

WARHAMMERTM AGE OF SIGMAR



THE GATES OF AZYR

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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.



CHAPTER ONE

Vandus, they called him.

It was a name of omen, one that carried the favour of the Golden City. He would be the first, they said. None would set foot in the Mortal Realms ahead of him, though the bringers of vengeance would be close behind. For a long time he had not understood what they meant, for they had had to school him as a child, teaching him to remember what he had once known by instinct.

Now, with the passing of aeons, he understood. The empty years were coming to a close, and the designs of the God-King were at last reaching ripeness. He was the instrument, just one of the limitless host, but the brightest star amid the constellations of salvaged glory.

For so long now, it had just been Azyr, and all else was lost in the fog of

time.

But there had been other worlds. Now, very soon, there would be so again.

They were gazing up at him – ten thousand, arrayed in gold and cobalt and ranked in the shining orders of battle. The walls around them soared like cliffs, each one gilt, reflective and marked with the sigils of the Reforged.

Vandus stood under a dome of sapphire. A long flight of marble stairs led down to the hall's crystal floor. Above them all, engraved in purest sigmarite, was the sign of the Twin-Tailed Comet, radiant amid its coronet of silver.

This thing had never been done. In a thousand years of toil and counsel, in all the ancient wars that the God-King had conducted across realms now lost, it had never been done. Even the wisdom of gods was not infinite, and so all the long ages of labour might yet come to naught.

He lifted his hand, turning the sigmarite gauntlet before him, marvelling at the manner in which the armour encased his flesh. Every piece of it was perfect, pored over by the artificers before being released for the service of the Eternals. He clenched the golden fingers into a fist and held it high above him.

Below him, far below, his Stormhost, the Hammers of Sigmar, raised a massed roar. As one, they clenched their own right hands.

Hammerhand!

Vandus revelled in the gesture of fealty. The vaults shook from their voices, each one greater and deeper than that of a mortal man. They looked magnificent. They looked *invincible*.

'This night!' Vandus cried, and his words swelled and filled the gulf before him. 'This night, we open gates long closed.'

The host fell silent, rapt, knowing these would be the last words they heard before the void took them.

'This night, we smite the savage,' Vandus said. 'This night, we smite the daemon. We cross the infinite. We dare to return to the realms of our birthright.'

Ten thousand golden helms looked up at him. Ten thousand fists gripped the shafts of warhammers. The Liberators, the greater part of the mighty host, stood proudly, arrayed in glistening phalanxes of gold. All of them had once been mortal, just as he had been, though now they bore the aspect of fiery angels, their mortality transmuted into majesty.

'The design of eternity brought you here,' Vandus said, sweeping his gaze across the sea of expectant faces. 'Fate gave you your gifts, and the Forge has augmented them a hundredfold. You are the foremost servants of the God-King now. You are his blades, you are his shields, you are his vengeance.'

Amid the Liberators stood the Retributors, even more imposing than their comrades, carrying huge two-handed lightning hammers across their immense breastplates. They were the solid heart of the army, the champions about which the Legion was ordered. Slivers of pale lightning sparked from their heavy plate, residue of a fearsome, overspilling power within.

'You are the finest, the strongest, the purest,' Vandus told them. 'In pain were you made, but in glory will you live. No purpose have you now but to

bring terror to the enemy, to lay waste to his lands and to shatter his fortresses.'

On either flank stood the Prosecutors, the most severely elegant of all the warriors there assembled. Their armour was sheathed in a sheer carapace of swan-white wings, each blade of which dazzled in its purity. Their spirits were the most extreme, the wildest and the proudest. If they were a little less steadfast than their brothers, they compensated with the exuberance of flight, and in their gauntlets they kindled the raw essence of the comet itself.

'We are sent now into the heart of nightmares,' said Vandus. 'For ages uncounted this canker has festered across the face of the universe, extinguishing hope from lands that were once claimed by our people. The war will be long. There will be suffering and there will be anguish, for we are set against the very legions of hell.'

Besides Vandus stood the great celestial dracoth, Calanax, his armoured hide glinting from the golden light of the hall. Wisps of hot smoke curled from his nostrils and his long talons raked across the crystal floor. Vandus had been the first to tame such a beast, though now others of his breed were in the service of the Stormhost. The dracoth was the descendant of far older mythic creatures, and retained a shard of their immortal power.

'But they know us not. They believe all contests to be over, and that nothing remains but plunder and petty cruelties. In secrecy have we been created, and our coming shall be to them as the ending of worlds. With our victory, the torment will cease. The slaughter will cease. We will cleanse these worlds with fire, and consign the usurpers back to the pits that spewed them forth.'

As he spoke, Vandus felt the gaze of his fellow captains on him. Anactos Skyhelm was there, lean and proud, master of the winged host. Lord-Relictor Ionus, the one they called the Cryptborn, remained in the margins, though his dry presence could be sensed, watching, deliberating. If the lightning-bridge was secured, those two would be at the forefront, marshalling the vanguard to take the great prize – the Gate of Azyr, locked for near-eternity and only unbarred by the release of magics from both sides of the barrier.

And yet, for all their authority, only one soul had the honour of leading the charge. The God-King himself had bestowed the title on him – Lord-Celestant, First of the Stormhost.

Now Vandus raised both hands, one holding Heldensen aloft, the other still clenched tight. His weapon's shaft caught the light of crystal lamps and blazed as if doused in captured moonlight.

'Let the years of shame be forgotten!' he declared. 'The fallen shall be avenged and the Dark Gods themselves shall feel our fury!'

The glittering host below clashed their hammers against their heavy shields before raising the weapons in salute and acclamation. The entire vault filled with the fervour of voices raised in anticipation.

'Reconquest begins, my brothers!' Vandus roared, feeding on their raw potency. 'This night, we bring them war!'

A great rumble ran across the floor of the hall, as if the earth were moving. Arcs of lightning began to snap and writhe across the golden walls of the vault. The sigil of the comet blazed diamond-clear, throwing beams of coruscation

across the hall's immense length. Something was building to a crescendo, something *massive*.

'This night,' Vandus cried, glorying in the full release of the divine magic, '*we ride the storm!*'

A huge *boom* shook the chamber, running up from the foundations to the high roof. The howl of thunder-born wind raced through the hall, igniting into white flame as it reached the full pitch of extremity. The golden ambient light exploded, bursting out from every part of the walls, the arched roof and the glistening floors, and lightning came with it in beams as thick as a man's arm.

There was a second rolling *boom* and the space between the walls was lost in a maelstrom of argent fire. The world reeled, as if thrown from its foundations, and the sharp tang of ozone flared, bitter and pungent.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the lightning snapped out, the brilliance faded and the winds guttered away. The hall remained, suffused with a glimmering haze of gold, still lit bright by the light of the comet-sigil.

Only now the marble floor was empty. No voices remained, no warriors stood in ranks – nothing but the receding echoes of the colossal detonation lingered, curled like smoke across the walls of gold.



CHAPTER TWO

There was nothing to do but run. Even that was pointless in the end, since you would always be caught, but the instinct remained – the primal desire to keep living, to keep going, to spite the gods a little more before the blood-sun set.

Her tribe had been ravaged since the last series of raids and now numbered less than forty souls. The old had been the first to go – too slow to keep moving, caught quickly, too tough to eat, their age-withered bodies cruelly toyed with before the scream-filled end. Then they had taken the infants, one by one, dooming the tribe to extinction. Those that remained were the ones who had been fast enough, who were not crippled by the poisons that ran deep in the earth or who were not carrying wounds that made them too lame or too weak.

Now even those last survivors were tiring. There was only so much the body could take, and a diet of gleanings from parched fields could not sustain their flight for long.

It was a shame. She had always been told that their bloodline was long, stretching back to a mythical time before the endless night. She had never quite believed the boasts, but now it hardly mattered – they would all be snuffed out at last, even if the fire-side legends were true.

Kalja squatted in the dirt, panting, pressing her palms into the dank soil, trying to recover. The others knelt or slumped close by – Svan, Renek, Elenar, the rest. Kalja pulled in deep breaths, feeling the ash coat her throat, knowing it would make her choke.

‘How close?’ asked Elenar, her dirt-crusted face white with fear.

Renek shrugged, beaten. ‘Does it matter?’

‘They are bloodreavers,’ said Kalja, breathing heavily. ‘They are no faster than us. We can make the delta.’

‘They eat the flesh of their living victims,’ said Svan dryly. ‘It fuels them. So yes, they are faster.’

Kalja pulled herself to her feet. She was emaciated, her cheeks hollow and her skin a pale grey. Her long hair hung in clumps around her face, and she carried a rough, blunt knife at her belt. Old wounds, the product of a lifetime spent running or fighting, crisscrossed her calloused skin.

Ahead of them, to the north, the dusk sky was lowering into a rust red. Flickers of vermillion lightning jumped along the distant horizon, broken by the vast silhouettes of old skull-towers. The earth in all directions was blasted and open, split into great plates and riven by dry gulches. What little vegetation survived in the wastes was black and gnarled, clinging to survival with the same grim determination that the mortals did.

Kalja sniffed. The wind tasted as it always did – hot ashes, the lingering sweetness of mouldering carcasses – but there was something else there too.

‘I can smell water,’ she said, turning back to the others.

Svan laughed hoarsely. It would not be water worth drinking – the streams of the Igneous Delta were spoiled, and dribbled in their winding courses like hissing lines of mercury. That was why none lived there, not even the most desperate of prey-humans. Its twisting mazes might hide them, but only for a while.

‘We will not last the night,’ said Renek, his shoulders bunched miserably.

Kalja spat on the ground. ‘Then stay. They will feed on your eyes while you beg them to kill you.’

A low rumble of thunder ran along the earth. A long way to the south, the braying of war-horns could be heard. Somewhere out on the charred plains the endless armies were marching again, scouring for skulls. They would not venture this far north – there was nothing here but gnawed bones, the remains picked clean by scavengers centuries ago. Bloodreavers, though, would run down anything.

‘We have to go,’ said Kalja, brushing herself down and getting ready to run again. Her legs ached and her stomach growled from emptiness, but there was

no alternative.

They broke into a run, all of them, Kalja and Svan at the forefront, limping and staggering north to where the delta awaited, staying alive for just a few more heartbeats amid a world that wished for nothing but to end them in agony.

Rakh chewed, savouring the tastes, the smells, the lumps of juice that rolled down his chin and trailed over his jerkin. He closed his eyes and drifted off into something like pleasure. He could feel the hot fluid flow into him, lending him divine strength. He licked his lips, and the metallic taste was sharp.

'Enough,' barked Sleikh, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Long trails of blood smeared across his scar-latticed jaw. 'More of them to come.'

Rakh scowled and grabbed for more meat. It might have been his imagination, but did the corpse twitch just a little? Always best to begin the feasting while they were still alive. The screams improved the taste, as did the tears.

You had to laugh when the tears came. All the others did. Fail to show enough enthusiasm, and when the famine-times arrived you might find yourself stretched over the knife-block yourself.

All around the gore-splattered campfire, Rakh's fellow bloodreavers were clambering heavily to their feet. Night was creeping in, making the long thorn-shadows slither over the earth. The temperature was dropping fast, and he felt the bite of it under his armour-plates.

There were fifty of them – a big hunting pack. They would need to capture all the mortals they had spied if they were going to eat enough to stay lean and supple, and that did not account for those that would escape the feast and be permitted to join them.

The bloodreavers were not witless savages, and for those who merited it there was always a way to survive. The price was cheap – join in the meat-orgies, learn to savour the quivering fats of a human's body, suck them up and roll them around your mouth while you spat out praises to the Lord of Blood.

Rakh had made that choice, a long time ago now. Every so often he remembered the first nights, when all he had wanted to do was retch, when he had rocked himself to fitful sleep, keeping his horror hidden lest it make him the next prey.

These days, he grinned to think of it. All had changed now. He had learned to relish the textures, the crisping skin pulled from the muscle, the polyps, the sleek venous organs. He kept chewing, tonguing the flesh around his iron-capped teeth.

Sleikh raised himself up, sniffing the night air. The pack-leader's red eyes stared, peering into blackness. Then he hissed, and a smile twisted his wolfish features.

'They stink yet,' he whispered, reaching for his bloody axe handle. 'This way.'

The others crept closer, fingering their hooks, their axes, their chains. The weapons were poorly made, for who but the warlords of the Brass Keeps could

command forges to give them what they needed? The bloodreavers were the scavengers, the gory-mawed beasts that prowled the flickering edges of campfires. They used whatever they could loot or fashion from the wilds, and that was enough to break flesh and flense muscle.

‘Follow,’ ordered Sleikh, loping out into the night.

Rakh darted after him, as did all the others, and the hunt resumed again.

Aqshy, the realm was called, though none but the most powerful of its denizens would ever have known that. Here, on the Brimstone Peninsula, the bones of the land were forged in fire, and under its rocky mantle ancient furnaces boiled and churned. Before the ages of ruin it had been teeming with life, lent vigour by the magical currents coursing over its mountains and gorges.

Those years were forgotten now, scraped clean from history by the ceaseless procession of damned armies. The cities of the realm were gone, the kingdoms were gone, overrun and turned into sucking quagmires of spilled ichor. New citadels took their place – temples to violence, clad in bronze and bound in brass, housing thrones of iron around which the blood boiled in runnels. The killing continued even when all possible dreams of conquest had been satiated, goaded on by the whims of cruel gods. The number of the dead had been incalculable, but in truth they had been the fortunate ones, for they had not lived to see what reality was capable of being turned into.

All that remained in Aqshy were the Lords of Ruin – mortal champions of the Pantheon, striding across the earth they had despoiled in the hope of finding something fresh to kill. With the demise of any true resistance, they turned on their own kind, launching swollen hordes at one another in a perpetual orgy of slaughter. The only ones who could survive for long in such a crucible were the Gifted – those blessed with the trappings of daemonic power or possessors of fell weapons. Dark magic swirled and simmered across the bone-strewn wastelands, fuelling the cycle of murder further, provoking the feuds that kept the anvils ringing and the forges blazing.

For the less exalted, all that remained was a kind of half-life, forever clinging to the edge of oblivion. Children were still born, and so the progeny of mankind lingered, but they were never more than prey, slaves or fodder, preyed on by the chosen of the victorious Dark Gods. To stay alive for more than two decades was considered fortunate, to make it to three was exceptional. After that, the rigours of life in hell were too destructive. There were no scholars, no princes, no wizards and no priests – just a desperate, scrabbling, grasping fight to draw one more breath, gain one more heartbeat and see one more blighted sunrise before the tides of killing caught up.

Kalja’s tribe, for all the stories they told themselves, were no different to the thousands whose light had endured for a brief time before being stamped out. They ran with desperation but with no hope. Only the manner of death remained an ambition – to meet annihilation cleanly, with little agony; that was the prize.

Kalja pushed the pace, feeling her breathing grow ragged but knowing that a

single slip now would end it. Svan kept up with her, the rest straggling behind, stumbling as the land became lumpy and twisted around them.

From the wider Brimstone Peninsula, they had reached the southern edges of the Igneous Delta and the earth was breaking beneath their feet. Fissures opened up, some clogged and dry, others glowing from the exposed fires below. Plumes of sulphurous steam roiled across the crusted landscape, breaking into slivers across the thorny clusters of iron-limbed plants.

It was hard to make any progress in that terrain – they would stumble down a wide gully only to see it end in a rubble-strewn cliff, or they would race across flattened plates before finding themselves surrounded by pools of boiling lava. Everything stank, and the heat dragged at them, making it a torture just to breathe.

‘This place will kill us quicker than they will,’ gasped Renek, limping badly from a gash on his left thigh – the thorn-clusters were vicious.

‘Pray that you are right,’ muttered Kalja, charging onwards, not allowing the weak to slow her. It was just possible the bloodreavers would settle for the stragglers that night, so it paid to keep to the front of the herd.

They reached a long, twisting defile. The further they went, the higher the banks on either side reared up. Soon the edges were too steep to climb easily, and lined with more thorns, and so the only course was to keep going down to the defile’s end and hope that it was not just another blocked route.

As they went, they heard the *thud-thud* of footfalls behind them. The narrow gorge amplified the sounds of the pursuers, reminding the tribe just how meagre the gap between hunter and hunted had become. Silently, grimly, the fugitives kept their heads down, trying to ignore the burning in their lungs, and kept going.

Kalja was the first to reach the valley’s end. Its two walls narrowed into a slender gorge, and for a moment she thought they would come together completely. In the end, they remained apart by little more than the width of a man’s waist, revealing a tiny gap through which she could push herself.

She squeezed between the two sides, feeling the hot stone snag at her ragged clothes. The cleft ran for more than twenty yards, and with every step the rock underfoot grew hotter and more oily. Soon Kalja was enclosed in almost complete darkness, and the press of solid rock around her made her want to scream.

Then, abruptly, the passage opened out again. She emerged onto a narrow shelf of rock, and the red sky arched away above her, mottled with gravid cloudbanks and scored with lines of lightning.

She pressed her back to the cliff-face behind her and looked out. The rest of her tribe pushed their way free of the cleft’s mouth and lined up along the shelf.

A broken scree-slope fell away before them, dropping steeply down to the edge of a plain. Obsidian-black terrain stretched off beyond that, marked by sinewy trails of fire and barred by the rolling fumes of sulphur-geysers. In the far north, the darkening horizon was studded with mountainous piles of skulls, blackened by flame. In between the pyramids of bone stood the remains of

ancient ramparts, all shattered, standing like ribcages against the turbulent skies. Iron scaffolds studded the ruins, some still bearing broken skeletons on their spiked wheels, and rusting gibbets swung in a growing storm-wind.

The stonework ran for miles, scarring the land as far as the eye could see. Once, the place must have been vast, a whole empire of great buildings. Amid the few edifices that remained, one stood out, derelict, isolated among the wreckage at its feet.

Two massive piers of stone thrust up out of the magma-scored earth, buttressed by statues in the shape of men bending under the burden. Pillars twisted atop those piers, each one carved with runes and bearing more images – dragons, serpents, icons of comets and twisting astrological symbols. The pillars combined into two enormous flanks of a single arch, which terminated in a keystone some three hundred feet above the level of the plain. Winding stone stairs ran up either side of the curves, twisting in and out of old turrets and watchtowers. Black-veined ivy cascaded down its flanks, cracking the stone and exposing glowing threads of magma within, but still the bulk of the structure remained intact, dwarfing all else, resplendent even in its degradation.

Kalja stared at it. An entire army, thousands strong, could have marched beneath that archway, and yet it led nowhere. No road had been built across the blasted delta, and the void under the keystone's curve gaped emptily, revealing more ruins on the far side.

The others picked their way down the slope towards the plain. Kalja snapped out of her reverie and followed them down. Less than thirty of them had made it, though if those at the rear had been taken, it might buy the rest of them a little more time.

'What is it?' whispered Kalja as they hurried down towards the arch's sweeping shadow.

'I care not,' said Svan, not even looking up at it. 'It cannot hide us, it cannot save us. Stop staring.'

But Kalja could not stop. Her eyes were drawn inexorably upward – to the towers, the sculpted stone, the strange runes that she could not read but which somehow felt meaningful. As she looked on, the air under the arch flexed as if it were liquid and had bulged from the far side. She halted.

Nothing. Hot ash-wind blew through the aperture, unchanged by the stone it passed under, still as foul as it ever was. Another growl of thunder shook the skies, and the clouds raced above them, piling higher with every breath she took. It would be a big storm. Perhaps the rain would foul their tracks and put the bloodreavers off their scent.

A scream pierced the dark, high and terrified. The sound came from the mouth of the cleft, and echoed strangely as it surged out into the open. Kalja knew the owner of that voice, and shivered to think of the torment that could make him cry like that. She shook herself down, forgetting about the ruins and concentrating on the old obsession – to take just one more breath, to live to see just one more dawn.

Then she started to run, hunted again, just as she always had been.



CHAPTER THREE

The bloodreavers fell into their habitual running pattern – spread out, fanning across the landscape like dogs on a scent. Those on the edges had the sharpest eyes and the keenest nostrils. They could detect mortal fear from a half-league distant, and ran it down remorselessly until it lay shrieking under their fingernails.

Rakh began to pant, falling into the rhythm of the chase. His blade – a pocked cleaver with a human bone handle – swung in his left hand, still wet with saliva and crimson. The others loped hungrily, swinging their blades, making their armour-plates rattle. The musk of blood-frenzy thickened on the hot air.

‘Blood for the Blood God’, he murmured to himself, slurring the words

through his damp lips. Where had he learned them? Why did every mouth utter them, from the Realm's spectral north to its parched south? No priest had ever taught them, for there were no priests in the wilds – the chant came naturally, willingly, as if the very air whispered it to him in his dreams.

They raced down a long, wide depression, veering around outcrops of the black-edged thorn bushes. Ahead of them yawned the mouth of a defile, the twin walls of which reared up steeper as the channel narrowed to a distant point. The prey had gone down that way – even Rakh could smell that.

'Faster,' snapped Sleikh, bounding over the piles of rubble, his axe-head swinging.

Beyond the pack-leader, out in the dark, something moved. Rakh was still running, so barely saw it, but he wasn't delirious – a shadow had detached from the base of the rocks, then vanished.

He craned his neck from side to side, struggling to keep pace with the runners around him. What had it been? Were there more of them? Had the mortals hunkered down, hoping they would pass them?

But Sleikh was sprinting now, making for the gorge's narrow throat. The oldest and deadliest members of the pack went with him, their bodies made spare and strong by a lifetime of gorging on raw meat. None of them had noticed the movement – they were consumed with the blood-scent now, locked on to the spoor of fear and exertion.

Rakh almost cried out a warning, but the pack-hierarchy clamped his lips shut – break the communal blood-scent and the rest would turn on him quickly, ripping into his sinews with just as much enthusiasm as they would prey.

And that was what doomed them. They had almost reached the mouth of the narrow cleft when the first of the war-horns blared out, cracking the skies and making Rakh's ears ring. He staggered, half-losing his footing.

Sleikh reacted immediately, spewing out curses, swinging his head to and fro, trying to see where the sound came from.

More war-horns sounded, this time from the other side of the valley, from up ahead, from behind, from everywhere. Rakh spun around, crouching defensively, spitting on his cleaver-blade to slicken it and trying to gauge where the enemy was.

The wait was scarcely more than a heartbeat. They burst from the high sides of the defile, spilling down from the tattered edges like rats spewed from a pipe. Rakh saw the sheen on their armour – scab-red, rimmed with black iron – and cursed his fate.

A warband, then, a Lord's retinue – better armed, brutally trained, more than a match for them.

'Gut them!' Sleikh was shouting, pointlessly, already racing to where the first of the red-armoured warriors was careering down the steep slope.

More warriors were coming up from the south now, hemming them in. They must have followed the bloodreavers for a long time, waiting for nightfall, confident that their prey would be so consumed by meat-lust that they would grow careless. They had been right.

Rakh stayed close to Sleikh, his palms sweaty. The bulk of the bloodreavers

came with him, contracting into a knot, turning outwards, keeping their faces to the enemy.

The first of the warband's fighters came in hard, hurtling from a breakneck descent, their mouths frothing with foam. A burly axeman in furs and black-rimmed plate crashed into Sleikh, barrelling him backwards. The rest slammed into contact, roaring from raw throats, hurling blades in spine-cracking lunges. They were massive, all of them – thick-limbed, clad in iron and steel and bearing axes with icons of ruin scratched into the blunt metal.

Rakh ducked under a wild swipe, then thrust up with his cleaver. The ragged edge bit slickly into muscle, and the warrior before him grunted in pain. Rakh twisted his cleaver and black blood bubbled up from his victim's mouth. He thrust the gurgling corpse aside, ready to meet the challenge of the next one.

Blood warriors, thought Rakh, ducking out of the path of another short-handled axe. *What are they doing here? This is the waste – nothing for them but ashes.*

The press of bodies around him doubled as more warriors crashed into the fray, slashing, kicking and punching with their spiked weapons. Gore flew around them in whirling slicks, thrown wildly by the hurtling axe-heads. Rakh ducked again, too slowly, and was struck on his helm with a glancing blow. It made his ears ring and he scrambled into the shadow of a bloodreaver, avoiding death by offering up his pack-mate.

More than a quarter of the rest were already dead, gutted like fish and gasping bloodily on the rocks. Sleikh had kept the pack together and was fighting hard, trying to reach the narrow cleft where they might at least have a rock wall at their back, but Rakh could see that it was already hopeless – they were surrounded, caught in the open and badly outnumbered. This would all be over very quickly.

He tried to break out, shoving the iron shield of a blood warrior aside and lashing out with his cleaver to clear a path. He managed to down another one – slicing through the creature's upper thigh, thrusting upward, head-butting him savagely across his exposed face – but he was stumbling amid the churning bodies, desperate to break free.

Somehow, driven by that desperation, aided by the flickering shadows, the screams, the darkness, he shoved himself into a narrow space between moving bodies, and saw the edge of the melee before him. Spitting thanks to the Blood God, he went for the gap, lunging out and slipping on the blood-wet rock.

He almost made it. Too late, though, he saw just why a space had opened up, large enough for him to slip into. Rakh skidded to a halt, falling back on to his withers, his ravaged jaw falling open.

The figure looming before him was gigantic. He towered over the blood warriors just as they towered over Sleikh's rabble. His armour glistened in the fading light, dull red like spoiled wine. The plates were lined with bloodied bronze, and adorned with skulls. He carried a great brass standard, and above it was set the icon of Khome in smouldering metal.

This was the leader, then, the champion, the brooding presence that kept the warband on its leash. Rakh had never seen armour so fine, nor a weapon so

suffused with earth-scouring power. As the first crack and growl of thunder broke out across the landscape to the north, Rakh writhed in the ankle-thick mire, shuffling backwards, uncaring now about anything other than escape from the behemoth that towered over him.

The champion took a single stride, covering the distance between them effortlessly, and pulled his standard high into the air. Flickers of carnelian slid up its shaft, crackling as they burned from the Khornate icon above. Rakh could only stare up at his killer, already tensing for the agony of the spiked staff's heel crunching into his stomach. Duly enough, the pole came down, and Rakh screwed his eyes closed.

'Skullbrand!' came a voice, roaring out of the night, shaking the earth beneath their feet.

Time froze. The screams died out, the battle-roars echoed into nothing.

Rakh's lungs continued to pull in air. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The heel of the killer's staff was just inches from his body, held rigid by the champion. The death's-head helm above was impassive – Rakh could only see the glowing light of two unnatural eyes burning behind a grotesque mask of iron.

The champion did not move. The warriors around him did not move. As if held by some invisible net, they had paused in their slaughter, leaving the surviving bloodreavers to cower on the ground beneath them.

Grudgingly, the champion withdrew the staff's spike. Rakh slithered backwards, away from the icon-bearer, glancing up at the warriors around him as they retreated. He managed to shuffle his way over to Sleikh, who had collapsed on the ground with a gaping chest wound. Despite everything, Rakh couldn't help but eye the glistening flaps of skin hungrily.

'What *is* this?' Rakh whispered.

Sleikh, grey-faced, gestured weakly. Something else was coming down the slope from the east, crunching through the loose stone. Blood warriors were falling back, making passage for it. The icon-bearer waited where he had paused, as still as a graven image, his staff held stiffly at his side.

'Blood for the Blood God,' Rakh murmured, issuing the words like a prayer. Prayers never helped, not in this land, but the habits of forgotten generations still persisted.

Another crack of thunder rumbled along the valley's edge. Rain began to spit, fizzing as it hit the winding cracks in the realm's charred land-skin. Rakh peered out into the gloom, at once daunted and compelled. An aura of dread hung over the whole tribe now, more complete than that generated by even the icon-wielder and his trained killers. Then the owner of the voice strode out of the shadows, and Rakh's pulse began to truly race.

This one was *colossal*. He was decked out in the same elaborate crimson armour as his captain, though every plate and facet was finer, larger, heavier. Everything about him reeked of a dark, majestic extravagance, from the skulls clattering at his belt to the spiked bronze halo rising high over his shoulders. The upper half of his face was hidden by a bone mask, but the lower jaw was exposed – a mottled scrap of age-hardened skin, swollen with distended teeth and marred with scars and snake-figure tattoos. He carried a vast twin-bladed

axe, the metal face of which was blotched with old stains and the shaft greater than the height of a mortal man. At his feet loped a huge, scale-hide hound with jaws like a vice and a studded collar around its corded neck. The creature bared yellow fangs at Rakh and let slip a long, grating growl.

Even in a place as fallen and debauched as the Brimstone Peninsula, there were some lords who commanded dread of a different order. Some monarchs of ruin were so deep in corruption that it overflowed like an aroma from them, polluting the very air through which they strode. Rakh was the lowest breed of vermin and untutored in the arts of the God of Carnage, but even he could sense that noxious stink now, dyed deep in the soul of the monster before him.

Their armour rattling, the blood warriors bowed the knee, recognising the paramount slayer among them. Even the icon-bearer inclined his helm, though the gesture was awkward, as if he were still straining on the chain, desperate to resume where he had been forced to halt.

‘Threx,’ said the warlord, with a voice that made Rakh’s teeth ache. ‘*Threx*.’

The warlord strode up to the icon-bearer and clasped the champion’s head with both mighty gauntlets. His mouth moved strangely when he spoke, exposing filed iron teeth within a pair of chafed raw lips.

‘There will be blood,’ he said, soothingly, yet with a kernel of steel. ‘You know it. You will fill your belly with it. You will gag on it, and we will drink deep as we have always done.’ He patted the champion on the cheek of his helm, like a father might a child, and released his grip. Then he turned away, running a frigid gaze across the beaten remnants of the bloodreaver tribe. ‘But not these. These are mine.’

He strolled up to Sleikh and stood over him. It was all Sleikh could do to meet the downward gaze, and his breathing was shallow and rapid. The warlord stooped, resting his great axe on the rocks and studying the bloodreaver coldly.

‘You are the leader.’ It was a statement, not a question, but Sleikh nodded – to deny it was pointless.

The warlord lifted the axe up, keeping the shaft-end down, and pressed the heel against Sleikh’s pulsing throat. ‘You were careless.’

He pushed down sharply, breaking Sleikh’s neck with a single thrust. Then his baleful gaze moved along, scrutinising those who remained. In his head, Rakh kept chanting the same thing, over and over, *Blood for the Blood God, Blood for the Blood God*, hoping he would be overlooked and the terror would pass. Even death would be preferable to enduring that lord’s attention – his heart already felt like it was fit to burst, and the sweat running down his neck chilled him.

With a grinding inevitability, though, the warlord’s deathly gaze came to rest on him.

‘Do you know my name?’ the warlord asked, and just listening to those words felt like his bones were being pulled from his body.

Rakh managed to shake his head.

‘I am named Korghos Khul,’ the warlord told him, working his black tongue sinuously over the syllables. ‘Seven warlords of seven keeps offer me tribute in

living flesh lest I return to tear their lungs from their unworthy chests. Even now my army marches, and this is but a tithe of those who follow me.'

Rakh wanted to scream. He would have done anything – *anything* – to escape those glowing eyes.

Khul stooped, coming closer, and foul vapours from his cloak wafted over him. The daemon-hound slunk around his feet, glaring at Rakh with a hungry leer.

'I seek the final skull,' Khul said softly, his voice a purring growl. 'I seek the zenith for my tribute. I have scoured the southlands for a hundred years, and none linger there worthy of my blade's edge. I have laid the cities of kings low, ever seeking the one who in death could finish this great work, and all I find is dross and wastage.'

As the warlord spoke, Rakh saw visions swirl before him, pushed into his mind by Khul's malign will. He saw great vistas spin away from him, each one glimmering with the ever-present smouldering of flame, cracked by magma, dominated by the smoking ruins of destroyed keeps. He saw armies marching, whole legions of red and gold, their helms lit by the churning of lurid skies.

And beyond all of them, far away, overlooked by eternal night and flanked by towers of beaten bronze, was a pyramid as vast as a mountain, its sides mottled and irregular. Only as Khul spoke did Rakh realise what it was made of – skulls, thousands upon thousands of them, heaped high and lodged fast, their empty eye sockets like flecks of midnight amid the sheen of picked-clean bone.

Rakh's mind started to spin. Did he want a bloodreaver's skull for that pyramid? Surely not – there were thousands of those. Why was the warlord telling him these things? Why not just kill him and be done with it?

'But the stars have led me here now,' Khul said. 'Something must yet still dwell in this place, where once there were high walls and strong swords. I need more souls. The Goretide must swell. I must cover this land in eyes, all of which are mine.'

The warlord extended a withered claw, bound in rings of black iron. Within the grasp of two taloned fingers was a single fleshy orb, straggled with pulpy sinew. Flickers of green magic slid across its pale surface.

'I cannot complete my great work with a mortal's remains. I seek a worthy capstone.'

Rakh shrank back, already guessing what was going to happen. A dull pain kicked in behind his eyes, and his lids started to bulge outwards.

'Do not struggle, flesh-eater,' crooned Khul, strapping his axe to his belt and reaching for a long, curved knife with his other hand. 'When this is done you may feast on the corpse of your old master.'

Rakh wanted to scream, but no sound came out. The mantra kept running through his fevered mind: *Blood for the Blood God, Blood for the Blood God.*

Khul's shadow fell across him, and Rakh felt the knife's tip press against the underside of his left eyeball.

'For you are mine, now,' breathed Khul. 'Take this as the first sign of your new devotion.'

Beyond the gate, the land rose again. It was shattered, like a burned crust, latticed with fissures and sinkholes. The foul waters of the delta snaked amid the dark plates, hissing where they dribbled against the open wounds of magma.

The lone edifice was behind them now, but it was still visible, dominating everything else and standing like a sentinel against the southern horizon. Ahead of them, hard to pick out in the gloom, there was a ridge. The summit was hunchbacked and crowned with three old towers, all of which were hollow, roofless and part tumbled down. The semi-buried statue of a man with a granite warhammer protruded from the dank earth, his head severed and shattered in pieces.

The rain was falling in earnest now. Swollen clouds above them were lit from within by what seemed like perpetual lightning bursts, making the black land snap with flashes of silver. Water ran in foaming streams over the gravel beds, making the pathways treacherous.

‘This will be a beast,’ muttered Elennar, glancing up at the unquiet heavens.

The air itself felt close, hot and electric. Many thunderstorms had raced across the burned plains in the past year, but this one had an unholy feel to it.

‘Keep going,’ Kalja snapped, slipping in the greasy mud and cursing the rain for coming now.

They reached the towers, which offered little shelter. Twenty-eight of the tribe had made it, all exhausted and drenched. The skinnier ones started to shiver, and their muck-sweat mingled with the streams of rain. The rest shuffled and jostled to get as close to the inner wall as they could. Most hunkered down near the base, pushing themselves up against the stones to avoid the worst of the rain.

Elennar slumped to her haunches. ‘And what happens when they find us?’

Kalja shrugged, taking up her place behind the barrier, too tired to care now whether it hid them or not. They had done all the running they could.

As she slipped down into position, she risked one more glance towards the archway, half a mile away to the south. It dominated the terrain. The rain lashed against it hard, and somehow the clouds seemed thicker over its keystone, as if drawn in by some vast force of attraction.

As she watched, a lone shaft of lightning snaked against it, throwing the statues into sudden relief. She briefly caught the outlines of men in armour, of human faces, of dragons and griffons.

Then it was gone. The rain got heavier. More thunder ground away, getting closer and louder. Kalja smiled wryly. If the bloodreavers didn’t catch them, the weather might still kill them anyway.

She slipped down into the mud, pressing her back against the stones, and closed her eyes.

Khul stood in the heart of the ravine, waiting for the rest of his army to reach him. The Goretide, they called it. A long time ago he had been proud of that title. It had been given in fear, and the fear of others was something he enjoyed.

Now, though, he struggled to remember exactly why. The great battles were all over. Once he had stood on the causeways of the ancient keeps, roaring his heart out at the mortals sheltered within, daring them to come and fight. And they had, back in those half-forgotten days. Their champions had ridden out to face the darkness, clad in steel plate and bearing two-handed broadswords. He had fought and killed them all, and every moment of it had been a joy. Some had tested him sorely – the old sorcerers, the great knights, the mighty warriors from the savage plains. When those great ones had died, he had felt the loss, and kept their skulls as remembrance.

The oldest of the skulls hung on his belt, drilled fast by chains and bleached white by the passing ages. There had long since been too many to count, so he had heaped them into tributes to his divine patron, pouring libations of blood across the pyres before watching them burn. His strength had grown with every season and new warriors had flocked to his banner, and thus the skull-pyres had multiplied.

The sacrifices pleased the God of Battles, and more gifts began to flow. Victory begat victory. He slaughtered the denizens of Scorched Keep in a week-long orgy of bloodletting, and in the deepest vault of that place he found the axe he now carried, one that could tear at the very fabric between worlds. He bested Skullbrand, the only fighter ever to do so, and so the bloodsecurator duly joined his burgeoning horde.

Khul smiled to himself. Threx was a lunatic. They whispered that he had once fought his way to the burning steps of Khorne's throne-dais itself, and there had challenged the greatest of Bloodthirsters to single combat before being ripped limb from limb. Amused by this, the Blood God had brought him back, gifting him the standard that summoned the howling madness of Chaos to the mortal plane.

Who could believe such a tale? And yet, there was no doubting the powers of the icon Skullbrand bore – on a hundred battlefields, its arcane veil-tearing had brought the Realm of Khorne screaming into solid reality, just one more weapon in the swollen armoury of the god-favoured.

But now, after all the victories, after all the triumphs, there was precious little joy remaining. The old adversaries were dead, their corpses long trodden into the dust. With every passing year, Aqshy passed more completely into the ambit of the Chaos realm, and all that remained to hunt were the verminous and sick. There were other Lords of War, to be sure, many as powerful as Khul himself, but their deaths were empty deaths, and the wars they fought now were little more than squabbles over ruined spoils. The God of Battles still rejoiced to see the blood flow, but for his servants the ichor was all mingled, and the endless cycle of honour feuds had slowly become a deadening procession.

At the sound of tramping boots, Khul looked up. The main body of his horde was approaching, marching up from the south. Its vanguard filled the valley from side to side, a serried mass of plate-armoured warriors. Banners swayed above the ranks, all bearing the sign of Khorne daubed in red inks on flayed skins. With the fading of the world's sun, torches had been lit, and their angry

light flooded up into the rain-swept sky. In another age, Khul might have foresworn such blatant displays of power, but there had long since ceased to be anything to fear from discovery.

All he feared, in any case, was the possibility of failure. His final skull-pyre, the bone mountain raised above the burning plains and surrounded by towering columns melted from the weapons of the defeated, awaited its summit – a capstone, ripped from a spine of a fighter worthy of the honour. When that was done, surely the last Gift would be bestowed – the ascension into daemonhood and an escape from the dreary procession of earthbound wars. Until then, he was locked in his current state, doomed to prey on the lost and damned for eternity.

Khul roused himself from his torpor. The army would not rest for long in this valley. He would drive them hard through the storm, past the valley's source and into the unknown country beyond. Perhaps something had survived on the very edges of the world, something that would stand up to him and make him earn his triumph.

Grizzlemaw let slip a whine and paced impatiently. The hound too had been a Gift, given after a battle fought long ago, but one for which Khul had no fond recollection. At times he thought the daemonic creature was little more than a mockery, a reminder of the one soul that had slipped through his fingers, and he hated it as much as he loved it.

'He hungers,' observed Skullbrand.

The icon-bearer had remained sullen since the bloodreavers had been let go. Khul reached for Grizzlemaw's collar and hauled him back close.

'He always hungers,' said Khul, massaging the creature's neck roughly. 'They were hunting, so let them hunt. I told you: you will have your blood.'

Skullbrand said nothing. Grunts and snorts were the most he normally uttered, unless the maelstrom of battle came on him, in which case his throat opened up into such roars that even his own troops shrank back from him.

Khul released Grizzlemaw. The warlord looked up at the skies, and the strengthening rain ran in rivulets down his chin. 'This storm smells strange,' he mused. 'I have been too long in the south. Was it ever thus up here?'

Skullbrand shrugged. 'You let them go.'

Khul sighed. 'They have the Eyes, and they have the fear of me. They will lead us to whatever prey lingers here.'

The vanguard of his army was approaching now. At its head was Vekh the Flayer, the stoker of his horde's wrath. The bare-headed master of pain, his skin stitched and scarred, strode up to him and saluted dryly. Behind him, the army's march came to a halt, and the troops shouted their salute to Khul, crashing axes against shields. He dismissed them with a shake of his gauntlet and they broke out from marching order, falling to the ground in tribal huddles and taking strands of raw man-meat from their packs to chew on.

'I thought you had found some rats?' Vekh asked, looking around him for evidence of a kill.

'I let them go,' said Khul again.

Vekh sniffed, disappointed. The bloodstoker enjoyed taking the survivors

after battles. Those placed into his care lived the longest of all the captives the Goretide abducted – not that it was something they necessarily welcomed.

‘You should know this,’ Vekh said, slyly, drawing closer. ‘Your army is impatient. It needs kills.’

Khul growled softly – a warning snarl, feline, infinitely threatening. Kills was all they ever demanded. ‘When this is over,’ he said, patiently, ‘I will take them back south, and they will have all the murder they desire.’

‘But not until you take your skull.’ Vekh smiled. ‘Just one more skull. So difficult. Can it really be worth so very much? I can give you skulls – as many as you like.’

‘Your own, then.’

Vekh laughed. ‘One day, maybe. Or maybe not.’

Skullbrand hissed at the Flayer, and ran his gauntlet down the shaft of his standard.

‘Threx is angry,’ Khul explained.

‘Of course he is,’ said Vekh. ‘You let them go.’

Khul stiffened, ignoring the bloodstoker. The Eyes he had planted in the bloodreavers had seen things, and he now saw them as if they were his own. The pack had found a plain of cracked earth, old ruins and an empty gate that led nowhere. They were hunting still, heading towards a rise crowned with three old towers, smelling mortal fear.

That was interesting. The gate was interesting. He had seen such things for himself, long ago when the world was not yet slumped into defeat, and there were legends dancing around those old places like witch-light. He still remembered the dreams, the ones that had come on the cusp of storms, the ones that never had an ending but promised so much.

He had known there would be a gate in the empty wastes, and he had known there would be bloodreavers racing towards it under the glowering weight of thunderheads. He had seen silver lightning race across the northern arc of the horizon and had followed it, sensing the otherworldliness of it even as his followers could smell nothing but the roasting meat of his victims.

‘Get them on their feet,’ he ordered, turning on his heel and marching up towards the cleft in the valley’s throat. ‘We march again.’

Skullbrand growled appreciatively and Vekh gave a sardonic bow.

‘That is more like it,’ he said. ‘I can hear the screams already.’



CHAPTER FOUR

Rakh barely noticed the gate. His face was bleeding from where the Eyes had been stitched in, and the pain made him crazed. All in his pack were the same – damaged and howling. They sprinted harder than they had ever done before, driven now by a terrible need. They had to *find*, to seek out whatever scuttling things still squatted in the crevices and drag them into the light. It was no longer about meat-orgies, but about the Goretide and service to the lord with the twin-bladed axe.

The lightning whipped down, over and over, lighting up the ruins with cold flashes. He saw the stonework sway and glimmer, and every burst made his bloody eyes flare with fresh pain. They had run past the gate, sweeping through its mighty foundations, sniffing and panting, following the scents of

despair.

Ahead of them were the three towers, each one drenched and lit up by lightning strikes. The mortals were *there* – scrawny prey-things. Khul would want to see them dragged out, made to squeal. Then they would be running again, searching, their nostrils flared, seeking something worthy of the Goretide's axes.

Rakh powered up the slope. He saw movement against the wall ahead – weapons being lifted, shadows moving. If he had not been in such agony he might have laughed, for such preparations would not help those who cowered behind the wall. The rest of the bloodreaver pack came with him towards the summit, hissing curses, knowing that the mortals had nowhere else to go and no longer bothering with stealth.

At last, there would be proper killing. At last, the gouges and the hooks would be twisted in deep, and there would be fresh meat dragged back for the master to pick over.

A great *crack* of thunder broke the skies in twain, and Rakh staggered. He looked up, his face spattered with rain, and noticed for the first time just what had happened to the sky. A vast circle had formed over the summits of the three towers. Like a vortex of storm-seas, it turned with gathering force. The lightning was incessant now, twisting and forking and mutating the night sky into a riot of cobwebbed silver.

Something about that display terrified him. It was like looking into Khul's pitiless face, only with a different kind of fear – a harder fear, a colder fear.

Rakh shrank back. He couldn't take his new eyes off the light, which was reaching a flickering crescendo. The rain bounced from the rock, driven into scouring flurries by the wind. Everything was glistening, flashing and burning.

He started to fall back, to slide down the slope. The impulsion given to him by Khul was giving way, replaced by a different dread.

Another *crack*, and this time the earth beneath him shuddered. Rock plates thrust upwards, tilting to expose rivers of seething fire beneath. The arch of the Gate swelled into flames that coursed over the naked stone, burning blue like marsh gas.

Then he was running, haring back the way he had come. This was no natural storm, it was some conflagration of the daemonic, sent from the pits of madness to swallow them all. The entire landscape was shifting, knocked from its roots by the elemental violence of the heavens. Rakh crashed to his knees, losing his axe in the fall.

He felt a sudden heat. It swelled through the rain, vaporising it and making the air thick with steam. He cried out, but his voice was lost in the greater explosion of primeval forces.

It was as if the world itself were being ripped apart and forged anew – light was everywhere, eye-searing and white hot. For an instant Rakh thought he was being burned alive, but just as suddenly as it had come, the blaze blew itself out.

He looked up, shaking uncontrollably. For a moment he saw nothing, his vision hazy from the flash of light.

And then he saw what the storm had brought.

Khul led his army through the cleft just as the storm reached its height. It had been far too narrow for his armoured horde, so he had exerted his power, calling out words of eternal resonance and raising his axe-blade into the eldritch night.

His god had answered, shaking the earth and remaking it around them. The sides of the cleft shuddered, cracked and were smashed into rubble, exploding in a rain of flying stone shards. The *boom* of it echoed out across the plain beyond, and the great expanse opened up before them, the path bludgeoned clear as if swept aside by mighty hands.

Khul bellowed with laughter, feeling the sharp pleasure of the power at his command. Even the stone beneath his feet obeyed the will of his dark patron – it would not be long now before the final gift was bestowed and he joined the legions of eternal slaughter.

His warriors surged forward, crying out his name in fell voices.

'Khul! Khul! Khul!' they chanted, breaking into a run, unshackling their axes from great chains looped about their armour and swinging the curse-darkened metal in clenched fists. With the crack of barbed whips and the bellows of the warband leaders, the great mass of fighters broke out from the confines of the parched valley, poured through the demolished gap between the cliffs, and looked out over the plain of ruins beyond.

Khul was at the apex of the charge with Grizzlemaw loping at his feet, and was the first to witness the deep veins of magic unleashed in the skies above him. An actinic tempest rampaged across the Gate's apex, and the colossal energies reverberated through his every muscle. Fell storms had been summoned in the past, some by his own command, but never like this one. Even the rain tasted different – icy, gritty, as if filled with tiny diamonds.

His ravaged old heart beat harder. Some great sorcery was at play here, of a kind he had never encountered before. Grizzlemaw sensed the battle-rage stirring and barked furiously.

'Advance!' Khul thundered, exhilarated by what he was seeing, hearing, smelling.

The Goretide swarmed down the long scree slopes, parting around their master and forging ahead, heading down swiftly to the plains. Their banners were raised against the teeming skies, and the sacred signs of Khorne swung up above the ranks of iron helms, already glossy in the rain. Companies of blood warriors marched out towards the Gate's foundations, chanting litanies to the God of Battles as they shoved against one another. Vekh the Flayer pushed on ahead of them all, lashing them into heights of frenzy. In his wake echoed greater bellows yet, issued from jaws that were far larger than those of the blood warriors in the mass of the horde, and yet still hidden by the swirls of night-shadow and sullen flame.

Khul remained where he was, poised above the expanse, taking in the vastness of it. He saw the old ruins and the demolished walls of age-scoured cities, and the distant marks of a forgotten apocalypse. Threx's bronze icon had

already kindled with an angry fire, feeding from the energy burning around them. Khul stood atop the stone shelf, his eyes narrowing. He looked up at the enormous arch, tracing its outline, noting the runes on the lintels. It had been a long time since he had seen runes of that kind – they should have been extinct, just like their makers. The sight of them fuelled his battle-lust further – their existence was like an explicit challenge. He would take them down, one by one, ripping them from the stone with his own hands.

Down below, more of his battalions fanned out, covering the black lands in a carpet of red. As the last of them reached the open ground, a mighty *crack*, like the bones of the earth snapping, echoed across the plains.

Khul laughed – he couldn't help himself. He lifted his arms, and lightning snapped against his clenched gauntlets.

'I am Korghos Khul, Lord of the Earth! Show yourself, storm-weavers, and test your mettle against one worthy of your strength!'

The storm flared. The tempest churned faster, surging around the Gate under its epicentre. A second *crack*. Plumes of flame shot up from the ground, spewing oily smoke above them. The stink of ozone filled the air and the rain boiled away in hissing cloudbanks. A low rumble ran across the earth, making the rock-plates grind and crack. It felt as if giants were stirring below the world's skin, rousing from aeons of slumber to break back into the realms of the living.

Then there was an almighty explosion of light, one that made his army turn their faces away, covering their helms with warding gestures. The banners faltered, the war-cries were silenced and the heavens erupted in sheets of silver flame. The air itself screamed, torn apart by some sorcery so potent and so pure that its elements were sundered from one another and forged anew.

Shafts of iridescence slammed down from the firmament, punching deep into the earth below. The wind's howl became deafening, racing across the reeling landscape and flattening the iron-limbed vegetation. The Gate seemed to swell, to grow, towering higher over a vortex of gathering power. Even as the land around it was shriven and the hordes were driven to their knees by the tearing gale, the vast arch remained resolute, untouched, carved from the very bones of the world itself and glowering black as obsidian against the storm's fury.

Only Khul kept his composure. He spread his arms wide before the elemental wrath, and laughed as the fire-scored wind tore at his cloak. He raised his axe high, and lightning snapped and licked up against its dire blade.

And so it was that he alone saw them come. He saw them borne down from the storm by the white-blue shafts and ripped from coils of shimmering magic. He saw them hurtle from the heart of the turning maelstrom, encased in brilliant cocoons of light. He saw them strike the earth with shuddering force. Where they crashed into the ground, domes of energy sprang up, each one swimming with raging coruscation. Then the domes shattered, spraying fragments of crystalline matter across the burning land, exposing the scions of the storm, the ones delivered by the wrath of the skies.

They were tall, taller than the greatest of mortal men, clad in purest gold and bearing warhammers that glistened with seething energy. Masks they wore,

gold as their battle-plate, each one gazing impassively out at the devastation around them. Some had pearl-white wings that spread out behind them, bearing them aloft almost as soon as they had landed. Others strode out from their broken cocoons, their movements fluid despite the weight of arcane armour. Their every movement was perfect, poised to perfection and suffused with god-like power. They strode out from the remnants of the lightning that had hurled them into reality, hefting their weapons with an eerie, fluid power.

One of them carried a great standard of gold and bone, and his face was masked with the stark image of a skull. Another propelled himself high into the storm-lashed skies, his wings still surrounded by the blinding aura of the descent. They were the lords, then, the masters of these strange outcasts from the arch of the heavens.

But Khul could see that one alone was the true master of the host. He had come down first, and had emerged from the annihilation of the domes before any other, and Khul had watched him with a greedy yearning. Alone of the warriors he did not tread the earth of the Brimstone Peninsula, but rode a giant beast with skin of dark cobalt and jaws the length of a man. The rider's cloak, billowing out in the eddies of the storm, was the sapphire of clear skies, and his helm was surmounted with a golden crest. The image of the hammer and comet shone out from a boss on his armour, and like the brothers that emerged after him, he carried that most devastating of the great weapons of old – the warhammer, crimson-shafted and wrought from glittering gold.

As soon as Khul saw this he remembered what it was like to face an enemy capable of fighting. He saw the might in those steel-clad arms, and the artistry in that golden armour, and knew then that these foes were like nothing he had ever faced before. The light of unsullied star-realms shone in their masked eyes, and the calm presumption of victory bled from their every poised movement.

But there was more than that – the mounted warrior held his attention. Khul heard Grizzlemaw growl, and recalled another combat, lifetimes ago, one which had remained unfinished, cut short by the intervention of lightning, just as this encounter had been presaged by it.

It could not be – such things were impossible, sundered by too much time and space – but the feeling was the same, the instinct was the same.

By now his army was recovering itself. They were picking themselves up from where they had fallen, shaking their heads to clear them, retrieving axes, remembering their voices of hatred and murder. Skullbrand strode among them, rousing them to repel the storm-borne host. Vekh had been faster, and was sweeping towards the three towers with flails whirling. Every stroke that he dragged across the back of the blood warriors snapped them from their stupor and roused them back into the lust for slaughter that had seen them tear across the plains toward the Gate.

Khul laughed again. He raised his axe and curls of lightning snapped on to the hell-forged iron.

'Blood for the Blood God!' he thundered, making those around him froth and snarl with rabid fury. *'One chosen skull for the pyre of his glory!'*

He angled his axe towards the lord of the storm-delivered, and fixed him for the death that would break the back of the glittering host before the night's end.

'You!' he roared. '*You* I shall take myself!'

The passage of the void had been like a death. Nothing, save the Reforging that he had endured so long ago, compared to its straitening pain. He had seen the deep dark in all its abyssal glory, yawning down into eternity over a vault of cold-burning stars. Amid that space, he had seen the snatched images of other realms, lit softly amid the thrown scattering of the firmament. He had seen places of blasted stone, over-verdant forests, and screaming towers of multi-hued madness. All of it was different and all of it the same – warped by the wills of malevolence, turned into variegated hells, lost to hope.

Then the visions had ripped away, replaced by the sheer fire of the descent. He had cried out, feeling the lightning surge through his very body, burning along his veins, spilling from his eyes, his mouth, his hands. Too late did he remember how it had felt the first time, when the God-King had reached out to pluck those he deemed worthy of ascension from the failing battles of the old ages.

Then the agony snapped out and he felt the Realm of Fire solidify around him. He heard the roar of its storms and smelled the acrid smoke of its endless pyres. The cocoon of celestial power bloomed about him, and he saw the dim outline of vast ruins through its translucent veil.

The dome blew out, dissolving in a rain of twisting shards. Vandus breathed in the first air of Aqshy. He tasted it, he heard its tumults, he felt the unstable tremors beneath his feet.

It had changed beyond all recognition – even if his dreams of the old life had not been so fractured, he would not have known the place. The skies were overcast with driving filth, the earth below sundered with rivers of spitting fire. Only the storm, a mere remnant of the Celestial Realm's purity, contained any splendour – the rest was spoiled.

Lifetimes ago, he had seen the limitless darkness take this world and torture it. He had seen the legions marching under blood-red banners, and the skies riven by the screams of the taken. He had seen the brass cities, where pyramids of scraped-clean skulls served as altars to gods whose victory was soon to be complete. Even now, removed by both time and space, he could remember the way the world had died. Every withered plain and craggy mountain had been taken, polluted by hatreds that were older than the stones themselves.

So much had gone. He could not know how long ago it had been, nor what mortal count of years he had reached before the God-King had seen fit to take him for his own, but he had dreamed in Sigmaron of the old houses of stone and thatch, in which had dwelt all those he had known in the life before life. He still saw their faces – the warriors who had ridden out with him when the skies were lit with dancing fires and the warbands of hell were abroad. Many had been precious to him – those who had fought longest and hardest, who had followed him out into the wilds and lived among the wolves when the light of

the sun itself was marred.

There was one face from those years that would never leave him – a woman's, a warrior just as he had been, the one with whom he had shared his soul. Hers was the only clear vision he still retained, but even then her name was gone. Her skin had been scarred like all the rest of them, and streaked with the grime of constant combat. It had been a hard face, made tough by the rigours of a war without end, but when she had smiled her dark eyes had held the light of stars.

But now that was washed away, seared by the white fire of the Reforging. That world, those faces – all were excised, and what remained was a mere reflection, twisted into horror, more potent than he could ever have imagined.

Around him his warriors hastened to their stations. They had known so little of what they would encounter, save for the vague location of the Gate and the likelihood of resistance wherever they emerged. Their prediction had proved sound – a massive army had already arrayed itself before them, pouring down from a far ridge and milling across the plains to the south of their impact sites. The horde before them outnumbered Vandus's own vanguard a dozen times, and even a company of Eternals would be borne down by such tides, given enough time. The task now – the *only* task – was to endure long enough to see the Gate unlocked. Until that was done, they were on their own. Once the portal was opened, whole legions of their brothers would be sent, and the war would commence in earnest.

Vandus saw that already his captains were doing what was required of them. Ionus was leading the Retributors down from the heights and into the valley of fire. They would be charged with holding the line around the base of the portal, and there the Cryptborn's strange powers would be tested as never before. Anactos had taken his Skyhost soaring into the rain-soaked storm, from where the assault on the magical wards would begin.

As for Vandus, he had the bulk of the Stormhost with him – the Liberators, destined to charge into the heart of the oncoming hordes, to take them on as no foe had taken them on for uncounted years. Their task was to engage the greatest of the creatures of Chaos, to prevent them from approaching the Gate, and to turn their advance in on itself, buying the precious time they needed.

Vandus gazed out over the sheer size of the horde, and a thrill of battle-energy shivered through him. They were immense, and their din was already deafening, but the thought of bringing his sacred hammer among them, of delivering the vengeance so long deferred, made his heart race. He raised Heldensen, and Calanax let slip a metallic roar from his gaping jaws.

'To me, my brothers!' he cried, and raw lightning leapt around him.

They answered the summons, shrugging off the last slivers of void-lightning, forming up into phalanxes of gold. Rain streamed down their armour, and yet did not diminish it – amid a fallen world, they shone like furnaces sent to burn away the corruption and salvage what little remained.

Calanax roared again, his mighty lungs hurling smoke and boiling rain far out across the battlefield. The dracoth reared up, yearning to charge into the depths of the host set before them. Vandus held him back for a little longer,

scanning across the landscape, deferring back the charge until he had determined the shape of the battle.

Amid the seething mass of crimson-armoured warriors, some were greater than others. He saw a mighty champion striding through the heart of the horde bearing a brass sigil of the Fallen Gods. He saw a bare-headed beastmaster flailing at the bloodied back of a massive creature, his eyes lit with a feral ecstasy. That one would be the first to reach him, and so Vandus silently marked him for the contest.

And yet, they were not the greatest of the army's masters. There was another, perched high on a cliff-edge to the south, standing alone before a narrow cleft in the rock. Even from so far away, Vandus could sense the overabundance of power, throbbing like a wound in reality. *He* was the master of this horde, and by his will alone did it go to war. Even as battle called him, Vandus found it hard to pull his eyes from the dark champion.

For an instant, he saw an image from another age – a village, burning, swamped with warriors whose armour was much like those he faced now. He saw a young warrior – blond, grizzled, cut by a hundred wounds – racing to face a warlord with a twin-bladed axe.

And for the first time in forgotten ages, he remembered his name.

Blackfist. Vendell Blackfist.

Across the gulf between them, the skull-helmed lord lowered his axe, directing it straight at him. Vandus felt the impact of that cold malice, striking him like a physical blow. Old mortal emotions raced through his mind, ones he had believed to be long scoured clean.

And yet, he had been Reforged. Those dreams had been torn away, and could never be recovered. All that remained was vengeance, the cleansing burn of sacred fire, the retribution of the long ages.

'To arms!' roared Vandus, holding his warhammer aloft and shifting as the dracoth bucked beneath him. 'Now comes the hour! Strike them down where they march, and may the vengeance of the God-King guide you!'

With a massed roar of acclamation, the Stormhost broke as one into the charge, serried in gold and sky-blue, poised to crash into the vanguard of the enemy with all the fury of the Celestial Realm unleashed.

Anactos, lord of the Skyhost, swept high into the air, releasing a shout of joy as he powered upwards. His Prosecutors came with him, stretching their pinions and glorying in the release of long-held energy.

All around them, the tempest surged. The winds were violent, tugging them one way and the other, ever-threatening to dash them against the rocks below. After the first exuberant surge, they stayed close to the earth, gliding just high enough to survey the battlefield that sprawled away below them.

The Gate was to the south, less than half a mile distant. Already its base was overrun with the warriors of Chaos, unwitting as to its purpose but knowing a bastion where they saw one. Ionus had led his Retributors towards them, and soon battle would be joined around the massive foundations.

More columns of lightning slammed down, releasing the last of the void-sent

Prosecutors from their glimmering domes. There were so few of them – they were like scarce points of starlight across the face of eternal night. Set against the monsters that now lumbered and crashed towards them, the vanguard looked painfully fragile.

Anactos laughed freely. His wings snapped back hard, pushing him back up into the heights. To test his skills against such a storm made his spirits sing. The Celestial Realm had been a paradise, one in which even the lowliest towers were crowned with circlets of jewels, but this was another thing entirely. The *danger* of it thrilled him, just as it did all his swift-winged bothers.

He heard Lord Vandus issue the command to advance, and watched as the Liberators fell into their battle formations. The last few of Anactos's own troops broke free of their crystalline cocoons, racing to join his aerial vanguard.

'Faster, and yet faster!' Anactos urged, addressing his Prosecutors as they wheeled about him. 'The portal awaits – you know your task!'

With a clap of wings, the Skyhost swung around and swept down low, streaking across the battlefield and towards the empty archway.

For Ionus, there was no rush of combat joy. He had emerged from the storm's wrath with the same chill disdain as he had ever felt for it. The fires and the lightning meant nothing to him, for they were all fleeting shadows set beside the dread craft that gave him his strength.

Already the shouts of the battle-frenzied were rising in volume. The blood of both sides ran hot, frothing in the veins of every man who bore a blade. It was mere chatter to Ionus, who always spoke in a whisper and whose glance alone reflected nothing but infinite silence.

Following Vandus's command, he trudged down the slope towards the Gate's foundations. The ruins of great edifices stretched away on either side, lain low by forgotten wars. He cared little for them, either – the Realm of Fire had never been his domain. Duty alone had brought him to this battle, a duty forged when the God-King had delved down into the uttermost depths of the Amethyst Realm and snatched him away from his destined oblivion. One night, if the fates allowed, he would return to those moonlit vaults, to where the skies were untroubled by suns and where the spirits of the ever-slain dwelt in their perpetual shadow.

Until then, he would lend the Stormhost his subtle powers, commanding the very laws that bound souls to flesh. Not for him a golden warhammer, but instead a reliquary of bone, one that channelled the esoteric forces of Shyish itself.

The Retributors who accompanied him were warriors after his own heart – grim, steadfast, not given to the recklessness of the Prosecutors nor the bravado of the Liberators. They would stand firm against the yammering progeny of nightmares for as long as but one of them drew breath, forming a line of gold that ringed the feet of the portal. His task was to hold the base of the Gate, enduring the horde were kept from its precincts until all was accomplished.

Vandus would drive onwards, hoping to gouge a wedge into the centre of the horde and engage its champions, while the Cryptborn would maintain the cordon around the portal. It was a task after his cold heart – reckless valour had little appeal, whereas endurance meant everything.

Already the front ranks of the enemy were loping towards them, their shock fading as the storm raged unabated above, goaded by their whip-wielding slavemasters and propelled by their own blood-fury.

Ionus watched them come, cracking no smile under his deathmask helm. He remembered the oaths he had sworn, as old and hard as the grave, binding him to the service of the one who held the promise of liberation for his beloved lands of shadow.

As the first of them drew within range, the Cryptborn held his bone-sigil aloft in both hands, feeling the cold sigh of unnatural winds curl around its length.

‘Unto death,’ he whispered, and advanced into the maw of hate.



CHAPTER FIVE

Rakh cowered with the rest of the bloodreavers, unable to believe what he had witnessed. One moment they had been running down the scent of terrified mortals, the next the skies themselves had broken asunder and gilded paragons had hurtled down from rifts in their heights.

From where he crouched, he saw the earth explode in clouds of splintered stone. A dome of silver flared up, raging like starlight, before shattering into a thousand spinning fragments. From its heart came a golden warrior, towering and imperious, his white pinions stretching out like the fell shadow of a vengeful angel. The warrior raised his warhammer high, and lightning curled around it in greeting. The storm boomed and cracked, the air itself singing with strange sorcery, and the angelic warrior leapt up into its heart, thrusting

upwards amid a riot of light and racing flame.

Rakh screamed out in rage, reaching for his cleaver. Others of his pack recovered their wits and scrambled for their own weapons. The bloodreavers may have been debased flesh-eaters, but they had all been raised in a world where fighting was the only form of life – once threatened, they would always strike back.

‘Not them!’ cried Rakh, hauling the others back before they could charge the greater mass of golden warriors. Those ones were already quitting the rise, forming up into battalions to march down into the lowlands beside the gate. There were too many to take on, and they were fearsomely well-armoured. ‘Pluck the birds from the skies!’

The winged ones looked an easier prospect – they had their eyes fixed on the Gate, heedless of those crawling on the ground below but staying close enough to be grasped. There were fewer of them and they seemed more fragile.

The surviving bloodreavers did as they were commanded, and Rakh led them up to the ridge’s summit. They went stealthily, hidden by the drifting clouds of underlit smoke, unseen by the golden warriors hovering just above head height.

As they closed in, Rakh began to believe that it could be done. He picked out one of the angels who had only just emerged from its lightning-dome, still glistening from whatever magic had summoned it and yet to ascend fully into the skies.

‘Take it!’ he hissed to his brothers, and together they sprinted to bring it down.

Rakh leapt, swinging his cleaver wildly at the warrior’s trailing ankle. The thick blade connected, smashing the armoured heel and causing the winged warrior to cry out. The angel tried to gain height but more bloodreavers piled in, leaping as high as they could to try to grasp the creature. Flails and long-chained hooks lashed out, punching into the warrior’s armoured plates and dragging him down to their level.

Once they had it encumbered, the bloodreavers fell on it in a ravening scrum, seizing its kicking legs and pulling it to earth. Rakh clutched its breastplate, hauling his way towards its throat. He caught a glimpse of its golden mask – a blank expression, belying the desperate life-and-death struggle – before he was thrown back to the ground.

The angel was incredibly strong. Despite taking a dozen deep cuts from axe-blades, it struggled on, ever trying to gain loft. Its warhammer, held one-handed, scythed around, smashing three bloodreavers clear and sending their broken bodies tumbling. It kicked out, severing the neck of another and almost breaking free.

Rakh pounced again, hurling his cleaver straight at the creature’s breastplate. The iron edge hit the metal but was deflected, scraping across the pristine surface. The bloodreavers became more desperate, drooling with anger as they battled to pull their prey to earth.

The prospect of healthy flesh to gnaw on rather than worm-infested gristle made Rakh frenzied with meat-lust, and he flung himself into the air one more time. This time his outstretched fingers caught onto something solid – the

warrior's weapon-belt – and he yanked down with all his strength. Others of the pack seized the angel and chains were flung up, clanking onto his limbs and dragging at him. The axes and cleavers got to work, slamming down and breaking up the armoured plate.

Rakh smelled the first gush of the creature's blood and knew then he would be locking his teeth onto skin within moments. He ripped the warrior's helmet back from its neck and stretched his jaws wide, picking his spot before he plunged down.

The lightning bolt hit him cripplingly hard and he was sent flying, his chest smoking and his jerkin burned to scraps. His head spun and his vision reeled. He reached for his weapon groggily, gasping from the shock and pain, and tried to get to his feet.

More bolts flew in, each one crackling like ball-lightning before exploding with a sharp bang. The deluge scattered the gang of bloodreavers, some of whom were caught by it and cut down just as he had been. Rakh stood up, still bleary-eyed, and stared into the skies.

The angels were swooping in low, hurling bolts of energy right into the midst of the bloodreavers. Now acclimatised to the buffets of the storm-wind, they were hurtling through the air in a blur of gold and cobalt, uncatchable, unreachable, and burning with wrath.

The one that had been pulled to earth got back to his feet, still swinging his warhammer and crunching the skulls of the bloodreavers about him. Rakh stumbled into a charge, holding his cleaver two-handed and determined to bring at least one of those damned flying creatures to its death.

The angel turned to face him, his armour running with blood, and opened the palm of his gauntlet. A ball of white fire slammed into Rakh, this time burning right through what remained of his armour and chewing into his chest. He screamed and collapsed onto his back, clutching impotently at the forks of heat tearing across his skin.

Prone and agonised, Rakh could only watch as the battle-ravaged warrior leapt back up into the skies, bloodied but still capable of flight. His counterparts were dropping to the earth now, landing amid bursts of the searing starfire that shot from their very hands. Others darted down low, airborne still but flying near enough to send their hammerheads blasting into the backs of the fleeing bloodreavers.

Amid all his dizziness, Rakh couldn't help but spit out a bitter laugh. They had tried to take down one of them, just *one*, and failed. Now the whole pack was suffering the vengeance of these strange and terrible warriors, and within moments they would be slaughtered to a man.

Rakh lifted his head just in time to see one more of the golden creatures coming for him. There would be no escape this time – he could barely move, and already the numbness creeping up his limbs was near-complete. With his last breath, he could only marvel at what had taken place.

What are these things?

But before any answer could be given the angel unleashed his fire, and Rakh's brutish world ended in a blaze of pain.

Vekh had seen the danger before any of the others. While the rest of the army were still blinking and staring stupidly at the apparitions from the skies, he had reached for his flail and summoned the bestial presence at the heart of the horde.

For the long march north the behemoth had been shackled, weighed down with spell-wound chains of iron made in the depths of Khul's forges. They had goaded it and dragged it, never getting too close, knowing what it could do. It had raged at them, lashing out under the burden of the iron collar and the iron yokes, and Vekh had always been there at its side, whispering the maddening words, stoking the fires that ever burned within its ruined mind.

'Skuldrak!' he had called as the fires fell from heaven, releasing its bonds with a word and calling the behemoth, the khorgorath, to his side.

And it had come. Despite the pain, despite the madness, it always came, answering the command of its tormentor and trampling the lesser creatures of the horde under its claws. It barged its way up from the very heart of the boiling multitudes until its red-rimmed eyes once more seized on the author of its agony.

Skuldrak was a monstrous creation, towering over even the hugest of the Goretide's other leviathans. Vast trunks of muscled legs supported a cavernous chest and absurdly oversized arms, each terminating in iron-tipped claws the breadth of a man's torso. An immense bony head thrust out from bulging shoulders, studded with tusks and pierced with the iron marks of Khome's favour. When the khorgorath roared, a welter of fizzing spittle flew from its open maw, drowning out all other calls of battle and inspiring those about it to new heights of savagery.

Skuldrak was Vekh's own creature, tortured into submission a lifetime ago and now shackled to his merciless lash, just as the entire horde was. The beast could endure phenomenal amounts of pain, something that Vekh put to the test whenever he could, goading it into the fullest extent of battle-wrath, making an already wildly aggressive creature into an engine of pure carnage.

United once more, the two of them – bloodstoker and beast of Chaos – charged across the open plain. Even as the bulk of the Goretide waited for Khul's orders, Skuldrak lumbered inchoately, bellowing in a haze of apoplexy as the flail bit deeper. For his part, Vekh had to run hard just to keep up, for Skuldrak unleashed was as ferociously fast as he was colossal.

Vekh's battle-lust, however, was more controlled than his beast's. He had seen the disposition of the enemy and gauged where best to strike. Their armour was new to him, as was the magical aura that played across their ranks, but every army had its lords, and if those could be struck down then the rest would fall apart. The Goretide was unbeaten, its name whispered with hushed respect even by those steeped in the favour of Khome – this night would not see a reverse of such god-marked fortunes.

As Vekh neared the first warriors of the glittering warband, their commander was obvious enough – a knight with a crested helm riding atop some kind of draconic beast. Others of the host, larger figures in heavier battle-plate, had already broken formation and were making for the ruined Gate, leaving their

flanks exposed. That was a critical mistake, Vekh judged – the ruin was worthless as a redoubt, and they were spreading themselves too thin in order to take it. If this crested beastrider could be killed, the whole encounter would be over with brutal swiftness, leaving only the long hours of torture to come.

‘Skuldrak!’ Vekh shouted, snapping out the spike-tipped flails with abandon. ‘That is the one! Break it now and your pain can stop!’

The leviathan thundered out a tortured bellow and powered towards the lightning-crowned rider. Vekh watched the golden knight respond, turning to face the oncoming charge. The beast he rode was a mighty creature, its scaly head wreathed with flame and its sinuous tail lashing like Vekh’s own flails, but it was far smaller than the khorgorath and had not been driven into the same depth of daemonic rage.

The gap between them shrank to nothing, and Vekh maintained the lash, whipping Skuldrak into a blur of speed. Bony tentacles burst out from the khorgorath’s shoulders, each snaking towards the dracoth rider, ready to snatch him from his mount and break his back.

The rider called out a battle-cry as the shadow of the khorgorath fell across him, hefting his mighty hammer as if it weighed no more than a reed. The weapon arced round, blazing with eye-watering light, and slammed heavily into Skuldrak’s oncoming flank.

A mighty *bang* rang out, and a blaze of silver light radiated from the impact. Skuldrak, for all its size and momentum, was rocked back on to its mighty haunches, and its hooves gouged deep into the solid stone. The knight swung again, switching back and driving the head deep into the creature’s ribcage.

Skuldrak screamed, at last experiencing pain worse than its master’s gouges, and twisted back to face the snarling draconic mount. Vekh, seeing the chance, raced in close, aiming to dislodge the rider and bear him down to the earth. The cobalt-skinned mount was too quick, though, snapping its jaws just a fraction too slowly to tear Vekh’s head from his shoulders but close enough to make him stagger back from the charge.

Now free to act, the gold-armoured rider rammed his hammer against the khorgorath’s skull as if it were a blade on an anvil. Skuldrak reeled away, roaring. Then the crested helm was turned on Vekh, where the beastmaster crouched, ready to launch a second attack.

‘Know your enemy before he ends you, spawn of ruin,’ came a clear voice, cutting through the battle-roar like a shaft of sunlight. ‘I am Vandus Hammerhand, Lord-Celestant of the Stormhost, and this night your reign comes to its end.’

Vekh snarled, taking up his flail again and readying it for Skuldrak.

‘Then know yours, Hammerhand,’ he replied. ‘I am Vekh, named the Flayer, and I shall wear your skin as my cloak before the night’s end. If you perform well, I may even let you die first.’

The Retributors reached the Gate just ahead of the horde. They spread out in a long line, making their numbers count for as much as possible. Each warrior stood two yards from the shoulder of his brother, giving room to wield the two-

handed greathammers with the power they warranted.

Ionus took his place behind the slender line of defence, knowing that it was not yet his time to move into the heart of the combat. As he watched, the formless mass of enemy warriors screamed towards them, shouting incoherently in brutish tongues. Some spoke debased languages that he understood while others raved in the language of the Old Gods, their words steeped in the slow corruption of millennia.

‘Remain steadfast,’ he whispered to those about him. His voice was as dusty and sibilant as ever, but he knew that every Retributor would hear him clearly enough. ‘Trust in the immortal will of Sigmar, the liberator of his people.’

The eyes of the foe were now visible, red-rimmed under beaten helms of iron. Ionus saw the mutilation of their bodies – wounds pinned open, brand-marks across faces, metal studs and spikes pushed through exposed skin. They all bore the marks of Khorne, carved into living flesh and carried above them on banners of cured hides.

‘He will preserve,’ Ionus breathed. ‘He will protect.’

Then the lines smashed together, the rolling tide of frenzy slamming hard into the cordon of gold. The Retributors had waited for the moment of most impact before letting fly with their hammers, and with their release the entire battlefield dissolved in a welter of cracked skulls and sprayed blood. Before they could lean into the return swing, the blood warriors were in amongst them, hacking with short-handled axes. The Retributors held the line, though the pressure of the charge forced them back, testing the slender perimeter before the stairway leading up to the Gate’s great archway.

Ionus coolly watched the fighting unfold. They had known it would be intense, and the sheer volume of hatred did not come as a surprise. The Old Powers had degraded what counted for humanity in this realm, perverting them into mere bestial tools, each one capable of nothing but rage. The damned screamed as they fought, screamed as they were hacked back, and screamed as their guts were torn from them by the heavy sweep of hammerheads.

Behind the Retributors, the Gate loomed massively, lit up by flashes of lightning and the aegis of fire kindled at its summit. The Prosecutors were late reaching their positions, though Ionus could see the first of them soar up against the night sky now, ready to unleash the wrath of the comet. Perhaps they had been waylaid – if so, then the need for haste had become more pressing than ever.

Then, over to his right, the first of the Retributors was brought down. The warrior had already accounted for a dozen of the horde and his hammer was heavy with a black slick of blood, but the press was remorseless. Ionus hastened to his aid, just too late – a long spear-shaft jabbed out, shoved forward by many sets of hands, and the tip punched through the Retributor’s throat, wrenching the helm up and forcing the warrior’s head back.

A huge roar rang out from the horde, and the ferocity of the attack picked up. The two Retributors on either side of their fallen brother closed off the gap, fighting hard to prevent the breach in the line becoming a flood through which the enemy could pour.

By then Ionus had reached the stricken warrior's side, and he crouched down low beside him. The Retributor was dead, and shards of the spear's shaft still protruded from the gaping hole in his throat. Ionus pulled the splinters clear and cauterised the wound with a wave of his clawed hand. Even as the blood warriors hammered at the defences, he worked calmly and quickly, bringing his staff to bear. Ghoulish energies pooled and flowed from the bone reliquary, reaching out to latch on to the Retributor's motionless corpse. There was a sigh like the cold wind across reeds, and the fallen warrior's body jerked. Spectral lightning leapt from the tip of the reliquary, clamping on to the Retributor's helm. The warrior burst back into movement with ghostly strands of luminescence writhing across his bloodied armour.

Ionus withdrew as the Retributor clambered back to his feet. The warrior pushed his way back to his place in the line and started to fight just as before. Unperturbed, his comrades moved aside to give him room, and the cordon was restored. Ionus backed away, scrutinising the remaining defenders and watching for any more breaks in the line.

The resurrection briefly cowed the horde beyond, as the work of their blades was undone. The fallen Retributor fought just as hard and just as well as those about him, with the only sign of his demise being the blood across his battered gorget.

Once the shock had faded, though, the blood warriors became even more deranged, as if affronted by the use of magical powers by one other than their own dark lords. They charged back at the Retributors, slamming spike-bossed shields into them, flinging axes with abandon, spitting curses even as the warhammers continued to reap a bloody toll. The Retributors were forced back a step further, managing the retreat expertly but still forced to close the gap between them and the stairs leading up to the Gate.

Ionus remained impassive, trying to pick out the leaders among the horde. His eyes finally rested on a true beast of a man, wading through the ranks of his own, fighting against them just to get closer to the front. He was arrayed in heavy armour of iron and bronze, and alongside a long-handled axe he carried a standard to match the Cryptborn's own. It was he who roused the lesser fighters to such heights of frenzy, and he who held the enemy's battle-lines together.

Ionus narrowed his eyes, studying the brass icon he bore aloft. It had an unnatural aspect to it, as if it had been forged in another world and did not belong on the mortal plane at all. Already flickers of red flame were dancing around its head, the harbingers of a greater release to come.

Ionus would have liked nothing better than to push out into the throng then, kicking aside the blood warriors to get at the real danger. When that icon disgorged its foul malediction, there was no telling what horror would be unleashed.

But his place was with the Retributors, holding the perimeter around the Gate lest the enemy guess its purpose and destroy it from its foundations. If he left the line now, the next warrior to fall would not get up and the fragile shield would surely break.

So he held his position, knowing that it was only a matter of time before their tenuous line would be overwhelmed. He risked one more look up to where the skies still boiled with the elemental tempest. The Prosecutors had begun their work, but they had much yet to do. Time was against them all, and with every moment more blood warriors piled into the furious melee under the shadows of the ruins. If the portal were not breached soon...

'Remain steadfast,' he whispered, to himself as much as those around him. 'He will preserve. He will protect.'

Anactos rose up on the swirling hurricane, his wings fighting against the storm-surge. His brothers had been scattered and were working hard to stay close to Gate's edge. The hordes seething on the earth beneath had tried to attack them again, hurling spears from the fire-lit dark, but Vandus's charge into the main body of the oncoming ranks had blunted those attacks for the moment.

The Prosecutors had been delayed by the attack of the bloodreavers and now needed to work fast. Anactos's joy in the flight had long gone, overtaken by the knowledge of just how little time they had. He could see the Lord-Celestant engaged in combat with a massive beast of Chaos, and the Liberator vanguard was already close pressed by a far greater mass of axe-wielding warriors. Ionus and his Retributors were almost completely hidden from view by the blood warriors they fought against, and if either flank of the Eternals' cordon should fail then all would quickly collapse into confusion.

Anactos kindled fresh comet-fire in his hands, watching as his warhammer transmuted into a spitting ball of blue-edged brilliance that span against his rain-slick gauntlets.

'Azyr!' he roared, sending the bolt blazing towards the Gate. It impacted not on the stone, but in the empty void under the great archway. As it struck the point directly below the keystone, it exploded, sending shattering lines of force cobwebbing across the gap.

The whole structure shook and the fires on the Gate's crown shuddered. From the other side of the gate, the Prosecutor Kallas launched a similar bolt, which struck the same target with the same effect. Pelias sent a shaft of comet-light spinning into contact, and then it was the turn of Valian, the one who had been dragged to earth by the bloodreavers. His comet-fire was weaker, affected by the wounds he had taken, but it struck the Gate's heart nonetheless, adding to the steady rain of impacts.

As the volleys of raw magic rocked the portal, the runes engraved on its soaring pillars stirred into a dull red glow. More flames spontaneously ignited along its twisting intricacies, surging up old stairwells and bursting through the conical roofs of its watchtowers.

The Gate's seals were strong, laid down during the last days of the Lost War. Sigmar had made the rune-signs himself, it was said, and his might and subtlety had held the portal fast for the long ages, resisting every attempt made by the Fallen Gods to force the passage to the Celestial Realm. Only the weapons of Azyr itself had the power to unlock those seals, and only then

when used with great force. Sending Eternals into battle without using the portal was astonishingly difficult, even when the entire wizard-choirs of Sigmaron were pressed into service to accomplish it. Only if the Gate were released from both sides at once would the road be fully opened, after which the greater force of the Stormhost could pass across the bridge between the Realms unhindered.

Anactos swept upwards again, catching a fire-flecked thermal current and using it to drive himself over the summit of the portal. He summoned up a new spectral warhammer, which shimmered in his grasp before solidifying into sigmarite. Then he hurled it back towards the portal's rim, and as it flew it transmuted back into celestial energy, streaking like the comet from which it had been born.

The explosion was greater this time – a riot of multi-hued light blasting from the Gate's empty heart. The storm-whipped void flexed like fabric, distorting the view through the aperture. A great crack appeared through which a faint glister of gold could be perceived, and the runes on the Gate flared, turning to the red of flame.

But then the wards resisted, reimposing the weight of aeons, clamping down on any attempt to break that which had been unbreakable for so long. The remaining Prosecutors of the Skyhost launched their own barrage of comet-fire, keeping up the relentless assault, but no more fissures appeared, and the runes remained in place and smouldering.

Anactos cried aloud with frustration. The constant summoning of comet-fire was draining, and the portal remained closed. Down below, the twin spearheads led by Vandus and Ionus were mere islands in an ocean of raging fury, and for all their valour they would soon be overwhelmed.

'For the God-King!' Anactos cried again, racked by pain as he summoned yet another bolt to hurl into the Gate's heart.

Even as he let loose, and the comet-born fire streaked to its target, he could not shake one terrible, nagging thought.

We have come too late. We cannot break it in time.



CHAPTER SIX

Khul was still a long way from his enemy, hampered by the crowds of his own troops, when he realised what the true danger was. He had taken the vast ruin ahead to be some dormant relic of ancient ages. When the gold-armoured hammer-bearers had filed down to surround it, he had assumed that they had thought to seize a remnant of old days – a sentimental move, fighting to hold it against the descendants of those that had first laid it low.

Only slowly, watching the winged angels dive and wheel, did he see what their real aim was – they were not here to take it, but to destroy it, and every action they were performing was bent towards that one goal. Khul had no idea why they would wish to risk their lives for such a pointless achievement, but was astute enough to guess that it was their only hope for survival. For the first

time, a tremor of doubt assailed him – he still had the numbers to slay them all, given enough time, but if the Gate held some secret power, something only they knew of, then they could not be allowed to fulfil that aim.

‘Skullbrand!’ Khul roared, rearing up to his full height and letting his axe spike with arcane magics.

Even across the entire breadth of the battlefield, with a thousand voices raised in anger and aggression, Threx Skullbrand heard the summons of his master and turned his crimson helm to heed the order. The bond between them, forged by lifetimes at war, was so acute and so drenched in dark magic that Khul had only so much as to say his name and Threx would hear it.

‘The Gate!’ Khul roared, gesturing to where the angels were pummeling it with their bursts of wild magic. ‘Break the aegis! Summon the Realm of Brass!’

Skullbrand nodded in acknowledgement, and immediately his icon-staff crackled with bronze tendrils. The howl of another wind joined in that of the world’s gales, and the atmosphere above the bloodsearator began to pulsate like a drumskin.

Khul might have stayed to witness what Skullbrand was doing, always gladdened to see the scions of the great Throne heed the call of a mortal soul, but in the midst of the struggle he had no leisure to stand idly by. He could already see that, incredibly, Vekh and his khorgorath were being battered by the beast-riding warrior. Despite the numbers set against them, the body of golden knights was holding its own, even pushing deeper into the ranks of his own army. They fought with a blend of speed and skill that far exceeded the brutal excesses of his own troops. For too long the blood warriors had fought only the weak and the terrified – it had made them flabby and careless.

Khul snarled as he marched down through the ranks of his horde, obsessed now with bringing down the helm-crested knight before any other might claim the kill. For so many ages he had been searching for a champion whose skull would crown the uncompleted Red Pyramid, his great paean to the God of Battles, and now at last he had it before him – an immortal, clearly; one possessed of the power to command the lightning and whose valour in arms exceeded even the heroes of the forgotten past.

But then Khul halted in his rampage, struck by the same realisation that had assailed him on the clifftop. He suddenly remembered the destruction of that last tribe. He remembered putting their villages to the fire, sweeping across their lands with the force of a whirlwind. None of them had ever submitted save through death. The bloodreavers had never turned one, and the ranks of his blood warriors had never been bolstered by them. Every fight against them, no matter how one-sided, had been turned into a brutal contest of wills, something that had made his savage heart swell with satisfaction.

This was the same. Though these warriors fought in the finest battle-plate, they were cast in the same mould. The beastrider in particular – *he* was exactly the same, not in his regal appearance but in the sheer tenacity of his bearing.

There had been lightning that night, too. There had been bolts from the heavens that had burned through his horde and nearly turned them back from

the final conquest. And then, right at the end, the great warrior – who had defied him and spat curses into his face and readied himself for a duel he could not possibly win – was gone, his place taken by charred earth and the stray crackles of celestial discharge.

Grizzlemaw whined, eager to take up the hunt again, straining on his iron leash. Perhaps the hell-hound recognised something too, and his every muscle twitched with desperation to rend and maim.

‘I know not how you have returned,’ growled Khul, swinging his axe-blade to clear a path through his own battle-incensed horde, ‘but I shall discover it before this night ends, and rip the truth from your shrivelled soul.’

Skullbrand had not welcomed the order from his lord. He had been primed to wade into the attack on the warriors below the gate, already relishing the cut of his axe-blade against their pristine battle-plate. Summoning the world beyond took time, and every moment he spent away from the slaughter made his soul ache.

The ground below him was now ankle-deep in blood, and his boots squelched through it as if through a mire. Most of it had come from his own kind, it was true, but it mattered not from where the blood flowed.

He raised his standard high and more bronze flames licked up against it, drawn from the fevered storm around him. Every death fuelled the vortex, tearing at the barriers between the world of the senses and the deeper vaults of unreason below.

Those of the horde closest to him, at least those not utterly blinded by their battle-rage, let slip shouts of excitement as they saw the bronze flames leap, and the assault against the enemy redoubled in ferocity. Skullbrand slammed his battle-standard down into the earth. He pushed with such force that the bannerpole sunk in two feet deep, carving through the blood-rich soil with ease.

As soon as it was anchored, the magic leapt from it like steam from a geyser. Skullbrand cried out – eight times, each one a different curse, all of them summoning the Realm of Chaos to the mortal plane.

A column of bronze fire jetted out from the standard’s tip, searing out into the wild night and rivalling the silver lightning thrown by the angels. The earth beneath began to boil, making the blood-slicks bubble and steam. Old charred plates were thrust aside by a new landscape of hot brass, burnished by the seething sea of blood and spreading out from Threx’s position like a breaking wave.

The very air itself screamed, and the rock below cracked. Amid the racing howl of unearthly winds, the Realm of Chaos burst into reality, shoving aside that which had existed before and replacing it with its own writhing pillars of madness.

Skullbrand threw his armoured head back and roared with triumph. More bronze flames engulfed him, surrounding his body in a cloak of immolation. The earth cracked and charred, and the spilt blood erupted from it in gouts of hissing steam. A new rain began to fall, though it was as thick as slurry and

stank of copper. Wherever the blood rain fell, the warriors of Chaos seemed to stand taller, to bellow louder, to sweep their axes with greater ferocity. They broke into the eternal chant – *Blood for the Blood God!* – in a brutal chorus of frenzied voices. Their armour burned with vermilion flames, and the air around them danced with the crackle of daemonic energies.

With the Realm summoned, Skullbrand released his grip on the staff. It remained lodged deep, poisoning reality and twisting the solid matter around it, but it no longer needed his guiding word. The bloodsecrator was now free to give in to his urges, and so thundered towards the slender thread of gold that even now kept his minions from taking the Gate.

‘Slaughter them!’ Threx bellowed, shaking with unfettered wrath and still wreathed in the burning bronze aura of the Blood God. ‘Slaughter them *all!*’

Vandus smashed his hammer down again, hurling the vast beast of Chaos back into the mass of bodies behind it. His Liberators pressed forward, fighting with their calm skill at arms, each one more than a match for the blood-rabble that faced them but still heavily outnumbered.

The Flayer was another matter – he used his flail as both a weapon and a deception, weaving clouds of darkness about him as he thrust and parried. The dracoth lunged for him, trying to rip his arm off, but Vekh was too quick, darting away before the teeth could close and dragging the spiked tips of his lashes across the noble beast’s muzzle.

All across the battlefield, the contest still lay in the balance. Vandus could see Anactos and the Skyhost weakening the portal’s wards with every strike, but it was not happening quickly enough. The charge of his Liberators had pushed the enemy back in on itself, but resistance was stiffening as the horde brought its sheer size to bear. If the Stormhost could not break the enemy’s resolve soon, Vandus knew he would have to retreat lest Ionus be overwhelmed – they did not have the strength to maintain two spearheads for long. Once he did that, though, then the battlefield would shrink further, allowing the enemy commander to throw his entire horde’s strength at a single point.

‘For Sigmar!’ he cried, blasting apart the skull of a blood warrior who got too close to the arcs of Heldensen.

The behemoth loomed back over him, inured to fear and enraged by the beating it had already taken. As it reached in again to swipe him from the saddle, Vandus leapt up, standing on the dracoth’s heaving spine, and whipped the hammerhead out towards it.

The beast made to dodge, believing the sigmarite was aimed at its flesh, but that was not Vandus’s intended target. With a shout of release, he channelled the power of the comet into the sacred weapon’s crown, and a stream of pure white fire burst from it, cascading into the onrushing beast’s charge and ripping deep into its burnished flesh.

It bellowed in agony, thrashing its great claws and trying to douse the flames that cascaded across it. The pure fires of Azyr pained it more than a thousand blows from its master’s whips, and it stumbled away, roaring in anguish.

With the behemoth seen off, the Flayer circled warily, bereft of his greatest weapon. He replaced his flails with a blade drawn from his belt, and waited for the mass of blood warriors to flank him. In a mirror movement, the surviving Liberators advanced around Vandus, and the two lines of warriors, crimson and gold, faced one another across a rare gap in the swirling melee.

‘Thus shall it be for you all,’ warned Vandus, returning Heldensen to its solid form and taking position back astride the dracoth’s back. ‘Leave this place and you shall endure life for another cursed dawn. Remain here and I shall end you now.’

As soon as the words had left his mouth, a great explosion rocked the landscape and a pillar of bronze energy thundered up from the ground over towards Ionus’s position. The detonation of magic was followed up by screams as the Realm of Chaos burst up from the heart of the battlefield.

Vekh laughed, as did those about him.

‘This is our place,’ he said. ‘You know not what we are capable of in it.’

Vandus quickly saw the truth of it. The warlord’s full tally of troops had now reached the battlefield, and the ranks of blood warriors had become almost endless. Banners to the God of Battles swung by the light of torches, rocking to the beat of human-hide drums, and the mocking laugh of triumph was already on the marauders’ lips. They were undaunted by any amount of losses, and the shed blood seemed to rouse them to ever-greater feats of bravado. Now that the very matter of the Corrupted Realm was spilling freely into the world of the senses, their strength was multiplied further.

The Realm was spreading, unravelling like a pox across the plains, bringing ruin with it. It was but a phantasm yet, but in that vision was the future of all Realms, should they fail. In those baleful fires and boiling metals was the destiny of mankind, the one that the God-King had seen more clearly than any other. It was infinite, and it was terrible.

Vandus hefted Heldensen and looked down at its unmatched shaft. The gold of it was unsullied, for the blood of the unclean boiled away with its every strike. The sigil of the comet was emblazoned down its length, and icons of honour and splendour had been carved into the holy sigmarite by the priest-smiths of the God-King.

This was not the weapon of a mortal man. Mortal terrors had no hold on him now. He had been Reforged, made into something a little less than the gods themselves, and even daemons had no strength to compare with that.

He drew himself high in the saddle, and the storm-gale made his cobalt cloak billow. He raised the warhammer again and lightning arced down from the heavens to greet it.

‘Fear no scion of the Outer Dark!’ he roared. ‘Their grip is over, their terror is gone! To me, Eternals of the Storm! Dawn shall come again!’

With an answering roar, the Liberators took up their holy weapons, led by their lightning-crowned lord, and the cries of war echoed out once more.

Anactos cried aloud, transmuting his hammer into the pure essence of the comet, and flung the blue-white fire at the void beneath the Gate’s arch. The

mixture exploded, sending a radial shockwave spiralling outwards. There was a sharp crack, an echo, a shower of dislodged stone, and he was hurled back.

With a surge of sudden hope, Anactos saw then that the Gate's seal had been weakened. The bolts of his brothers had almost broken through, but now they were fighting hard just to stay alive, and the rain of comet-fire had slowed to a trickle.

Anactos himself was tumbling now, thrown out of position by the backwash from the explosion. He pushed down hard with his damaged wings, gaining a little loft. Though deathly weary, he summoned up yet another transmuted hammer, ready to convert the energy of the storm into a comet-bolt and send it spinning into the cracking centre of the Gate's portal.

As he swivelled for the strike, he felt the storm pushing him down again, back into the open maw of the horde below. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a mighty champion in crimson armour, now no more than thirty feet beneath him. The icon-bearer was pulling his twin-bladed axe back for the throw, and Anactos knew that there was no way he could avoid it. He still had the energy of the comet cradled in his gauntlets, though. If he used that, he could smash the Chaos champion apart before he had the chance to loose the blade, giving him time to escape, to fight again, to survive.

Anactos allowed a smile to flicker across his ravaged face. He only had the power for one such bolt, and there was no question what he would do with it. With all his remaining power, he hurled the comet's essence into the fractured heart of the portal. The very next moment he felt the thrown axe-blade bite into his spine, flung with perfect accuracy by the champion below.

The Skylord arched his back, stricken with purest agony, and plummeted to earth. He cartwheeled helplessly as he fell, unable even to see with any clarity whether he had penetrated the portal's seals or not. The tempest screamed about him, ripping his broken armour from his breast. He had a sensation of extreme cold, before he cracked to the ground, his wings rent and his armour shattered.

His last living sight was of blood warriors clustered around him, their axes raised and their faces twisted in hatred and mockery.

He grinned bloodily at them. 'By Sigmar, your breed is ugly,' he rasped.

Then the blades fell.

The time had come, and Ionus could no longer remain behind his brothers. The Retributors had fought beyond even the stringent standards expected of them, defying exhaustion to hold the precarious cordon against an enemy that knew no fear and lived only for carnage. Despite all their heroism, a third of their number had been dragged down, too far away to be revived by the Cryptborn, their bodies hacked apart by the vengeful mobs. The survivors had been driven back steadily up the wide stairs leading to the portal itself, and there was now nowhere left to go.

Sensing the climax of their labours, Ionus at last joined them on the front line. He took up his reliquary in both hands and swung it like a mace, bludgeoning and thudding it into the oncoming ranks.

But that was not the only weapon in his arsenal – his arts gave him the power to restore life, but also to leech it away. With a dry hiss, Ionus released the storm-spirits from the reliquary's heart, and crackles of bone-white lightning shot from the tempest above.

The lightning scored down, raking across the oncoming blood warriors and shrivelling them within their armour. Wherever the shafts hit, the warriors of Chaos were burned to death amid the dazzling electric flames, their skin crisping and smoking as it was seared from within. They twitched like marionettes before collapsing, smouldering amid their red-hot battle-plate.

That bought them a moment's respite but it could not last. The warriors of the horde surged back into contact, their mania undimmed by their losses – indeed, the more of them that were killed, the more their enthusiasm for violence was stoked.

As Ionus fought on, he felt the first pangs of weariness in his arms. Another Retributor fell, disembowelled by a sickening swipe from a cleaver, and the line of defence teetered on the brink. As the passage of the stairway was gradually lost, Ionus caught sight of the great crimson-armoured champion, the one who had summoned the Realm of Chaos with his icon. He prepared himself, ready for the contest that would decide the final fate of the Gate's defence.

But the icon-bearer did not engage. Instead, he hurled his axe high up into the heavens, its twin-bladed head spinning in a whirl of thrown blood droplets. Ionus followed its path, watching with horror as the weapon struck Anactos Skyhelm in the back, crippling the Prosecutor-Lord and sending him crashing to earth.

If that were all, then Ionus would have felt the grief for his loss and turned back to the fight, knowing the peril they were in. But Anactos, with his final living act, had sent a storm-blast into the very heart of the Gate's pulsating mouth. Ionus watched it fly towards the target, streaking like a falling star.

When it hit, the impact was unlike the others – the entire expanse of emptiness blew apart like glass, shattering into a thousand shards. A massive secondary explosion blew out from the epicentre, tearing away the world's storm in a riot of unleashed gold and white.

The shockwave was incredible, racing out like a tidal surge and felling all in its path. Prosecutors were ripped from the skies and tossed like gulls in the storm. Webs of gold shot across the ancient stonework, illuminating the eyes of the giants that held the arch aloft, and the runes crackled with new fires of argent.

Ionus reeled, driven to his knees by the gale, but somehow remained in place to watch the event for which so much had been sacrificed.

'Hold fast, warriors of Azyr!' he commanded, his grave-dry voice raising at last. 'This is the hour!'

As he spoke, the raging tempest within the arch's ambit exploded. The runes shattered, throwing slivers of red-hot stone high into the gale. Whole beams and buttresses crumbled, and the stairways and towers were thrown down. The rain blew outwards, sent flying from the detonation's locus and hurled out

wide across the raging fields of war.

In the midst of it all, the Gate itself changed. Old stonework crumbled and cracked, revealing a structure of purest ivory beneath. The faces of the statues were fully exposed, the patina of ages seared away, their serene faces once more gazing out over the Realm of Fire. A gale surged under the arch, driving out the last of the corrupted flames and replacing them with an inferno of gold.

And then, through the archway itself, sent hurtling into the heart of the tempest by arcs of cerulean lightning, came the Legions of Azyr at last. Rank after rank of Liberators materialised on the battlefield, sent through the ancient ways between the worlds and allowed passage by the unsealed Gate. Whole warbands of Prosecutors soared under the archway before riding high on the eddying winds, their hammers already glowing white. In their wake marched the Retributors, hastening to the aid of their surviving brothers on the great stair.

Despite himself, Ionus could not help cracking a dry smile of vindication. This was why they had dared the passage of the void, and it was for this that the labour of long ages had been expended.

The Gate was open. It would never be closed again. The Realmswar, so long in abeyance, had begun once more.

‘And so begins the time of vengeance!’ the Cryptborn declaimed, holding his reliquary aloft and releasing cold fires from its casket. ‘Now march, my brothers, and bring *death* to the enemy!’



CHAPTER SEVEN

When it happened, even Khul paused in his rampage. He felt the stormwind tear past, and saw the red flames of Khorne extinguished. The Gate's portal blew apart and the besieging warriors were driven from its edge, replaced just moments later by a whole new army – ten times the number he had faced just a moment before, with more arriving all the time.

He gazed out at their sheer perfection. They were arrayed just as the others in a shimmering display of gold and cobalt, each of them bearing the hammer sigil on their peerless armour-plate. If they had been a formidable foe before, they were now truly daunting, a test for the greatest of all the Realms.

At that, Korghos Khul let slip a harsh laugh of pure pleasure. The Blood God had blessed him beyond measure. The long years of boredom and futility were

forgotten in an instant, replaced by the fervour that only came from mortal danger.

His host felt likewise, and their war-cries reached a new pitch of feverish intensity. This is what they *lived* for. This was the glorious gift of the one who sat on the Brass Throne. No worthy enemy could blunt their fury, for their only fear was to be surrounded by weakness and decay. The return of the Celestial Legions was as welcome to his kind as the return of a great and noble ally, for it presaged nothing but eternal combat, the one thing that victory had deprived them of.

For all that, Khul quickly saw that the conquest of the Gate was doomed now. The lightning-chased Legions were swiftly reinforcing it, driving Skullbrand's forces back down the slope and out on to the plains. The greater prize still remained, though – the beast rider yet lived, and was reaping a bloody swath through all that stood before him. There was no sign of Vekh, and the khorgorath was long gone. Other mighty beasts of the horde were being assailed by whole companies of Celestial knights, and the shape of the entire battle now hung in the balance.

It was only as Khul watched the helm-crested captain fight his way into the heart of the horde that the last of his long-discarded memories came rushing back. The *Direbrands* – that was what they had been called – the last of the great peoples to resist, the ones he had fought for a generation to subdue. Their chief's name had been Blackfist, his very hands charred by the fires of battle but still able to carry the warhammer that had ever been his weapon.

But back then, just when Khul had thought that combat would at last be joined, the chance had been ripped away from him, lost in a snarl and a snap of lightning. He had raged beyond all reason at the loss, and his fury had lasted for a whole year before slipping into uneasy slumber. Even the Gift of Grizzlemaw, given to him in recognition of the slaughter of Azyr's last free people, had not compensated, and the Realm of Fire had suffered grievously under his wrath.

Vendell Blackfist.

The more he watched, the more certain he became. Even if all else were cast into the fires of defeat, *this* was the task for which he had been sent to this place: to take the final Direbrand skull and place it atop the Red Pyramid. Such a sacrifice would guarantee his passage into ever-living service to the Blood God, from whence he would lead the forces of ruin into war across the planes of eternity.

'Blood for the Blood God!' Khul thundered, throwing his arms wide and goading those about him into a frothing madness. 'Skulls for his Throne!'

His horde did not waver. Not one of them turned to flee, for the blood warriors fed on slaughter as a lesser breed gorged on meats. The sight of the swelling ranks of golden warriors was like a drug, and they charged back into the grinder of battle with wild-eyed ecstasy on their scarred faces.

Khul let them go. He gave Skullbrand his head, and expended no energy seeking Vekh. Only one task remained for him, the one that he had been yearning for since the end of the ancient wars and the coming of the long

victory.

‘The last of the Direbrands,’ he growled, striding out with Grizzlemaw at his side. ‘By the god who gives me strength, how I have *longed* for this day to come.’

Vekh watched the arrival of the Legions of Azyr, and his battle-frenzy turned to blackest rage. More clearly than any other, he saw the certain doom of the battle across the plains, and he howled his disbelief into the storm.

The blood warriors about him fell back, their aggression blunted at last by the advance of the lightning-borne. Vekh roared back at the horde, grabbing for their iron collars as they surged past him, ready to hurl them back into the fray, but the numbers were too great – a battle had a momentum to it, a rhythm like the tides, and the swell had been turned.

Skuldrak lumbered away, wailing still as the last flames of Azyr consumed its flesh. Vekh let it go, turning his flails instead on the mortals within range.

‘Back!’ he screamed. ‘*Back!*’

His whips cracked, snapping like loosed serpents, wrapping around the necks of the craven. Two of those closest to him lost their heads as the coils pulled tight, and others had their flesh lacerated. Hot blood splattered across Vekh’s armour, spurring him further.

He clambered up to higher ground, reaching an outcrop of black rock standing tall amid the boiling hordes. He screamed all the while, his scarred face running with spittle and his eyes blazing.

‘Stand fast, spineless filth!’ he bellowed, hurling the barbed scourge around him in wide arcs. ‘Recover your fury! Recover your rage!’

It should have been impossible for one man, no matter how mighty, to stem that gathering rout, but dread of the bloodstoker had been inculcated into every fighter of the Goretide since the earliest days of the Realms’ corruption. Those that did not die under the agonising lashes were stung back into the only emotion left to them: rage. The first one halted in his charge – a lumbering champion with severed hands clanking from chain-lengths about his neck. He turned, roaring in pain, before setting off back towards the oncoming enemy. Vekh’s whip slashed around again – four more blood warriors remembered their battle-lust, then eight, then a whole company.

‘Tear them apart!’ raved Vekh, driving them back, his arms pumping, his instruments of pain biting in a whirl of black-edged steel. ‘Cut them limb from limb and bathe in the blood that flows! Bring *me* skulls, enough to rival Khul’s own! Blood! Blood for the Blood God!’

He marched back down from the outcrop, laying about him with every stride. Roars greeted him – the recognition of a whole army. The rot had been stemmed and their kernel of defiance rekindled. They came with him now, chanting death-curses again, revelling in the weals that scored their angry faces and blood-raw backs.

Vekh drove them hard, hunting for any more that dared to pull clear from the field. The fiercest fighting was ahead of him, sundered by a sea of bodies. He had let the beastrider best him, drive off his khorgorath, and that insult could

not be borne.

‘Follow me!’ he roared, goading his warriors into a charge. ‘The one who rides the beast! Kill him first, then kill them *all!*’

Vandus fought with the strength of a man renewed. With the breaking of the portal, a weight lifted from his arms, and Haldensen flew once more with the first vigour of the charge. Calanax pounced, catching blood warriors under his claws and shredding them to ribbons. The Liberators around him pressed the advantage, bolstered now by new warriors arriving at their backs. The horde of the enemy still outnumbered them but the gap had closed, and now the Eternals’ greater strength and skill was beginning to tell.

All of them knew that this was just the first of many Gates that would be opened. The God-King himself had closed them, right at the end of the age of darkness when the Realms were overrun. It had been His final act before the ways of the void were denied, and after that only the Celestial Realm had been preserved intact. Just as the last hope was failing, He had extended his reach into the heart of the losing battles. Those who fought on, even as their deaths were assured, were taken – pulled clear of the killing fields and dragged through the fast-closing portals.

After that, isolated from the Realms amid the spires of Sigmaron, came the agony of the transformation – the long change in which cleansing fire stripped the old life from them and gave them immortality in its stead. They were augmented, made stronger and faster than before. They were given the great warhammers to bear, and gifted armour of sigmarite cast in the purest shade of gold. The Reforging had been accomplished, and Legions of the Stormcast Eternals created.

All this had been done in the knowledge that one day, when enough strength had been assembled, they would each go back, the ways would be made straight again, and the arch through the abyss would be restored. To have failed here in the Realm of Fire would have set all that in ruins. The Fallen Gods would have redoubled their efforts, building new armies of daemons and the corrupted, accelerating their design to plunge every land into the one realm of pure Chaos before any hope of reconquest could be attempted.

The war ahead would be long, surely longer and more painful than any that had come before, but at least that first step had been taken. Vandus knew that other assaults were being launched even now, each across a different portal of the sundered kingdoms. One by one, the God-King’s armies were hammering at the closed doors, and one by one they would all be breached.

The knowledge of that gave him joy of a kind he had not experienced before, not even in the bliss of the Celestial Realm itself. At yet, even as he slew with abandon, pushing the enemy before him in a welter of cracked bone and broken armour, that joy was tempered by a greater realisation.

The face that he still bore in his dreams, the one that had never left him even amid the golden spires of Sigmar’s city, was long gone. Only on his return to the Realm of Fire did he truly understand how many years had passed, and how far sundered he was from the lives of all he had known. There would be

no going back to the world he had once striven to save, for it was utterly destroyed, replaced by a living hell of endless violence. As his warhammer scythed around him, bringing destruction to all that stood in its path, Vandus saw that this victory would not give him what he had yearned for. He was conquering for others, those who would come afterwards to repopulate these scoured lands, but not for himself.

The Direbrands were gone. Vendell Blackfist was gone. All that remained was the thing he had been made into: the Lord-Celestant, the instrument of the God-King's will.

'For Sigmar!' he thundered, wrenching his thoughts back to those of war. 'For the Celestial Throne!'

And yet, even on the cusp of his great triumph, the war-cry was more angry than triumphant, and a hollow ring had entered into the words of glory.

Ionus led the charge down from the Gate and onto the plain below. All the momentum was with his forces now, and the blood warriors were crushed beneath the armoured boots of his retinue. Storm-spirits whined and swooped overhead, forming a protective shield above them. The Retributors were irresistible, striding with resolute confidence towards their brothers in Vandus's column. Once the two flanks of the Legion joined up, the core would be unbreakable.

Even as he advanced south, though, Ionus remained vigilant for a reversal in fortunes. This was a dangerous time, and the enemy remained powerful. The icon-bearer was still alive, and the horde fought on amid the driving rain.

'Do not give in to pride,' he warned those about him, striving to keep them focused. 'Those whom the fates raise up they may also cast down. Remain wary! Look to your brothers!'

As if to prove the truth of his words, a mighty bellowing broke out from the lower reaches of the delta, far beyond where any Eternal had yet penetrated. Something huge was barrelling up from the depths, roaring in berserk fury. Blood warriors were already running from it, unable to restrain whatever force had been unleashed within their midst.

Ionus let his staff blaze with pearl-grey illumination, lighting up the sea of warriors before them and exposing the source of the booming war-cries.

A second khorgorath had been loosed against them, and it was charging with all the force of a rolling tidal wave. Blood warriors and Liberators alike were crushed and swiped from its path, their armour no defence against the writhing nest of bone tentacles. Its mighty claws swung like jackhammers, gouging long trails in the earth before flinging the debris high. Ionus saw the drooling madness in its bestial face, and knew then that it had been played to within a hair's breadth of destruction. It would recognise neither friend nor foe, but would destroy all in its path until the furnace of its existence was ended forever.

The Retributors about him immediately threw themselves towards it, all of them heedless of the danger and determined to bring their grandhammers to bear.

‘Leave it!’ cried Ionus, knowing that the creature was beyond their ability to kill, but he was too slow to prevent the clash.

Two score Retributors placed themselves in the beast’s path, and were swept aside. Many of them managed to strike it, breaking open huge wounds in the leviathan’s flanks, but nothing halted its rampage. One lone warrior held his ground before it, smashing the face of his lightning hammer into the khorgorath’s blood-streaked maw. The beast backhanded him with a flailing arm, sending the huge gold-armoured knight careering back into the following ranks of blood warriors.

‘Withdraw!’ cried Ionus, wrathful now. ‘The beast is mine!’

He swept to the forefront, blocking any more of the Retributors from taking the monster on. The khorgorath locked its red eyes on him and thundered in close, lowering its massive head like a bull on the gallop.

Its force was almost unstoppable – a living mountain of muscle and sinew, all allied to a soul of fire. Even the Cryptborn, with all his mastery of the laws of life and death, felt a beat of doubt as he saw the colossus bearing down on him.

‘Shyish!’ he cried, thrusting his staff before him and bracing for impact.

The khorgorath crashed into a summoned wall of pale grey energy, and its blood-red body instantly changed colour, whitening like embers after the fire’s death. Its headlong charge lurched to a halt, and it skidded to one side, dropping its enormous shoulder as its legs gave way.

Ionus remained steadfast, pouring on more of the deathly, soul-sapping magic. The khorgorath writhed amid the clutching strands of grey, its mighty heart hammering, its jaws clenched open in agony. It reached out with a claw, determined to strike at the source of its pain, but Ionus sidestepped the blow. His reliquary blazed with a frigid flame and the beast of Khorne crumpled to the dust, its brutal spirit spent.

As the khorgorath expired before him, Ionus at last released the spell and clutched the staff for support, his head light. Summoning up such force, with so little preparation, had almost ended him. The Retributors surged onwards, fanning around him to press the advantage. Before them lay a long path of ruin, the channel gouged by the khorgorath’s devastating run, strewn with the bodies of both Eternals and blood warriors.

It was only then, just as the dust was settling and troops on both sides were able to recover, that Ionus saw what purpose the charge had served. Standing amid the detritus was a skull-masked lord, one who bore a huge axe one-handed. He held a daemon-hound on an iron leash. He smiled coldly, and strode towards the Cryptborn at the head of a phalanx of plate-armoured guards.

‘Your task was to die here,’ the warlord told him, coming closer with every ponderous stride. ‘I loosed this beast to drive a road towards my prey, and yet you remain to bar the way.’

As soon as he saw the axe flickering with baleful energies, Ionus knew he was outmatched. Even had he not released the death-essence to fell the khorgorath, the contest would still have been beyond him.

He pulled himself up to his full height, kindling new ghoulish light above the crown of the reliquary.

‘You do not know what it is to die,’ Ionus said dryly, preparing for the clash.

All around him, his Retributors charged once more into battle, aiming to take the warlord out of the contest. They were met by the lord’s bodyguard, and the two flanks of warriors clashed together, neither side unable to reach the other’s master.

‘Your kind is not of this world,’ said the warlord, his cruel voice more intrigued than angry. ‘At least, not all of you are.’

‘All worlds are the realm of Sigmar,’ Ionus replied, happy to keep talking for as long as possible – it gave him time to recover. ‘When we are done with them, your kind will be but a foul memory.’

The warlord nodded slowly, as if he approved of the sentiment. ‘But you are different,’ he mused, still holding back from the charge, though his hound pulled at the chain. ‘You say “Sigmar”, but it does not mean the same as when the others chant his name. What *are* you, I wonder? What path has led you to fight alongside these lesser souls?’

Ionus smiled beneath his deathmask. If things had been different, he might have been pleased to recount the tale. He would have told of the debt he owed the God-King, and the ancient curse that his choice had made him subject to. He would have told of Nagash, the deity who slumbered still but would be sure to come for him when the toll of years was complete. He might have said that, yes, he *was* different, and that he was the Lord-Relictor of the Stormhost, privy to secrets that not even the Hammerhand had been made a party to, and that every road ahead of him was dark and filled with pain whatever the outcome of this battle.

In the event, he merely leaned on his staff, drawing what strength from it he could, and gave the warlord a grim salute.

‘I know your purpose,’ Ionus told him. ‘With what power I have, I will prevent you.’

At that, the enemy warlord laughed out loud. ‘I care nothing for you, death-lord,’ he said, loosing the hound’s collar, ‘but you stand between me and my prey, and thus your time draws to its close.’

The hell-hound pounced, leaping for the Cryptborn’s throat. Ionus swatted it aside with a blast from his reliquary, but by then the warlord had swept into contact. Khul brought his axe down, aiming to shatter Ionus’s pauldron, but the Cryptborn shrank back, blocking the strike with the reliquary’s staff.

The impact was crushing, forcing him down to his knees. Ionus pushed back, but his strength ran from him like water from a broken jar.

‘Should you live, be sure to seek me out when all is over,’ whispered Khul, pressing down savagely. ‘There is room in my ranks for one such as you.’

Then he suddenly released the pressure. Ionus tried to rise, to slam his staff into the warlord’s chest, but the movement had only been made in order to clear space for another strike. Khul, snapping his arms around, swept his axe crossways, catching the rising Ionus square in the throat. The blade clanged into the Cryptborn’s gorget, and he was ripped from his feet and thrown

through the air. As he tumbled through the dust, his vision going black and his senses deserting him, Ionus loosed a final flurry of storm-spirits, aiming to suck the life from the warlord just as he had done with his lesser warriors.

Grizzlemaw, though, was in their path. The daemon-hound snatched the spirits from the air, and ripped them from reality with a shake of his neck.

Ionus felt their deaths as an icy spike through his heart, and his last strength gave out. His golden helm struck the ground, and his hands slipped free of the reliquary's staff.

Khul walked towards him idly, hoisting the axe high and preparing to use it, when a lone voice cut through the battling warriors around them.

'No further.'

Khul turned, and a broad smile creased across his bony jawline. Grizzlemaw growled and raised its hackles, but the warlord merely prepared himself, bracing the axe across his body and planting his feet firmly for the onslaught.

'Then all is accomplished,' he said, his deep voice resonant with pleasure. 'You face me at last, and thus my final trophy finds its home.'

Setting eyes on Khul at last, Vandus felt a surge of old emotions. His dracoth roared, desperate to strike, and the daemon-hound did likewise. In every direction, Liberators, Retributors and blood warriors remained locked in mortal combat, a sweep of violence that ran from the Gate's edge to the mouth of the valley beyond. Everything was in motion, everything was poised.

And yet he could not move. The warlord of Chaos stood before him, just as he had been in the other age. He had grown in stature since then, and there were more skulls hanging from his iron belt, but the crimson helm and the black-toothed mouth were the same, as was the crackling axe-blade at his side that had laid whole kingdoms low.

For the first time since setting foot in this land, Vandus felt his twin lives truly blur. He was the Lord-Celestant, bringer of Sigmar's wrath. He was the chief of the Direbrands, doomed to die before the blades of the Goretide.

Khul fixed him with his dark eyes and amusement twitched across his exposed mouth.

'The one who ran,' he said. 'That is what they named you, in the later years. They cursed that name even as I killed them.'

Those words hit home. Vandus remembered how it had been – the howl of anguish, the pleading to be sent back. Every soul he had pledged to protect had died that night, bereft of the warhammer that would have been wielded in their defence.

'This realm is now taken from you,' Vandus said, holding the dracoth back, loath to launch the attack that he had been created to make. 'The Gate is secured. You have no purpose here but to die at my hand.'

Khul remained smiling, and flickers of blood-red fire raced across the edge of his axe-blade. 'No purpose? *You* are my purpose, Direbrand. You are the culmination of my great quest, and when your age-bleached bones are placed atop the pyre of Khorne, then *all* these realms will be mine.'

The voice was so terrifyingly familiar. Vandus remembered the raw fear,

how he had forced himself to fight through it. All mortals were subject to that fear – Khul was a creature of a maddened pantheon, a mere cipher for their limitless malice. The stuff of Chaos leaked out from his every pore, and though he was already less than a man, it would take but a fraction more power to make him far greater than a daemon.

‘The God-King foresaw this day,’ replied Vandus. His voice was as steady as his weapon-arm, but it belied the turmoil within – he spoke to remind himself as much as he did to challenge his old adversary. ‘You laughed then, but your defeat was already ordained.’

‘*Laughed?*’ roared Khul, outraged. ‘Gods of Ruin, boy, I was *enraged!* I laid a dozen kingdoms in ashes and still my thirst was not slaked.’ But he was laughing truly now, his eyes shining with a raw exuberance. ‘If I had known that you would return, that the only one of my enemies who had ever escaped me would come back to me, I would have spared them so much pain.’ He fixed Vandus with a sardonic look, utterly unafraid, drenched in the strutting confidence he had always displayed before the kill. ‘They died because you left them, Direbrand. That is the truth of it, and you know it in whatever heart your God-King has given you.’

Boy. That was what the warlord had called him, just before the lightning had come. In truth he must have been little more than a child then, bearing weapons forged from crude metal and defending collections of hovels barely capable of standing in a gale. Now he was the first of the Legions of Azyr, gifted power beyond mortal reckoning, and still the word ‘boy’ cut him to his soul.

Vandus. Vendell.

That was *enough*.

He released his hold over the dracoth, and took up his warhammer as the creature powered into the charge. At the same moment, the daemon-hound pounced, joined by its master in the race to combat. Khul leapt high, striving to reach Vandus and launching a great circuit of his axe. Vandus parried, and the two weapons clanged from one another, sending a shockwave blazing out from the impact.

As the two warriors spun apart, the dracoth took on the daemon-hound, and together the two beasts fell into a snarling, snapping brawl. Khul swept back in close, thrusting his blade at Vandus’s body, and this time the collision nearly wrenched Heldensen from his grip.

‘Your gifts have not made you stronger,’ said Khul, mockingly. ‘You were weak then, you are weaker now.’

Vandus swung the hammerhead across, generating huge momentum, but the blow rebounded from Khul’s counter-strike and the fires along its ensorcelled length guttered out. Calanax was holding its own against Grizzlemaw, but nothing seemed to harm the Lord of Khorne. They traded more swipes, denting and cracking the armour they both wore, and neither broke through to give the decisive wound. The wider battle raged about them, though no warrior dared to intervene in their lords’ duel, locked as they were in deadly struggles of their own.

Khul changed tack then, falling back by a stride’s length. The dracoth sensed

the retreat and thrust after him, trying to seize him by the neck. Grizzlemaw leapt for the creature's scaled shoulder and lodged fast, driving its yellow teeth into the flesh. The dracoth reared, wrenching himself from the daemon-hound's grip, giving Khul his opening as Vandus struggled to control his mount – the warlord's axe found a way through, biting deep along Vandus's armoured thigh, and the Lord-Celestant cried aloud.

The blood warriors in earshot roared with scorn as they heard the sound, and the Liberators felt a shard of doubt enter their souls. The duel had become the locus around which the entire battle revolved – with no breakthrough from either army, it had come down to the survival of the lords that led them.

Khul sprang back, evading Vandus's vengeful strike, panting hard. For all his mastery, he too had taken heavy damage, and his strength, though immense, was not infinite.

'Will you be taken from me again, I wonder?' mused Khul, circling the dracoth, keeping his axe-edge high. 'At the moment when I hold your life in my hands, will your God-King pull you from peril as he did before?'

Vandus barely heard the words. Everything he had done since his Reforging now hung on this moment. He had been sent to Aqshy to slay the warlords who ruled it, and now, with the storm of Sigmar's wrath circling above him, he was still holding back. His power felt blunted, incomplete. Every time he aimed Heldensen at his adversary, his aim lacked the sharpness it had possessed in a hundred other duels.

The dracoth was undeterred, and lashed out fiercely at the hound. The two beasts were bleeding freely now, their jaws a mess of torn flesh. Khul prowled back for the next strike, his dark outline radiating a casual lethality.

'Why even return?' the warlord asked. 'Can you not see it? There is nothing left. You should have kept the Gate closed – we will come hunting for you now, just as you have done for us.'

The taunt had been designed to enrage him, to place the fear in him that Azry too might be at peril, but Vandus did not linger on those words. The ones that resonated with him were the others: *there is nothing left*.

And then he understood. His grief had risen when he had seen what he was fighting for – the fire-scarred wastes, the old ruins. That was not what he had once striven to protect. He had breathed the realm's parched air and smelled its charred bones, and his mighty heart had sunk.

Even now, an aspect of him was lodged in that other world, the place in which all his old loves had dwelt. He had been a part of that, and in the long years of preparation a part of him had hoped something would be left to retrieve – some survivors, some mark of the old civilisation. When it was clear that the past was lost, that hope had dissolved. He could not fight for the Aqshy of the present as he might have done for the Aqshy of the past.

And therein lay his fault – he had let his old self swim up to the surface, for the grief was not his, it was Vendell's. Vandus had not been sent to restore the realm of the past, he had been sent to create the realm of the future.

Heldensen roared into flame once more. The sign of the comet emblazoned on his armour burst out with a pure light, reflecting the hidden glory of the

Celestial Realm. Vandus pulled the dracoth's head around, driving him hard at the waiting figure of Korghos Khul.

The warlord gave no sign he had detected the change, and raced to rejoin battle. Their weapons smashed into one another once again, but this time it was the axe that rebounded, its fires wavering. Vandus flung down another blow, knocking Khul back and sending him staggering.

Vandus spoke no words, for his fury was now enough. Khul recovered himself, his laughter gone. In a thousand years he had never been bested, and he surged back into contact, his blade whirling about him in tighter circles.

Vandus angled his hammer down, aiming to catch the axe-head in mid-flight. As he did so, his dracoth missed his aim, freeing Grizzlemaw to strike. The daemon-hound leapt clear of Vandus's steed, its jaws agape. At the last moment, Vandus wrenched Heldensen to block it, and Grizzlemaw's teeth clamped on to the golden hammerhead.

That left him exposed, and Khul was there to take advantage. The lord of Khorne sent a vicious swipe whistling for Vandus's ungarded neck, crying out with triumph as the killing blow swept in. There was no evading that strike, for Khul had poured all his long festering hatred into it, and it was unleashed with an infinite outpouring of his seasoned malice.

'For the Blood God!'

But Khul's cry of triumph was cut short. The Lord-Celestant's outline blazed with azure fire, and he wrenched the hammerhead from Grizzlemaw's jaws. Khul's axe-head cut through the haze of crackling lightning, but connected with the lightning-crowned metal. The two weapons clashed again, each one propelled by the entirety of their bearer's strength. With a thunderous crash, the full power of the storm was unlocked, and this time it was Khul who was thrown back.

His armour still incandescent with shimmering celestial energies, Vandus pressed the attack, and Heldensen smashed through Khul's hurried guard, knocking the cursed iron aside. Another hammer-blow flew in, angled back, flinging Khul's blade from his hand and hurling it end over end into the horde beyond. For the first time the warlord's eyes betrayed fear – he could see the prize slipping away from him, eluding his grasp just as it had done before. He snarled and leapt straight for Vandus, talons outstretched, going for his neck.

Vandus was too fast, though, and Heldensen hurtled around, catching the oncoming warlord full in the chest. The lightning-wreathed head cracked the crimson armour open, and Khul was sent tumbling away, the first roar of true pain leaving his bloodied lips.

The dracoth pounced, going after Grizzlemaw and digging the talons in deep. Vandus pushed clear of the saddle, joining the assault on the daemon-hound. He waded in close, waiting for the coiled spring, and caught the beast in mid-jump. Grizzlemaw was immune to the sacred fire burning along Heldensen's shaft, but was as subject to the indomitable strength of sigmarite as any mortal creature. The heavy hammerhead crunched into its ribcage, driving in the bones and tossing the broken-backed hound aside.

Then Vandus turned back to Khul. The warlord had been thrown many yards

back, hurled into the heart of his own warriors, crushing many of them beneath his armoured bulk. Khul stayed prone, his weapon gone and the fires of Khorne extinguished. Vandus went after him, his hammer now light in his grasp. The moment had come and there was no doubt remaining. The Brimstone

Peninsula of old had been destroyed, and the ruined butcher before him was just one small facet of that tortured past. With his death the new age could begin – the age of renewal.

‘Nothing remains,’ Vandus said, his voice cold. Khul stared up at him, bleary-eyed, half comprehending. ‘Aye, nothing remains, not of this place, and not of the man I once was. You should not have come back to face me, warlord, for all things have changed.’

Vandus Hammerhand drew Heldensens back then, poised to deliver the strike that would end his ancient tormentor. Khul snarled, his throat catching with bubbles of blood, and something kindled under the shadow of his helm – a fell light, igniting like stirring embers.

Vandus met that gaze, and was instantly caught. Visions thrust into his mind, as clear as shafts of fire. He saw eight towers, each bridging the void between the burning horizon and the storm-cracked sky. Between those towers he saw another Gate, a vast remnant of ensorcelled stone and iron, shackled with mighty chains and wreathed in blood-red immolation. And yet this one led not to the glory of the God-King’s realm, but to the depths of madness beyond all mortal reckoning. Under its lintel seethed a gaping wound in reality, one through which unbounded malice bled into the worlds of the living.

Under the shadow of that gate stood the pyramid of skulls – the one Khul had boasted of. In those shuddering visions the warlord lived and climbed to the summit, his progress lit by the baleful glow of the open Gate. Khul carried a lone burden in his exposed claw – a severed head, still glistening with flesh.

Vandus reeled, just for a moment, consumed by the vision before him. He recognised the features on what remained of that face and it chilled him to his soul. Below him, Khul let a smile flicker across his bruised mouth.

‘For the Blood God!’ came a frenzied cry, cutting through the tumult.

The spell of the vision broke, and Vandus’s gaze snapped up.

The words were not the warlord’s. The whip-wielder had returned, driving a fresh phalanx of blood warriors and bloodreavers before him. The newcomers crashed into the battling lines, scattering the vanguard of Liberators and pushing them back deep into their own ranks.

Vandus alone stood firm, recovering himself and smashing aside the blood warriors that slammed into him. He slew swiftly, his hammer scything, but hundreds swarmed at him, driven by the merciless goad in their midst.

Vandus’s dracoth reared up, tearing and ripping his way to his side, and the two of them were reunited amid a swirling sea of foes, each fighting furiously just to stay on their feet and not get dragged under the bow-wave of the assault.

‘For the God-King!’ Vandus cried, remounting even as he shattered the skulls of those trying to haul him down.

They were pushed back towards the Gate, where they were joined by

Liberators fighting back after the shock of the charge. The crush intensified, and the fighting rose to an apex of desperate brutality. There was no room for art, no space for finesse – Celestial resolve was pitted against a riptide of mindlessness, and the Hammers of Sigmar fought back then as savagely and as pitilessly as those they faced.

Caught in the centre of it all, driven westward, Vandus caught a last glimpse of Khul, trampled by his own kind, lost under the rampage of ironshod boots. It was impossible to tell whether he lived or died, but he was soon beyond all hope of reaching.

Freed of his baleful presence, though, Vandus felt a sudden lifting of the dread that had hung in their air since the warlord's arrival. The tenor of the storm itself changed, and all across the battlefield the Eternals sensed it. A great shout, issued from thousands of immortal lips, rose up into the maelstrom-driven air.

Sigmar!

The battle-chant resounded across the Igneous Delta for the first time in mortal memory. The Gate remained open, and more Eternals were coming through the portal with every passing moment.

The dracoth swept his serpentine head from side to side, gouging out the throats of all within range. The Stormhost regained its shape, responding to the onslaught as they had been trained to. The final charge had been vicious, but even the champions of the horde, those steeped deepest in battle-rage, could see that with Khul's defeat, the night was already lost. This land's marred sun would rise soon, casting red light over a new vista of gold and cobalt.

Vandus raised his warhammer aloft, and it blazed with the unbound splendour of the lightning's heart.

'Azyr!' he cried. 'For the God-King!'

And as one the Hammers of Sigmar took up the shout, surging back at the enemy with the light of the Celestial Realm burning in their eyes.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Hours passed before the last of the enemy was beaten back. Even in defeat many of them still fought on, bitterly contesting every last tract of ground. More Eternals fell in that fighting, brought down by the savagery of the blood-crazed horde.

But Vandus came among them again, his strength now unmatched, and the last resistance was broken. Khul never returned. Of Vekh the Flayer there was no sign, nor of the beast he had enslaved. Skullbrand, bereft of the leadership of his master, was hammered back into the west, and with him went the last of the Realm of Chaos, melting back into the earth in rippling waves of oily smoke. Phalanxes of Liberators pursued the defeated horde, only halting when the dangers of becoming isolated became too great. Then they set the banners

of Azyr to fly on the ruined walls, and mounted a guard on the hollow towers. With the rising of the sun, the entire plain was taken, ready for the next assault. Others would already be preparing to cross the void to secure what had been won, but the Hammers of Sigmar could not rest for long – their task had long been ordained, and before the blood had cooled on the battlefield they would be marching again.

Only when the last of the enemy had been slain did Vandus return to the Gate. By then he had given his dracoth freedom to hunt freely, and now he walked across the earth in the manner of the rest of his Eternals, his footfalls sinking deep into the gore-rich soil.

Ionus was waiting for him at the foot of the stone stairway, leaning heavily on his reliquary staff. The Cryptborn bowed as the Hammerhand approached, as did all the Stormhost present.

‘So his faith in you was vindicated,’ said Ionus, dryly. ‘In the end.’

Vandus smiled. ‘You witnessed it. Did you doubt?’

‘When I saw you fight like a callow youth, yes. Not at the conclusion. What ailed you?’

Vandus looked about him. The sheer despoliation still had the power to chasten. ‘This place,’ he said. ‘Though we were warned, there could be no preparing.’

Ionus grunted. ‘That was why you were charged with forgetting. The Reforging should have made you whole.’

‘And you, then, Cryptborn? You have forgotten too?’

Ionus let slip a harsh laugh. ‘Well, we must both learn – there can be no going back.’

‘No, but there may be a second forging, for you and all the others.’ Vandus looked out over his army, their armour now streaked with blood and soiled with the filth of the Igneous Delta. ‘This was mine.’

The two of them began to walk up the long stone stairwell, Ionus limping heavily. Above them soared the arch of the Gate, now glinting in the light of the world’s sun. Age had been stripped away by the storm’s wrath, and the artistry of its makers was revealed once more.

In time, more than Eternals would come through that portal. Artificers and stonewrights would return, making good what had been laid low. This ground won was just a fragment of the Brimstone Peninsula’s vast expanse – they had established a mere pinprick of light against the swath of darkness that ran off into every compass point. When those points of light were united, drawn together by the coming of many Stormhosts, then the war would flourish in earnest.

They both knew that other portals were under attack now. Some would succeed, carving new paths into the territory of the great enemy. Others would no doubt fail, though their valour would still be a testament to the God-King’s vision. This was just the start, the unfolding of a thousand battles that would sweep across lands long lost to despair.

‘And what of Khul?’ asked Ionus, breathing heavily as he climbed. His wounds had been grave, and even the Lord-Relictor would take time to recover

from them.

'He lives,' said Vandus. 'The shame of his survival will haunt him, just as mine did me.' He looked out across the ruins. 'He will return, once his broken body has healed. We must be ready.'

Ionus nodded. 'And so we will be.'

Vandus said nothing of his vision then – the Gate into the abyss, the pyramid of skulls. He would be compelled to, in time, for already his mind was turning to the campaign to come. He would have to bend Ionus to his will before the Stormhost marched next, and that would not be easy.

The two of them reached the summit of the stair. Above them soared the archway, now free of the fires that had raged across it. The air hummed with an actinic charge and lightning still flickered around its edges, but only the deep bloodstains on the stone marked the true scale of what had taken place under its shadow.

The air tasted of ashes, and the copper tang of blood underpinned it all. The great heaps of bone were visible in the distance, hazy in the dawn, and beyond them reared the faint outlines of greater towers.

Ionus halted, and shot him a wry smile. 'You have tidings you wish to share,' he said. 'But take a moment, lord, to consider what has been done this night.'

'And just what has been done, Cryptborn?' asked Vandus, feeling the weariness of the long fight catch up with him at last. 'We are conquering a burned wasteland. Whatever evil we succeed in slaying, we come too late.'

'Perhaps,' said Ionus. 'Perhaps not. Come – I have something to show you.'

Throughout the night of horror, they had never moved. They had hugged the stone, burrowing down as if they could somehow tunnel their way out of harm's way. The sky itself had burned, riven with flames of both bronze and silver, and the rocks below had groaned and cracked.

Of all the fears she had endured, that had been the very worst. Kalja had long been resigned to her own life ending in bloodshed, but this was different – the world was ending, tipped on its axis, dissolving into a screaming vortex of madness.

At the start, she had been glad to see the bloodreavers retreat, but then she had seen what they were retreating from. The storm-borne were daemon-kind, surely, thrown down from the fiery skies and sent to visit anguish on the mortals below. Their faces were horrific – golden masks that gave away nothing – and they bore enormous weapons of fire and steel. Each one was far taller than a man, and their voices were fell and strident.

The others of the tribe had been shaking by then, locked down, caught between the gathering of armies too vast to comprehend. Their long flight across the delta had ended at the hill of the three towers, and Kalja's faint hopes of holding off their pursuers amid the ruins had at last been exposed.

But then, slowly, the shape of the battle had changed. Kalja had seen the daemon-kind take on the bloodreavers, and after them the larger horde that had followed. All the fighting had been concentrated on the massive arch-ruin, and the hill-side where they sheltered was forgotten.

They were not daemons. She saw that as she had watched, half in terror, half in fascination. Though they inspired fear, it was not the mind-numbing dread of the aethyr-born, but a cleaner fear, one generated solely from their warlike mien and savage bearing. They were brave, astonishingly so, throwing themselves into the very centre of the great army that had followed them over the plains. For a long time they had been isolated and heavily outnumbered, surely destined to die below the ruins they were striving so valiantly to hold, and at one point she had got to her feet, ready to race down into the inferno to join her blade with theirs.

Svan had pulled her back. 'Are you mad?' he had hissed. 'Leave them to slaughter each other!'

But this had not been just another of the endless feuds between rival powers – this had been something new, something that no one had witnessed before. She had continued to watch, desperately urging the newcomers to prove their worth, even when it looked like their demise was imminent. When the Gate had opened and the second great host of gold had emerged through it, she had had to quash a cry of joy, burning up from inside and threatening to spill from her mouth.

After that, the battle had raged with even more intensity. The storm had thundered and the lights had become blinding. She had not seen the end, for the noise and the elements' torment had at last pushed her back down into the meagre protection of the stones about her, crouched like an infant, her hands clamped over her ears.

Right at the end, though, when the horde had finally been broken, there had been fighting at last. Some of the warlord's warriors had fled in their direction, and Kalja and the others had taken up arms in their frozen fingers. She had killed one blood warrior, catching him unawares as he vaulted the walls, but then others had rounded on her, their blades glinting by the light of the fires.

She had hissed a curse at them and prepared to die with as much ferocity as she could muster, when one of the golden knights burst among them. His movements had been of a different order to those he fought – his warhammer had flown in a blur of speed, crushing and maiming with every bone-jarring hit. Those he had not slain quickly fled, limping off into the dark and carrying life-ending wounds. Then the masked killer had turned on Kalja, his warhammer angled to end her too.

She had been too shocked to move. As the rain had scythed down, she had stood stock-still, her blunt knife dripping in her hand. The masked killer had hesitated, clearly unsure. Others of the tribe, scattered by the blood warriors' attack, had crept back, all of them gaping up at the newcomer, like her too overwhelmed to intervene.

'If you are here to kill me,' she had said, forcing the words out through fear-tight lips, 'then do so now.'

On hearing the words, the gold-armoured warrior had relaxed his grip on the hammer. He had fallen to one knee before her, bringing his head to a level with her own, studying her face intently. Kalja had suffered the scrutiny, feeling wretched and filthy set beside his splendour.

‘You are whole,’ the warrior had said, and his voice had been deeper and more resonant than anything she had ever heard. There had been something else there, also – astonishment, perhaps. ‘By Sigmar, you are whole.’

Vandus listened to the mortal tell her tale, not interrupting until the end. Ionus stood besides him, as did Avaren, the Liberator who had discovered her. Smoke from the pyres drifted across the plains below them, a dirty brown that stained the overcast sky.

The Lord-Celestant tried to resist the urge to stare openly at her. Part of him was appalled by her very existence – she was a wretch, her bones protruding starkly, her rags hanging from a skeletal frame in layers of filth. For all that, she stood proudly before them, her shoulders pushed back, her fingers fidgeting at the knife-hilt tied to her belt. There was defiance there.

Once she finished speaking, he went up to her, falling to one knee as Avaren had done. Even stooped he was far taller than her, and set beside his war-finery she looked almost comically fragile.

And yet, he thought, they endured here throughout all the ages of darkness. Could we, with all our gifts, have done the same?

‘What are you called?’ he asked, speaking as gently as he could.

‘I am named Kalja,’ she said.

‘How many of you are there?’

‘Just what you see, lord.’ Less than twenty had survived the night, and all those who remained were sick and famished.

‘And are there more, out in the wilds?’

‘How many, I know not. If others live, then they are hunted as we were.’

Those words made him angry. These were the children of humanity, the last remnants of a once-great people. For them to be chased down like beasts was the darkest of the blasphemies that had been visited on this cursed land.

‘Do you know what we are?’ he asked.

The woman stared at him blankly. He might as well have asked her how best to compass the moon. She had known in her life nothing but the theology of Dark Gods, and the name of Sigmar had never been uttered in a mortal’s hearing. The sigils he bore on his armour were as esoteric to her as the icons of Chaos were to him.

Seeing her confusion, he reached up and lifted his helm from his head. For the first time, she beheld him as he truly was. There was immediate recognition there, for although Vandus was an Eternal, changed and augmented by the powers of the Celestial Realm, his features were still those of a man.

‘We are salvation,’ he told her. ‘We are the end to pain and the beginning of hope. While one of us draws breath, you will never be hunted again. We are the warriors of Sigmar, and this is the dawn of his Age.’

Some of what he said made no sense to her, but the tone of his words clearly struck home, for a line of tears ran down her grimy cheek. For an instant, Vandus was reminded of the old image, the one he had cherished even in the midst of the lamplit halls of Sigmoron.

When she had smiled, he remembered, her dark eyes had held the light of

stars.

He might have pressed Kalja further then. Perhaps, if the fates had allowed it, he would have discovered that she was some scion of a tribe he had known, maybe of even the Direbrands themselves. He almost asked her, for her defiant face was so similar, so redolent of the one he had known.

But the question died on his lips. He had passed the test amid the fires of war, and would not tread that path again. It mattered not where this human came from, nor what blood ran in her veins – she was a daughter of Sigmar, and her survival alone was surety that the return to the Realms was not made in vain.

‘Then,’ she asked, looking unsteady on her feet, ‘are the wars over?’

A desperate hope was burning in her brown eyes, one that vied with exhaustion. She had been taken to the very edge of extinction, as had all her people, though Cryptborn assured him she would survive.

Vandus would have loved to have told her that they were over, but here, in this place, at the first reunion between those who had been left and those who had returned, she deserved the truth.

‘When all is accomplished, they will be,’ he said. ‘From this day forth, every last tithe of strength will be spent to reconquer what was lost, and to hold it, and to rebuild anew.’

Then his faint smile faded, for he could still smell the ashes of burning, and knew that the bloodshed of the past night was but a foretaste of what was to come, in this and every other Mortal Realm.

‘But for now,’ he said, never letting his eyes leave hers, ‘I tell you truly, they are only just beginning.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*.

For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novel *Wrath of Iron* and the omnibus *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the End Times novel *The Fall of Altdorf* and the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

An extract from *War Storm*.



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 demeanour.

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.

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