he knew, save the miasmic haze that cloaked this place. In a way, he was thankful for it – no mortal could gaze upon the loathsome horrors of Nurgle’s garden and emerge sane.

Then, perhaps you are already mad, he thought, and choked on a wild laugh. If he started laughing, he would not stop. Around him, he heard the tinny giggles of nurglings and worse things, as they watched him go by. So far, none had sought to bar his path, and why would they? There was no escape from the garden, and he was already marked by one greater than they. ‘Only the faithful,’ he hissed. ‘Only the faithful. Only the faithful.’

Another splash, closer this time. He felt the muck tremble beneath his feet as

his pursuer drew close.

‘Why do you run, little pustule?’ Bolathrax’s deep voice rumbled from the haze somewhere behind him, thick with foul mirth. ‘Can we not promenade the Grandfather’s glopsome gardens together, Gardus?’

He bent his head and forged on, trying to ignore the voice, the stink of this place, all of it, save what lay directly ahead of him. ‘Only the faithful,’ he breathed.

‘There is so much to see, Gardus... so much to learn at Grandfather’s knee, if you but have the wit to listen,’ Bolathrax boomed. ‘Slow your feet, stay awhile...’

His voice faded, and Gardus wondered whether the creature had any more sense of where it was going than he did. Then, perhaps it didn’t care. To Bolathrax, he was but an afternoon’s pleasant diversion.

Gardus thought again of stopping, turning, facing the daemon as a true Stormcast, hammer in hand, but he knew that was simply another sort of madness. He had faced the creature and been found wanting. Here, in the very seat of Nurgle’s power, he stood no chance at all. All he could do was run.

So Gardus ran.

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An extract from *Ghal Maraz*.



The sound of the Dirgehorn hung over everything.

Here, so close to the source, it was almost a physical pressure, beating upon the minds and souls of the Stormcast Eternals who fought their way through the crooked, fungus-slick trees and overgrown fen of Rotwater Blight.

The call of the Dirgehorn was *in* everything, reverberating from every stone and stump, quavering in the fly-blown air like an unending groan. The hideous sound of it rolled on and on, each note slithering into the next. It was a wave of pure discord, sluggish and flat, carrying with it despondency and gloom. It was a constant drone that shivered along on the wings of flies and miasmic breezes, withering trees and cracking rocks. Where it passed, green leaves turned black and the very stones sprouted quivering boils and buboes.

The sylvaneth had been put to flight by its mournful note, clutching at their heads with palsied fingers as their bark-like flesh grew cracked and pale. Those who had made Rotwater Blight their home fled deeper into the forests to escape it, and the land echoed with the sounds of their flight. Dryads shrieked and wailed as they staggered through the swampy forest, adding to the already horrid din, and squealing forest spites filled the air, flickering like fireflies as they hurtled away from the maddening pulse.

But while the treekin fled, the Stormcasts plunged into the teeth of that droning sound, determined to silence it or perish in the attempt. Retinue after retinue, brotherhood by brotherhood, they slogged on, through stinking mire and dying glade, pitting lightning-forged hearts and souls against the blaring call of Nurgle. Liberators and Retributors marched in ordered phalanxes along the mould-spotted trails and were guided by winged Prosecutors, who braved the fly-choked air to steer their kin to firmer ground. The Decimators' weapons glowed with cold fire as they carved a path towards the Dirgehorn's call, hacking through thick vines that sprayed viscous sap and clutching branches that writhed like serpents as they fell.

The Steel Souls, a Warrior Chamber of the Hallowed Knights, led the way. Their panoply of war gleamed silver and rich gold, while their shoulder guards and heavy shields were of deepest regal blue. The Steel Souls were not alone in their march – others shared their burden. Warrior Chambers from the Astral Templars and the Guardians of the Firmament both fought their way through Rotwater Blight alongside the Hallowed Knights, their Decimators joining those of the Steel Souls at the point of the spear.

The Stormcasts had borne the wailing call of the artefact known at the Dirgehorn for many miles and days of marching, braving horrors undreamt of. They had struggled through belching quagmires and hillocks of dead insects. The bubbling morass of the Greenglow Lake stretched to the west of the armoured host, splitting the land like an open wound. To the east, the thick forests of the Blight rose wild and forbidding. The sky overhead was the colour of an infected wound, and a choking wind blew from the east.

Everywhere Lord-Castellant Lorrus Grymn of the Hallowed Knights looked, it was as if the land was dying. He strode alongside the column, accompanied by the furry, feathered shape of his loyal gryph-hound, Tallon. His heavy halberd lay across one broad shoulder, and he kept a firm grip on its haft, ready to swing it into position at a moment's notice. He held his warding lantern high, casting its light across the ranks of warriors as they marched. The fortifying glow burned off the layers of filth that caked the armour of his brethren, returning it to a glorious lustre, as was fitting.

The Hallowed Knights had been the fourth Stormhost to be founded, the ranks of their Warrior Chambers filled with the faithful of the Mortal Realms. Their only commonality was that each had called upon Sigmar's name in battle and had been heard, and that each had shed his mortal flesh in the name of a righteous cause. The Steel Souls were the best of them, tried and tested and found worthy in the fires of war. But not without cost, Grymn thought.

Yes, the Steel Souls had paid a heavy price. Lord-Celestant Gardus, the one who had given them their name, was gone, lost through the realmgate known as the Gates of Dawn, leaving his warriors bereft of his leadership. It had been Gardus who had led the first strike into the wilds of Ghyran so that a permanent path to Azyr might be opened. It had been Gardus who had been sent to ensure that Grymn and the rest of his Warrior Chamber might descend upon the Jade Kingdoms to reinforce their brothers. It was not to be, however.

Despite the aid of the Astral Templars, and the last minute intervention of the warglades of the mysterious sylvaneth, Gardus had been forced to destroy the realmgate and had perished in the act. Damn you, Gardus, Grymn thought, not for the first time. It was even as the Lord-Relictor of the Steel Souls, Morbus Stormwarden, had said. The sage had seen Gardus' fall in his dreams and had come to Grymn with his concerns. But too late.

And now Gardus was gone. The best of them. The one who had been, up to this point, Grymn's only equal on or off the field – a man with whom he had been proud to stand shoulder to shoulder against the foes of Sigmar.

The Steel Soul had not died as a Stormcast ought and returned to the great forges of Sigmaron, there to be remade by the hands of the God-King himself. Instead, Gardus had thrown himself into the Realm of Chaos, locked in combat with a greater daemon. No soul returned from those hell-realms.

Not even one made of steel, Grymn thought. Angry now, he turned his thoughts to the present. They had a duty to fulfil and they would meet it no matter the cost. The Dirgehorn would be silenced. Of this Grymn was confident. But he knew that while the artefact had sorely afflicted the inhabitants of these wooded realms, it was not the sole cause of their pain.

Flies droned and swamp-sludge bubbled as rotted boughs creaked in the unnatural pall that marked the places where Nurgle's influence had eclipsed that of the Realm of Life's rightful ruler. Chain-throttled oaks moaned wordlessly about them and forest spirits struggled helplessly in the mires of Nurgle's making. The Stormcasts who fought across the ever-shifting landscape of Ghyran were doing what they could to free the Jade Kingdoms from the clutches of the Plague Lord, but they could not do it alone. Sigmar had sent representatives to find the Lady Alarielle, in her seclusion, and re-establish old ties, but as far as Gryn timer knew they had all returned to Azyr empty-handed.

Alarielle had, like Sigmar himself, existed for untold aeons, and there were murals in Sigmaron dedicated to her. The largest and greatest of these showed Sigmar waking the Radiant Queen from her centuries of slumber, and the two throwing back the forces of darkness together. Once, she had been the God-King's ally. Once... but not for many years, since the powers of ruin had swept through the Mortal Realms and the great celestine Gates of Azyr had slammed shut, sealing the Realm of Heavens off from the rest of the Eight Realms. Now those gates were open once more, and Sigmar had stretched forth his hand to old and new allies alike, so that together they might throw off the chains of monstrous tyranny.

A good dream, if as yet unproven, Gryn timer thought.

'Lord-Castellant!'

Gryn timer looked up as the silver swooping form of Tegrus of the Sainted Eye, Prosecutor-Prime of the Steel Souls, gestured towards the shore of the lake. Gryn timer cursed as he saw several Stormcasts stumble towards the dark waters.

'Tallon – go!' he said urgently as he hurried towards the warriors. The gryph-hound chirped and bounded away. The animal slid between the Stormcasts, snapping and shrieking, stopping them in their tracks long enough for Gryn timer to reach them. 'Back, you fools, get away from the water,' he roared.

As he caught hold of a stumbling Stormcast's shoulder and pulled the warrior back, the still waters of the lake erupted in a storm of lashing, mouth-studded tendrils. Several of the Stormcasts were snatched up before they even had time to cry out. Tallon flung himself upon one tendril, severing it with his beak and freeing the warrior it held.

'Back,' Gryn timer roared again, hooking his lantern on the blade of his halberd and extending it out over the water. The light of the warding lantern shone across the frothing lake, and the tendrils retreated as if burned. In the darkness, something wailed like a damned soul, and Gryn timer heard heavy bodies flopping and thrashing.

'Tegrus,' Gryn timer called out to the Prosecutor swooping overhead. 'Drive these beasts back into the depths!'

Overhead, Tegrus led his winged warriors out over the water. They hurled their celestial hammers at the vast shapes that dwelled beneath the murk. The monsters plunged deeper into the waters to avoid the barrage, leaving behind only a sour smell and the shooting blue light of those warriors they had

managed to drown before Grymn had stymied them.

‘Away,’ he snarled, gesturing back towards the path. ‘Get back. Move!’

Grymn turned his attentions to the warrior he’d saved. The Liberator stumbled against him as they moved away from the water, half-torpid, weapon and shield dangling from his grip. He was an Astral Templar, clad in amethyst and gold.

‘Awaken,’ Grymn said, shaking the Liberator. The warrior slumped, and Grymn grunted as he caught him. ‘Awaken, I say – do not give in. Heed me!’ He set his halberd so that the light of his lantern caught the warrior full. As the light bathed him, the Liberator struggled upright, gaining strength from the healing glow of the warding lantern.

‘I just... I just wanted to clean this filth from my war-plate,’ the Stormcast said, his voice slurred. ‘To wash myself clean of the taint of this place. To drink...’

‘Yes, brother, there is no shame in that,’ Grymn said urgently. ‘But this place devours warriors as surely as any beast. You must keep to the road. Stay in the light.’

Some among the Stormhost were beginning to succumb to the waking nightmare of this realm, their spirits sapped by the relentless blare of the Dirgehorn and the miasma that clung to the land around them. Their war mantras were drowned out by the growing cacophony of the horn, denying them succour, and every day saw more warriors sent back to Azyr in a blaze of blue light. Rotwater Blight was as much their enemy as the servants of Nurgle.

‘I can... I can hear it, Lord-Castellant,’ the Liberator said. ‘It’s... burrowing into my mind... my soul.’ He reached up as if to tear his helmet off, and fumbled with his weapon and shield, nearly dropping them. ‘It’s echoing in my head!’

Grymn seized the warrior’s hands.

‘Stop,’ he snarled, shouting to be heard over the shriek of the Dirgehorn. ‘You are Stormcast. Remember what that means, brother.’

‘I have him, Lord-Castellant,’ a voice said.

Grymn looked up and saw the heavy shape of the Lord-Celestant of the Astral Templars. Zephacleas had been a big man, even before his Reforging, and he loomed over Grymn now, his amethyst armour scorched in places and scored with the marks of claws and fangs. Now he caught the Liberator by the shoulders.

‘Arcos, isn’t it? You stood with me at the Lake of Screaming Reeds, when that toad dragon hurled itself at the shieldwall of our brothers. I nearly broke my blade on its blubbery hide and you were there, shielding me from its vile spew. And at the Grove of Blighted Lanterns, did you not raise your hammer in defence of your brothers, as the jabberslythes screamed? Stand tall, Arcos. We are the Beast-Bane, slayers of the Black Bull of Nordrath, and we shall not allow a mere winding tune to break us.’

The warrior nodded wearily and allowed his Lord-Celestant to urge him back towards his brethren. Zephacleas watched him go, and then turned to Grymn.

‘Death is a high price, but not without its allure,’ the Lord-Celestant said,

watching the lake.

‘Is your resolve so fragile, Beast-Bane?’ Grymn asked harshly.

‘No, but this hellish landscape has worn us down, Grymn. For some among our warriors, to return in failure is beginning to seem preferable to slogging through this foulness for even a single hour more,’ Zephacleas growled. ‘Even the air attacks us.’ He clutched at his head for a moment. ‘And that blasted wail never ends! It gnaws at us every moment, digging into us. I can’t even hear myself think.’

‘We must press on. We are close,’ Grymn said. ‘The horn grows louder, and we are assailed more frequently. We are close, Zephacleas. And only the faithful shall prevail.’ He thumped the other Stormcast on the shoulder. ‘Much is demanded...’

‘...of those to whom much has been given,’ Zephacleas finished. ‘Gardus says – said – that often.’ He shook his head. ‘I wish that he were here.’

‘As do I,’ Grymn said. ‘But we must–’ A cry from above interrupted him. He looked up, saw the Prosecutors circling a high, sloping hill that overlooked the lake and said, ‘Tegrus has found something.’

‘The enemy?’ Zephacleas asked.

‘Better, I think,’ Grymn said. ‘Come, we must alert the others.’

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