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AGE OF SIGMAR



CHILDREN OF TECLIS

A LUMINETH REALM-LORDS NOVEL

EVAN DICKEN

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The Mortal Realms have been despoiled. Ravaged by the followers of the Chaos Gods, they stand on the brink of utter destruction.

The fortress-cities of Sigmar are islands of light in a sea of darkness. Constantly besieged, their walls are assailed by maniacal hordes and monstrous beasts. The bones of good men are littered thick outside the gates. These bulwarks of Order are embattled within as well as without, for the lure of Chaos beguiles the citizens with promises of power.

Still the champions of Order fight on. At the break of dawn, the Crusader's Bell rings and a new expedition departs. Storm-forged knights march shoulder to shoulder with resolute militia, stoic duardin and slender aelves. Bedecked in the splendour of war, the Dawnbringer Crusades venture out to found civilisations anew. These grim pioneers take with them the fires of hope. Yet they go forth into a hellish wasteland.

Out in the wilds, hardy colonists restore order to a crumbling world. Haunted eyes scan the horizon for tyrannical reavers as they build upon the bones of ancient empires, eking out a meagre existence from cursed soil and ice-cold seas. By their valour, the fate of the Mortal Realms will be decided.

The ravening terrors that prey upon these settlers take a thousand forms. Cannibal barbarians and deranged murderers crawl from hidden lairs. Martial hosts clad in black steel march from skull-strewn castles.

The savage hordes of Destruction batter the frontier towns until no stone stands atop another. In the dead of night come howling throngs of the undead, hungry to feast upon the living.

Against such foes, courage is the truest defence and the most effective weapon. It is something that Sigmar's chosen do not lack. But they are not always strong enough to prevail, and even in victory, each new battle saps their souls a little more.

This is the time of turmoil. This is the era of war.

This is the Age of Sigmar



CHILDREN OF TECLIS

A LUMINETH REALM-LORDS NOVEL

EVAN DICKEN



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PROLOGUE



Death came from the sea. Grand Archivist Uiharan thought he had prepared for all eventualities, but how could one anticipate the end of the world?

It had been decades since Uiharan last drew steel or wove a spell in anger, but the soul never truly forgot the terrible cadence of battle. He had been a Loreseeker after all. Long before he had come to the Inscribed Citadel and turned his hand to quill and parchment, Uiharan had trod razored paths alongside bright hosts of Vanari, wrested stolen secrets from the clutching hands of sage and sorcerer. That knowledge was here now, in the vaulted stacks along with the rest of his life's work – four thin tomes, bound in Syari shimmersilk, glimmering opalescent amidst the ruddy reds and creaking browns of the other books of arcane lore.

A vanity, yes, but he had been vain, and a Grand Archivist could be forgiven some eccentricities.

A shudder ran through the stacks, protective enchantments and warding mandalas flexing under the weight of necromantic assault. Centuries of collected lore shifted in its casements, white-robed archivists fluttering like caged birds as a few of the more precarious records toppled from high perches. Reflexively, Uiharan set a hand upon his work, not sure if he meant to steady it upon its shelf, or buttress himself against the fell shadow

that had fallen across his home realm of Hysh.

His fingers lingered on the letters of his name, inscribed in silvered script below the monograph. A gentle touch, as if to bid farewell.

‘Grand Archivist, they come.’ Although Syldaris spoke softly, her words carried the weight of a magistrate passing sentence.

Uiharan nodded. Air settled in his lungs, as if he were some petulant child holding his breath so that he might forestall the inevitable. It had been too much to hope the spectral invasion might pass them by, that the Inscribed Citadel had already weathered the worst when Nagash’s Necroquake toppled their spires and sent juddering cracks through the walls.

All of which should have been impossible.

Like other arcane institutes, the Inscribed Citadel had laboured to erect a spire of purest aetherquartz, imbued with stabilising wards to shore up Hysh’s arcane firmament. A great network had arisen across the Realm of Light, centred on the Tower of Prios, a sorcerous capstone erected by Holy Teclis himself.

The spires should have bled strength from Nagash’s mystic assault, preserving the Realm of Light from the worst of the necrotic devastation. But somehow, they had failed to do anything more than blunt the Necroquake. Though the other Mortal Realms had suffered worse, Hysh was not prepared for such an assault.

Uiharan released his captive breath, turning to Syldaris. The elder antiquarian was awash in her articulated Vanari Warden battle plate, rune-inscribed shield and sunmetal spear gripped in hands more suited to the restoration of ancient treasures.

As if aware of the tenor of Uiharan’s thoughts, Syldaris glanced down at her antique panoply, pale lips curling in a self-conscious scowl.

‘I cut a much more imposing figure in my younger days.’

‘We all did, old friend.’ Uiharan touched her on the shoulder, smiling to dispel any lingering discomfort. ‘We all did.’

‘The others await on the wall.’ Syldaris’ gaze flicked over Uiharan’s shoulder, as if she could pierce the archive casements and survey the shrieking horde upon the cliffs beyond.

‘And Lord Regent Chariel?’ Uiharan asked, hating the note of desperation in his voice. ‘Has Elarin reached Illium?’

‘We have seen no sign of the city’s warriors.’ Syldaris shook her head with

a clatter of ancient plate and chain. ‘It seems Elarin has failed to convince Chariel to honour her oath to defend us.’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘Perhaps not.’ Syldaris’ frown gave lie to the tepid reassurance.

‘I will join you in a moment.’ Uiharan straightened. It had been too much to hope Chariel would bring the forces of Illium to their aid. The Inscribed Citadel was a small archive, possessed of few relics of note. Uiharan did not begrudge Lord Regent Chariel her decision – how could the lives of a few archivists possibly measure against those of an entire city?

And yet, even such stark accounting could not dispel the lingering embers of hope that flickered in Uiharan’s chest.

At least Elarin would be spared.

She was the best of his disciples – clever, curious, and capable of such delightful insights Uiharan could not but shake his head in awe. Had Elarin been of noble birth she would have had her pick of lyceums and arcane academies, but her people had been sailors – merchants, river traders, and sea wardens as far back as their waterlogged history could be traced. There was no wealth, no privilege, no power to be had save upon the boards of their own ships. And so, Elarin found herself at the Inscribed Citadel, talent circumscribed by blood and birth.

In truth, Uiharan had not sent her to convince the Lord Regent to honour her oath and defend the archives, but rather to spare Elarin what was to come.

Servants had prepared Uiharan’s battle robes. The feel of woven chain and plate so familiar, and yet awkward in their unyielding memory. Even the most rigorous of scholarly debates were no substitute for martial training. Thankfully, the servants had lengthened the straps, taking out the robes in several places to account for Uiharan’s somewhat expanded physique.

As Grand Archivist, he should have wielded Glimmerdark, but even the fine edge of that storied blade would have been as a newly cut quill before the shrieking necromantic tide that battered the citadel’s failing walls. Better to send their finest relic with Elarin, and preserve both thereby.

It hardly mattered. Uiharan’s old Loreseeker blade still felt good in his hand, as did the warm wood of his staff. He drew the blade, regarding his reflection in the gleaming surface. The sunmetal shone exactly the same; only Uiharan had changed. How long had it been since it had been bared?

Years, surely. Decades, perhaps.

Old muscles creaked through half-remembered forms, runes of ice, and flame, and scorching light dredged from misty recollections of battles fought a lifetime ago. Uiharan would have preferred to spend days reacclimatising himself to the feel of armour and weapons, but a jittering crack from beyond the walls of his modest chamber cut short his martial reverie.

He could hear the shrieks now, tormented spirits bound to a broken wheel, unable to find solace save in the tearing of flesh, their hateful agonies slaked only through the spread of death. They had come screaming from the aethereal cracks, ley lines and geomantic webs snapping like overtaxed cables as the howling, clutching horde poured from the Realm of Death.

Uiharan hurried from his chambers, along the winding hall and out upon the battlements. Back straight, he stepped into the brilliant radiance of Hysh, the Realm of Light's eternal glow comforting even amidst such lambent shadows.

The archive's dozen guards stood still as temple columns, heavy, two-handed blades gripped in gauntleted fists. There was no tremor in their bearing, no trepidation in their stance. They were Vanari Bladelords, more weapon than warrior, their every thought sharp as the swords they wielded. The battle to come was just another expression of their art, another chance to seek enlightenment through the perfection of martial form.

They were a stark contrast to the archivists and initiates. Scholars sweated in ill-fitting armour, unfamiliar weapons held in awkward grips. A few had been warriors in their youth, but most were youths who had yet to become warriors. Lips moved in quiet recitation, sharp intonations cutting the mouths of sorcerers more used to weaving wonders – runes of delicate light, ephemeral elementals, geomantic mandalas so subtle as to rest upon the land like gossamer thread. This, perhaps, was the cruellest of Nagash's spiteful maledictions, that such skill and wisdom need be turned to more brutal endeavours.

There seemed no end to the spirit host. Strengthened by the necromantic tide, their numinous forms glimmered with the sickly glow of witchlight, a twisting, scrabbling horde that clawed at the citadel's guttering wards. Hateful shrieks became screams of delight as the first of the runes buckled before the unrelenting assault. They poured through the spreading gap in a

flood of spectral bodies, like windblown leaves skittering across stone.

Its protective enchantments crumbling, the citadel's cracked stone ramparts proved little obstacle for the howling host. They simply flowed up the wall, little more than a shift in perspective for those lacking bodies or weight.

The first of the defenders' spells came crashing down. Lines of brilliant light pierced gloom-shrouded bodies even as others were scoured from the stone by swirling conflagrations of lightning and fire.

Incantations rose through Uiharan's racing thoughts, his lips, his hands, his soul falling to familiar cadences of destruction. A wraith rose in front of him, ghostly face warped in an expression of inconceivable hate as it swung a jagged scythe.

A wave of Uiharan's staff and it simply dissolved, the energy that bound its spectral form dispersing like blood spilled into a raging sea.

Scores of howling banshees filled its place. Wrapped in bone-pale robes, they fell upon the last of the runic mandalas like carrion crows, pallid jaws spread impossibly wide as they ripped and tore at the remaining wards. Some of the archivists sought to drive them back with spiralling blades of light, only to have the banshees turn their hideous hunger upon the sorceries, then the scholars themselves.

A pair of Bladelords hurried to defend the archivists. They moved without thought, without hesitation, gleaming blades transcribing geometrically perfect arcs. Aethereal flesh parted like clouds before the razor-edged sunmetal of their swords. For a moment, the Bladelords moved like diving herons, the ghostly throng parting around a welter of slashing steel. Then, the two Vanari were simply gone, the pale tide washing over them in a shrieking, scrabbling flood.

The dead were on the walls now. Uiharan saw a young archivist pinion a howling Nighthaunt, only to have two others slip by his guard to sink rusty blades into his ribs. A rattling mob of manacled spectres fell upon a pair of archivists, bludgeoning aside their ward with chains and sheer malice.

In desperation, Uiharan drew what remained of his power about him like a cloak. Waving for the others to withdraw to the archives, he hammered his staff upon the rampart, incantations glittering in the air as he wove a brilliant web of runes around the fractured stone. Although much of his war magic had been lost to the fog of time, Uiharan had spent his life among the

stones of the citadel, his inscriptions adding to the work of other Grand Archivists, a line of enlightened scholars stretching back to the Spirefall.

Uiharan was no aelementiri, no master of elemental forms, but every block, every arch, every buttress of the citadel had felt the touch of his sorcery.

He called to them now.

Even so, the wall was vast and his powers limited. A murder of hollow-eyed ghosts swirled around the edges of his protective enchantments, battering at them with the long reaping hooks that had replaced their hands. Even as he poured more power into the burgeoning enchantment, Uiharan felt his wards pricked by a hundred terrible blows, the harridans' high wail seeming equal parts torment and glee.

A heartbeat and they would have been on him, but a glimmer in the corner of Uiharan's vision resolved into Syldaris.

The elderly antiquarian fell upon them like a wind-toppled tree. Her shield raised to ward Uiharan's flank, Syldaris' spear lashed out, fast as a cormorant's beak as it pierced pale chests and punctured howling faces. The embittered mob slashed at her, teeth gnashing as pallid flames lit their hateful eyes. Bleeding from a dozen gashes, Syldaris seemed rooted to the battlement, her spear the ripple of light upon cresting waves.

Uiharan felt the final runes fit into place and he raised his arms, drawing tight the web of gleaming light. The ramparts gave an aggrieved rumble, stones shifting as if awakened from some terrible nightmare.

The ghostly horde paid no mind to the new enchantments – so similar to the wards they had so recently torn asunder. But Uiharan's web was not meant to shore up the Inscribed Citadel's defences.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Shouting the last blazing words, he threw an arm around Syldaris, dragging the antiquarian back along the shuddering battlement. The spectral mob gave chase, snapping at their heels like a pack of blood-maddened crag wolves.

Uiharan threw himself back as the first of the stones gave way. He and Syldaris tumbled into the relative safety of the archive.

Behind them, the ramparts buckled.

Normally, such destruction would have been little threat to beings made from spite and spirit, but the stones of the Inscribed Citadel were more than

mere masonry. They were steeped in arcane energy, thrumming with geomantic force harnessed by generations of arcane artisans. Uiharan might not be able to hold back the flood, but he *could* create one of his own.

Whipped into a maelstrom by Uiharan's sorceries, the enchanted stones battered Nagash's spectral host. Aethereal bodies were ground to wisps as massive blocks clashed together. Wraiths were pummelled to the ground by swirling masonry, only to be crushed by heavier blocks. The wave of spirits flowed back upon itself, fear overwhelming hate for perhaps the first time in their vicious afterlives.

Uiharan could but cover his head as the roiling maelstrom of masonry and light collapsed upon itself, the echoing boom of a thousand thousand stones eclipsing the aggrieved howls of their ghostly victims.

After what seemed an eternity, the last cracking doom faded to echoes, and only dusty silence remained.

Uiharan pushed to his feet, half dragging Syldaris as he surveyed the wreckage. The outer walls were little more than rubble. Uiharan's great working had scattered stones for miles up the coast, but the archive spire still stood, and with it the precious knowledge of generations.

Throat tight, tears pricking the corners of his eyes, he looked to Syldaris.

'We won. The invaders have been driven...' Hope curdled in Uiharan's chest as he saw the antiquarian's horrified stare. Syldaris looked not at Uiharan, nor at the wreckage of the citadel walls, but at the archives behind.

Slowly, Uiharan turned to behold a scene of slaughter.

Of those who had fled, little remained save bloodied corpses. Tomes and scrolls had been torn from their casements, ancient knowledge carelessly scattered about like limbs after a brutal storm. But it was neither the death nor the destruction that made a tomb of Uiharan's chest.

The Ossiarchs stood in serried ranks, blade, spear and blackened shields motionless as a winter forest, their skeletal faces empty of any emotion, any thought save cold detachment. They seemed not an army but a force of nature, some storm blown far inland by capricious winds, there to ravage those who thought themselves safe from such elemental cruelties.

'H-how?' Syldaris' murmured question was answered as without a word, without a sound, the ranks parted. The sudden movement stirred the air in the chamber, a rush of salt and sea brine drowning the familiar musty smells of leather, ink and old parchment. As if he were recovering from a blow to

the head, Uiharan's vision suddenly came clear. Now, he could see the kelp dangling from obsidian blades, the sand and streaks of barnacles across armour and shields. And like that, he understood.

The Nighthaunts had been nothing but a distraction.

'They walked.' Uiharan's words came as a whispered curse, the last bitter dregs steeped in failure. 'Across the sea, up from the depths, they *walked*.'

From amidst her skeletal entourage stepped an abomination. In her graven features Uiharan saw no hope, no mercy.

Only the cold promise of death eternal.

CHAPTER ONE



The day had dawned cold and grey, corpse-pale clouds rolling in from the Dwindlesea to strangle what little light pierced the oppressive gloom. Pinpricks of icy rain stippled Loreseeker Elarin the Illuminated's face. Sharp on her cheeks, they bled into her robes, sending icy fingers tickling beneath her breastplate and greaves.

Like the Realm of Death itself, Shyish's weather cared little for the living.

Elarin bore the discomfort without complaint, pausing only to adjust one of the braids of dark hair the wind had teased from her coiled topknot. She picked her way across the broken cliff, careful to avoid the bits of weathered bone jutting from under rocks and poking from crevasses. Although Lord Regent Chariel's forces had scoured most of the unquiet dead from this blighted stretch of shore, the Ouroboran Coast was far from safe.

'We should not be here.' Celastir's voice came sharp as her bared blade. The Bladelord was helmetless, auburn hair swept up with a sunmetal clasp, her pale, sharp-chinned face seeming set in a perpetual scowl. Celastir's gaze flitted across the ragged cliffside like a prism hawk searching for prey, the tip of her rune-etched greatsword twitching as if the blade itself were impatient.

‘It is close.’ Elarin cocked her head. Lips moving in cants of seeking, she sought to tease threads of necromantic power from amidst Shyish’s funereal winds.

‘Lord Regent Chariel would not approve of—’

Elarin turned away with a cluck of her tongue, leaving her bodyguard to scowl at the rocks and sand. Celastir was right, of course, Chariel would be furious to discover one of her sorcerous advisors had wandered into the Shyish hinterlands, chasing a strange eddy of necromancy. Unfair as it was, this would be exactly the type of thing Prince Sennareth could use to paint Elarin as a danger to the Lumineth salient.

Elarin felt her lip curl at the thought of Regent Chariel’s Bannerblade. If anything, *Sennareth* was the danger. If the prince had his way, the Lumineth would simply sit back and await Nagash’s return.

As they always did, thoughts of the God of Death conjured a tightness in Elarin’s chest, the shadowed scars along her ribs prickling with cold fire. She had seen Nagash fall, broken on the peak of Mount Avalenor, his body pierced by shafts of brilliant light, scoured by the God-Mage Teclis’ holy wrath.

It had been a close thing, closer perhaps than many realised. Even in victory the Lumineth had paid a terrible price. One Elarin would see they never had to suffer again.

As if to echo her dire thoughts, a chill wind blew off the Dwindlesea. Short, sharp gusts like the thrusts of enemy spears whipped the dark waters into a frenzy, waves crashing against the maddening gyre of cliffs that gave the Ouroboran Coast its name.

Elarin craned her neck to peer down at the snarled bluffs below. Pale bones stood stark against the slate-grey stone. Arms, legs, ribs, even the occasional grinning skull, speckled the vast expanse of rock like shells cast upon windswept sands. Entombed by tons of stone, the skeletons snapped and scabbled, pulled and flexed, vainly trying to tear themselves from the rocky cliffs. Occasionally, a bit would fall free, only to be snapped up by the waves and bludgeoned back into the hungry stone. The constant churn of bone, breaker and boulder made the cliffs appear to move, as if the Ouroboran Coast were some vast, skeletal beast slowly devouring itself over the course of millennia.

Prince Sennareth claimed it was the army of some rebellious Necrarch

lord, cursed by Nagash to remain conscious as they were forever consumed by Shyish's cruel geography.

Sennareth was a liar, of course, but Elarin hardly cared.

In their way, the cliffs were almost beautiful.

'There.' Steadying herself with her rune-etched staff, Elarin drew her blade to gesture at a shadowed overhang some fifty paces distant. Although there was nothing to distinguish this particular shelf of rock from a thousand other wind-scarred crags, it glittered in Elarin's sorcerous sight, the snarled weave of necromancy writ cold upon the ancient stone.

Celastir stepped to her side, squinting at the rock. There was no uncertainty in her bearing, no apprehension, only the steady regard of a duellist sizing up an opponent. The Bladelord might question Elarin's decision to leave the safety of camp, she might question the wisdom of seeking a place steeped in such dark power, but she did not question Elarin's skill.

'Should we inform the Lord Regent?' Celastir asked.

'There might not be time.' Jaw tight, Elarin studied the flow of amethyst energy. In addition to unleashing a tide of death upon the Mortal Realms, Nagash's Necroquake had unearthed many things that were better forgotten. This could be one such evil, locked away by some long-departed psychopomp to protect Shyish.

It had been months since Chariel Thrice-Burnished had led her gleaming host through the Shyish Realmgate to establish a Lumineth bulwark in the Realm of Death. Even amidst the battles and strife, this place would have called to Elarin.

Which meant it had been opened recently.

Elarin's incantation set twinkling motes of light swirling up through the air. Bits of native Hyshian brilliance, they guttered like dying embers, golden brilliance tarnished by the oppressive weight of Shyish. Even so, it was enough to illuminate the outline of a heavy door set into the rock, its face covered with sigils of warding and concealment. Stepping closer, Elarin could see the runes were not etched into the black basalt, but set within the stone itself. The ossified remnants of fish and nautili and other small sea creatures, their bodies had been twisted into uncomfortable sigils then left to fossilise within the rock.

The door sat ajar, its wards broken. They had been strong enchantments,

steeped in the weight of ages. Such spells would have taken time, power and most of all patience to unravel. Although the Lumineth possessed all these traits, such dogged persistence spoke to a more ageless mind, one that thought nothing of months or years.

The thought of confronting such terrible patience sat like a stone in Elarin's stomach.

Whatever had opened this tomb, it was not mortal.

Even so, she was not afraid. If anything, her limbs tingled with a strange species of excitement. Elarin was a Loreseeker, sent to prise open Shyish's sepulchral depths and bring the Realm of Death's secrets to light. If she turned away, it would be as much as admitting she was not up to the task, that all the struggle, all the destruction, all the death had been for naught.

The names of her slain comrades slipped from Elarin's cold lips. Repeating them gave her strength. The others had fallen with the Inscribed Citadel, buried beneath the rubble. But Elarin remained. She must act for all of them, carrying the weight of the memory, their sacrifice.

She glanced to Celastir. Apparently sensing her resolve, the Bladelord gave a tight-lipped nod. Elarin drew her blade. Forged for another, the hilt did not fit her hand as well as it might. Nonetheless, she took comfort from Glimmerdark's familiar weight.

Staff held high to illuminate their way, she stepped into shadow.

The passage was smooth, walls free of cracks or mortar, the floor dipping towards the centre as if the rock had simply been boiled away. They had gone but a few dozen paces when the tunnel opened up, stone giving way to rib-like sheafs of bone. Interlaced like fingers and bound by coils of whip-tight sinew and stretched tendon, they lined the walls and ceiling, forming a wide dome perhaps twenty paces across.

Several tunnels led away from the central nave, their walls scored by the marks of ancient teeth, honeycombed by bits of calcified marrow. Not even the slightest breeze moved the stagnant air, as if the whole place held its breath.

It had the look of an Ossiarch crypt. Elarin had scoured enough of them to recognise the skeletal architecture, but where the others had housed vaults and sarcophagi, this bone cathedral held nothing but echoing stillness.

Celastir shifted amidst the clinging shadows. 'Whatever was once here is gone now.'

‘No.’ Elarin’s reply was barely a whisper, but she could feel the rightness of it. The bone cathedral practically vibrated with spiritual force. It permeated the walls, the stone, the very air, seeping through Elarin’s wards to settle like oil on her skin. So strong was the gyre of necromantic force she could barely get a sense of its distance, let alone direction.

Celastir was speaking, but Elarin could not make out her words through the hollow thrum of energy. Like the beat of distant drums, it seemed to resonate in her bones.

‘This way.’ She needed to move, if only to feel the weight of her limbs. Lips buzzing from the power of the place, Elarin spoke new wards into the air. Runes of strength and stability quieted the churning roar in her thoughts.

She took the leftmost tunnel, which branched, then branched again, twining into other passages, delicate as the weave of burst capillaries on the cheek of a corpse. Here and there, Elarin caught glimmers of clarity amidst the tangled weave, threads of spiritual energy flitting through the gloom like minnows in a shadowed stream.

Seeking clarity, Elarin removed one of the flecks of aetherquartz from her robes. A bit of purest power distilled from the light of Hysh, she gazed into the gem’s flickering depths, letting its facets focus and amplify her reason. It was as if she had stepped below an icy waterfall, the shock washing away the sandy morass of confusion and doubt, leaving a bedrock of uninflected reason.

She gazed upon the numinous interplay with new eyes, vision sharp enough to follow even the smallest thread. Like a hunting hawk, Elarin moved with unrelenting purpose. She did not need to glance back to know that Celastir followed a pace behind, just as she knew they were not alone in the crypt. Something stalked the tangled halls, searching with terrible, uncompromising patience; but it had not found what it sought. Not yet, at least.

The chamber was small, little more than an intersection at the juncture of four tunnels, barren of marks or distinguishing features. They had passed many similar cavities within the bone cathedral, but something gave Elarin pause.

Sheathing her blade, she knelt to press a hand to the bone. Warm beneath her fingers, it pulsed with spiritual energy, aetheric vibrations like the flow

of some distant underground river.

‘Old wards.’ She hissed the words through gritted teeth. There were indeed enchantments here, swirls of obfuscating sorcery so faint as to be almost invisible. Elarin prodded at the enchantments, careful not to unleash whatever terrible energies they contained. It was mortal magic, debased aelven runes gathered into a rough semblance of balance. No doubt, the creator had been someone of intelligence and power, but they had also been human, and even the most intricate mortal sorceries seemed base and clumsy when compared to the complexities of Lumineth magic.

Her senses whetted to razor sharpness by the aetherquartz, Elarin quickly found the weaknesses in the wards, bits of extraneous runecraft like rust spots upon a length of chain. She focused on one of these flaws, carefully prising apart the nested declensions to lay the whole eldritch working bare.

The whole chamber seemed to waver as if seen through water, revealing a waist-high plinth in the centre of the room. Upon it rested a small construction of faceted shadeglass. Roughly the size of a clenched fist, the relic was cylindrical in shape, and composed of a collection of tiny shadeglass prisms capped by gilded carvings of clutching, skeletal hands. Shapes swirled within the dark facets, a twisting eddy of contorted faces, all glimmering with pale witchlight.

‘A soul reservoir.’ Elarin reached out a hand. The flesh of her palm felt hot and tight, as if held to a bonfire. ‘I have read of these things – used by Mortarchs and necromancers to power all manner of terrible sorceries.’ She shook her head. ‘Such power. This reliquary must contain thousands of trapped souls.’

‘Then we should destroy it,’ Celastir replied.

‘What would that gain us?’ Elarin grasped the reservoir, feeling a jolt of energy leap up her arm.

‘It would deprive the Ossiarchs of this abomination.’

‘So would returning it to camp for study.’ Elarin gave an irritated hiss. She did not question Celastir on bladework, why did the Vanari feel compelled to challenge her on sorcerous matters? Rather than debate her bodyguard, she gazed deeper into the reliquary, seeking to comprehend the subtle interplay of spiritual force within.

Elarin did not intend to draw upon the thing, only to gain some insight into how to transport it safely, but it was as if the relic *wanted* to be used. She

had barely begun to examine the shade-glass when a burst of spiritual energy sent her stumbling back. Not an assault so much as a rush of power. It dragged Elarin from her body, her senses becoming diffuse and distant as she fell deeper into the strange artefact. Like victims fleeing a burning tower, souls jostled her from all sides, pressing against her wards with manic intensity.

Celastir gripped her arm, but Elarin hardly felt her touch, her vision bombarded by wild images. She passed through bone and rock, insubstantial as thought. The Ouroboran Coast spread before her as if in miniature, overlaid by a dense web of pulsing geomantic lines. They flowed with spiritual energy, feeding the necrotic winds of Shyish. In a moment, Elarin knew she could trace them all the way back to Nagashizzar, where dread Nagash lay entombed – asleep, but undying.

Amidst the amethyst web sat a blot of purest void, deep and dark as a vast ocean trench. Although the distant glow of Hysh remained high overhead, a shadow fell over the coast. Night spread across the rocks like spilled ink, a shade with no maker, a swirling void that seemed to enfold all it touched.

Fleshless legions marched in its wake. Weapons bared, fleshless visages raised as if in adulation, they marched in perfect lockstep, moving with nightmarish precision.

Ossiarch Bonereapers. More than Elarin had ever seen. More than she had ever imagined there could be. Where they moved, the shadow grew. It crept along the geomantic lines, runnels of obsidian blood flowing back to Nagashizzar to reinvigorate the Bonereapers' immortal master.

This time, there would be no reprieve, no salvation. Nagash's return would herald an end to all things.

'Something approaches.' Celastir shook Elarin, causing her eyes to flutter open.

'They mean to raise him.' She clutched at her bodyguard's arm. Still caught by the terrible visions, Elarin blinked at phantom shapes, battles, bodies falling only to rise again.

Teeth bared, Celastir slapped the soul reservoir from her hand.

Like a swimmer surfacing after a long dive, Elarin gasped in a whooping lungful of air. Her gaze crawled across the ossified floor to where the reservoir lay against the far wall.

Celastir took a step towards it, heavy sword raised, but Elarin pulled her

back.

‘It is evil.’ The Bladelord almost snarled the words.

‘It is powerful.’ Elarin tried to keep her voice level, biting back the skirl of nervous energy that seemed ready to burst from her lips. ‘But the vision was not evil. If anything, it may hold the secret to frustrating Nagash’s return.’

Celastir half turned, but before the Bladelord could draw breath to speak, her eyes widened. With a grunt, she shoved Elarin back.

Surprise became anger, then shock as a blade of blackened metal cut the air where Elarin had stood but a moment earlier.

Celastir’s sword caught the strike on the backswing, sunmetal shrieking on obsidian nadirite as it drove the blade down. The Vanari was quick to recover, letting the weight of her greatsword turn the block into a wide, looping slash that cleaved armour and bone.

Elarin drew her own sword, staff raised to spread a steady glow. With a muttered curse, she turned to see more skeletal forms advancing amidst the shadows on all sides, spears levelled, shields locked, remorseless eyes bright with pale witchlight.

It had been foolish to unweave the wards that concealed the soul reservoir. By unleashing the relic’s power, Elarin had made it a beacon.

With a flush of cold realisation, she recognised the attackers as Mortek Guard: foot soldiers of the Ossiarchs. Elarin had destroyed scores of the skeletal legionnaires during the Lumineth push into Shyish, but as they moved into the light, she could see these foes were different.

Tiny, intricate engravings covered every bit of exposed bone, scenes of death and entombment interspersed with necromantic sigils delicate as the scrimshawed leviathan bones Elarin’s uncle Zathran used to bring back from far voyages. Their armour was the black of rain-slicked obsidian, heavy nadirite blades appearing almost liquid in the gloom.

Celastir met the Mortek advance with a storm of cuts and parries, her blade seeming almost to double as it lopped the heads from spears and sought the gaps in their armour.

Incantations blistered the air as Elarin sent a line of coruscating moonlight down the hall to her right. Perfectly straight, it bisected shields, piercing heavy bone plates to send sparks coursing along ribs and spines. The Ossiarchs glowed with an inner light, bones backlit by silver flames, brilliance streaming from their eye sockets. They crumpled like rotten

wood, still feebly swiping as they stumbled on legs reduced to pale ash.

A spear thrust from Elarin's left and she batted it aside with her staff, embers of crackling force filling the air where enchanted wood met the chill of Shyishan nadirite. Deft as a needle, her blade threaded the thin breach between shield and plate.

Had it been but mere steel, the sword would have found little purchase amidst the armoured bone, but Elarin's blade was Glimmerdark, a relic of days long forgotten. Crafted of purest crystal, it was shaped in the coruscating brilliance of the Perimeter Inimical and cooled in the silvery radiance of Celennar, Hysh's moon. Glimmerdark was an ancient and powerful blade, traditionally wielded by the Grand Archivist of the Inscribed Citadel.

But Master Uiharan had died with the others, all his wisdom lost when the high spires of the citadel had been ground to dust by Nagash's hordes. Elarin might not be worthy to draw his blade, but there were none alive who could contest her right to wield it.

Glimmerdark slid into the Mortek's throat, graceful as a diving cormorant. Bone ran like water along the blade's crystalline edge, disrupting the admixture of soul energy that flowed through the undead construct. The Mortek fell like an unstrung shadow puppet, the terrible light of its eyes guttering out.

But there were more. There were *always* more.

Back to back, Elarin and Celastir stood like breakers before the rising flood of bone and shadowed steel. Wherever their blades landed, a Mortek fell, their armour no proof against the scouring light of Hysh.

'We must retreat.' Celastir's words came between measured breaths, the Bladelord's expression not a warrior's fearsome scowl, but rather the careful concentration of a master artisan.

'Not without the relic.' Elarin cast a quick glance towards the soul reservoir. Although they had succeeded in keeping any of the skeletal legionnaires from reaching the artefact, such was the press of armoured forms that neither she nor Celastir could risk a lunge for it without opening themselves to a killing strike.

Ducking a spear-thrust, Elarin lashed out with her blade. But rather than cut the cords of necromancy that bound the Mortek, she slapped the abomination with the flat of her sword, the bright burst of Hyshian light

causing her attacker to stumble back. Seizing on the moment, Elarin drove a hard kick into the Mortek's shield.

The move bought her barely a heartbeat, but it was enough. At Elarin's call, a score of gleaming threads lit the chamber. They swirled like wind-caught silk, drifting on an aethereal breeze above the heads of the combatants. Runes spilled from Elarin's lips, weaving, twisting, knotting, until the threads became a gleaming web of interconnected silver and gold.

The Morteks locked shields.

Elarin snapped her arms out like a fisherman casting a net, and the glittering web settled across the packed ranks. With a final sealing rune, she drew the lattice back, but rather than ensnare the Morteks, the strands sheared through her attackers.

Disjointed, they tumbled like shattered masonry. Elarin spun to draw the gleaming web over the attackers on Celastir's side, only to see the threads tear and fray, a net snagged on some deep underwater cliff.

Some other sorcerer worked against her.

Teeth clenched, Elarin sought to reweave her spell. Even as she reinforced the runic vertices, her sorcerous gaze sought the author of destruction.

The Morteks did not possess the ability to unweave her spells. Whatever commanded them, it was a creature of frightening power.

Warding runes flickered like dying stars as a blast of necromantic energy hammered into Elarin's protective enchantments. Such was the power of the assault that Elarin felt the chill even through her wards. Cold as a winter sea, it cut across her cheek, heavy with ageless malice.

Elarin abandoned her lattice of light, arms crossed as she sang new runes into the churning maelstrom of death magic. It raged about them, seeking weaknesses in her wards, questing tendrils of raw spiritstuff like the tentacles of a kraken.

But Elarin was not some mere summoner of tricks. She was Lumineth, the last in a line of Loreseekers stretching back to the very dawn of their race. Try as they might, the Ossiarchs would find no flaw in her incantations.

At last, the flood became a torrent, then a trickle, revealing the form of Elarin's attacker.

The Ossiarch Mortisan was tall and almost impossibly long-limbed, her glistening obsidian armour studded with the fangs of deep-sea predators. Although the face wrought into her high-crested helm was a barren, alien

thing, devoid of motive or emotion, the eyes that burned within radiated cold arrogance. In her hands, the Mortisan bore a scythe of nadirite-tipped bone, its length etched with coils of necromantic sigils that seemed to whirl and eddy, tugging at Elarin's gaze as if to drag her thoughts into their cold embrace.

She expected another eldritch assault. Instead, the Mortisan stepped forwards, scythe arcing down to carve a glittering trail through Elarin's runic defences. It might have cut Elarin too, had not Celastir met the slash with a sweep of her broad blade. Even so, the force of the strike drove the Vanari back a step, her breath steaming in air gone suddenly cold as midwinter. Celastir's stumble became an attack as she spun, blade held in a tight, killing arc.

But the Mortisan had already stepped back into the ranks of her guard, and Celastir's strike found nothing but the unyielding barrier of a Mortek shield-wall.

Although Celastir spoke not a word, Elarin could tell from the shift in her bodyguard's stance that the battle was lost. Perhaps together they could have overwhelmed the sorceress, but ringed by scores of guards, the Mortisan was untouchable as Nagash himself.

Elarin cast a desperate glance at the soul reservoir. For a wild, despairing moment, she considered hurling herself at the relic. Although it was powerfully protected, her sorceries might be enough to destroy the reservoir and unleash its army of captured spirits.

It was a foolish thought, unbecoming of a Lumineth. Elarin was not some Sigmarite fanatic, prepared to sacrifice her life in a doomed endeavour. The Ossiarch sorceress would strike her down before she took a step. All Elarin would accomplish would be to add her and Celastir's bones to the army of their foes.

She needed to return to camp, to warn Lord Regent Chariel.

There was no need to speak, no need to command. Celastir was Lumineth. In the deadly press of battle, she and Elarin acted as one.

At Elarin's nod, Celastir hurled herself at the massed Morteks, the force of her blows driving a wedge into the ordered ranks. Elarin could have used the respite to reinforce her wards, but she knew that to be a waste.

The Mortisan was not here for them.

Elarin crafted a tumult of piercing radiance, runes of swiftness and

sunlight sharp as arrows, that rained destruction down upon the packed phalanx. For all their unshakeable hate, the Morteks could not but buckle before the force of her arcane assault. The path momentarily clear, Elarin and Celastir rushed through the gap.

The Mortisan could have exploited their retreat – another blast of spiritual force would have shattered what remained of Elarin’s wards. But no killing blow fell, no tidal wave of souls came crashing down to sweep them away like flotsam. Instead, the Ossiarch sorceress went for the soul reliquary, her movements swift and focused as a spider slipping towards a web-trapped moth.

There was no comfort in the knowledge Elarin had judged rightly, only a hollow anxiety. Memories of the terrible vision lurked at the back of her thoughts. A night-dark tide sweeping down the coast, flowing back to Nagashizzar, back to the God of Death.

Even as they fled through the coiling tunnels of the cathedral, the hideous clatter of bone and steel behind, Elarin was not wholly dejected. She had lost the reservoir, but had come away with knowledge.

And as any Loreseeker knew, that could be its own reward.

CHAPTER TWO



Sennareth ambushed Elarin on her way back from the bone cathedral. As was often the case with the Prince of Cera Niall, he did not come alone.

The Lumineth camp occupied a wide, rocky swell just west of the coast. Shielded from wind and wave by the cliffs, the elevation provided a clear view of the surrounding land. Master Lesaris and his calligraphic acolytes had inscribed warding runes around the camp. They spiralled out across the cracked stone in thin golden ribbons, warding against gheists, curses and other aethereal malefactions.

Thin as it was, the ring of Lumineth runes seemed to diminish Shyish's oppressive weight. Given free rein, Master Lesaris would have cheerfully inscribed the entire Ouroboran Coast, great binding runes sealing the region off from the flow of death magic that suffused this realm. Such measures had been effective against the subtle bleed of Chaos into the Mortal Realms, but Elarin was not so certain they could contain the force of all Shyish.

Beyond the wards, Lumineth pickets were concealed behind rocks and skeletal trees. Auralan Sentinels with triple-stringed arcbows. Like many in High Sentinel Kyris' following, they had traded the blues and whites of Illium for muddy grey cloaks, their lacquered armour smudged with ash and grave dust to better blend with the surrounding terrain. Although Elarin

could not see them, she had no doubt they marked her coming, news of her and Celastir's return winging ahead like a flight of arrows.

There were no requests for identification, nor calls for Elarin to explain herself. Although attached to the Lumineth army, she was not a part of it, beholden to none save the Lord Regent herself. It was to Chariel's command pavilion that Elarin headed, planning to report her encounter with the Ossiarchs as well as the troubling vision granted her by the soul reservoir.

The first glimmer that something was wrong came from Celastir. The Vanari paused with a hiss of warning, blade low but ready. Elarin looked up to see a pair of Auralan Wardens barring her path. Their breastplates bore the triple diamonds of Cera Niall, marking them as part of Sennareth's contingent. The fineness of their robes and armour stood out even among the assembled Lumineth. Cera Niall was a city grown rich on gems and prism shards. Spared the worst of Nagash's devastation, it had risen to new prominence in the wake of the Necroquake.

Elarin halted, fixing the two with a withering glance.

'I am bound for the Lord Regent's pavilion.'

Despite the elaborate filigree of their armour, they were mere Wardens, and should have made way without question. Instead, they remained still as stone, spears straight, shields close to their chests. Elarin was about to test their resolve when Sennareth finally deigned to make an appearance.

The Prince of Cera Niall cut an imposing figure in his angular war plate. Although Shyish's insipid gloom leached the sparkle from the gems adorning his high helm and turned the enamelled white of his breastplate the colour of pale bone, Sennareth's raiments still seemed to glimmer with a striking inner light. His blade was sheathed at his side, one gauntleted hand resting lightly on its intricate pommel. It was a duelling sword, fit more for the high courts of Ymetrica than the sepulchral boneyards of the Ouroboran Coast.

The same might be said for Prince Sennareth himself.

A score of Cera Niall Wardens trailed Sennareth like the sweep of a wind-caught cloak. They moved in perfect lockstep, spreading out to bar the entirety of the path, the two other Wardens stepping back amidst the serried ranks. Behind Sennareth, a pair of white-robed attendants bore Regent Chariel's war banner. One held the banner itself, tightly rolled within a long

box of oiled glimmerwood, sealed with a golden clasp. The other bore the banner pole, holding it in both hands with the care usually reserved for holy relics.

As Regent Chariel's Bannerblade, Prince Sennareth ought to have been carrying the flag himself, but even the Lord Regent had to bow to diplomatic exigency. Sennareth's forces made up one of the largest contingents in the Lumineth salient, just as Cera Niall's vast resources had provided the lion's share of their supplies. Such largesse did not come without price, and Sennareth's appointment as Chariel's right hand was largely political.

'Loreseeker Elarin the Illuminated.' He steepled his fingers in a common Ymetrican greeting, meant to evoke the high, sweeping cliffs of their home. 'I had hoped we would cross paths before council.'

Elarin eyed the phalanx of Wardens. 'You seem to have done more than hope, Sennareth.'

'Prince.'

'I'm sorry?'

'*Prince* Sennareth.' He gave a soft sigh. 'We may have left the perfection of Hysh behind, but that does not mean we should abandon decorum as well.'

'My apologies.' Elarin's position did not require her to genuflect, so she remained upright. Still, Sennareth was a powerful noble – no good would come of needlessly antagonising him.

Fortunately, the prince seemed not to take offence. 'They say you are bound for the Lord Regent's villa? I am also headed in that direction. Might we walk together?'

Elarin regarded Sennareth. In the time since she had made the prince's acquaintance, she had never known him be one for idle chatter. Everything Sennareth did or said served a purpose, which meant he desired something from her.

'Of course... prince.' She gave a perfunctory smile. 'It would be my pleasure.'

At Sennareth's nod, the Wardens fell in to either side. Celastir remained close to Elarin, as did Sennareth's banner bearers, but the rest of the prince's guard retreated to a comfortable distance, forming a loose ring to shield the conversation from prying ears.

Sennareth made a show of studying the featureless sky. ‘I have heard Shyish used to be a beautiful realm, a paradise for mortal souls.’

‘So they say.’

‘Now look at it.’ He sighed. ‘A wretched place, haunted by ancient bones and unquiet spirits.’

‘We have not come here to sightsee.’

‘Well put.’ Sennareth chuckled as if Elarin had made a clever quip. ‘And just why have we come here, Loreseeker?’

‘To prevent another Necroquake and forestall Nagash’s return.’

‘Exactly.’ He raised one long finger. ‘We were all witness to the devastation, the death. Truly, it seemed the Spirefall writ small. My heart bled for our people’s losses, which is why I heeded Teclis’ call and committed the full might of Cera Niall to this noble endeavour.’

Elarin made no reply. Sennareth had failed to mention that a successful campaign in the Realm of Death would burnish his reputation as a military leader, opening new doors in the Ymetrican high courts.

Apparently mistaking Elarin’s silence for agreement, the prince nodded to himself.

‘And what a campaign it has been. Long months of doom and privation, battles with remnants of Nagash’s terrible host, the very land and sky against us.’ He clenched a gauntleted fist. ‘But we have *won*, Loreseeker. We have driven the dead from the Ouroboran Coast and established a strong beachhead in Shyish.’

‘You think our work here is done?’ Elarin asked.

‘Oh, far from it.’ He gave a companionable nod. ‘I merely think we should consolidate our gains.’

And there it was. Fielding an expeditionary force was a costly endeavour, even for one as wealthy and powerful as Sennareth. He did not lie – Chariel’s campaign had been largely successful in securing the Ouroboran Coast for the Lumineth. It was not foolish to suggest they fortify their position, acting as an outpost and early warning against Nagash’s corruption.

A few days ago, Elarin might have even agreed with the prince.

But that was before the vision.

‘I have no desire to see more Lumineth fall in needless conflict.’ Sennareth’s words came soft, but full of emotion – an affect which no doubt

served him well in court. ‘You wish to expand your research into Shyish. If you would but see fit to support my plan for retrenchment, I could do much to assist your endeavours. Cera Niall possesses many arcane scholars, sages and archivists whose collected wisdom might be of use to a learned seeker such as yourself.’

Had Sennareth offered wealth or warriors, it would have been easy to decline, but the thought of an entire city’s intellect harnessed to the task of exploring Shyish’s secrets almost moved Elarin to concede.

Almost.

‘I serve Regent Chariel and I serve our people.’

‘As do I, as do I.’ Sennareth gave a vague wave, as if to brush away Elarin’s assertion. ‘And I ask you, Loreseeker – how best do we serve our people? As conquerors, or defenders?’

He turned to her, carefully measured concern on his sharp features. ‘The Lord Regent has called a war council to plan the next steps of our campaign in Shyish. Chariel listens to you, Loreseeker. If you would but suggest we—’

‘Alas, prince, I cannot do as you ask.’

Momentary anger flashed in Sennareth’s eyes, little more than the barest twitch. Elarin would have missed it had she not been studying his face. He was clearly unaccustomed to both interruption and rejection.

Less than a heartbeat, and the irritation was gone. When Sennareth spoke again, nothing but courtesy coloured his tone. ‘May I enquire as to your reasoning, Loreseeker?’

Elarin frowned. ‘Certain new dangers have come to light. We must act, and quickly.’

‘Did you discover something in the cliffs?’ Sennareth’s gaze flicked from Elarin to Celastir, perhaps in the hope the Bladelord’s expression might provide some hint as to the cause of Elarin’s sudden vehemence. Fortunately, Celastir remained cold, her gaze distant, almost uninterested.

‘My report is for the Lord Regent alone,’ Elarin replied.

‘I am Chariel’s Bannerblade, her second in command.’ He drew himself up. ‘Have I not fought for this? Have I not bled?’

The prince did not lie. Despite his courtly pretensions, Sennareth was no coward, nor were the warriors of Cera Niall. He had led a dozen charges, held the line when the shambling dead threatened to overwhelm the flanks and carve the heart from their centre.

‘I question neither your skill nor your courage.’

‘Then what?’ He cocked his head, a shock of silken hair covering one expertly rouged eye. ‘Have I done something to cause offence? If so, please allow me to make apology and restitution.’

‘You have given no insult.’ Elarin met his questioning gaze, her tone sharp as cut glass. ‘I simply do not trust you... *prince.*’

The momentary flush of satisfaction Elarin felt at seeing Sennareth’s carefully cultivated mask of courtesy slip was quickly eclipsed by concern. She had expected surprise, even anger, but the prince’s eyes went cold as the Dwindlesea.

When he spoke again, his words were measured, as if each were some treasured relic with which Sennareth was loath to part.

‘I expect more wisdom from a Loreseeker.’ One hand closed tight upon the pommel of his blade, as if to crush the orb of polished crystal. ‘I have borne your eccentricities thus far because the Lord Regent seems to have developed a strange fondness for you, but do not mistake tolerance for lenience.’

He stepped closer, the move echoed by the ring of Wardens. ‘If you will not listen to reason, then perhaps it is best you not speak at all.’

Perhaps it was the crudeness of the implied threat, or perhaps it was some vestige of apprehension left by her near death at the hands of that scythe-wielding Mortisan, but Elarin felt anger swell in her chest, hot and bright as the Perimeter Inimical.

‘I provide counsel to Lord Regent Chariel.’ Although her throat was tight, her heart pounding, Elarin somehow managed to keep her voice level. ‘I will not be silenced by you, nor by any other jumped-up courtier with pretensions of glory.’

‘So be it.’ The prince made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. ‘Simply remember that you are alone out here, Loreseeker. And, as we all know, Shyish can be a dangerous place.’

‘I am not alone.’ Elarin could not help but glance to Celastir.

Impossibly, the Bladelord seemed not even to be paying attention, her gaze fixed on a particularly menacing mass of clouds gathering out to sea.

Following her gaze, Sennareth chuckled. ‘Even your bodyguard cannot be bothered to take your side.’

He stepped back, arms spread as if in invitation. ‘Consider the future, and

your place in it.’ He nodded towards the approaching clouds. ‘What good are you to anyone if you are lost to this wretched place?’

With a rustle of shimmersilk and war harness, the prince turned away, his smile returning. He called to his Wardens by name, joking with the nearest as he strode away, bound for Chariel’s council, no doubt.

Elarin whirled on Celastir, her hands balled into fists. ‘Why did you not intervene?’

‘You were in no danger.’

‘The prince threatened to kill me.’

‘Here? In the middle of camp?’ Frowning, Celastir shook her head. ‘Even Sennareth would not be so bold.’

‘And when he does decide to strike?’

‘I swore to defend you – from the dead, or the blades of other Lumineth, it matters not.’ Finally, the Bladelord met Elarin’s eyes. ‘But I cannot protect you from your choices.’

‘You would have me bow to Sennareth’s whims?’

‘I would have you not openly antagonise one of the most powerful nobles in this army. I would have you not go traipsing alone far from the protections of camp. I would have you not throw yourself upon the spears of Ossiarchs. I would have you exercise even a fleck of caution before seeking to unlock the powers of ancient necromantic relics.’ Despite the fierceness of her rebuke, Celastir’s cold scowl seemed graven in stone. ‘But it is not my place to command, only to follow.’

Elarin’s cheeks burned. In the time since Celastir had given Elarin her oath, she had come to value the Bladelord’s presence. Without the Inscribed Citadel, without her colleagues, Celastir had become a bedrock on which Elarin could find firm footing. She had come to think of Celastir as more than a bodyguard – a comrade at the very least, even a friend.

Elarin swallowed against a throat gone suddenly thick, her stomach tight as a clenched fist. She had never realised Celastir thought of her as a burden. What else might she have overlooked?

Breath whispered in her lungs. ‘If you no longer wish to be my—’

‘You would deny my oath?’ Celastir asked, the slightest hint of crimson colouring her tanned cheeks. ‘Have I been that poor a guard?’

‘No.’ Elarin almost whispered the word. ‘Never.’

‘Good.’ Celastir turned once again to regard the horizon. There was no

tension in her bearing, no regret in her face. It was as if they had never spoken.

‘We should hurry.’ Celastir thrust her chin at the angry clouds. ‘It will rain soon.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Blinking, Elarin continued on her way to the Lord Regent’s pavilion, Celastir falling into step behind.

Elarin had returned to camp with concerns – about the Ossiarchs, about the Ouroboran Coast, about Nagash – but at least she had been secure in her duty. The confrontation with Sennareth had revealed more than a prince’s arrogance, it had shown Elarin the ground on which she stood was far from stable.

This was not the first time Elarin had felt such uncertainty. It had been the same with the Inscribed Citadel. Master Uiharan and the other archivists had seemed eternal, unshakeable. Their insight had circumscribed the whole of Elarin’s being, seemingly inexhaustible in their wisdom.

And yet, in one terrible night, she had seen it all swept away, little more than chaff scattered by the wind of Nagash’s terrible working. Elarin had worked to give some purpose to the destruction, had sought to find meaning even amidst the twisted wreckage of her life. She had thought the others desired this, too – Chariel, Sennareth, Celastir. But nothing had truly changed.

Elarin gripped her staff tighter, hand drifting to the pommel of her blade. Her purpose remained clear as Hysh’s scouring brilliance, but Sennareth had been right.

Elarin was alone.

CHAPTER THREE



The rain came with unaccustomed fury, slashing down from bellicose clouds as if to scour the Lumineth from their rocky perch. Long familiar with Shyish's petulance, Elarin merely raised her hood, thin filaments of crystalline thread sparing her the worst of the clinging damp. Even so, it could not diminish the wind, which raged through camp like a vengeful shade, threatening to topple even the most secure tents.

Beyond the smothering weave of wards and guards, the Lumineth warhost flickered like a candle raised against a storm. Paths radiated out from the central command pavilion, crossing one another at angles perfectly calculated to aid in movement and defence. Scores of high-peaked tents clustered around guttering fires, each marked with the pennant of a particular company. Auralan Wardens in glittering plate and scale patrolled the perimeter, long spears sharp as their watchful gazes. Other Lumineth went about their business, heads bowed against the storm – Wardens, Sentinels, even the occasional Dawnrider guiding their mount from Shyish's questionable grazing to the safety of the stables. Although seemingly at ease, all had the wary air of warriors on the eve of combat, weapons close to hand, careful always to mark the positions of their comrades.

At the first clash of warning, the Lumineth soldiers would be quick to don armour and form tight ranks. They had done so often enough. Hardly a night passed without some risen foe testing the camp's defences. Skeletons and zombies shambled from the gloom, spectres crackling against the wards, dire summonings ringing the dark in streaks of purple and blood-red malevolence. There was no coordination to the attacks, but the steady trickle of undying malice was enough to keep the Lumineth on edge.

Elarin moved down the wide central avenue, guards slipping from her path as if part of a well-choreographed dance. Some did so with a bow, others did not. Elarin paid them no mind. She had eyes only for the wide, crested peak of the command pavilion, Chariel's flag at the top.

Sodden as Elarin herself, it snapped and twisted as if tormented by the cruel winds. Elarin could barely make out Chariel's sigil upon the faded fabric – the cerulean peaks that wreathed the city of Illium in silvery mountain ivy, three prism hawks soaring overhead, their faceted wings spread to catch the Ymetrican light.

Once, the sight would have filled Elarin with righteous fury, her mind spinning with thoughts of the Inscribed Citadel's high walls cracking before the terrible might of Nagash's Necroquake, the final words of her teachers and colleagues lost amidst the howls of the unquiet dead. Elarin had not been there. She had seen none of it, *heard* none of it, the pain of loss sharp as a broken rib.

Now, Chariel's banner conjured only the barest flutter of regret, the pain of loss buried beneath the weight of so many futile battles.

As always, Elarin reminded herself that she fought for Ymetrica, for her people. But the affirmation rang hollow. She had avenged the fallen a dozen times over. Fought on, even as their faces bled away like salt in the rain. Now, her hatred seemed almost reflexive, a habit so ingrained it had become a part of her life, easy as walking, common as breath.

Two of Chariel's remaining guards stood by the pavilion entrance, long blades gripped in bright, gauntleted hands. Precise as a lunar clock, they stepped aside, one reaching out to part the entrance curtain so Elarin could enter. At her nod, Celastir took up position near the other Vanari.

If danger awaited Elarin within her patron's pavilion, then all was truly lost.

Chariel Thrice-Burnished waited inside. The Lord Regent was the

pavilion's only occupant apart from a lone ossuary moth fluttering around one of the prism lamps. Chariel hunched over the wide, flickering expanse of her war table, long-fingered hands flicking through myriad battle permutations, dozens of miniature skirmishes playing out in ghostly pantomime before her narrowed eyes.

As always, the Lord Regent wore her articulated battle armour. It seemed to Elarin she never took it off. The white-and-blue enamelled plate was engraved with enchantments drawn in intricate gold inlay, thin as spider silk. A long cape of scintillating blue shimmersilk swept from her shoulders, rippling like sunlight on water. A gift from Holy Teclis, Chariel's cape was edged with razored aetherquartz, strong as sunmetal and sharp enough to carve through tempered steel. Elarin had seen many foes distracted by the Lord Regent's sword and shield, only to fall to a sweep of killing silk.

With a bow, Elarin swept off her waterlogged cloak and hung it upon one of the high-backed camp chairs, pausing to loosen her braids so they might dry better.

Chariel glanced up from her arcane wargames. 'You are wet.'

'It is raining, lord.'

'Is it?' Chariel frowned up at the roof as if her gaze might pierce the pale fabric. 'I had not noticed.'

'I bring important news.' Elarin tried to imbue her words with urgency. If a war council had been summoned, it meant the other commanders would soon arrive. 'Danger gathers in the north, a dark tide spilling from some as of yet unrevealed source.'

'There is always danger.' Chariel straightened with a wince. One hand pressed to the small of her back, she waved the other about. 'This is Shyish. The cliffs, the waves, the cemeteries and crypts, the very air – all of it is our foe.'

'This is something more, lord,' Elarin replied. 'Perhaps even a means of resurrecting... him.'

Chariel's brows met in sombre concern. 'And how did you discover this new threat, Loreseeker?'

Elarin drew in a slow breath, considering. It was clear her recent exploration had vexed the Lord Regent. As a Loreseeker, she was allowed much freedom, but Chariel's authority flowed from Teclis himself.

‘Your sudden departure placed me in an uncomfortable position.’ Chariel moved to one of the nearby tables, pouring herself a small goblet of Zaitreci brandy from a crystal decanter. ‘Both Sennareth and Master Lesaris voiced concerns.’

‘My apologies, lord.’ Elarin offered another low bow. ‘It was a strange thing, sudden and cold, flickering at the edges of my sight. I needed to follow before it guttered to darkness.’

‘I told them I had set you a task.’ Chariel took a sip, then set her goblet down, rolling the fine golden liquor around her mouth. ‘It was either that or let the others know you had departed without leave.’

‘I needed to move quickly,’ Elarin replied. ‘As it turned out, my haste was well warranted. There was an Ossiarch crypt, carved into the side of the cliffs. Inside I found—’

Chariel slammed her palm down on the table, shocking Elarin to silence. When the Lord Regent turned, her voice was low and cold.

‘A mandala only functions if all runes are in harmony. You have seen first-hand what we face, what will happen should we fail.’

Elarin could but nod. She knew what her patron had sacrificed, how far she was willing to go.

Perhaps sensing Elarin’s troubled thoughts, Chariel’s voice softened. ‘We both regret the past, but nothing can change what was – only what will be.’

Elarin bit back her response. There was no use antagonising the Lord Regent. Chariel had made her choice, had refused Elarin’s entreaties and kept her forces behind the high city walls of Illium while Nagash’s hordes destroyed centuries of precious knowledge.

Chariel stiffened, ever aware of Elarin’s poorly hidden scars.

‘I have shown you too much leniency. It has made the others suspicious.’ She fixed Elarin with a level stare. ‘You are not some rank apprentice. You are a master Scinari attached to *my* command. And as a master you must consider how your actions affect your comrades.’

Chariel took a step towards Elarin, shaking her head. ‘I know we seek the same ends, but the path you tread *must* be mine, Loreseeker. Otherwise everything we have built may come undone.’

Everything *you* have built.

Elarin knew better than to speak such words. Chariel was a powerful noble, and like many of her ilk, did not appreciate having her authority

questioned. Her stomach cold and hard as raw iron, Elarin forced herself to meet the Lord Regent's eyes.

'I understand.'

Chariel was right, of course. In her hurry to uncover new knowledge, Elarin had weakened the Lord Regent's command – and weakness could not be tolerated, not with nobles like Sennareth eager to advance their own ambitions. As loath as Elarin was to dirty herself with politics, the search alone was not sufficient cause for her to flit off into the hills.

'Good.' Chariel favoured her with a stern nod. 'Now, tell me of this Ossiarch crypt.'

Elarin had barely drawn breath to reply when the entrance flap swished open, letting in a burst of swirling rain.

Master Lesaris entered, back straight despite the weight of age. His hair was white as a snow-capped cliff, swept back as if to frame the rich dark skin of his forehead. Eyes like chips of polished obsidian regarded Elarin from under heavy brows, the lines of Lesaris' ancient face like the folds of a map worn from long use. He wore the robes of a master Calligrave, glittering with runes of glimmering aetherquartz, a geomantically attuned theodolite lantern dangling from the upper curve of his long staff.

Elarin was not used to seeing the Calligrave in sandals rather than his long *daethar* boots, gliding above the battlefield like a wind-carried leaf. Even without the extra height the boots gave, Lesaris cut an imposing figure, like an ancestor statue brought from some ancient mountain shrine to pass judgement upon unworthy descendants.

Unconsciously, Elarin found herself straightening her robes, drawing herself up, as if trying to convince the Calligrave she was worth the weight of his regard.

Sennareth came close behind, a muted burst of Ymetrican horns heralding his entrance. Far from the pompous arrogance he had displayed earlier, the prince's manner was respectful, almost reverential, as he carefully removed Chariel's war banner from its elegant box, moving to affix the softly glowing fabric behind the Lord Regent's throne. Elarin could not but note the prince's cloak was dry, as was his red-gold hair, no doubt shielded from the storm by a gaggle of fawning servants.

'Lord Regent.' He gave a low bow, then stepped aside.

Behind the prince came the three lesser commanders. They entered

quickly, one by one, as if Sennareth had ordered them to wait, which he no doubt had.

High Warden Ildirin's hawkish face was set in its customary expression of disdain, as though he had entered some feculent sump rather than a Lord Regent's pavilion. Not a speck of grave dust clung to the plate armour he wore, and the seams of his robes were pinched to razor sharpness. Months in Shyish had lent his pale skin an almost deathly pallor – the flush of health replaced by a dusty, greyish tone – but it had done little to diminish Ildirin's tightly coiled energy. He offered a crisp salute to Chariel, before going to stand behind his seat at the table, every movement precise as if he had rehearsed them a dozen times.

In stark contrast was Steedmaster Kuonor. Broad-featured and bright-eyed, he possessed olive skin that was several shades lighter than Elarin's own deep umber. The Steedmaster's riding armour was festooned with fangs and bits of bone wrested from the bodies of defeated foes, a cape of tanned vargheist hide thrown casually across one shoulder. Ringlets of glossy black hair spilled down his face, and the tight coils of his beard were capped with rune-etched circlets of gold. As always, Kuonor smiled like a man privy to some ancient and powerful secret, but if he actually knew such a thing, it had spared neither him nor his Dawnriders from Shyish's brutal attention.

Of all the contingents, it was the cavalry who had suffered most. Some whispered this was due to Kuonor's bravado, but truly, it was the Dawnriders who ranged farthest, struck fastest. They were always in the vanguard, and that came with a price.

Last came High Sentinel Kyris, her tanned face streaked with ash, blonde hair blackened with soot to better match Shyish's miserable terrain. Like her Sentinels, she had long ago discarded sunmetal-and-white robes for local accoutrements. A cloak the colour of wet shale concealed a mix of dull steel and boiled leather, Kyris' only nod to her exalted position the triple-stringed waxwood arcbow slung over one narrow shoulder.

Chariel acknowledged the others' bows, waving them to seats around the war table. Elarin took up her customary place on the Lord Regent's left, trying her best to ignore Sennareth's elaborate genuflections as he seated himself at Chariel's right hand.

'Our endeavour has been blessed with much success since coming to Shyish.' As was her wont, the Lord Regent began without preamble. 'We

have cast down the Ossiarchs' crawling wall, driven their skeletal legions from the high cliffs that ward this accursed coast. We have scoured their crypts and toppled their fortress mausoleums, their bone tithe reduced to little more than windswept ash. It is a victory to be proud of, and yet there remains much work to accomplish.'

Chariel folded her hands. 'I would hear your thoughts.'

'I have etched an Alarith rune beneath the high cliffs.' Master Lesaris' gaze flicked to the ground as if to part the stone itself. 'The geomantic substrate is stable for now, but I will need to expand the mandala if we are to establish any sort of arcane bulwark against this wretched place.'

Steedmaster Kuonor shared a long look with High Warden Kyris. At her quick nod, the Steedmaster spread his hands.

'We range in all directions, four crypts scoured this week alone.' He clucked his tongue like a parent correcting a small child. 'But every night births more. You have seen the cliffs – the dead crawl from the stone itself.'

'The camp is secure.' High Warden Ildirin spoke as if Kuonor had addressed the statements directly to him. 'Watch tripled, no patrols smaller than ten.'

'You have all proven yourselves.' Chariel raised a calming hand. 'This is not a question of dedication or ability.'

'What, then?' Lesaris' weathered voice pierced the silence of Chariel's indrawn breath. The elderly Calligrave was perhaps the only councillor with the authority to ask such a direct question.

Chariel nodded, dispelling any implication Lesaris had spoken out of turn. 'The Ouroboran Coast is but one facet of this war. When I answered the call of Holy Teclis, I swore to take the fight to Shyish itself so we may never again suffer Nagash's vicious greed. We have carved a foothold in this place. Now it remains to see what we shall do next.'

'Next?' True to form, Lesaris did not relent. 'It seems we have fulfilled our mandate. The realmgate is ours, the coast around it secure for miles. If Nagash or his Mortarchs stir once more, Hysh will have ample warning.'

'The camp is secure,' Ildirin repeated, adding his implicit support to Lesaris. Kuonor lightly pounded the table to punctuate his approval of the statement, while Kyris' lack of objection was endorsement enough.

Chariel's gaze swept the long table, but Elarin had eyes only for Sennareth. The prince had said nothing. Although his expression spoke of

quiet regard, there was a grinning glitter in Sennareth's eyes that Elarin disliked. He must have approached the others as he approached her. Elarin wondered what he had promised them.

She needed to say something before Chariel was once again moved to inaction.

'But for how long?' Elarin's voice cut the silence like the crack of breaking ice.

The Lord Regent did not reply. Elarin knew the answer, they all did. The Lumineth had suffered no defeats, but they *had* suffered. No great slaughter, no reaping of lives, but a steady bleed, the drip, drip, drip of dead and wounded, borne back to the realmgate on their shields or burnt upon bright biers so their souls might rise to their next enlightenment. Elarin knew the number, had tallied it nightly as she lay awake in her tent, the cold essence of Shyish creeping into her bones.

'I can summon reinforcements from Cera Niall.' Sennareth's words were soft, almost thoughtful, as if the prince were mulling over a half-remembered anecdote. In that moment, Elarin realised she had played into Sennareth's gambit, her concerns not undermining his desire to remain in place, but providing opportunity to strengthen his position in the host. Cera Niall warriors would bring Cera Niall commanders, no doubt hand-picked by Sennareth and his coterie.

'Another warhost, perhaps two.' The prince gave no indication of the weight of his words, voice calm and uninflected. 'Workers and engineers as well. With proper fortification, we could hold indefinitely.'

'You have given me much to consider.' Chariel sat back, steeping her hands, her face set in a look of quiet contemplation. The Lord Regent clearly understood the implication, but there was little she could say without appearing petty or uncharitable. Elarin had hoped to brief the Lord Regent of her vision in private, but if Sennareth was allowed to have his way, the Lumineth salient might never move again.

'Such complacency is what allowed Nagash to invade Hysh,' Elarin replied. 'We cannot simply wait for the God of Death to rise. Inaction brings doom.'

'And how do you know this, Loreseeker?' Sennareth cocked his head. 'Do you command some arcane insight to which we are not privy?'

Elarin swallowed against the angry thrum of her heart. Sennareth was

baiting her, just as he had earlier. If she lost her temper, she would lose any chance of convincing Chariel of the urgency of her search. She drew in a steadying breath, leashing any emotion that might betray her. When she spoke again, it was with the calm affect of a teacher delivering instruction.

‘Indeed I do, Prince Sennareth.’

CHAPTER FOUR



In her third year at the Inscribed Citadel, like all initiates, Elarin had been required to stand for a Defence of Principles. She had spent months in preparation, studying, writing, debating her fellow students all in the service of constructing an unassailable tower of logic. She had come into the high archive in a swirl of notes, a serried phalanx of bristling reason, ready to weather the intellectual blades and arrows of her teachers.

It had taken them less than an hour to tear her to pieces.

She had stood before Master Uiharan and half a dozen elder archivists, desperately overmatched as she sought to defend her research against centuries of accumulated knowledge. The masters had eviscerated Elarin's arguments, forcing her into the realm of conjecture and supposition, and ultimately, stuttering failure.

In the end, she had all but fled the chamber, scrolls clutched to her chest along with the remains of her tattered pride. It had been all she could do not to pack her meagre possessions and slip from the citadel, a thief of knowledge, unworthy of the prize she coveted.

Master Uiharan had found her after the intellectual brutalism, coiled like a river eel in one of the many reading nooks scattered through the archives. Rather than comfort or cajole, he had simply sat with her, speaking softly of

his own studies, and the many, many times he had faltered in their pursuit. Uiharan's quiet monologue had replaced the aggrieved mutter of Elarin's thoughts, giving her space to shore up the foundations of her shattered self-image.

'What happened?' she had asked, at last.

Uiharan had merely bobbed his head, smiling. 'Seven masters once again proved they were smarter than a single student.'

'I don't understand.'

'Like martial skill, intellectual defence can only be learned through hard and painful practice.' He had leaned in, then, a gentle hand upon her shoulder. 'The Defence of Principles is not meant to measure how one wins, but how they *lose*.'

As they had back then, Uiharan's words helped Elarin calm the anxiety twisting in her gut, the prickle of hairs along her arms and neck. Sennareth sought to undermine her, to show her for a liability, an eccentric whose counsel could not be relied upon. If Elarin wished to convince the others of the danger of her vision, she must remain calm.

Drawing in a slow breath, Elarin steadied herself. She was a Loreseeker, a Grand Archivist. She had debated greater minds than Sennareth, picked apart their arguments, her logic sharp as a duelling blade.

'On my recent journey, I uncovered a concealed crypt, a twisted cathedral of bone. It was a terrible place threaded with ancient necromantic energies,' Elarin said to the assembled Lumineth commanders.

'We have scoured a dozen tombs in recent weeks,' Kuonor said with a dismissive toss of his head, the ringlets of his hair glittering like strands of obsidian in the prismatic light. 'What makes this bone cathedral so special?'

'It was not the crypt itself, but what it contained,' Elarin replied. 'A soul reservoir – a relic brimming with imprisoned spiritual energy, more than I have seen since the invasion.'

Master Lesaris' disdain seemed engraved upon his craggy features. 'You destroyed this thing?'

'I did not have the time.' Elarin raised a hand to forestall further questions. She had hoped to be more circumspect, but if she dissembled, Sennareth and the others would be quick to pounce on any inconsistencies.

Even so, the relic's dire vision lurked at the corners of her thoughts. Elarin could almost feel the impending doom, its terrible closeness like the breath

of some ancient funereal beast, reeking of caverns and charnel pits. There was nothing for it but for her to tell the truth, unfiltered, unpolished.

So she did.

To his credit, Sennareth did not interrupt, only watched her from beneath hooded eyes, his hands steepled on the table in front of him. The others were less guarded. Elarin could almost feel Master Lesaris' scorn as she told of her encounter with the accursed relic, and the dark vision she had prised from its inner workings.

Both Kuonor and Ildirin looked fit to leap from their seats when she spoke of the Ossiarchs and their Mortisan commander, but a glance from Chariel was enough to restrain the two warriors' more bellicose instincts. Kyris asked few questions, seeming more concerned with the crypt's location than contents, but given the High Sentinel's scouting responsibilities, such focus made sense.

'My vision spoke of danger up the coast, darkness spreading from a place of great and terrible power, an army of Ossiarchs gathering to fulfil Nagash's will.' Elarin spoke directly to Chariel. For all Sennareth's posturing and prevarications, the Lord Regent remained the final authority.

'It has taken months to secure a solid foothold in Shyish.' Sennareth spoke at last, his tone matter-of-fact. 'Now you would have us march into the unknown to chase some half-remembered nightmare?' He turned to Chariel, shaking his head. 'This would risk *all* our gains.'

The Lord Regent gave a thoughtful frown, but did not immediately respond.

Elarin spoke into the contemplative silence. 'If I am correct, we could lose everything by remaining here. The Lumineth are strong and disciplined, but this is Shyish – the dead will always hold dominion.' She fought to keep the emotion from her bearing, but it was difficult with the memory of the vision so fresh in her mind. Chariel's host would meet the fate of the Inscribed Citadel, their spires cast down, walls broken, bones *stolen*.

'If this peril is as you say, then fortification becomes even *more* paramount.' Master Lesaris flicked a bony finger as if Elarin were a fleck of dust to be brushed away. He turned to Chariel, shaking his head. 'Only fools abandon a position of strength. We cannot simply pull up camp and march into the unknown reaches of Shyish on the word of some... arcane dilettante.'

Unlike Sennareth, Lesaris' insult held no malice. Somehow worse, it was rooted in disdain. Clearly, the old Calligrave did not think Elarin worthy of a position in Chariel's entourage.

Lesaris' casual dismissal of her abilities caused a flush to creep up Elarin's neck, but she swallowed the urge to respond in kind. Losing her temper would only confirm the Calligrave's mistaken beliefs.

Better to rise above such pettiness.

'I understand your concerns, master.' She offered Lesaris the slightest of bows. 'It is a risk, to be sure. But was it not a similar impulse that robbed our people of the chance to undermine Nagash's grand working?' Elarin kept her voice calm, steady, as if she were delivering a lecture on the properties of Aqshian cinderglass rather than an impassioned plea. 'This is Shyish, we have seen its horrors. There is no bulwark the dead cannot overwhelm, no mandala that will not crumble to the slow creep of entropy. We were sent here to forestall the God of Death's return, to serve as our people's first defence against the assorted malevolences of this realm. To remain inactive is not wisdom, but wilful ignorance.'

'The Ossiarchs are more concerning to me.' Kyris ran callused fingers along the wood of her arcbow, as if the weapon might offer unconsidered insights.

Kuonor rocked back in his seat, grinning. 'I have faced these skeletons before, bones break easier than steel.'

'This is no mere Deathrattle horde.' Lesaris turned his severe gaze upon the Steedmaster. 'Nagash's personal legion – terrible, implacable. A foe worthy of consideration. Yet another reason to act with care.'

'Indeed.' Elarin could not but agree with the Calligrave. 'But care need not mean inaction. If the Ossiarchs plan something, and I believe they do, then it is paramount we act to stop it.'

'What of the lives of our warriors?' Ildirin asked, stiff-necked and scowling, as if he expected Elarin to draw her blade. 'This is not some jaunt up the coast, but a foray into hostile territory.'

'Come now, High Warden. Do you command a legion of farmers?' Kuonor's laugh boomed like a festival gong. He spread his muscular hands, grinning as if he and Ildirin shared some private joke. 'Your soldiers came to fight. We *all* came to fight.'

Prince Sennareth gave a soft hum of concern. 'Be that as it may, I cannot

help but feel it would be beneficial to collect more information. If Loreseeker Elarin is correct, and there is some abominable scheme in the working, surely there will be other signs.'

'A shift in the local realm lines at the very least.' Lesaris nodded. 'Yet I have sensed nothing.'

'By the time we feel a change, it may already be too late.' Elarin felt her grip on the conversation slipping, but before she could muster a reply, Sennareth went for her throat.

'Master Lesaris is our most accomplished sorcerer, he would have detected such a threat as Elarin claims to have foretold.' His tone was almost apologetic. 'Which leads me to wonder if our esteemed Loreseeker might have been unduly affected by her encounter with this accursed relic.'

'I know what I saw.' Elarin didn't remember standing, but she was somehow on her feet, glaring down at Sennareth. 'As a Loreseeker it is my duty to seek out such threats. If you question my ability, we shall exchange more than words, prince.'

Sennareth's expression was one of wounded shock, as if *he* were somehow the victim. It was all Elarin could do to master her windblown thoughts. The prince did not come at her openly, with good intent. Any further outburst would only weaken her case. Dimly, she realised the others were watching her – their expressions ranging from disdain, to shock, to amused interest.

'Apologies if I have given offence, Loreseeker.' Sennareth made shields of his hands. 'All know of your interest in necromancy. I merely voice a concern that perhaps it has led you to a... *premature* conclusion concerning this new threat.'

Elarin cast a desperate glance around the table, finding little support. It was no use trying to reason with the others, they had already made up their minds; but the Lord Regent's silence still offered some glimmer of hope. Even so, it would be impossible for Elarin to construct a convincing case with Sennareth and Lesaris questioning her every word.

'Lord Regent.' She offered Chariel her best courtly bow. 'I would ask if we may speak alone.'

To Elarin's surprise, the Lord Regent gave the slightest of nods. She pushed to her feet, glancing to the others.

'Leave us.'

For once, Sennareth had no easy reply. ‘Lord Regent, we are your war council. This is quite irreg—’

‘I shall consult with you all in turn.’ Although soft, Chariel’s voice carried the weight of supreme authority. ‘But I *will* hear what the Loreseeker has to say.’

The Lord Regent’s tone left no room for argument. The others might question Chariel’s judgement, but they were Lumineth – discipline would always triumph over desire.

In a bare handful of breaths the others had filed from the command pavilion, leaving Elarin and Chariel alone.

The Lord Regent turned her chair to face Elarin, then sat, one elbow on the table as if they were merchants discussing silk futures in some dockside tavern.

‘Now.’ Chariel leaned forwards, her expression flat as a winter pond. ‘Tell me why I should risk my entire command on insights gleaned from a cursed relic.’

‘I am a Loreseeker. It is my duty to seek out arcane dangers,’ Elarin replied. ‘Would you question such a report from High Sentinel Kyris’ scouts?’

‘This is no mere scouting report.’ Chariel shook her head. ‘It will take more than your word to convince the others.’

‘Then *order* them. You are Lord Regent, not Sennareth.’

Chariel let out a slow sigh, but remained distressingly silent.

‘I know what I saw,’ Elarin continued. ‘The vision was true. If we remain here, the Ossiarchs will gather in their hundreds, their thousands, bent to Nagash’s dark design. Although I do not yet know the true shape of this threat, I know they cannot be allowed to succeed. If we do nothing, we shall be swept away, the way to Hysh left open.’

‘A compelling, if troubling, argument.’ The Lord Regent nodded as if to herself. ‘Unfortunately, it is not enough.’

Elarin sank back into her chair, the carpeted floor of Chariel’s tent gone treacherous as a wind-tossed sea. She regarded the Lord Regent, throat tight as she recognised Chariel’s expression – eyes shadowed, her high brows arched in worthless concern.

It was the same she had worn when she doomed the Inscribed Citadel.

And yet, there was something more, a guardedness Elarin did not

recognise. She had grown accustomed to candour in their conversations. Chariel was her patron, her lord. Without the Lord Regent's support, Elarin would have never been admitted to the Order of Loreseekers, never earned such an exalted position in a Vanari warhost. It also meant she had no power save what the Lord Regent granted.

The perfect advisor.

'What is it?' Elarin asked.

Chariel shifted slightly, a tic Elarin had long come to associate with discomfort.

'What are you not telling me?'

'Better not to know. It would only weaken your case,' Chariel replied softly. 'Give Sennareth more cause to doubt your motives.'

'Lord, I am a Loreseeker. It is my duty to study and advise.' Elarin caught and held Chariel's gaze. 'No decision ever suffered from too much information. What use am I if you withhold the truth?'

Chariel's jaw pulsed, once, twice. Then she gave a slow nod. 'The Mortisan you described, she is named Naxia of Cadovar – an old and terrible creature, last scion of a doomed city, one of the first swallowed by Nagash in his bid to control all of Shyish.'

'How do you know of this creature?' Elarin frowned, confusion and trepidation warring in her breast. 'We have never faced Ossiarchs before.'

'That much is true,' Chariel replied, her voice a mix of acceptance and regret. 'It was she who toppled the Inscribed Citadel.'

Memories of broken spires rose like sunken monoliths revealed by ebbing tides. It had been weeks before Chariel had deemed it safe enough for Elarin to return to the citadel, a blasted, broken thing. The high wall had crumbled, rune-inscribed stones spread across miles of coast as if scattered by the hand of some petulant gargant. Nothing remained in the archives, not a scroll, not a tome, not a single body. It was as if her comrades had been simply erased.

'But...'

Elarin shook her head as if to deny the truth of Chariel's words. 'The Citadel fell to the Nighthaunt, Nagash's spectral host.'

'They assaulted the citadel, yes – but it was the Ossiarchs who annihilated it.'

'You said it was not safe, prevented me from returning until your scouts had explored the ruins.' Elarin stiffened, her thoughts a tangled web of

anger and recrimination. ‘Why keep this from me?’

‘You were young, untrained. Better for you to think those responsible had been destroyed.’ Chariel glanced away as if embarrassed by her justifications. ‘I needed you to focus on your studies, not vengeance.’

Elarin could summon no words, the lie that had underpinned their entire relationship tainting any reply she might muster.

Perhaps interpreting Elarin’s silence as condemnation, Chariel rose, hands smoothing the front of her war robes.

‘I make no apology.’ She strode across the tent, a wave of her hand bringing the war table to life once more. ‘We were reeling from the Necroquake, crippled by Nagash’s invasion. You would have found little more than a quick death, your bones added to the Ossiarch legions.’

Elarin gripped the arms of her chair, fingers whitening on the intricately carved scrollwork. Had the Morteck Guard she faced been crafted from bits of Master Uiharan? Scraps of his skeleton, his *soul* beaten around an armature of undying malice? The very idea of his gentle hands gripping a nadirite blade opened a cold hollow in Elarin’s stomach.

When Elarin spoke next, her words were calculated to wound.

‘You failed them.’

‘And what would you have done, Loreseeker?’ Chariel turned, her calmness boiling away like morning mist. ‘Illium needed me. There was no decision to be made. A few hundred scholars, a teetering archive of esotery weighed against the lives of thousands of our people?’

‘We were your people, too.’ Elarin let her shoulders drop, her gaze fall. Chariel had lifted her from the ashes, raising her to untold heights. Elarin had always thought it was her acumen, her loyalty that had won the Lord Regent’s support.

Now, she knew it was pity that moved Chariel.

The Lord Regent had kept her, not as an advisor, a confidant, but as a servant, bound by chains of regret and obligation. By uplifting Elarin, Chariel had sought to salve her own wounded conscience. For all his poisoned ambitions, Sennareth had been right. Even Loreseekers were not immune to the push and pull of political machinations.

Elarin’s thoughts turned cold and sharp. If she was to be used, then she would gain from it. Not revenge, but justice. Celastir, Sennareth, Lesaris, none of them could comprehend the true threat.

But this was not the Defence of Principles. Elarin did not need to overcome a dozen opponents, she only needed to move one.

‘I forgive you.’ Although little more than a whisper, Elarin’s lie seemed to strike the Lord Regent with the force of a hurled spear. Chariel placed a hand upon the war table as if to steady herself.

‘You are correct, lord. The time was not right.’ Elarin straightened, meeting her patron’s unsteady regard. ‘But now, we stand at the head of a mighty host – all sworn to oppose Nagash’s will.’

She pushed up from her chair. Moving over to the war table, she ran a hand across the faceted aetherquartz, shifting the image to display the Lumineth encampment.

‘There are no innocents to protect, no cities to defend, no one to be sacrificed.’ Elarin nodded at the camp. ‘It is as Steedmaster Kuonor said, we are warriors – sworn to take the fight to Shyish so our people would never again suffer Nagash’s vicious greed.’ She turned to Chariel, softening her voice. ‘Your concern for our lives is what makes you a great general. And yet, what are the lives of one host measured against the Lumineth who reside in Hysh? The threat is real, Naxia’s presence confirms it. Why else would the Ossiarchs come if not to speed their master’s return?’

Elarin gripped Chariel’s arm – a breach of protocol, but a necessary one. She walked a precarious path. One misstep could see her cast from the host, relegated to some backwater archive, the remainder of her sad existence spent cataloguing the research of her betters.

‘There is no choice, lord.’

Chariel ran a hand through her hair, emotions slipping across her face like waves upon a winter sea – anger, regret, resignation. The Lord Regent presented herself as an unassailable bastion, proof against the vagaries and vicissitudes of emotion, but that was only her role. Elarin had spent years at Chariel’s side, privy to her decisions, her regrets, her doubts.

Better than any, the Lord Regent understood there was no triumph against death, no victory time could not reverse. Entropy bled all their endeavours, from sorcerous to the mundane. To erect a wall was to watch it slowly crumble. To destroy one deathless host was to sight another upon the horizon, uncaring, unbeaten. Even Lesaris’ great stabilising runes were nets cast over sand. The Realm of Death did not resist the Lumineth, so much as wear away at them like waves crashing on the shore. They could cut down

their undead foes, send their souls shrieking into the aether, but no end awaited.

None save the grave.

When Chariel closed her eyes, Elarin knew she had won.

‘Spread the word.’ The Lord Regent turned, her voice pitched to carry.
‘We march at first light.’

CHAPTER FIVE



The skeleton unfolded, ribcage blossoming like an ossified flower in the killing glare of Elarin's incantation. Its blackened bones joined the others piled at her feet, helm and rusty iron blade reduced to cooling slag.

'Leave some for us, Loreseeker!' Kuonor's shouted admonition rose above the clatter of hooves as the wedge of Dawnriders parted around Elarin, so close she could have touched the heaving flanks of their mounts. The Steedmaster's mane of dark hair streamed behind him, his vargheist-hide cloak snapping like a wind-caught pennant in the speed of his charge.

They hit the advancing undead like a warship carving through heavy waves, cloaks snapping, armour bright in the tepid gloom, their brilliant lances piercing bone and ragged chainmail with equal ease. Any normal foe would have broken before the charge, scattered like dry leaves; the skeletal soldiers merely waved their jagged blades, jaws stretched in soundless screams as they shambled towards the Dawnriders.

They were not Ossiarchs – their mouldering bones were swathed in grave goods rather than articulated nadirite. The glow of their eyes was the flat glimmer of false dawn rather than the pitiless flicker of witchlight. Far from the lockstep precision of Morteks, these were sorry, shuffling things, dredged from the veins of ossified dross that ran through the Ouroboran

stone.

But their task required neither skill nor discipline, only the relentless weight of numbers.

Kuonor wheeled his horse, the arc of his sabre bright as a crescent moon as it removed flailing skeletal limbs. The Dawnriders remained for a moment, a maelstrom of slashing blades and crushing hooves, then they were through the undead, leaving nothing but broken bodies in their wake.

Arrows flashed down from the nearby rise, neither a storm nor hail, but precise as diving herons. The remaining skeletons toppled as each sunmetal barb found a home, piercing shadowed eye sockets and severing spines, not a shaft wasted.

The undead did not relent. During Nagash's invasion, such skeletal flotsam came on tides of night, the dark energy of the Necroquake smothering the pale half-light that passed for evening in Hysh. But even the God of Death's greatest working could not overmatch the Realm of Light's eternal brilliance. More than once, day had provided a much needed respite from the endless tides of dead.

But in Shyish, dawn never truly came.

A skeleton crawled towards Elarin, its legs severed, its skull caved in from the stamp of a shod hoof and one arm little more than a stub of ragged bone.

Elarin had seen countless such creatures since coming to Shyish. Deathrattle, Nighthaunt, even the occasional Soulblight vampire, she had made close study of their form and function, hoping to unlock a better means of combating them. There were many who said her studies of necromancy trod too close to corruption, but such was always the path of the Loreseeker. For Elarin to turn away from such knowledge would be to repudiate her very calling.

She could see necromantic energy pulse through the skeleton, musty, yellowed bones moving as if manipulated by some cruel puppeteer. Empowered by Shyish's amethyst energies, necromancy possessed none of the delicate care of Lumineth sorceries. It was a harsh, unlovely thing, more power than finesse. Yet such sorcery had somehow torn asunder the very fabric of the Mortal Realms, and condemned all life to Nagash's chill embrace.

For that reason alone, it was worthy of study.

Elarin watched the flow of power, spiritual energy leaking from a dozen

rents in the enchantments that animated the skeletal soldier. Soon, its unnatural life would bleed into the lambent energies of Shyish, and the thing would be little more than a pile of broken bones. Elarin was fascinated watching the interplay of death magic, like the inner workings of some rudimentary clockwork artifice laid bare.

A few seeking runes were enough to tease out the threads of enchantment that bound the skeleton. Careful as a surgeon stitching up a wound, Elarin knotted the broken ends, reweaving and reinforcing the web of necromantic sorcery.

The effect was astonishing. The skeleton did not stand, so much as float, carried upon a numinous gust of amethyst energy. Arms flailed, eye sockets burned as its chattering teeth ground showers of purple sparks into the air.

Elarin felt a similar exhilaration kindle in her own chest. Her study of necromancy had led her to pore over such sarcophagi and tomb inscriptions as the other Lumineth saw fit to leave behind, but such theoretical constructions were far from practice. It was one thing to understand how to rouse the dead. Far different to accomplish such a feat herself.

Could Elarin turn the walking corpses on their makers? Spare the lives of her companions? Her people?

She raised a trembling hand, a command on her lips.

A flash of dazzling steel removed the skeleton's head. Celastir pivoted, the force of her backswing cleaving the thing's wretched body in two. It fell like a burning building, power bleeding from severed enchantments.

The Bladelord turned on Elarin, her tone sharp. 'What were you doing?'

'My duty.' Elarin returned Celastir's cold stare, anger hardening to contempt. She was growing tired of her every move being questioned. 'I am tasked to study the secrets of this place, just as you are tasked with keeping me alive. I would suggest you focus on your duties and leave me to mine.'

'It would be easier to do that if we marched with the main force.' The Bladelord turned to kick the skeletal remains down the rise. 'There is no call for us to travel with the vanguard.'

'It was my vision that brought us here,' Elarin replied. 'I should contribute to the defence.'

Celastir seemed about to reply when the Dawnriders came galloping back, Kyris' Sentinels jogging close behind.

'Not a bad morning.' Kuonor reined up a few paces from Elarin. Twisting

in his saddle to survey the scattered bones, he ran a hand across the gold-capped coils of his beard. ‘Two hundred, at least.’

‘And how many of your riders did they drag down?’ Kyris’ question punctured the Steedmaster’s burgeoning mirth.

‘I have not made an accounting as of yet, but I suspect few, if any.’

‘We cannot afford even a few,’ Kyris replied. ‘Not if Loreseeker Elarin speaks true.’

And there it was. Although compelled to follow Chariel’s orders, it was clear the other commanders thought this a fool’s errand. No doubt Sennareth’s whispered imprecations had played a role in turning the others against her. Only Kuonor had expressed even the slightest support, and that more an outgrowth of his desire to come to grips with the foe.

No matter. Soon enough, they would all see.

With a sharp whistle, a Sentinel rose from behind an outcrop of rock some half-mile distant. He raised his arcbow in a gesture Elarin had grown to dislike, then waved a clenched fist towards the far sea cliffs, once, twice.

‘Another two hundred, from the east.’ Kyris chewed her lip. ‘They grow bolder.’

‘Let them.’ Kuonor patted his steed’s neck. ‘I could ride this filth down all day.’

‘You may have to. All night, as well.’ Kyris’ gaze flicked to Elarin, her misgivings all too evident. ‘Will you be joining us, Loreseeker?’

Elarin felt Celastir tense at her side. The urge to accompany the vanguard burned bright in Elarin’s thoughts, but she doused the flame. She had thought to study Ossiarchs, to tease out their animating principles just as she had Shyish’s other walking dead. But the Lumineth had found only shambling corpses. Several days’ hard march up the coast, and not a Mortek to be seen.

A callous, if clever, plan. What need had Naxia to expend her warriors when the coast crawled with such necromantic dross? The constant assaults bled the Lumineth of lives and morale. The warhost might follow the Lord Regent’s orders unto death, but discipline was no shield against the slow creep of doubt. By the time the Lumineth reached Marrowscar, the soldiers would be worn thin, with or without Elarin’s aid. Like it or not, the best way for her to support Chariel was to strengthen her own position.

‘Alas, I have business back at camp,’ she said, at last.

‘Of course, Loreseeker.’ Kyris gave a quick bow. ‘We are grateful for your assistance.’

‘And I yours. Celastir and I shall return when we are able,’ she added, and meant it.

Kuonor raised his sabre in a rough salute, then galloped off, his laugh echoing amongst the stony hills.

Kyris shook her head. ‘That one will go smiling to his grave.’

‘Better that than weeping,’ Elarin replied with a wistful shake of her head.

The High Sentinel regarded her for a long moment, then sniffed. ‘Will you require an escort, Loreseeker?’

‘No need.’ Elarin turned away. ‘Celastir will be more than sufficient.’

The main force marched roughly a mile behind the vanguard, near enough to provide aid, but with enough distance to avoid ambushes and snares. Elarin and Celastir covered the ground in silence. There was nothing to be said.

The advance guard allowed them through with only the most minute of hesitations. Barely a heartbeat, yet it spoke volumes of their mistrust. Elarin expected such from Sennareth’s warriors, but these were Illium soldiers, sworn to Chariel in word and deed.

She bore the insult with tight-lipped composure. Elarin knew the lies Sennareth told of her: that she was a Loreseeker grown enamoured with necromancy; that she had lost her way, threatening to drag the whole of the warhost to its doom. He could not spread such malicious gossip openly, but Sennareth possessed the subtlety of a lifelong courtier. For all her power and knowledge, Elarin was ill-equipped to combat such elusive insinuations.

She needed allies, and she needed them quickly.

Her time with Kuonor and Kyris might have earned their grudging respect, but it had not earned their support. Ildirin was likewise unlikely to aid her. Like a spear-thrust, the High Warden’s thoughts travelled in straight lines. He had made it clear he thought this endeavour a dangerous waste of time.

Which left only Master Lesaris.

The Calligrave strode among the acolytes of his entourage, his sharp features, dark skin, and sombre expression lending him the look of ancient statuary. Although there was little call for the drawing of runes on the

march, Lesaris remained at the ready, his ebon gaze roaming the surrounding cliffs, missing nothing.

‘You bring news from the vanguard?’ Lesaris asked without preamble.

‘More of the same,’ Elarin replied.

‘Ah.’ Flicking back the long sleeves of his robe, he folded his arms, somehow still looking down on Elarin despite being a head shorter. ‘You have come to convince me.’

She hid her surprise. ‘Yes, master.’

‘I expected you sooner.’ He gave an absent nod, glancing over her shoulder at some invisible current of geomantic energy. ‘Sennareth has almost succeeded in turning the rest against you.’

‘Almost?’

‘Walk with me, Loreseeker.’ It was not an invitation.

They left the main force, both Celastir and Lesaris’ own personal guards trailing a respectful distance behind. The Calligrave led her up a low hill, moving quickly despite his age. Elarin was sweating by the time they reached the summit, grateful for even the sluggish breeze, laden with hints of brine from the nearby Dwindlesea. The salt smell conjured misty memories of Elarin’s childhood – moving amidst the fish market, carried upon her mother’s shoulders; the smell of the Almarin docks when Uncle Zathran’s ship came back from a long journey; the climb along the lower pier, she and her sisters dangling their feet over the edge, giggling as the cold ocean waves splashed across their calves.

That place was gone now, as were all who dwelt there. It was strange – Elarin had spent weeks sifting through the ruins of the citadel, but she had never thought to return to Almarin.

‘Well?’ Lesaris’ question snapped Elarin from her bittersweet ruminations.

‘Master.’ She sketched a low bow, more to gather her thoughts than placate the Calligrave. ‘We have been almost a week on the march, and I thought perhaps you may have sensed the Ossiarchs’ endeavours.’

Lesaris raised a pale eyebrow. ‘Have you, Loreseeker?’

‘No.’ She sighed. ‘If anything, our path seems somehow drained of power. There is necromancy, but it is vague, non-specific. Hardly the careful work of a Mortisan like Naxia. But you have more wisdom than I, and may have discerned some obscurity I have not, master.’

‘Flattery does not suit you.’ Lesaris’ lip curled. ‘And even if it did, I fear Prince Sennareth has quite exceeded my tolerance for empty praise.’

Elarin could not help her surprise. ‘But I thought you and he—’

‘Simply because we agree on certain matters does not mean I support, or even *approve* of the prince’s ambitions.’

‘Then you know he seeks to eventually supplant Chariel.’

‘I removed myself from such base politicking years ago.’ Lesaris gave a dismissive sniff. ‘I care not who leads this warhost, only that it is led *well*.’

‘And you doubt Chariel?’

‘If I doubted the Lord Regent, we would not be having this conversation.’

It was as if he had reached into Elarin’s ribs to grip her heart with cold, brittle fingers. ‘You doubt my vision.’

‘I believe the threat you saw is real.’ The runes dangling from his robes clinked and clattered as he turned to pinion her with a sharp gaze. ‘What I doubt is you.’

Elarin’s confusion must have shown, because Lesaris gave a thin smile.

‘This endeavour.’ He spread his arms as if to gather up the marching force below. ‘It is not a mission of study. It is about survival. There is value in your calling, Loreseeker. Much has been lost that should be recovered. But this, *this*...’ He flicked his fingers as if casting stones at the surrounding hills. ‘I have seen many of your order fall to such temptations. There is no knowledge here that does not destroy, no power that does not corrupt.’

‘You fear I walk too close to the enemy.’

‘In the bone cathedral, when you discovered the soul reservoir.’ He cocked his head. ‘What was your first impulse?’

‘To study it.’ It was the wrong answer, but somehow Elarin understood that to lie would be even worse. ‘A blade cares not who it cuts. It is the hand that decides.’

‘You would quote Tyrion to me?’ The Calligrave arched an eyebrow, a quick flutter of expression that might have been irritation or amusement. ‘A fair point, but the fact remains – had you destroyed the soul reservoir rather than attempting to understand it, the relic would not have fallen into the hands of our enemy.’

‘And we would know nothing of the Ossiarchs’ plans.’

‘Ah, you *are* a clever one.’ Again came that subtle tic at the corner of Lesaris’ lips – amusement, Elarin was sure of it now.

‘It matters not who leads this warhost, only that it is led *well*. Is that not what you said?’ Elarin pushed her advantage. ‘The others do not believe I speak the truth. How can such division aid our mission?’

‘And if I were to speak on your behalf?’ Lesaris asked. ‘If you were to find the source of this... doom?’

‘I would destroy it.’ It was not a lie, not really. Lesaris was correct, some truths were better left hidden.

The old Calligrave regarded her for a long moment. Silence stretched between them, taut as a mooring line. Elarin made fists in the sleeves of her robe, her body seeming almost to bend under the weight of Lesaris’ scrutiny.

Arguments jostled in Elarin’s thoughts – logic, rationalisations, a roiling tumult of facts gathering on her tongue. And yet, somehow, she knew that to speak would weaken her position. So she remained silent.

At last, the Calligrave gave a slow nod. ‘I shall do as you ask.’

‘Thank you, master. I–’

He held up one finger, a teacher lecturing a boisterous student. ‘But know that I am watching you.’

‘We desire the same thing.’

Lesaris’ smile faded, replaced by his customary scowl. ‘That remains to be seen.’

Without another word, the Calligrave descended the hill, leaving Elarin to stare at his retreating back.

She stood for some time, running through the discussion like a sheaf of research notes. It had not gone as expected, and yet, she had won the support of the most respected Scinari in the warhost. Sennareth would be hard-pressed to spread more lies under Lesaris’ watchful eye.

The Lumineth would march as one, at least for the moment.

The breeze shifted, salt tang replaced by the oppressive odours of dust and dry bone. Elarin turned to study the shadowed coast ahead, not quite able to restrain the hollow flutter in her stomach.

‘It seems we follow your vision.’ Celastir stepped to Elarin’s side.

‘Perhaps.’ Elarin ran a hand through her hair, the motion sending a prickle along her neck. ‘Only pray I have not doomed us all.’

CHAPTER SIX



‘The locals call it Marrowscar.’ Kyris held two fingers above the shadowed fortress. The war table had rendered the place in dusky tones of grey and black, high towers thrust spear-like from a nest of jagged battlements. Perched on a long spit of stone, it seemed an imposing edifice. Then again, Elarin knew the enchanted map was prone to artistic liberties. Although Kuonor and Kyris’ forays up the coast were enough to place the fortress’ size and position, neither had actually seen the place up close.

‘And what forces defend this stronghold?’ Lord Regent Chariel leaned over the table as if she might peer through the keep’s delicately inked walls.

‘We cannot say.’ Irritation bled through Kuonor’s every word. ‘There is but one approach. We could not draw close without exposing ourselves to those within.’

‘And the cliffs below the citadel?’ High Warden Ildirin stood as if carved from polished granite. ‘Impassable, I assume.’

‘A small force, perhaps.’ Kyris sucked air through her teeth. ‘Although it seems likely the sea cliffs are also watched.’

‘It seems we must assault the main wall.’ Chariel gave a slow nod, glancing to Lesaris. ‘What of the arcane topography?’

‘It is a necromantic locus.’ The Calligrave made a vague gesture and an

amethyst web spread from the citadel. ‘Marrowscar sits atop the conflux of half a dozen realm lines, and yet the area around it is empty of power, as if the citadel were some manner of geomantic void.’

‘Could they be feeding Marrowscar’s arcane defences?’ Chariel asked.

Lesaris gave a thoughtful frown. ‘Possibly.’

‘Can we blunt their power?’

‘Almost certainly. An *Alaithi* rune, here and here.’ Lesaris touched the lines. ‘And a line of interlocking inscription along the periphery.’ He traced a small semicircle across the base of the peninsula. The purple glow diminished, but did not fade entirely. ‘Unfortunately, there is little we can do about those that run from the Dwindlesea itself.’

Chariel sighed. ‘It will have to be enough.’ She turned to Elarin. ‘What do the spirits say?’

‘For a place of such dark power, the coast is strangely empty of spirits.’ Elarin hated to report such meagre progress. ‘Those I could find were barely capable of communication, but I could sense their fear of Marrowscar.’

‘I can attest to this barrenness.’ Kyris nodded. ‘The raids have stopped.’

‘The Ossiarchs gather their forces,’ Ildirin said.

Kuonor raised a heavy fist. ‘All the better for us to destroy what remains.’

‘I doubt they will meet us on the field,’ Chariel said. ‘We shall need ladders, towers, rams.’

‘Consider it done, lord.’ Ildirin gave a crisp salute. ‘The woods about here are sparse, but we shall make do.’

‘Kyris, Kuonor, your scouts have surveyed the area?’

‘Yes, Lord Regent.’ The High Sentinel bowed. ‘It is much the same as the rest of the Ouroboran Coast – little cover besides boulders and lichfinger brambles. Marrowscar has command of the entire peninsula, we will be under fire the entire way.’

‘Worse.’ Kuonor bared his teeth, nodding. ‘The ground is hilly, broken. There are no good avenues for a charge.’

‘I would see this Marrowscar.’ Chariel straightened to regard the two. ‘Gather your Sentinels and Dawnriders, we shall make a quick sortie.’

‘And what of my forces, lord?’ Prince Sennareth had been silent for most of the council, a thin veneer of courtly graces barely concealing his sullen petulance. Although Lesaris had not directly confronted the prince, the

Calligrave must have made it clear he would tolerate no more politicking, for Sennareth's barbs had dissolved like morning mist. No doubt the prince still worked more circumspect machinations, but Elarin hoped they would conquer Marrowscar before any were realised.

Despite her concern, it made Elarin inordinately pleased to see Sennareth discomfited by his own intrigues.

'Bring the Cera Niall forces closer.' Chariel straightened. 'We shall need to move quickly once Master Lesaris inscribes the runes.'

'As your Bannerblade, my place is by your side.' It was as strong a rebuke as Sennareth could muster given his recent decline in support.

'In battle, yes. But I intend only to get a feel for the fortifications.' She placed a comforting hand on the prince's shoulder. 'You command while I am away.'

'Yes, Lord Regent.' The concession seemed balm enough for Sennareth's wounded pride, for he raised no further objections.

Chariel examined the enchanted map, pointing out places for further study. Kuonor's riders would skirt the peninsula, looking for potential avenues of assault while Chariel scouted the fortress itself. Elarin had no doubt they would find some means to even the odds, they were Lumineth, after all.

'Shall I accompany you, lord?' Elarin asked, ignoring the flicker of cool disdain in Sennareth's eyes.

Chariel paused for a moment, then shook her head. 'Better you continue to learn what you can from the local spirits.'

It was a blow, albeit a small one. Elarin had hoped to examine Marrowscar. As it was a necromantic locus, there was much she could learn from studying the citadel – how it was constructed, inscribed, even how it absorbed the flow of pure death magic from the realm lines.

Perhaps that was why Chariel sought to keep her from it.

Orders given and received, there were no questions among the Lumineth commanders, each moving to their task with the surety of long practice. This was not the first of Nagash's bastions they had toppled, and, Teclis willing, Elarin hoped it would not be their last.

As Chariel and the others moved off, Sennareth and Ildirin set to deforesting those few stubborn copses of ash and scrub pine that clung to the wave-battered coast. No stranger to sieges, the Wardens went to work, the glow of their sunmetal panoply bright even in the Hyshian gloom, a

glittering beacon against the creeping dusk. As a Loreseeker, Elarin had little role in such martial preparations, nor could she do more than observe Lesaris' calligraphic inscriptions. Better for her to attempt to discover what she could of this place's arcane topography.

They had camped several miles from Marrowscar, along a ragged curve of hills that shielded the citadel from view. Despite Naxia's sudden quiescence, it was impossible the Mortisan was unaware of the Lumineth host upon her doorstep. The very fact she had taken no action was in itself telling. Perhaps the Ossiarchs hoped the Lumineth would break upon Marrowscar's high walls, or perhaps they planned some manner of ambush.

It was to this task Elarin turned herself. A prism of bright aetherquartz clutched in one tight fist, she sought to centre herself. Long used to Elarin's meditations, Celastir moved several paces away, the tip of her long blade resting on the ground as she took up her careful watch.

Elarin closed her eyes, letting the energy of Shyish flow through her, her mantra a mix of aelven chants interspersed with necromantic invocations. Master Lesaris might have taken issue with her interest in darker sorceries, but Elarin was unconcerned. She did not seek to shape or control the spiritual energy, only to observe.

Back in Hysh, Elarin had but to close her eyes to feel the steady thrum of eldritch power through the Realm of Light – streams, mountains, cities, all circumscribed by perfect topographical form. The very geography of Hysh seemed to buoy her up, its brilliant glow pure as her intentions. It had seemed impossible not to commune with the spirits of land and sea, her soul resonating with ancient wisdom.

Shyish, too, had spirits: pale, miserable things that clung to her like burrs; vicious, hungry shades with burning eyes that stalked the shadowed corridors of her dreams; ancient souls, so far gone they could not even recall what it was like to draw breath. It was said Shyish had once held shards of paradise, the afterlives of a thousand thousand mortal faiths, presided over by a panoply of forgotten gods. If the Realm of Death had ever boasted such Elysian domains, they were now little more than bones, their former rulers consumed by Nagash in his quest to exercise total dominion over death.

Viewing the numinous realm was like being underwater: distance, time, form, all obscured by currents of amethyst magic. Far from the churning

gyre of spirits Elarin had encountered elsewhere in Shyish, the lands around Marrowscar were barren. Those few essences that remained were little more than wisps of tattered soulstuff. They shied from her scrutiny, scuttling away like insects fleeing beneath an overturned rock.

Strange.

Marrowscar squatted atop the peninsula like a hungry spider, seeming to swallow the eldritch energies of the conflux of realm lines. Elarin focused on the distant keep, not daring to approach for fear of arcane snares and wards. The realm lines pulsed with energy, their vibrant amethyst hue eclipsed by the inky void of Marrowscar itself, a dark hollow that resonated with the dire prognostications granted her by the soul reservoir.

Despite the featureless void, Elarin was able to discern a faint flutter of sorcery behind the keep's high walls. At first it seemed like necromancy, but as she bent her arcane insights to the task of probing the strange enchantments, she began to notice odd differences.

The power was there, sure enough, but the hand that shaped it did not resemble Naxia's. Ossiarch enchantments reeked of ash and stone, unyielding as the legions they created. But this was different. A magic of souls, certainly, and yet as Elarin studied the shifting interplay of forces, she felt not the hollow chill of the grave, but the cold grip of ocean depths. It pressed down upon her, an almost physical weight crushing the breath from her lungs.

Elarin was tempted to delve deeper, but to do so would risk discovery. She was not so arrogant as to believe she could stand alone against whatever dwelt within Marrowscar. Better to report her findings. Chariel and Lesaris may have seen such sorceries before.

Elarin opened her eyes, drawing in a surprised breath as the oceanic images lingered in her vision. She could almost see the swirl of ethereal currents – not the crash of breaking waves, but a patient tide, creeping higher and higher as the Lumineth made their battle preparations.

The effect was subtle. If not for Elarin's recent sorcerous investigations, she might have missed it entirely. The sealike swirls of ether were not some remnant of her vision, but real arcane phenomena made manifest by some outside force.

Even as Elarin watched, shadows began to form amidst the ethereal gyre. Tall forms moved like festival dancers, lithe and long-limbed, seeming

almost weightless. It would have been beautiful, if not for the jagged blades clutched in their hands.

‘They come.’ The words tumbled from her lips in a ragged gasp.

Celastir was at her side in a heartbeat, one hand on Elarin’s shoulder.

‘We must warn the others.’ She staggered to her feet, eyes wide.

It came as a trickle, a pallid ghostly luminescence like the lure of an angler maw, the light of Shyish’s pale constellations filtered through a gently rising tide.

‘They come!’ Elarin snatched up her staff. Hammering the butt upon the stony ground, she unleashed a flare of crackling energy. Already she could see spectral waves lapping around the Lumineth war camp, drawing tight like a finely crafted net.

Nimble forms glided from the ethereal waters. Pale as sea foam, their bodies were criss-crossed with jagged scars, iron collars around their throats, and strange half-runes etched upon their brows. Even without sorcerous sight, Elarin could feel the feeble flicker of their souls, weak as starlight filtering down to the ocean depths. Eyeless, expressionless and naked to the waist, the first few ranks bore great scythe-like blades, forged of a strange opalescent steel. Those behind carried gnarled bows, shaped from a mix of driftwood and carapace.

At their head strode a lean figure. Swathed in spined armour, a flickering lantern suspended from the crest of her high, curved helm, she clutched a hooked polearm in hands almost as thin as those of the bleached skeletons who had harried the Lumineth up the coast.

But it was neither the sudden assault, nor the pale, eyeless horde that caused the breath to curdle in Elarin’s throat. Despite their terrible aspect, the attackers moved with a familiar grace, their sharp features and upswept ears conjuring a sense of sickly recognition in Elarin’s stomach.

They were Namarti. Idoneth. *Aelves*.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Elarin had read of Idoneth, although she had never seen one. Her uncle Zathran occasionally spoke of trading with the Ionrach enclaves hidden below the bright waves of the Gealus Ocean. The Ionrach had fought Nagash; their High King, Voltornos, even sent forces to combat the undead invasion of Hysh.

The Idoneth had been allies, perhaps, but not friends. At their heart, even the greatest Idoneth were twisted, broken things, sea raiders who sought neither wealth nor plunder, but the souls of their victims. They would swoop from the ether in a welter of blades and flashing scales – a quick, brutal strike that left nothing behind save soulless husks and disjointed memories.

Although Shyish's constant malevolence had made the Lumineth wary, the nearest Wardens were taken off guard by the sudden appearance of Idoneth in their midst. The Namarti Thralls were sad, pitiful creatures, robbed of true existence, but they were yet aelves, possessing echoes of the deadly grace that was the birthright of all Teclis' children. Although no match for the Lumineth's deadly precision, they attacked with silent ferocity, hurling themselves upon the braced pikes with seemingly no concern for life or limb.

The lean, spine-armoured commander moved among the churning ranks of Thralls. Her curved polearm cut the leg from a charging Warden, almost decapitating another on the backswing. Glittering spears were thrust towards the Idoneth commander, but she merely slipped back among the advancing Namarti like a rakerdart between coral shoals.

Great blades rose and fell, shearing through plate and chain as the Auralan Wardens formed a loose phalanx. Although they were a mile or more from the sea, spectral waves surrounded the Lumineth, twisting and churning with each of the tidal sorceress' movements. Elarin could see High Warden Ildirin at the fore of the formation, helmetless, his long hair loose and languid in the unnatural currents.

He cut down two of the pallid aelves, his bright blade piercing the swirling murk. At his shouted command, the Wardens formed into tighter ranks. Armour and weapons glowing like sunlight through water, they held against the fearsome tide.

Runes on ashen foreheads flared, bloody injuries closing in an eye-blink as the Thralls shook and shuddered, their mortal wounds nothing more than scars. They were back on their feet in an instant, blades in hand. Although Elarin did not recognise the spells, she had read of the Idoneth's Soulrenders, and knew them as something to be feared.

Elarin started for the beleaguered phalanx, only to pause as a shift in the etheric currents drew her attention elsewhere.

A second Idoneth sorcerer appeared in a welter of crashing waves. His robes were the opaline sheen of oil on water, the scaled plates of his armour seeming almost to glisten in the gloom. Framed by the sweep of his finned helmet was a grinning face. He was strangely broad-featured for an aelf, and although his smile seemed almost genial, his dark eyes glittered with cruel promise.

A sweep of his arm set ghostly breakers racing towards Ildirin. Although the etheric waves did not strike with physical force, their effect was nonetheless overwhelming. The High Warden and several of the nearest warriors seemed almost to wilt, staggering under the pressure of some invisible, crushing weight.

A tall figure glided from amongst the shifting ranks of Namarti. Although attired as a Thrall, his bare chest was inked with twisting whorls and complex shapes, criss-crossed with straps and bandoliers from which hung

an assortment of wickedly edged weapons. Unlike the pale horde surrounding him, the tattooed Idoneth had eyes, although they were a pallid white, rolled back as if he were an ocean predator preparing to bite. His lips moved, although neither in curse nor incantation. Rather, the tattooed commander sang a high, haunting shanty. Although its words were lost amidst the clatter of battle, the melody blossomed in Elarin's chest, cruel and cold.

Barely breaking stride, the tattooed Idoneth slashed down at Ildirin, who, despite the Idoneth enchantments, somehow managed to interpose his blade. Even so, the force of the blow drove the High Warden to his knees.

Elarin came to his aid. Her incantation spat golden motes of light into the swirling gloom. Like coins tossed into a well, they glimmered amidst the spectral waves, bleeding arcane force from the tidal sorcerer's enchantments.

Ildirin surged to his feet. The High Warden aimed a cut at the tattooed Idoneth's head, revealed to be only a feint as he pivoted to lock the aelf's jagged blade. Rather than seek to free his weapon, the Idoneth released his sword to draw a pair of curved short blades.

The two moved as if partnered in some impossible dance, blows visible only by their impact. Ildirin's darting blade drew a shallow gash through the intricate tattoos webbing his opponent's chest. In return, the Idoneth cut at the joints of Ildirin's armour, and soon the High Warden's chainmail was bright with blood.

Elarin drew more energy, shaping a spell that would add strength to Ildirin's attacks, only to have her nascent incantation swept away by a rush of etheric currents.

The sea-cloaked sorcerer rose like an ancient leviathan. His smile was gone, replaced by something terrible, a dark fury that burst from his lips in a jagged scream of rage. He spread clawed hands, gathering himself as if to hurl Elarin into the sky, only to sag as the arcane fundament shifted beneath them.

Lumineth runes blazed like beacons in a storm. A powerful mandala of nested sigils spread across the ground as Master Lesaris strode onto the field, geomantic inscriptions buttressing the Lumineth even as they bled strength from their attackers.

With a snarl, the robed sorcerer raised his arms. Elarin could see the

swirling eddies of energy shift, preparing to usher in another horde of eyeless Thralls. This time however, the arcane currents were constrained by Master Lesaris' wards, the careful weave of Lumineth rune magic channelling the flow of power away from the main body of warriors.

Liquid shadows shifted as more Namarti charged from the murky depths of the ethereal sea. Despite the Tidecaster's efforts, they did not appear amidst the Lumineth ranks, but a dozen yards away, forcing them to charge the wall of braced pikes.

With the Idoneth sorcerer's attention on Master Lesaris, Elarin was free to aid Ildirin. She turned back to the fight, only to see the High Warden standing above the fallen Thrallmaster. The Idoneth's hands were empty, Ildirin's blade already stabbing towards his opponent's chest. The Thrallmaster should have been scrambling, trying to muster some last defence.

Instead, he grinned, his teeth long and sharp as a deep-sea predator's.

A sleek shape darted from the murk. Long-bodied and sharp-finned, with wide underslung jaws, it swam through the air. Jagged fangs pierced Ildirin's armour as the eel-like creature bit down upon his sword-arm.

The High Warden tried to pull free, his expression turning from pain to fury as his blade tumbled from nerveless fingers. He struggled to wrench his arm from the creature's jaws, but the eel only wrapped its long body around his chest.

Before Elarin could begin even the simplest enchantment, the Thrallmaster was on his feet, Ildirin's blade in hand.

He gave the sword a few experimental swipes, then slashed it across the High Warden's throat.

Elarin's cry bled into a raging torrent of sorcerous conjurations. Her words cut lines in the air, curling arcs and vertices that would scour the murderous Idoneth from Shyish. But the Thrallmaster was already gone, swept away by the uncaring tides of battle.

With a shout of helpless fury, she unleashed her killing enchantments upon the Namarti. Armless, legless, their bodies carved by a webwork of purest light, the Thralls fell to the cold earth never to rise again.

More Wardens joined the fray, the blue and ivory of Cera Niall mixing with the deep azure of Illium. Elarin spied the Lord Regent's mountain-and-hawk banner flying above the battle and made for it, Celastir close behind.

It was too much to hope Chariel had returned, but Sennareth still bore her banner, and the Lumineth warhost would rally to it.

Blood spattered the prince's cheeks, bits of sunmetal glinting through where the bright lacquer had been chipped by enemy blows. Even so, he was careful to plant the Lord Regent's banner before turning his needle-sharp gaze on Elarin.

'You spoke of Ossiarchs, not sea aelves.' He shouldered past a pair of Sentinels to glare at Elarin. 'Why were we not warned?'

'Now is not the time for recrimination.' She returned his fury with a full measure of her own. 'Where is the Lord Regent?'

'Reconnoitring the ridges.' He nodded towards the distant curve of hills girding the thin spit of land upon which Marrowscar perched like some vast carrion crow.

'I shall find her.' Elarin made to turn away, but Sennareth caught her arm.

'We need your sorceries here.' His words were almost a snarl. 'I order you to—'

The heel of Celastir's hand caught the edge of Sennareth's jaw. It was a light blow, not enough to break bone, nor even bruise. Still, the force of it snapped the prince's head back, allowing Elarin to pull free.

'We *need* the Lord Regent.' She interposed herself between the prince and Celastir.

Sennareth's guards stepped forwards, but he waved them back, eyes burning with cold hatred. 'Go on, Loreseeker. Run away.' He gave a derisive flourish, eyes sharper than the duelling blade in his hand. 'But do not think this is over.'

Elarin did not even dignify the prince's venom with a response, stalking away through the battle, her own anger smouldering like banked coals in her breast.

'Now you defend me?' she said as Celastir moved to her side.

'He laid hands upon you.' The tall Bladelord spoke as if that was all the explanation required.

Perhaps it was.

They moved through the conflict, Elarin's sorceries buttressed by Celastir's flashing blades. Namarti fell, only to return, persistent as the roving dead that had dogged the Lumineth's steps ever since they set foot in Shyish. The Idoneth came not as a crashing flood, but a thousand tiny

breakers, more Thralls appearing throughout the camp even as their wounded leapt back into the fray, brimming with stolen soul energy.

Celastir snatched Elarin back as another whirling gyre opened nearby. A hail of barbed arrows presaged a rush of bow-armed Namarti Reavers. Arrows glinted from raised shields and glittering plate. Barely one in ten pierced chain or flesh, but it was enough. Although the Reavers could not match the martial skill of Kyris' Sentinels, they flowed through the portal like water through a breached dam.

'We need to find cover.' Celastir cut an arrow from the air, then another, this one hissing towards Elarin's throat.

'We *need* to find Chariel.' Elarin knit a shifting bulwark of sorcery, her hands moving through runic formations. Bright smudges of light filled the air around her as arrows struck the barrier and burned away like bits of astral debris falling to earth. With Celastir's blades warding her flank, Elarin strode through the battle, lashing out at any of the enemy who drew too close.

Two Thralls had cornered a Warden. They battered at him with heavy blades, wild, looping strikes that sought a way around his raised shield. Elarin's incantation conjured a thin ribbon of sunlight. Drawing her hand like a farmer casting grain, she looped it around the Thralls, then drew it tight to cleanly bisect the pair.

The Warden offered no gratitude, nor did Elarin expect any. Battle left little time for courtesy.

A wedge of Dawnriders galloped past, scattering Thralls like children kicking through drifts of snow. At their head rode Kuonor, head down, lance couched, his long vargheist-hide cloak spread behind like dark wings.

'Lord Regent Chariel?' Elarin shouted as the cavalry wheeled to charge another knot of Idoneth.

'Returning with Kyris, close behind.' Kuonor jerked his head back in the direction from which he had come, his smile almost feral as he regarded the flood of Idoneth. 'By Teclis, these brine-swilling wretches are everywhere!'

'We must link the forces,' Elarin said. 'Support the others. I shall seek Chariel.'

Kuonor turned his mount, nodding to the other riders as he pelted towards the golden ring of Sentinels.

Jaw clenched against the tightness in her throat, Elarin hurried up the low

hill. They had expected Ossiarchs, hordes of risen dead backed by necromantic might – a clenched, gauntleted fist meant to smash through the Lumineth ranks. Instead, they were being picked apart by a school of sharp-toothed rakerdarts, phalanxes surrounded and overrun, new assaults from every quarter. The Idoneth did have one thing in common with the Bonereapers, however.

Like the Ossiarchs, the Idoneth did not stay dead.

Even now, Elarin could feel their terrible sorceries wearing at Master Lesaris' wards like water upon ancient stone. The gaunt, spine-armoured sorceress weaved among the dead and dying like an eel through corral. Pale soul-light dripped from her hands, spiritual energy drawn to her in a swirling vortex. Reavers sprang to their feet. Freed from the grip of death, they joined their fellows on the advance.

The weight of their fire would be too much for Elarin's wards. With a grunt of frustration, she cast about, intending to heed Celastir's advice they seek cover, when a flight of elegantly pinioned shafts arced down from above.

Up the rise, Kyris and her Sentinels moved like mist through the partially constructed siege equipment. Long used to fighting with no formation, they slipped from cover to cover, concealed by dull armour and loose robes. They did not pause, did not even seem to aim, and yet every one of their barbs found a home in pallid flesh.

Lord Regent Chariel stood upon the hill's summit like an ancestor statue brought to life. She flitted among the attackers like a bladed zephyr, every strike a kill, her cerulean cloak inscribing bloody lines across Idoneth flesh.

Three Namarti leapt forwards, curved greatswords arcing down.

Chariel swayed aside, and the strikes found nothing but empty air. She stepped among the Thralls, blade licking out almost as if to caress the pale chin of the nearest Namarti. He reeled back, head cleanly severed from his shoulders.

The Lord Regent spun, seeming almost intoxicated as she slipped between the scything blades. The thrust of her shield folded the second Thrall in half, and she bulled him aside like a bit of old parchment. The third Namarti tried to dodge away, but Chariel's foot snapped out, quick as a lunging shard lynx.

Elarin heard the Thrall's bones snap even over the roiling clatter of battle.

A line of Bladelords followed close behind. The remains of Chariel's personal guard, their swords seemed almost liquid as they flowed around parries and slashes, leaving nothing but ruined corpses in their wake. Salt-streaked arrows arced from gnarled bows, only to be coolly swept aside by a flick of Chariel's cloak.

The Lord Regent slipped through the fray. Cloak fluttering she strode up to Elarin, movements sinuous as a piece of wind-caught silk.

'What of the others?' Her voice retained a distant calm, even in the midst of battle.

'Ildirin is dead, although his Wardens still hold along with Sennareth and Master Lesaris.' Elarin found her breath, the Lord Regent's presence like a cooling cloth laid upon her fevered brow. 'I sent Kuonor to support them.'

'Good.' Chariel turned as the High Sentinel hurried over.

'They come from all angles, Lord Regent.' The concern in Kyris' grey eyes belied her matter-of-fact tone. 'Double our force, perhaps more.'

'You have seen the battle.' Chariel glanced to Elarin. 'Can we repel these creatures?'

'If there had been warning, perhaps...' Elarin swallowed against the swell of anxiety boiling up her throat. If *she* had given warning. She met the Lord Regent's questioning gaze and shook her head.

'I see.' Chariel turned to survey the chaos below. 'Link with the survivors of the main force, attempt a withdrawal.'

'And you, Lord Regent?' Elarin asked, already dreading the answer.

'My guard and I shall hold back the tide.'

'But we need you.' Elarin hated the traitorous tremble in her voice.

'I have led us into an ambush.' Chariel turned away.

'There was no way to foresee the Idoneth held Marrowscar,' Elarin replied. 'It was I who brought us here. I who—'

'And yet, the failure is mine.' Chariel glanced back, her gaze troubled. 'It has *always* been mine.'

From the set of the Lord Regent's shoulders, the sharp regret in her tone, Elarin knew Chariel spoke not only of this warhost, but of the Inscribed Citadel as well. The failure had always lain between them, hot as a fresh brand despite the years of hollow justification.

Chariel stepped up to look down at Elarin. 'I am sorry, Loreseeker.'

Elarin had thought it would unburden her to hear Chariel finally take

responsibility for abandoning the citadel to its fate, but the admission changed nothing. Uiharan and the others were gone. No words could bring them back.

‘You do not have to do this.’ Elarin shook her head as if to deny the truth of their situation. Even knowing the Idoneth were too many she could not bring herself to let Chariel go. ‘We can link up with Sennareth and the others, redress ranks and fight our way free of—’

‘Enough!’ The Lord Regent’s command carried the force of Teclis’ holy will. She turned, cloak billowing behind with a sharp snap. ‘Go, both of you. Every moment brings us closer to the abyss.’

At Kyris’ call, her Sentinels launched a coordinated volley of arrows, Idoneth falling like wheat in a hailstorm, unable to match the deadly accuracy of triple-stringed arbows. The path momentarily clear, Sentinels abandoned their cover to sprint down the hill. No sooner had they passed than the Soulrender was there. Mortally wounded Thralls pushed to their feet, plucking arrows from eyes as they swept along behind the advance, lapping at the rear of Kyris’ formation like a hungry tide.

Then Chariel was among them, sword flicking like a courtier’s fan as she dismembered the rising Thralls. Her Bladelords arrayed themselves in a loose line, their flashing blades like a razored dam the flood of Namarti were unable to surmount.

For the moment, at least.

‘Loreseeker, we must move!’ Kyris stepped to Elarin’s side. She set a trio of arrows winging among the Thralls ahead.

With a pained nod, Elarin turned from the embattled Sentinel.

She added her own sorceries to the Sentinels’ fire, gaze fixed upon the faint glimmer of the remaining defenders. Blazing curves of illumination slashed amongst the foe, flesh and bone boiled away by scouring light.

Idoneth sorceries assailed Elarin’s wards, and she turned her attention towards keeping the worst from among the massed Lumineth. She focused on the battle, on cutting through the ranks of Thralls. Better that than to glance behind, to see Chariel and her few surviving guard holding back the pale tide that gathered in their wake.

‘I thought you would never arrive.’ Steedmaster Kuonor raised a grateful hand in welcome. He was without a mount, his fine riding armour streaked with blood and grime, several feet of broken lance gripped in gauntleted

fists. As Kyris' Sentinels joined the phalanx, the other Lumineth commanders hurried over.

'We are to fight our way free, then withdraw,' Elarin said.

'Are those Lord Regent Chariel's orders? Or yours?' Sennareth asked.

Kyris stepped to Elarin's side. 'They came from Chariel herself.'

'And what of our Lord Regent?' A note of concern threaded Master Lesaris' question, the first bit of concern Elarin had ever heard from the old Calligrave.

With a start, Elarin realised they were all looking at her.

'Chariel wards our escape.' She spoke quickly. 'She may yet win free.'

It was a lie, and they all knew it. In deference to the Lord Regent's order, and the desperation of their situation, the others raised no question. Even so, their feelings were evident in the tight-lipped nods, the grim expressions as they turned away, movements stiff as they ordered their surviving Vanari to begin an orderly withdrawal. Even Prince Sennareth seemed shaken by the news, his customary self-assurance dulled by the sudden shift in tides.

For all their differences, Elarin could not blame him for his concerns. The same disquiet had taken root in her own mind, compounded by the fact it had been Elarin's words, her arguments, her belief that had led them here. That she had been blind to the Idoneth threat only whetted the recrimination to painful sharpness. Even now, Elarin believed the doom her vision had foretold. She would have gladly thrown herself upon the pyre to undermine the Ossiarchs' plan. It was a far different thing to sacrifice not only her comrades but also her patron, her lord, her friend.

Elarin cast a glance over her shoulder. She could not pick Chariel from amidst the swirling tides of battle, but the glitter of sunmetal and lack of pursuit were evidence the Lord Regent yet fought.

Feeling as if she struggled against a riptide, Elarin turned away, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Chariel's death would have been hard to bear even had it served some noble purpose, but it was a truly bitter draught to lose the Lord Regent for no good reason...

No, that was not wholly true.

Thanks to Chariel's sacrifice, the Lumineth would survive.

For how long, Elarin did not dare guess.

CHAPTER EIGHT



‘Arrogant Lumineth, your callow souls shall be put to better use.’ Although it possessed no eyes, the Namarti’s scarred face turned to follow Sennareth as he paced across the stony soil.

‘Why did your people attack us?’ the prince asked again, but the Thrall only gave a rasping chuckle, tongue running over teeth like broken glass.

‘We were hungry.’

‘How many of you are there?’ High Sentinel Kyris leaned forwards on her camp chair, voice hard as the ground on which the Lumineth had pitched their makeshift camp.

‘As many as the sands beneath the Dwindlesea. As many as the waves.’ The battered creature shifted with a rattle of chains. ‘Echaros the Lightless pierces all veils. We rise from the unfathomable gulfs, borne on obsidian tides, many-souled scions of lost Aighmar.’

Sennareth turned to Lesaris. ‘What do you know of Echaros? Or this... Aighmar?’ The prince’s lips twisted as if the name carried a bitter taste.

‘Idoneth enclaves, perhaps?’ The Calligrave glanced to Elarin, pointedly ignoring Sennareth’s frown. ‘Loreseeker?’

‘I have never heard of Echaros, but I seem to recall the Aighmar are descended from the Mor’phann enclave of the Great Quagmire – insular,

even for Idoneth.’ Elarin swallowed, searching foggy memories for bits of half-remembered knowledge. The Idoneth were like ghosts, overwhelming scattered outposts to leave nothing but empty husks in their wake. Even the survivors remembered little, their memories clouded by strange sorceries.

Except this time, Elarin and the others remembered.

She frowned, considering. It must be some strange aspect of the Ouroboran Coast or perhaps Marrowscar itself that undermined the arcane amnesia that struck so many victims of the Idoneth.

‘Interesting aside, Loreseeker. But why are the Idoneth *here*?’ Sennareth asked.

Elarin had read of the sea aelves in her studies of Shyish, although only in passing. Her focus on necromancy and the dead had crowded out more esoteric interests. ‘Some terrible doom befell the Aighmar. We can only speculate as to the cause, but perhaps it drove them to Marrowscar?’

The captive Namarti bared his fangs, but did not respond.

Sennareth’s disdainful scowl did not even flicker. If anything, the information seemed to deepen the prince’s dislike of Elarin. Chariel’s disappearance had unsettled the Lumineth military hierarchy. Sennareth clearly coveted the position of Lord Regent. Although the majority of the surviving forces were sworn to Cera Niall, he could not claim the title without the remaining commanders’ unanimous approval.

No doubt the prince sought to twist the situation to his advantage. If not for Master Lesaris’ continued support, Elarin suspected Sennareth would have happily blamed her for their defeat. Almost a quarter of the Lumineth army had fallen to the Aighmar ambush, and those that remained were searching for answers.

‘Shyish holds foes enough for all.’ Kuonor shook his head. ‘We have no quarrel with the Idoneth.’

‘Your very existence is an insult.’ The Namarti spoke in a low, hateful hiss. ‘Pampered scions of light, squatting in your spires and high palaces, arrogant as your traitor god. You know *nothing* of quarrels.’

Sennareth’s kick took the Namarti square in the jaw, sending the wretched creature tumbling back in a spray of jangling chains.

‘Blaspheme Holy Teclis again, and I shall have your head.’

The Namarti rolled over, slowly pushing to its knees, eyeless sockets seeming to linger on Sennareth’s disgusted grimace. Blood streaked the

Thrall's filed teeth, its smile empty as the grey sky overhead.

'Take it.'

'We shall learn nothing from this creature.' Sennareth made a disgusted gesture, turning away. 'Dispose of it.'

'With pleasure, prince.' Kyris stood.

Elarin shook her head. 'Wait, there is more we could—'

One of Kyris' pale arrows sunk into the smooth flesh of the Namarti's eye socket. The Thrall collapsed with a sigh that sounded almost grateful.

'That was for Ildirin.' The High Sentinel whispered between clenched teeth, her expression cold as the waves crashing on the Ouroboran cliffs.

Elarin drew in a slow breath to calm her irritation. 'We still do not know why they have occupied Marrowscar.'

Sennareth waved a hand as if to dispel a bad odour. 'You said yourself. Their enclave was destroyed, they must have sought a new home. I say we leave them to it.'

'The Idoneth are sea raiders,' Elarin said. 'They do not settle on land. Something must have drawn them to the citadel.'

'Perhaps it was the same vision that ensnared you, Loreseeker.' Sennareth spoke Elarin's title like an insult. 'Had we remained in camp, as I counselled, Ildirin would still be alive, as would Chariel, and hundreds of others.' He shook his head. 'I shall have no more of this foolish endeavour. We should make for the realmgate, and quickly. There we can gather support and fortify.'

'And what of our dead?' Kyris asked.

'A dread accounting, to be sure.' Ever the consummate politician, Sennareth's expression softened as he turned from Elarin. 'But we know not the Idoneth's strength.' He placed a hand on Kyris' shoulders. 'I feel your loss, High Sentinel. But we cannot, in good conscience, risk the remainder of this host just to recover the fallen.'

She shook free of his grip. 'The Idoneth will harvest their souls.'

'And ours, should we return.'

Kyris looked about to argue, but only clenched her jaw, looking away.

Elarin looked to Lesaris for support, but the old Calligrave only shook his head, hands raised in a calming gesture. It galled Elarin that Lesaris would counsel patience, even now. The Idoneth were clearly occupying Marrowscar in pursuit of dark knowledge, but like the runes he inscribed,

the Calligrave was a stolid, practical thinker, his thoughts etched upon stone, not air, slow and immovable.

‘Mathren, I would have your thoughts.’ Sennareth turned to the new High Warden, a sharp, pinch-faced woman raised from the ranks of the Cera Niall nobles, no doubt to buttress the prince’s claims.

‘Out here we are unsupported. It is wise to regroup.’ Mathren did not disappoint. She might as well have prostrated herself before the prince in her hurry to lick Sennareth’s boots.

Kyris had said all she would, and Kuonor still seemed adrift without his mount. Even if they had raised objections, Sennareth was Chariel’s Bannerblade, her second in command. There was nothing they could do, nothing anyone could do.

Anyone except Elarin.

‘This changes nothing.’ Although soft, her words caught the attention of all within the small clearing. They turned to her, caught in the breathless pause between lightning and thunder.

‘Whether its roots lay in Ossiarch or Idoneth sorcery, this only proves the truth of my vision,’ Elarin continued. ‘To turn back now would be to see this darkness become reality.’

Sennareth turned on her, his smile terribly reminiscent of the dead Namarti’s. ‘Chariel may have indulged your eccentricities, Loreseeker. You will find me far less tolerant.’

He raised a hand as if to beckon the other commanders closer. ‘No one who embraces darkness can come away unshadowed. Elarin’s motives may have been pure, but this single-minded quest has led her astray.’ His smile wilted, replaced by false concern. ‘A vision gleaned from an accursed relic. I am sure Elarin *believes* in this numinous doom. But is it truly a portent of things to come?’

He shook his head. ‘More likely it is a trap, laid by this Ossiarch sorceress to lure two of her foes into conflict. We have already sacrificed Lord Regent Chariel to Elarin’s vision. Shall we cast ourselves upon the pyre as well?’

Elarin should have replied, should have mustered arguments, proofs, logic strong enough to sway even the most vehement doubters to her side. But her thoughts were like dry sand, scoured by the loss of her patron.

Her friend.

The weight of Chariel’s passing settled on Elarin like a funeral shroud.

‘I believe the Loreseeker did not know she led us to our doom, but she led us nonetheless,’ Sennareth continued, his voice pitched to carry. Like a forum orator, he turned as if to regard the ranks of tired warriors spread across the rocky escarpment. ‘You have fought hard. All of you. All of us. I know the pain of loss, I feel it keenly. Which is why I shall not squander another Lumineth life on this doomed endeavour.’

Looking to Elarin, Sennareth’s expression seemed sorrowful, almost apologetic. If not for the sharp edge of satisfaction whetting his words, she might have believed him.

‘You served Chariel as well as you were able.’ He nodded as if gifting her with some ancient bit of Teclian wisdom. ‘But your aid is no longer required. It is time to rest, Loreseeker, to heal. Your long quest comes to an end.’

Elarin drew in a shaky breath, gathering the musty air into her lungs. There could never be an end. That was what the others did not understand. She wanted to cry out, to let slip the dire understanding that seemed to suffocate her every thought.

Instead, Elarin let the breath go.

‘Marrowscar.’ Her throat felt thick, her skin tight across her skull as she turned to regard Celastir. ‘That is the end.’

‘Of our lives, perhaps, our holy mission dying with us.’ A shadow of malice nestled at the corner of Sennareth’s lips. ‘I was Chariel’s Bannerblade. She placed me in charge. It is only right this warhost follow my commands.’

Elarin met his gaze, voice heavy with the weight of inevitability. ‘I am not part of this warhost.’

‘No. You are not.’ Sennareth rocked back, his voice a mocking lilt as he flicked his fingers at the distant shadow of Marrowscar. ‘Go, then. I only pray your death serves as some small balm to those you betrayed.’

It was all Elarin could do not to slap the grin from Sennareth’s face. Instead, she turned to the other commanders.

‘Chariel led us well. She believed in this mission, sacrificed herself for it. How can we do any less?’ Elarin drew breath to continue her appeal, but before she could give voice to another word, Sennareth’s sharp command cut the air.

‘Prepare to depart.’

‘There will be time for discussion. We can return later, in strength.’ Lesaris’ attempt to soften the prince’s order might as well have been a dagger in Elarin’s ribs.

She ignored him. So was revealed the cowardice of age – weakness masquerading as wisdom.

Kuonor would not meet her gaze, his former air of bravado diminished.

‘I will accompany the Loreseeker,’ Kyris said with a nod. ‘Perhaps a small force may accomplish what a larger one could not.’

‘You would rob us of our scouts?’ Sennareth spread his hands, the very image of conscientious concern.

The High Sentinel considered his words for a long moment.

‘A dozen of them, yes. Only volunteers.’ She glanced at Mathren, upper lip curling in disdain. ‘Give this to me and I shall step down as High Sentinel.’

‘Your insights will be sorely missed.’ Clearly delighted by the prospect of elevating another of his nobles, Sennareth was quick to acquiesce.

Elarin did not wish to hand the lord regency to the prince, but it was clear she could not move the others through argument or emotional appeals.

All that remained was to *show* them the truth.

‘I thank you for your trust.’ Fist over her heart, Elarin bowed to Kyris.

The former High Sentinel seemed discomfited by the attention, acknowledging Elarin’s genuflection with a jerky nod that would have verged on insult in other circumstance.

‘I will gather volunteers.’ She spoke quickly, already moving away.

‘Prepare to depart.’ Sennareth repeated the command.

Kuonor drifted away, seeming almost lost. Master Lesaris favoured Elarin with one last disappointed frown before he turned and left. Just this morning, such approbation might have sent tendrils of anxiety threading her spine. Now, it passed over Elarin like a thin autumn breeze, stirring neither leaf nor bough. Now that the Calligrave had revealed himself blind to the threat of Marrowscar, Lesaris’ disapproval no longer carried any weight.

‘I can consult with the Vanari. Perhaps there are some among Ildirin’s Wardens who would also accompany us.’ Although Celastir spoke softly, Elarin could read the Bladelord’s irritation in the grim set of her jaw. Clearly, Celastir also favoured Prince Sennareth’s approach.

It hardly mattered. Elarin could not have the Bladelord’s respect, but she

would have her loyalty.

‘Yes,’ Elarin said, nodding, her mind already turning to Marrowscar and the nascent doom behind its walls. ‘That would be best.’

The Bladelord moved away, leaving Elarin and Sennareth.

‘I did not want this, you know.’

It took a moment for Elarin to register Prince Sennareth had stepped close, his words soft but urgent.

‘I respected Chariel. She was a fine warrior, a fine leader.’ His gaze flicked away, then back, as if he were mustering the strength for some deep confession. ‘I cannot replace her.’

‘That was the first truth I have heard from you, prince.’ Elarin had no patience for the secret sorrows of nobles. ‘Whether you wished it or not, you are Lord Regent in all but name.’ She flicked her fingers at the tattered Lumineth host. ‘Go. Lead. And let me be about my business.’

Sennareth’s expression hardened. He regarded her through narrowed eyes, looking like he wished to say more. Instead, he spun on his heel, striding off, head low, shoulders angled forwards as if he walked into a strong wind.

And, once more, Elarin was alone.

CHAPTER NINE



Elarin had always loved the sea. She had grown to maturity on the diamond-sand beaches of the Gealus Ocean, her home port of Almarin nestled safely in the curve of that gleaming coast. The sea threaded her earliest memories – the creak of ships at dock, the gentle crash of waves, smells of salt and sand, the distant boom of thunder as one of the Gealus’ infrequent storms rolled towards the coast.

Later, she had come to Illium and the Inscribed Citadel, the Shimmer-sea bright as liquid glass in the ever-present glow of the Perimeter Inimical. The beaches were different there: rocky scarps, sea cliffs so sharp they seemed carved from the stone itself by some godlike blade. Storms there were frequent things, sudden as the shifting breeze, dark clouds like stampeding aurochs as they battered the land with rain and stabbing lightning as if they sought to topple the mountains themselves. On those days, Elarin had taken her studies to the highest rooms of the citadel, wind howling around the tower walls, the clatter of rain upon the peaked roof like the hammering of a thousand blacksmiths. The spires had been warded against lightning, and still every nearby crack had sent Elarin to her feet, startled, yet grinning at her foolishness.

Even then, Elarin had loved the sea.

Loved it, but never trusted it.

‘Are you sure of this, Loreseeker?’ Kyris asked for perhaps the dozenth time since they had slipped from camp, skirting the low hills to skulk along the jagged Ouroboran shore like thieves in the night.

‘The Idoneth are at home in the sea.’ Celastir added her concerns to the Sentinel’s. Truly the two seemed struck from the same mistrustful mould.

‘Exactly why they will not expect us to brave the cliffs.’ Elarin tried for Master Lesaris’ matter-of-fact tone, but could not quite seem to imbue her words with the Calligrave’s poise. ‘Also, there is Marrowscar itself. The Idoneth occupy the citadel, but do not appear to have mastered it. The rush of geomantic energy will shield us from any seeking spells, as well as erode any wards they may have laid. I could not conceal an army, but I can hide us. Even a master sorcerer would not be able to sift our presence from the torrent of power.’

Confidence. It seemed to come so easily to individuals such as Sennareth, but Elarin had always found such foolish assurance a paradox, exercised only by those who did not know enough to grasp the limits of their understanding.

‘And what if they have posted mundane guards?’ Celastir asked.

Elarin nodded at Kyris. ‘I shall leave them to our master infiltrator.’

The Sentinel wrinkled her nose at the appellation, but did not contradict Elarin’s praise. She glanced at the trailing warriors – a dozen Sentinels buttressed by a score of Ildirin’s Wardens who had chosen to avenge their fallen commander rather than follow Mathren. They had discarded their pikes and heavy plate, rendered awkward by the precarious cliffs, instead adopting garb similar to Kyris’ scouts – blades, shields and light chain armour.

Despite their hard-eyed gaze, the sombre set of their jaws, Elarin needed to remind herself they were not lifelong warriors, but artisans, sailors, weavers, masons, called to war by the Decree Tyrionic, which bade every Lumineth take up arms in defence of their people. Unlike her, or Celastir, or even Kyris, they each had another life to this, a calling outside of blood and battle, a home, perhaps even a family.

It made Elarin wonder if they had more to lose, or less.

The small band moved along the coastal cliffs, half-walking, half-climbing, ever aware of the skeletal limbs poking from the rough stone.

Although disjointed, they could grab and claw, turning the already treacherous footing positively perilous.

At Kyris' suggestion, they had taken to lopping the hands from the protruding skeletal limbs. Although impossibly ancient, the bones were infused with necromantic strength, and anchored enough to make excellent handholds.

It took the better part of the day to traverse the few miles to Marrowscar, the dark citadel almost concealed behind the thrust of unkind cliffs. Even at a distance, Elarin could not wholly quell the upswell of unease that filled her at the sight of the terrible place. Her companions must have felt the same, as all paused, almost reflexively, to regard the citadel.

'Made by the dead, for the dead.' Kyris gave voice to the anxiety twisting in Elarin's gut.

'Let us hope it does not become our tomb as well,' Celastir added.

Elarin felt she should say something, but all that came to her tongue were vague platitudes. 'Holy Teclis protects.'

A few among the Vanari made warding signs. The rest checked their ropes.

The water was particularly rough below the peninsula's rocky base, as if the Dwindlesea took personal affront to the ancient stone. Elarin was grateful her small band hailed from Ymetrica, and had grown up amidst its cloud-scattered peaks. Despite the bitter cold, sharp shale, and even sharper claws of the cliff's ossified captives, the Sentinels and Wardens took to the rocks like a herd of Ymetrican longhorns.

As they climbed, Elarin focused on the shifting interplay of arcane forces coursing through the rocks. She chanted runes of obfuscation, subsuming her and her companions within the murky flood of death energy. Above, Marrowscar gripped the numinous firmament like some giant stone claw, siphoning power from the realm lines to leave nothing but empty aether behind.

But to what end?

Elarin could feel the subtle flow of Idoneth sorcery, a slight but constant bleed of energy creeping around the edges of the ancient fortification. She noticed the remains of seeking spells, alarums and wards woven around the lower walls, now reduced to little more than tattered fragments. It seemed the Idoneth had attempted, and failed, to ward the sea approach, their sorceries swallowed by Marrowscar's inescapable void.

Elarin's quick blush of satisfaction at having guessed correctly was quickly subsumed by concern about the citadel itself. It seemed this was some manner of arcane sinkhole, the realm lines disappearing like water tumbling down into a vast, bottomless chasm. Elarin was sure her vision involved this ethereal vortex. She had staked her life and the lives of her companions on the belief that they could find and destroy the source of Marrowscar's terrible power. If Elarin failed, the Idoneth would be the least of their concerns.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded for Kyris to ascend.

The Sentinel seemed almost to glide up the ancient stone, fingers finding even the slightest crack. Half a dozen of her Sentinels followed behind. Although their arcbows remained strapped upon their backs, each held a fire-blackened dagger in their teeth.

The lip of the battlement extended over the cliff, small holes in the stone no doubt meant to allow the defender to drop all manner of wickedness upon any who sought to scale the escarpment. Fortunately, the murder holes were wide enough for Kyris' small band to slip through.

Elarin held her breath. Several heartbeats passed, long enough for her nascent anxieties to blossom into spreading doubt. Marrowscar could be crawling with Namarti. All it would take to put an end to Elarin's foolish mission would be for one of the eyeless Thralls to raise an alarm. They would cut her down, and harvest her soul to rekindle their own cursed spirits.

A pale hand extended over the crenellations, fingers extended to form the rune *Yngra*.

Safety, albeit fleeting.

Elarin and the others hurried up the wall. Five dead Namarti lay upon the battlement, blood almost invisible against the dark stone. Kyris' scouts were already heaving the first over the side. The Dwindlesea would swallow the Lumineth's foes.

'Where now, Loreseeker?' Kyris asked.

'A moment.' Closing her eyes, Elarin extended a tenuous thread of perception into the impossible darkness. Barely a glimmer of her full power, it slipped among the roiling clouds of syphoned spiritual energy to seek the eye of Marrowscar's arcane abyss. Whatever the Idoneth planned, this would be the key.

Amidst the echoing dark, she felt the brush of thousands of hands. Spirits, their ghostly forms worn thin as ancient gossamer by the swirling gyre, held tight like ships caught by some vast, impossible depth. Ignoring their faint cries, Elarin plunged deeper, careful to avoid the glimmer of other eyes, Idoneth sorcerers like fangmora eels sculling amidst the shoals of death magic. It may have been the constant arcane roar of the realm lines, but Elarin thought she detected relatively few sorcerers – the barest scattering of enchantments cast like jetsam into the whirling gyre.

Diving deeper, at last she came to a place of purest entropy. Spiritual currents eddied, the vast and terrible whirlpool above fading to the distant howl of wind upon crumbling battlements. Void slipped into her mind, drowning thoughts in shadow, the glimmer of her own soul guttering amidst the featureless black expanse. It was a place of nothingness, unsullied by even the faintest flicker of thought, of life, of hope.

Elarin tried to turn away, to swim back towards the churning vortex above, only to find she had lost all sense of direction, unsure of whether she moved away from the void, or deeper into it.

‘Loreseeker!’ A hand gripped her shoulder, drew her from the midnight depths. Impossibly hot, it burned like fire against the thin weave of her robe.

Elarin opened her eyes, breath hissing into desperate lungs. She was lying on the cold stone, its chill seeming to have settled in her very bones.

‘You collapsed.’ Celastir drew her into a sitting position, one arm crooked protectively around her shoulders. ‘You were not breathing, your flesh was as a corpse’s.’

‘I am well.’ Elarin attempted to stand on legs gone cold and wooden. She ventured a thin smile. ‘The seeking required I dive deep, perhaps too deep. But I have discovered what we are searching for.’

‘We should move, then,’ Kyris said, crouching in the shadow of a jagged crenellation. ‘More of those eyeless Namarti could be along at any moment.’

‘That way.’ Elarin nodded towards a high tower. Unlike the others, it possessed no adornment, lacking even the arrow slits that pockmarked Marrowscar’s other spires. Although connected to the citadel’s walls, it was located near the centre of the courtyard. Elarin would have mistaken it for Marrowscar’s central keep, save that it seemed far too small to serve such a

function.

Kyris readied her bow, three arrows nocked but not drawn. Her Sentinels did the same, the Wardens behind bracing shield and blade.

Leaning on Celastir, Elarin tottered after the advance guard. Her arms prickled, legs unsteady as rotten wood, but she gradually worked feeling back into her limbs, muttering cleansing mantras to clear whatever lingering necromantic snarls remained within her spirit. By the time they reached the tower, she was able to walk on her own, taking up position behind Kyris and her Sentinels, blade and staff at the ready, Celastir a step to her right.

Unlike the rough lines and heavy construction of the rest of Marrowscar's architecture, the stones of the tower met at sharp angles like the facets of some tall crystalline obelisk. A single staircase rounded the outer wall, not only leading to the upper floors, but also spiralling in the opposite direction, down underground.

They began their descent into darkness, the tower's lichen-crusting walls barren but for the occasional graven scone, empty of torch or illuminating prism. No doubt used to the endless night of the far ocean depths, the Namarti had no need of light. At Elarin's nod, the Lumineth drew sure hands across their weapons, allowing just the barest trickle of sunmetal to glimmer through. It gave their surroundings an eerie, shifting glow, as if they moved through some deep underwater grotto.

They met four Namarti ascending the stairs, dead before they could even lay hands upon their heavy, gnarled blades. Kyris hid the bodies in a low alcove; it did not provide the best concealment, but the corpses would be invisible to any who did not stoop down to look.

The stone steps led down to a wide chamber, paths branching in several directions.

They were far below ground, now. Elarin could feel the press of entombed souls, bony fingers scrabbling at the edges of her sanity, conjuring images of thin aelven skeletons trapped by unlovely stone. She was not given to fear of tight spaces, but the slow crush of endless aeons set her arms prickling.

With a deep breath, she dispelled the creeping fears, centring her thoughts as she led the small band deeper into the bowels of Marrowscar. They met few Namarti within the shadowed depths – small groups of five or six Thralls, whispering amidst themselves in their fluid, sibilant tongue. The

Lumineth pressed back into lambent shadow, avoiding the twitch of eyeless heads, not even daring to breath for fear the Namarti's strange senses might pick them from the clammy gloom.

Some did, and paid for their vigilance with their lives, arrows winging from the murk to nest in mouths or puncture lungs. Ildirin's Wardens finished off any who attempted to rise, expressions cold as the fortress stones as they bent to their bloody work.

Once, twice, Elarin felt the brush of sorcery against her arcane senses. Each time she muttered necromantic rites, drawing the currents of death magic around them like a frigid cloak. It was easy enough to disappear within the darkness of the place.

Marrowscar seemed almost to welcome her.

Elarin felt the door long before she saw it. Imbued with ancient death magic, the black iron seemed to positively vibrate with sorcerous might, a low thrum that rose above the whisper of breath, the beat of anxious hearts. It was not a portal so much as a window, nested layers of eternity rich with the weight of ages. There was no lock, no hinges, the pitted iron seeming almost part of the stones that surrounded it. Elarin could sense the languid drift of Idoneth sorceries, not so much piercing the deathly wards as worming into arcane cracks, eldritch fundamentals eroding like delta silt, carried slowly away by the steady flow.

It was deftly done, the sorcery far more delicate than either the Tidecaster's threshing waves or the unnatural animus of the spike-armoured Soulrender. The Idoneth had another sorcerer, then. One possessed of power to rival even a Lumineth Scinari. The realisation filled Elarin with a mix of trepidation and curiosity.

Behind her, the others waited, little more than shadows in the clinging gloom. None raised questions, sensing perhaps this was not a barrier to be bypassed in the physical sense.

Despite the eroding flux of Idoneth sorcery, the door remained solidly shut. With time, Elarin realised the enchantments would gradually wear away the defensive wards, gaining the caster entry. But she did not have time.

Careful as a scribe penning marginalia within the pages of an ancient, illuminated masterwork, Elarin threaded runes of subtle unbinding into the arcane tapestry. She knew better than to touch the Idoneth enchantments –

even unwarded, any overt change might resonate within their creator. Rather, she manipulated the Ossiarch magic, drawing upon her long study of necromancy. She approached the portal not as a Lumineth Loreseeker, but as an Ossiarch, the age-old swell of necromantic force hers to manipulate.

It was far more complex than raising a skeleton, but Elarin had always welcomed an intellectual challenge. Slowly, she realised the key lay neither in subtlety nor brute force, but rather in cold scrutiny of the self, the circumscription of mortal ambition within the chill regard of life eternal.

To open the lock, Elarin needed to become as the dead.

She drew the necromantic energy to her. Runes shone silver in the half-light as she tightened the cloak of her wards, not to guard against the aura of death, but to magnify it, reflect it upon the door so that she and her companions appeared as tattered revenants rather than living, breathing souls.

There was no shift, no moment between open and shut. Rather the change came like dusk, an almost imperceptible diminishing within the arcane framework, shadows growing larger and larger until the door unlocked.

It did not swing open, nor did it rise or slide into the stone. Rather, darkness deepened around the ancient metal portal, edges planed smooth, features swallowed by inky gloom until the door itself seemed little more than a featureless void.

Without a word, Elarin stepped into the darkness. It was cool on her skin, neither wet nor dry, but soft like the brush of unseen cobwebs across her face. The others followed, any trepidation they might feel at passing through a necromantic portal quieted by the urgency of their mission.

All was calm in the chamber beyond.

The roar of realm lines, the voiceless howls of trapped spirits, the maelstrom of arcane force raging across the walls of Marrowscar – all of it faded to silence. Elarin found herself at the eye of the amethyst storm, able to see the tempest, but unaffected by it.

Heavy stone walls curved in a perfect circle, the chamber perhaps fifty paces across, its upper reaches lost in darkness. A low plinth rose up from the centre of the room like a skeletal finger, and atop it, carved with all manner of osseous glyphs, sat a single orb of polished obsidian.

From the walls, row upon row of graven skulls regarded Elarin, their

remorseless gaze seeming to pierce her very thoughts, laying bare the bones of her mind. In that moment, she felt what it was to be an Ossiarch, to feel one's purpose so pure and clear that it resonated through every part of your being.

'What is it?' Celastir asked.

'A bone-tithe nexus?' Kyris responded before Elarin could find the words. 'I have seen such terrible things in Ossiarch ruins.'

'Not a nexus of bone, but a nexus of *spirit*.' Elarin raised trembling hands, letting the barest flicker of her power run across the orb. It was like tossing a stone into a bottomless well, swallowed without the slightest ripple.

'Fascinating.'

'We must destroy it,' Celastir said.

Elarin regarded her, confused.

'Is this not the source of doom, Loreseeker?' Kyris asked.

'I cannot say.' Elarin frowned.

'This nexus sits at the heart of Marrowscar.' Celastir stepped towards the orb, gesturing at the carved skeletons etched into its supporting plinth. 'Surely that is reason enough.'

'Whatever the Idoneth plan cannot be an improvement over the Ossiarchs,' Kyris added.

'I must be sure.' Elarin felt the breath coil in her lungs, languid as a summer stream. What did the Idoneth plan?

She extended her senses, expository mantras spilling from her lips even as she fashioned a runic lens – all the better to explore, examine. Like a shattered stele bearing an inscription in many languages, she could draw upon her knowledge of death magic to buttress her understanding. For a moment, she could feel the citadel around her, the push and pull of spiritual energy at her fingertips, a great gathering of souls bound to some great purpose.

'Loreseeker.' There was urgency in Kyris' voice.

'I cannot destroy it.' She shook her head. 'Not without knowing what such destruction might unleash.'

'Elarin,' Celastir said.

Elarin turned, irritation prickling along her spine. Who was Celastir to question her? But Elarin's bodyguard was no longer looking at the orb. Rather, her attention was focused on the doorway behind them. The

doorway that even now swirled with lambent shadows, ripples of formless menace beneath a midnight sea.

Elarin did not need to see to know what lurked beneath those dark waters. The Idoneth had come.

CHAPTER TEN



The human soul was a thin, pitiful thing, barely more than a curl of sea foam atop the churning vortex of amethyst energy. Tongue pressed firmly to the corner of his salt-rimed lips, Echaros the Lightless, last Soulscryer of doomed Aighmar, bent low over the delicate tracery of soul-light, seeking spiritual tides to buoy his incantations. He could almost taste the power in the old Ossiarch citadel, every sombre stone imbued with the energy of countless souls. No less than four Shyishan realm lines converged at the fortress. And yet, for all its terrible might, Marrowscar remained distressingly opaque to Echaros' arcane enquiries.

It had been the promise of power that had led Echaros here. But the citadel was a void, an empty tomb where there should have been power and knowledge. What little remained was a deathly aura, an animus forged of bone and shade rather than flesh and soul. The whole Ouroboran Coast was a canker, an empty place that sapped the sorcery of all who set foot upon its craggy cliffs. Echaros had discovered this, as had the others, when they raided those few settlements that passed for civilisation in this accursed place. The ethersea was slow, sluggish, its effect on their targets' memories almost non-existent.

Yet another bitter dreg in a life well steeped in such disappointments.

Jaw tight, Echaros hooked the tattered edge of the human soul and threaded it into the net of spiritstuff he had so carefully woven over the past several days. He paused to regard the enchantments, gaze unconsciously flicking to where his scryfish would have swirled and darted in the ethereal currents surrounding him. His school had died with Aighmar, lost at the Siege of Blackfire along with most of the enclave's other aquatic allies. These were a good facsimile, even lacking flesh and blood, but they could not quite fill the void.

Nothing could. And therein lay the difficulty.

Softly glowing eyes stared back, unblinking lamps bright in the shadowed hollows of their piscine skulls. They moved not as individuals, but as a whole, divinatory revelations hidden within the skeletal school's iridescent murmurations.

Echaros shook his head, frowning. The outcome was unclear. The outcome had been unclear since he and the other survivors had fled the wreckage of Aighmar. Unbidden, memories of that terrible day filled his thoughts. He saw his enclave's Akhelian warriors fall to ash, scoured by flickering warfire, their bodies little more than dark silhouettes dispersing like ochtar ink dripped into an uncaring sea.

Lost, but not forgotten. Never forgotten. Time and tide may have bled Echaros' dreams white, memories lost amidst the breaking waves, but he would not abandon his people – not until the last of them slipped from his grasp.

The Namarti was chained to a low table, manacles tight around scarred arms and legs, his neck and torso secured by heavy black iron bands. He did not struggle. The Thrall had come willingly. The restraints were merely to prevent any thrashing once the procedure had begun.

Although the Namarti were long inured to pain, Echaros had noted a distressing tendency towards violence among previous subjects. The agony went beyond physical discomfort – even the strongest willed among his regrettable kin could not withstand such torments.

The last Thrall had dissolved from the inside, bones turning to amethyst flame, skin and muscle peeling back as the poor creature's withered soul flared like an undersea volcano, his burning terrible, brilliant, but also brief.

Even this had done little to dissuade more Namarti from offering themselves to Echaros for experimentation. They understood, they *all*

understood.

He did this for them.

Carefully, thread by thread, he arranged the thin web of soulstuff across the Thrall's scarred chest. The Namarti did not react at first, blind to the arcane forces gathering about his attenuated animus. Echaros drew in a low, rasping breath, and began his chant once more.

Now, the Namarti began to scream.

His voice rose in a wordless howl, echoing from the high tower's heavy stone walls like leviathan song. Echaros closed his ears to the Thrall's pain. Incantations sharp as bared blades, he peeled back the wretched creature's soul, the Namarti's anguish coiling up his throat, threatening to drown Echaros' chant in ages of undeserved suffering.

But Echaros, too, was no stranger to pain.

Arms burning, vision swimming, he wrapped the aethereal net around the Namarti's soul, stitching the fractured fragments into a luminous whole. For a moment, the Thrall shone bright as a Soulrender's lure, his outline burned into Echaros' vision. He had to look away, blinking at the brilliant afterimages, his eyes pricked with tears.

When he looked back, the Namarti was nothing but a husk.

The body crumbled at his touch, tattered remnants of soulstuff drifting away like rootless kelp.

Head bowed, Echaros sunk to his knees. The injustice of it washed over him like a breaking tide. As brutish as the Sigmarites' god was, at least he had imbued his grunting, screeching charges with pure souls. For all his vaunted power and wisdom, this was something Teclis could not accomplish, at least when he had dragged the Idoneth from the slaving maw of the dark god Slaanesh.

The Idoneth had been the aelven god's first children. And he had failed them.

Unable to move, Echaros let the failure wash over him, thoughts sluggish as the murkminnows that skimmed the lightless depths of his lost abyssal home. He longed for his scryfish, their schools offering guidance to those who knew how to discern the oracular patterns. But Echaros did not open his eyes. His scryfish were dead. There was nothing to see, nothing but darkness and a final, whimpering death.

The soft sound of dowerchimes broke the doleful silence. Echaros did not

need to look up to know the others had returned. Like many who grew to maturity in the Aighmar Abyss, he had long learned to recognise his fellows through sound and feel alone.

Arach Lossarnos led the small procession, the creak and rattle of his weapon harness punctuated by the click of boots upon the stone floor. Although the Namarti had taken to calling him the ‘Drowned Prince’ due to his Akhelian heritage, Arach had abandoned all claim to nobility when he took the title of Thrallmaster. Even so, he acted with the arrogance of a king. And why not? There were none alive to correct him.

‘We returned some time ago, Soulscryer.’ Echaros could almost hear Arach’s sneer. ‘Why were you not there to welcome us?’

‘I was busy.’ With a sigh, Echaros pushed to his feet, pointedly not looking at the desiccated corpse upon the table.

‘Another lost?’ Scyllene Ebontide slipped past Arach in a flutter of dark robes. The Soulrender had removed her high-crested helm and set aside her spined armour and talúnhook, but the pale glimmer of lurelights dangling from her sash showed a pinched, narrow face, restless eyes and cheeks hollowed with concern.

‘Akrinor.’ She touched the smear of ash, jaw tightening. ‘He fell thrice defending the chorrileum at Blackfire. I had to hold him back from diving into the ratmen’s warfire to rescue what remained. Futile. All of it.’

Echaros could summon no reply. He had tried to think of the Namarti as sacrifices to a greater goal. To be reminded of their names, their deeds, brought their loss into uncomfortable focus.

Scyllene’s slit-eyed gaze crawled to Echaros.

‘No more lost. You swore to me.’ She spread her arms as if to part the clinging gloom. ‘To *all* of us. We followed, fought, believed... For what?’

Echaros bit back tepid excuses, only shaking his head. He had hoped for so much more when they had conquered Marrowscar – safety, power, knowledge. But the ancient fortress remained as dead as its former rulers. Echaros had not yet even breached the necromantic locus in the catacombs below the Hollow Tower.

‘It is a touchy thing, necromancy. Especially when your subjects have not passed on.’ Ajarn Voltach favoured them all with a shrug and a cold grin. Blood spattered the Tidecaster’s opalescent armour, his long indigo cloak pierced with what looked to be burns and arrow holes. Noticing Echaros’

frowning study, he twirled like a flume dancer, holding up the tattered fabric for all to see.

‘Gives me a hard-bitten look, don’t you think?’

Arach chuckled at the Tidecaster’s antics. The Thrallmaster grinned, hands on sabre hilts, his sharply filed teeth glinting in the half-light. Even in mirth Arach had the aspect of a coiled vent serpent, fangs bared and ready to strike.

‘The raid went well?’ Echaros could not quite hide the note of excitement in his voice.

‘As well as it could. We took many souls, but more survived.’ The Drowned Prince spun on one booted heel, stalking along the chamber perimeter. It was a habit with the Thrallmaster, always moving, always hunting. Like a dagger-jawed alloplex, Arach needed to keep swimming lest he drown.

‘Eighty fell who I could not raise.’ Scyllene’s response was almost a snarl.

‘Namarti.’ Voltach flicked his fingers as if casting away a spray of muddy water.

Scyllene rounded on him. ‘They are all the kin we have left.’

‘All the kin we have left are in this room.’ If anything, her anger seemed to amuse Voltach. ‘Better to crash like waves than bleed away with the tide. Eh, Soulscryer?’

Although it had not been his intent, Echaros was forced to agree. ‘I am close, Scyllene. I can feel it.’

‘A few more?’ She kicked at the table, fury and sorrow warring in her voice. ‘Nothing but death awaits us here.’

‘This is Shyish. Nothing but death awaits us anywhere.’ Voltach gave a mocking tilt of his head.

‘There are the Mor’phann. Our cousins would—’

‘Our cousins would abuse us. Use us as fodder in their wars against the dead.’ Arach shrugged. ‘Just as we would them, if our situations were reversed.’

‘We will find no safety in the Great Quagmire.’ Echaros stepped up to take Scyllene’s hands. For a moment, he thought the Soulrender would pull away, but she only held his gaze, the weight of her expectations almost crushing him.

‘I can save our people. You must trust me.’ Once more, Echaros cast his

terrible promise into the ruins of Scyllene's shattered hopes.

'I do.' The tension in Scyllene's face gave lie to her words. She doubted Echaros, they all did; but ultimately there was no other choice.

'Did you get them?' He released Scyllene, turning to Arach.

'Not as many as hoped.' The Thrallmaster paced back and forth. 'Although unprepared, the Lumineth mustered a vicious defence. Worse, they remember. We should strike before they do.'

'Now, they will be ready.' Scyllene bared her teeth. 'I am loath to part with more lives.'

'Better that then see them at the walls of Marrowscar,' Arach replied.

Echaros frowned, glancing to Voltach.

'They had sorcerers, powerful ones.' The Tidecaster nodded at his cloak. 'It would be best to regroup and use what we have gained.'

'The souls I harvest burn *bright*.' Scyllene's smile was tentative, if sharp. She lifted a small lurelight, the lambent glow of captured spirits brighter than it had been in many long months.

Excitement blossomed in Echaros' chest, not only over the strength of the Lumineth souls, but the fact they would allow the remaining Aighmar Idoneth to survive. The rest of the Mortal Realms saw his people as ravagers who left nothing but soulless husks in their wake. The truth was not that the Idoneth hungered for spiritual plunder, rather that they *needed* it.

Even before the loss of Aighmar, Echaros' people were a dying race. Teclis' betrayal meant that only one in a hundred were born with full souls, becoming Akhelian nobles or Isharann sorcerers. The rest were Namarti, pale and weak, kept alive only through a steady stream of captured spirits.

It was why the Idoneth raided. Neither for joy nor plunder, but for simple survival. They could live on lesser souls – human, duardin, even orruk or grot – but to claw even a bit of stolen life back from Teclis' spoiled children... that was more than vengeance.

It was justice.

Echaros studied the interplay of Lumineth souls within Scyllene's lurelight. Far stronger than the tepid human dross he had been forced to work, they might withstand even the rigours of enchantment. Echaros had led his people to Marrowscar in the hopes of rebuilding some shadow of the Aighmar chorrileum – the vast arcane archive-reef that had protected and

nurtured his people's souls for generations. But upon conquering the ancient fortress and driving out its skeletal defenders, Echaros had discovered another path.

The Ossiarchs worked with souls as well as bone, fragmenting and reshaping raw spiritstuff to imbue their Morteks with powerful animus. If their Mortisans and Soulmasons could do so much with grave dust and bits of ragged bone, surely Echaros could accomplish more.

There came a flicker in Echaros' perceptions, a shift in the numinous currents, not so much seen or heard, but felt, like the passing of a nearby school of fish.

'Something is wrong.' He looked up, eyes narrowing.

'The souls are pure,' Scyllene replied. 'I gathered them myself.'

'No, not here.' Echaros took a few cautious steps, head angled like a striking venomaw. 'The locus. Someone has opened the door.'

'Kynlac?' Arach's smile became something dangerous. 'I warned you to destroy that old sack of bones.'

Echaros checked the enchantments threading the ancient citadel's prison. 'The creature remains securely bound.'

'He must have summoned other Ossiarchs,' Voltach said. 'They could be massing beyond our walls, waiting for their allies to strike from within.'

'It does not *feel* like Ossiarch sorcery,' Echaros replied, already moving for the chamber door. 'Whoever seeks to breach the locus must be stopped. Voltach, Scyllene, with me. Arach, gather as many Namarti as you can.'

'With pleasure.' After a mocking bow, Arach jogged from the chamber.

Scyllene called for her armour and weapons, brought by silent Namarti as they hurried through Marrowscar's tangled halls and down into the fortress' tenebrous depths. Echaros felt the familiar pressure, almost as if they were deep underwater. But where the cold, crushing void of the Aighmar Abyss had been comforting, the weight of Marrowscar dripped with the implacable malice of its Ossiarch creators.

Namarti lay strewn before the nexus gate, each felled by a single strike. Fortunately, life still flickered in a few. Scyllene had them up again quick enough, but they could only shake their eyeless heads in confusion. The last moments before death were always murky. Something had struck from the shadows, too quick to remember.

The black-iron gate stood ajar, rendered insubstantial by strange

enchancements. Again and again, Echaros had sent incantations questing into the flow of death energy, but they had discerned nothing. The nexus was a dead zone in more ways than one, a locus situated at the conflux of several realm lines, powerful and protected by the energies of Shyish.

‘Shall we greet our guests?’ Voltach made a whirlpool of his hands. Etheric currents were mirrored in the Tidecaster’s dark eyes, his grin wide and excited as he sought to peer through the shadows.

‘Whatever breached this gate was powerful.’ Echaros held out a hand, seeking to sift through the arcane detritus. Runes flickered in the dark, familiar but strangely shaped.

‘Those are Lumineth sigils.’ Scyllene’s lip curled at the mention of their prideful aelven kin.

‘Perhaps it is that old geomancer.’ Voltach smiled, already stepping forwards. ‘I would dearly love to thank him for despoiling my favourite cloak.’

Echaros stopped him with a shake of his head. ‘I will not risk Aighmar’s three remaining Isharann in a foolish advance.’

Voltach looked as if he wished to say more, but a slit-eyed glare from Scyllene silenced even the Tidecaster’s smiling bellicosity.

Soon enough, Arach came pelting down the hall, several dozen Namarti in tow.

‘Wise of you to wait.’ The Drowned Prince rolled his neck, drawing a pair of serrated gut hooks. At Echaros’ nod, he sent the first of the Namarti through.

Echaros felt them fall – quickly, precisely.

Undaunted by danger, the other Thralls swarmed the gate. Arach raised one of his blades in salute, diving after his warriors.

Voltach spun, cloak fluttering like a ship’s sail as he called upon the ethertide. Sinuous currents enfolded them, a ward against spell or blade. Scyllene braced her talúnhook, the flickering glow of her lurelights bright against the eldritch sorcery.

With a nod to the others, Echaros stepped through the gate.

Beyond was a scene of chaos. Namarti fell back, pierced by arrow and shining swords. A thin line of Lumineth surrounded a carved basalt plinth capped by an engraved sphere of impossibly dark stone. A wall of razored death, the Wardens’ blades darted amidst the press of Namarti. Sentinels

stood behind the golden phalanx, triple-stringed bows reaping a deadly harvest among the Thralls.

Scyllene was an eel amidst the fallen. Her incantations coaxed life back to sword-pierced hearts, strength back to severed muscle, violent thought back to slumbering minds. The Lumineth might be stronger, faster, but once beaten, they would not rise again.

And therein lay their weakness.

Voltach unleashed swirling estuaries of anguish, sinking the defenders' thoughts in silted recriminations.

It felt good to see the Lumineth falter. Their perfect faces twisted with grief as they gave ground before the Namarti.

Arach darted up to slip a dagger past one of the large shields, but was met by a long two-handed blade. A Lumineth in scaled armour and a high-crested helm stepped from the flagging ranks, somehow matching the Thrallmaster blow for blow. For the first time, Echaros saw the Drowned Prince's needle-toothed smile slip. He might have relished the humbling, had not Arach been their best warrior, all that remained of the once mighty Aighmar Akhelians.

For all the terrible immediacy of the duel, it was not the clatter of blades that drew Echaros' attention. Rather, it was the strange lattice of Lumineth sorcery. It spread across the columned shadows like a branching tree, rune upon rune in a nested mandala that seemed to tug at his eyes. In its centre stood a sorceress with staff and blade, her face uncommonly lined for one of the Hyshian aelves, her robes streaked with soot and ash.

Even so, she burned with a brilliance Echaros had never witnessed before.

He buttressed his own defences, expecting some manner of arcane assault, but the Lumineth sorceress did not strike. Rather, she added to the spell, incantations surrounding the obsidian orb.

Echaros stopped mid-chant, unbelieving.

Somehow, the Lumineth had managed to tap into the locus.

It was an imperfect working, bleeding like a harpooned leviathan, but still the Lumineth sorceress managed to grasp the necromantic fundamentals. Echaros watched, spellbound, even as shadows flicked by his face – arrows narrowly deflected by Voltach's oceanic wards.

More Namarti poured from the breached portal. A dozen, two, they added their weight to the swirling melee, serrated blades grinding sparks from the

shields of the beleaguered Lumineth.

‘Stop.’ The Lumineth sorceress’ cry was lost against the clatter of combat. Only Echaros heard.

He studied the tangled weave of necromancy and unfamiliar runes that twisted around her raised staff. As much as Echaros was loath to admit it, he could not deny she had accomplished far more in a few hours than he had in weeks.

All lost, were she to be slain.

‘*Stop.*’ When Echaros spoke, his voice echoed in the thoughts of every Idoneth in the wide stone chamber.

Raised to heed the word of the true-souled as near divine, the Namarti relented, a pale tide drawing back to leave the dead and dying. Robbed of support, Arach retreated with them, his fury like a hunter who has found a kill snatched away. Voltach was shouting, Scyllene hurling questions like some indigent whaler crew casting harpoons.

Echaros ignored them all.

He regarded the ragged formation of Lumineth, their hateful eyes upon him, long hair in disarray, perfect flesh marred by streaks of dirt and blood, their armour battered to near shapelessness by the onslaught. Some had arrows drawn, a score or more aimed at Echaros’ heart – far more than his wards could manage even had he cared to reinforce them.

He did not.

Not because he feared death, but because he knew *she* would see.

‘You are at our mercy.’ Echaros kept his voice flat – no threat, a mere statement of fact.

‘Many of your followers would be slain.’

‘Would they?’ Echaros cocked his head, then nodded towards several of the Namarti sporting the scars of mortal wounds.

This, more than anything, seemed to finally puncture the Lumineth’s arrogance. No doubt they had been raised on tales of bravery and heroic last stands. The Idoneth had no such foolish fables. The reality of a brutal and imminent demise tended to lack the panache of warrior tales, but it did make for more realistic expectations.

‘Who taught you to work necromancy?’ He nodded at the Lumineth sorceress.

‘No one.’ Her reply came sharp as the arrows aimed at Echaros’ heart.

‘Why have you come here?’ he asked.

‘Why have *you* come here?’

A fair question, but one Echaros did not care to answer. He regarded the sorceress, wreathed in coils of amethyst energy. Intricate constellations of Lumineth runes glittered among the interplay of arcane forces, not muting or redirecting the currents of death magic, but somehow drawing them from nothing. It was a feeble display, one Echaros could have swept aside with but a few sharp incantations. Even so, the mere fact the Lumineth had coaxed *any* power from the Bonereaper citadel was worthy of consideration.

Echaros had sought aelven souls in the hopes they might provide a purer admixture for his research. An interesting avenue, but the opportunity to seize the sorceress’ secrets offered greater rewards for less risk. It was unlikely she would consent to share her knowledge with Echaros, not after they had raided the main force of Lumineth. He needed some way to compel her. From what little he knew of the Lumineth, their stiff-backed arrogance left little room for threats of violence. Perhaps a more diplomatic solution might bear fruit.

Words cost little, promises to enemies even less.

‘Lay down your arms and you shall all be spared.’ Echaros’ announcement was met by disbelief from both sides. Arach’s outraged croak mirrored by the disdainful grimace of the tall Lumineth warrior with the deadly longsword.

‘You cannot simply let them walk free,’ Scyllene hissed between clenched teeth. ‘Not after what they have done.’

‘I do not intend to release them.’ Echaros’ gaze flicked to Scyllene, then back to the Lumineth sorceress. ‘You and your companions shall be our *guests*.’

‘Prisoners, more like.’ This from a rather unremarkable Lumineth in a soot-grey cloak.

Voltach chuckled. ‘Better than corpses.’

‘You agree with Echaros?’ Scyllene turned on the Tidecaster, who shrugged.

‘Clearly our Soulscryer has a plan.’ He favoured Echaros with a frowning glance. ‘You *do* have a plan?’

‘Of course.’ He turned to the Lumineth sorceress. ‘You did not come to

Marrowscar for mere vengeance, did you?’

She frowned, gaze flicking from Echaros to the obsidian sphere. Beneath her wary expression he detected the faintest flicker of curiosity.

‘You are studying this place, aren’t you?’ she asked. ‘To what end?’

‘I could ask the same of you.’

‘They killed Ildirin and a hundred others.’ Again, the grey-cloaked aelf sought to interpose herself. Echaros fixed her with a frigid glare, his voice flat as a becalmed sea.

‘If it is your wish to perish, I shall not argue.’ He turned away. ‘Shyish welcomes the dead.’

‘Wait!’

It was all Echaros could do not to grin.

‘When Nagash invaded Hysh, the Ionrach enclave fought side by side with my people.’ The Lumineth sorceress’ voice carried. ‘Are the dead not enemies of both Lumineth and Idoneth?’

Echaros nodded. ‘They are.’

‘We seek to prevent Nagash’s return,’ she continued. ‘We did not know the Idoneth held Marrowscar.’

‘It was not our intention to let such information spread.’ He returned a thin smile. Better not to linger on the raid lest the Lumineth think to enquire about the souls of their dead. Echaros raised his hands, palms out.

‘I have made a study of necromancy.’ He nodded towards the obsidian sphere, the vestiges of Lumineth sorcery still lingering in the air. ‘As have you.’

She nodded, but did not relax.

‘As you said, the dead are enemy to us all.’ He kept his tone light, as if to bely the danger of the situation. ‘We should combine our knowledge.’

‘And why would I do that?’

‘For one, I can spare your lives.’ He cocked his head. ‘And prevent any future... misunderstandings.’

‘If it is my aid you want,’ she replied, ‘release my companions.’

‘Such loyalty is admirable, but futile.’ He stepped back among the ranks of Namarti and the protection of Voltach’s tidal wards. ‘Fight or lay down your arms. Either way, you remain here.’

The sorceress turned to engage in a whispered conversation with the cloaked archer and the armoured champion who had held firm against the

Drowned Prince.

‘This is a mistake,’ Arach said.

Scyllene nodded at the Thrallmaster’s admonition. ‘The Lumineth cannot be trusted.’

‘And we *can* be?’ Echaros replied with a smile. ‘Give me a week. If the sorceress and her followers prove unhelpful, you can harvest their souls yourself.’

Although the Soulrender’s dour mask did not shift a hair, Scyllene nodded grudging consent.

‘One week,’ Arach hissed through gritted teeth.

There seemed to be similar disapproval among the Lumineth. Echaros noted slit-eyed glares, the champion gesturing their way with obvious disdain. Finally, the sorceress chopped a hand through the air and leaned close to the others. Her words were indistinct, but her posture and movements spoke volumes. The long-sworded Lumineth looked about to argue, but something the sorceress said caused her to shake her head in apparent disgust.

After a few hissed commands, the sorceress whirled away from the others to face Echaros. ‘We accept.’

‘Excellent.’ He offered the slightest of bows. ‘I am Echaros the Lightless, Arch-Soulscryer of Aighmar.’

‘Elarin the Illuminated, Scinari Loreseeker.’ Her reply was terse, guarded as her stance.

Echaros did not mind. He cared nothing for her history, her pride, or her life. Echaros cared only for the knowledge she possessed.

And he would have it. One way or another.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



‘This makes no sense.’ Echaros made a low, rattling sound in the back of his throat. It was a sound that, even in the few days they had spent together, Elarin had come to associate with impending violence.

Lips pressed into a thin line, the Soulscryer slashed bladed fingers across the rudimentary rune Alaithi, shattering it into a burst of shimmering fractals.

‘It takes many years of study to master even the fundamentals.’ Elarin kept her voice steady, knowing he would not lash out at her. The Soulscryer’s anger came cold and brutal, but it was a precise thing, calibrated to remove the source of irritation, not any who may be in the vicinity.

‘If you were to remove my chains, I could assist in crafting the generative mandala.’ She rattled the heavy, rune-inscribed manacles that bound her hand and foot. ‘It is not as if you lack for guards.’

A score of Namarti Reavers ranged around the edges of the nexus chamber. Spaced well apart, they moved like hunting hounds, sleek and deadly, their spiny bows close to hand, arrows nocked and ready. The merest nod from Echaros would send a dozen shafts winging towards Elarin’s heart. No doubt her comrades were under similar watch. The Aighmar Idoneth were many things, but careless was not one of them.

After disarming Celastir and the others, Elarin's followers had been led to one of the keep's central towers. Although Echaros had not allowed her to speak with any of the others, in the several days she had spent with the Idoneth he had been scrupulous about ensuring she knew they were alive and well. Perhaps it was for the best. After the surrender, Elarin doubted Celastir or Kyris had any kind words for her.

Celastir, in particular, would be a difficult conversation. The Bladelord had been willing to die fighting, at least until Elarin reminded her of her duty. Surrendering her weapons would safeguard Elarin more effectively than falling to a swarm of Namarti Reavers.

The precautions were pointless. Elarin had no intention of escaping, not until she had unravelled the secrets of the ancient citadel. Marrowscar held great power, more than even the locus of realm lines would suggest. It tugged at the surrounding winds of magic, dragging wayward spirits into the hungry void like some necromantic lodestone.

'Attend.' Echaros' whispered command drew Elarin from her arcane considerations. The Soulscryer had replaced the rune Alaithi with several Idoneth sigils. Familiar in the way descendants are to their ancestors, Elarin recognised many similarities in the casting. But the differences went beyond superficial. To cast a Lumineth mandala was to tread upon firm stone, while the Idoneth workings were more like sand – unstable, but no less powerful.

Elarin watched as the Idoneth runes flickered and changed. She almost called out a warning as a trickle of necromantic power slipped through the working, but somehow the runes held, not binding the dark orb, but redirecting the void back on itself – a snake devouring its own tail.

Echaros gave a low hiss of satisfaction, leaning forwards, his dark, near-pupilless eyes wide and excited. The runic net flexed, almost lost amidst the orb's inky darkness. Amethyst sparks crackled along the interconnected strands, filling the air with the smell of burning bone. Slowly, Echaros' enchantment began to fade.

'Why will it not hold?' He narrowed his eyes, as if the orb were some hated foe. 'There is power enough for a hundred such enchantments. It is as if this thing swallows sorcery.'

'My manacles, quickly,' Elarin said, unable to quell her own enthusiasm.

Almost without thought, Echaros flicked a hand, the warded chains falling

away like twists of dry grass.

Elarin stepped to his side, weaving a buttressing arc of Lumineth runes into the failing enchantment. Like sturdy tent stakes pounded into hard earth, they provided anchor points for Echaros' sorceries. He moved as if casting rope, looping bright bands of soulstuff around the lambent energies. Side by side, they chanted into the writhing shadow, his fluid cadences a low backdrop to Elarin's sharp incantations.

And, for a moment, the mandala held.

Impossibly, the necromantic orb grew even darker. Although it did not grow, the locus seemed to take on weight and mass, tearing through the filaments of their arcane web. A blast of swirling shadow knocked Elarin and Echaros from their feet and sent the Namarti scrambling for cover.

Elarin tumbled across the hard stone, fetching up against the chamber wall with a shock hard enough to cause her teeth to click together. It was a long moment before she could find her breath; her feet, even longer.

A Namarti helped her up, its eyeless head turned away as if Elarin were possessed of some vile odour. Two other Reavers supported Echaros. Although the Soulscryer sported a long gash above his left eye, his voice was clear.

'Another failure.' He attempted to push free of his attendants, only to have one leg buckle. Elarin noticed the shadow of a spreading bruise on his knee.

'You are injured.'

'It is nothing.' Echaros' tone was more irritated than pained, he glanced to one of the Reavers. 'Bring Scyllene.'

With a bow, the Thrall slipped from the nexus chamber.

'Such power.' Elarin rounded the obelisk.

'Useless in this state.' Echaros straightened, standing under his own strength, the barest flicker of discomfort on his sharp features. 'It is like pouring wine into the sea.'

'We almost had it.' Elarin shook her head. 'Given time and study, we can—'

'There is no time!' Echaros bared his teeth in disgust. Elarin must have taken an unconscious step back, because the Soulscryer's dark eyes flicked to her. For a moment, she thought Echaros would strike out in anger. Instead, the Idoneth swallowed, dagger-tipped fingers smoothing his robes.

He drew in a slow breath, fury seeming to ebb. 'There is never enough

time.'

Elarin could not but agree. She moved towards him, curious despite herself. 'Why did you bring your people here?'

Any answer Echaros might have given died as Scyllene Ebontide stalked into the nexus chamber. The Soulrender had neither removed her armour nor discarded the long, hooked polearm that had proved so wickedly efficient in the raid.

'Step away from him.' She spoke as if Elarin were a disagreeable insect. When Elarin complied, the Soulrender moved between them, polearm at the ready.

'Where are her manacles?'

'They were unnecessary,' Echaros replied.

'Unnecessary?' Scyllene's lip curled. 'I saw her burn a squad of Reavers to ash.'

'We have her companions.' Echaros glanced to Elarin. 'And her oath.'

'The word of a Lumineth.' Scyllene almost spat the words, but she raised no further argument. Bending to study the Soulscryer's wounds, she clucked her tongue, then drew forth a glowing lantern from her robes.

'Is that some manner of repository for spiritual energy?' Elarin leaned forwards for a better look.

'It is your death, should you continue to pester me.' Scyllene turned, shielding the lantern from view.

Elarin held her tongue as the Soulrender coaxed shimmering threads of soulstuff from the lantern. Pale energy coiled about Echaros' wounds, Scyllene's movements calm, almost detached – a master artisan practising her craft. A moment, and Echaros was whole again, wounds little more than faint scars, the spiritual damage almost invisible.

Almost.

'Have more care.' With one last glare at Elarin, Scyllene slipped from the chamber.

'Why does she hate me so?' Elarin asked after the Soulrender's footsteps had faded into the low hum of the nexus. 'I fought only in defence of my people. She was the aggressor.'

'Scyllene does not hate you.' Echaros spoke offhandedly, his attention focused on the nexus. 'She hates all Lumineth.'

'Why?'

‘You are Teclis’ children.’ Echaros favoured her with a scowl. ‘We were merely practice.’

‘That cannot be true.’ Elarin knew of mighty Teclis drawing Idoneth from uncountable torments in the maw of the dark god Slaanesh. She had read of their withered souls, steeped in a sea of bitterness and recrimination. They had fled from the aelven god’s care, seeking solace in gloomy, wretched places – grottos and undersea abysses that mirrored the dark recesses of their own self-pity.

When Echaros gave no reply, Elarin moved closer. ‘That was ages ago. We have learned much in the intervening centuries. Teclis cares for all his children, I am sure this weighs heavily upon him. Perhaps if you were to return, we could—’

‘We are not some riddle.’ Echaros turned on her, voice low and dangerous. ‘Some race of sad, broken things languishing for want of Lumineth salvation.’

He took a step towards her. A strange chill threaded the chamber, his words seeming almost to steam in the air.

‘Our god is *dead*. Devoured.’ He raised a hand, one razored finger hovering before Elarin’s nose. ‘Yours betrayed us. If there is any salvation to be had, it shall be by our hand alone.’

The Soulscryer’s wounded hate coiled around Elarin’s throat like a noose, choking off any reply. Perhaps noticing her hesitation, Echaros abruptly stepped back, something akin to embarrassment fluttering across his sharp features.

‘The generative mandala failed.’ He looked away. ‘We must seek answers elsewhere.’

‘Other than the nexus?’ Elarin ran through the runic permutations. ‘There were no errors in my arcane framework.’ Seeing Echaros tense, she shook her head. ‘Nor in yours. At least not that I could discern.’

The Soulscryer studied the orb as if it were an enemy across the battlefield. Although his expression remained harsh as a sea cliff, Elarin could almost feel the frustrated anguish building behind the mask of cold detachment. Like the inhabitants of some deep-ocean gulf, strange thoughts moved beneath the Soulscryer’s surface, motives and ambitions that never saw the light of day.

‘Surely there were other places you could take your people?’ She spoke

softly, not wishing to prod the prickly Idoneth. ‘Why Marrowscar?’

Echaros regarded her for a long moment, not a flicker of emotion in his cold scrutiny. She did not trust the Soulscryer, not for a moment, but she saw in him a curiosity, a desire that resonated with her own ambitions. If he sought to use her, she would use him as well.

Echaros made no move. The moment stretched between them, tight as a drawn bow. Elarin prepared herself for another burst of petulant anger.

But the Soulscryer only turned on his heel. Hands clasped behind his back, he strode from the room. ‘Come.’

Elarin hesitated for but a second. The Soulscryer’s earlier outburst had unsettled her more than she cared to admit. For the moment, however, she remained Echaros’ prisoner, her will constrained by the lives of her companions. Even so, the Soulscryer knew much of Marrowscar. It was not only the vision that drove her forwards – Marrowscar itself seemed somehow intertwined with the fate of Shyish, perhaps even Nagash himself.

If the God of Death was to be locked away, this place held the key, Elarin was sure of it.

‘Loreseeker?’ Echaros spoke from the wide doorway.

‘Apologies.’ With a thin smile, Elarin followed, her Namarti minders close as remoras.

They passed through Marrowscar’s tangled catacombs, a maze of crypts and ossified storerooms that seemed to stretch on without end. Employing an old memory trick taught her by Master Uiharan, Elarin marked the various twists and turns, assigning each a branching rune, angles and direction combining to form nested symbols, easy to read as a bit of text.

Knowledge never hurt. Also, she might need to find her way back to the nexus. Better not to rely upon the good graces of her captors.

Ajarn Voltach stood before a pair of heavy iron doors, their thick-banded faces etched with a dizzying spiral of Idoneth wards. The Tidecaster was tall, even for an aelf, his face unusually expressive for the dour Aighmar.

‘Come to show our guest the Lord of Bones?’ Voltach’s smile did not reach his eyes. Elarin was reminded of the shard lynxes that roamed the upper reaches of the Ymetrican mountains. Deadly hunters, they stalked their prey along crag and ravine, almost invisible save for their jagged grin, fangs bared in anticipation of the kill.

‘Step aside,’ Echaros said.

Still smiling, Voltach gave a low bow, one hand extended as if to usher them inside.

Several Namarti moved to unbar the heavy doors, which opened into a long hall of featureless stone. Without joint or seam, it looked to have been bored into the cliff itself, the walls polished to almost lustrous smoothness.

Echaros entered without hesitation, but when Elarin made to follow, Voltach stepped into her way, leaning close.

‘Your master geomancer.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘The one who inscribes runes upon the earth.’ Voltach’s tone was gentle, almost conversational, but there was something Elarin disliked in the Tidecaster’s eyes.

‘Our Calligrave?’

‘Yes, your Calligrave,’ he replied. ‘What is his name?’

She glanced to Echaros, striding down the hall seemingly unmindful of the Tidecaster. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Stone and earth, sea and surf.’ Voltach chuckled. ‘We are twins of a sort, he and I.’

Elarin regarded the Tidecaster. Other than Echaros, Voltach had been the only one among the Idoneth who had treated her with anything approaching courtesy. With Scyllene and Arach barely able to restrain their hatred, it would not do to alienate a potential ally.

‘He is known as Master Lesaris.’

‘Lesaris.’ Voltach spoke the name as if tasting it. He stepped aside with another grinning bow. ‘My gratitude, Loreseeker.’

Elarin hurried down the hall to catch Echaros. She meant to enquire as to the Tidecaster’s interest, when they rounded a sharp curve and her questions died upon her lips.

What stood before her was a scene raised from the shadowed ocean depths. High coralline towers rose like grasping fingers, their rough and pitted exteriors glowing softly in the light of ethereal currents. Schools of tiny iridescent fish swam through the misty air, milky eyes seeming almost to peer through Elarin. Shadows coiled amidst ragged crevasses, the long, sinuous forms of rakerdarts and scythe eels sculling in the shadowed recesses while urchins and multi-limbed crustaceans crawled over shifting tendrils of anemone and inky kelp.

The strange aquatic sight caught Elarin's attention, but what held it were the threads of necromantic power wound throughout the incredible structure. They twined like creeping ivy over the reef and its inhabitants, fortifying the swirl of Idoneth tidal sorceries that fed the ethersea.

The air was chill, somehow thick with the eldritch pressures of the deep. It was the same as when the Idoneth had attacked, although there was no threat here. None, at least, that Elarin could discern. Fascinated, she moved a hand before her face, watching as trails of ghostly vapour followed her fingers.

'What do you know of chorrileums?' Echaros asked.

'Very little.' Elarin frowned. What few descriptions of the Idoneth's strange enchanted reefs she had happened across were vague, imprecise things. Gleaned from captured sailors and the occasional Lumineth diplomatic mission, reports often contained conflicting information.

His throat bobbed, a surprisingly mundane tic. 'Teclis failed us in many ways. But this is the cruellest, perhaps.'

Stepping into the watery ether, the Soulscryer's long shadow seemed almost to take on a life of its own, darting through the tangled chorri-leum.

'When your people die, where do your souls go?'

'On to our next enlightenment,' Elarin replied. 'Higher upon the Teclian Ladder, intellect and soul rarefied through rigorous study and practice.'

'Of course.' Echaros' lips twitched into a smile that was not at all amused. 'We have no such luxury. Slaanesh hungers for our souls. They are drawn to him, his daemonic servants and mortal pawns seeking them out like hunting allopex.'

He spread his arms, turning like an artist displaying some new installation. '*This* is how we preserve ourselves. A place of rest, of peace, inasmuch as such a thing is possible for Idoneth. The souls of our departed are stored in chorrileums, both protected by, and protecting, their living descendants.'

Elarin studied the coral formations. Although they brimmed with magical power, she detected not even the barest flicker of bodiless souls.

'It is empty.' Her words came almost like a sigh.

'It is.' Echaros drew in a slow breath. 'The Aighmar chorrileum was torn asunder at the Siege of Blackfire, the souls within consumed by terrible sorceries. Without its safety, the spirits of my people are lost to darkness. Although the secrets of shaping such powerful structures are lost to all but

our eldest sages, I thought to...’ He gestured at the reef.

‘With necromancy?’

‘The Ossiarchs are masters of soul magic,’ Echaros replied, a hint of desperate emotion creeping into his voice. ‘Once I have unlocked their secrets, I can create a chorrileum stronger than any in the Mortal Realms, a place not even the Dark Gods can touch.’

There was a strange beauty even in this terrible place, but something slithered in the back of Elarin’s thoughts, an unquiet question, uncomfortable in its urgency. She stepped into the chill eldritch currents, feeling them catch her cloak, her body lighter than mist.

It was like standing under a fall of meltwater. The cold seemed to seep through skin and muscle, settling into the very root of Elarin’s being. All around, the etheric currents shimmered and changed, scales melting from fish to reveal sharp-edged skeletons; the myriad crustaceans becoming cracked and grey, missing limbs, their claws chipped, eyes little more than dark hollows. Worst was the coral. What had been a maze of hues and textures faded to the colour of old bone, worn almost smooth to the touch.

Elarin wrapped arms around her chest, sudden realisation like a spike of ice driven into her forehead.

The reef, its inhabitants, all of it was crafted from skeletons.

‘The Idoneth did not build this.’ She looked to Echaros, willing him to deny her words. ‘You said you drove the Ossiarchs from this place.’

‘Not all.’ The Soulscryer waved one fang-tipped hand, spires of gnarled coral parting like curtains to reveal a cage of enchanted water, its silvery bars lithe and liquid in the gloom.

The prison was large, twice as tall as an aelf and perhaps twenty feet wide. Idoneth runes flickered through the bars, swept along the glittering flow like aetherquartz cast into a mountain stream. Inside was a haze of counter spells and obfuscating wards, layer upon layer until the whole of the cage seemed almost to churn with apotropaic energies.

The reason for such protections came clear as another flick of Echaros’ razor-tipped fingers sent a score of luminous skeletal fish swirling around the prison.

Elarin stared at the occupant, its deathless regard like a cold hand clenched about her throat. Even though it was swathed in chains, both arcane and mundane, she could feel its ancient hatred.

The reason for Echaros' necromantic prowess became unnervingly clear. He had done more than study the Ossiarchs, more than attempt to unlock the secrets of their terrible fortress.

He had captured a Mortisan.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Elarin had been too weak to fight Nagash's invasion. Her training at the Inscribed Citadel had been largely confined to scholarly pursuits, the protection and preservation of aelven knowledge being generally considered to be no less important than that of the Lumineth themselves. They had learned much from the devastation of the Spirefall. Their high, elegant towers had been toppled not by some ravening horde, but by the Lumineth themselves. Powerful, arrogant, Elarin's ancient ancestors had cast asunder all they had wrought in pursuit of unattainable perfection.

What use was survival if nothing of your culture, your mind, your very *soul* remained?

A thousand such questions whirled through her mind as she beheld the abomination chained within the cage of silvered water.

The Mortisan's skull was vaguely aelven, but thin almost to the point of vulgarity, its high crown rising to a sharp point. A sharp brow ridge shaded two cavernous hollows, empty of all but gnawing darkness. Across the creature's forehead were a line of eye-shaped holes. Seemingly bored directly into the bone, they wrapped around the entire circumference of the creature's skull, corpse-light sparking in the hollows. Its torso was a tangled web of steel and bone, sharp spars of nadirite interspersed with tapered ribs

like the wreck of some ancient warship. The creature had no legs Elarin could see. Rather, the Mortisan's upper body rested upon an insectile palanquin, an ossified carapace tapering to a dozen segmented legs, each tipped with a jagged spike of nadirite.

'This... is Kynlac.' Echaros almost spat the Ossiarch's name. 'Master Mortisan, Soulmason, and former lord of Marrowscar.'

'What is this you bring me, aelf?' Kynlac scuttled closer. 'More grist for my reef?'

It studied Elarin, head tilting back and forth like a carrion-bird as it regarded her with a dozen eyes. She found herself recoiling from the Soulmason's scrutiny. As daunting as Naxia had been, at least the Soulreaper had been comprehensible. This creature was a mockery of aelven form, its every movement an insult to Elarin's sensibilities.

'Powerful. I could do *much* with this one.' Kynlac stroked the bars of its cage. Even its limbs were monstrous, its upper arms little more than lengths of bone, scrimshawed with necromantic formulae. At the elbow, they split into twinned forearms, radius and ulna twisting like wrung cloth towards a pair of clutching, skeletal hands, four in all. As the Soulmason ran its fingers across the bars, Elarin saw each had been lengthened with an extra joint, rendering the whole hand strange and spider-like.

'She is not for you.' Echaros' gaze flicked to Elarin, then back to the abomination in the cage. 'But perhaps you are for her.'

'Why preserve this vile thing?' Elarin asked, already dreading the answer. Even in the long struggle against Nagash's minions, the Lumineth had never managed to capture a Mortisan. Their Morteks would fight to the second death to defend their overlords, and the Mortisans themselves thought nothing of sacrificing their physical bodies, knowing their spirits would return to Nagash's withered bosom to be raised once more.

All of which suggested this Soulmason had *allowed* itself to be captured.

'Kynlac has proven a source of valuable insights,' Echaros said.

'This creature is a servant of Nagash. Everything it does hastens its master's return.' Elarin shook her head, the horrors of the soul reservoir's vision creeping back into her thoughts. Reservations sharpened to razored focus. Although her vision had been centred on Marrowscar, she doubted Echaros was responsible for the doom.

Seeing Kynlac, she understood, at last, the source of danger.

‘You cannot trust this thing.’

‘Do you think me a fool?’ Echaros’ question came sharp as his talons. ‘Some Sigmarite dabbler without the wit to discern truth from base manipulation?’

Rather than reply, Elarin simply gestured at the bone reef.

‘No experimentation is without its danger.’ Echaros gave a low hiss, cold anger bleeding from his expression. ‘The Ossiarchs of this place had been collecting bone tithes for years. Better a chorrileum than a Mortek legion.’ He gave an uncomfortable tilt of his head. ‘It is not as if I offered Kynlac any Idoneth.’

‘Not yet.’ The Soulmason’s chuckle was the creak of ancient gates. ‘Do so, and I shall build you a paradise.’

Elarin bared her teeth at the creature. ‘A tomb, more likely.’

‘Better a tomb than endless torture at the hands of a vengeful daemon.’ It grinned, revealing teeth etched with terrible sigils. ‘Nagash is far kinder than Slaanesh. Slip free of the mouldering fetters of mortality. Your demise is inevitable. Better to come willingly, gently.’ Kynlac fanned out its arms. ‘Oh, what a masterwork I could make of you two.’

‘*Silence.*’ Echaros hurled the command like a spear. Kynlac made as if to laugh, only to lurch back, dragged into the shadows by numinous fetters, its voice swallowed by the roar of rushing water.

The Soulscriber turned to her, head low, shoulders high, voice soft – as if he expected Elarin to bolt from the chamber.

‘I have learned much through sorcerous interrogation.’ He shook his head. ‘But the Soulmason is an old and canny creature, and there are limits to my power.’

Elarin wanted to turn away, to unleash cutting sorceries upon the bone chorrileum and Kynlac. The Idoneth might slay her, but at least she would prevent annihilation. Echaros’ gaze seemed to pinion her, his features sharpened by a life of mistrust and privation. Even so, Elarin could not but recognise the noble line of his jaw, the high forehead, the sweeping points of his ears.

In another time, another life, Echaros could have been Lumineth.

‘Why bring me here? Why show me all this?’ Elarin told herself it was not pity that moved her to listen to the Soulscriber’s words.

‘Back at the nexus, when you added your runes to mine...’ His hands

made hard fists at his sides. ‘We almost had it, but something was missing.’

‘And you think Kynlac holds the secret?’

‘I *know* he does,’ Echaros replied, uncharacteristic excitement lending strength to his words. ‘Together, we can find the *truth*. Is that not why you came to Marrowscar?’

He took a slow step towards her, his posture not threatening, but almost beseeching. ‘You were correct when you said the Ossiarchs were foe to both our peoples. How can letting mine perish advance your cause?’

‘You attacked us.’ Elarin turned away, voice whetted by memories of the raid. ‘Murdered my comrades, my friends.’

‘Shyish is not a kind realm.’ Echaros’ reply held no contrition. ‘We long ago learned to strike first. Do not forget that it was you who marched an army to our very doorstep.’

‘We did not know.’

‘Neither did we.’

Elarin drew a long, slow breath, the dead air of the chorrileum sitting heavy in her lungs. What horrors must Echaros have witnessed? What could his life have been like beneath the deathly waters of Shyish, hounded by dead and daemon alike? She could see the tension in his bearing, wounded suspicion draped about him like a sodden mantle, thick and smothering.

Although it spurred her decision, Elarin was not moved by emotion alone. Kynlac represented a clear threat to her people. Under the guise of assisting Echaros, she would have opportunity to dispense with the captive Bonereaper. More, its death would remove the threat of Nagash’s return *and* free Elarin to plumb the depths of Marrowscar’s strange spiritual nexus. Even her brief glimpse of the ancient fortress’ power had shown Elarin unbelievable potential. In a way, it would be like breaking her oath as a Loreseeker *not* to unlock Marrowscar’s secrets.

When Elarin spoke again, her voice was calm, measured. ‘I will assist you.’

One of Echaros’ thin, dark brows arched, mistrust dripping from his every word. ‘Why?’

‘We cannot strike free the fetters of history,’ she replied. ‘But neither need we be bound by them.’

Echaros was quiet for a long time, almost deathlike in his stillness. For a moment, Elarin worried the Soulscryer had seen through her platitudes.

‘I cannot release you.’ He looked to the floor, seemingly unable to meet her eyes. ‘The others would not allow it.’

‘I am not asking for freedom.’ She shook her head. *Not yet, at least.* ‘Only that whatever we discover, we explore it together.’

Echaros gave the only response he could, his slow nod fanning embers of hope in Elarin’s chest. She had come here to study the dead, to keep their cruel god from rising once more. Although this path was not one she’d envisioned, she would walk it nonetheless. Echaros might never trust her, but she would see to it that he needed her.

‘Come, let us be about it.’ She turned to the watery cage, already whispering the centring mantras that would sharpen her arcane insights. Distantly, she found herself wishing for aetherquartz, but the few remaining crystals had been confiscated along with her staff and blade.

No matter, she would have it all back soon enough.

Echaros stepped to her side, almost sinuous in his movements as he extended a single finger as if to beckon Kynlac forwards.

‘Come.’

Arcane chains went taut, the flow of water reversing to force the Soulmason forwards. It twisted within the binding enchantments. Sprays of amethyst sparks cast the Ossiarch’s terrible features in harsh relief as it tested its bonds. Elarin caught glimpses of the creature’s ageless power, its necromancy neither the complex structure of Lumineth rune magic nor the supple weave of Idoneth sorceries, but something cold and ancient, a relic of ages long past. Kynlac was old, older perhaps than the Spirefall, than the Age of Myth. It seemed impossible the Soulmason had ever drawn breath.

Echaros did not bother with questions. Instead, the Soulscryer spread his fingers like a bladed fan, each grown impossibly long in Elarin’s sorcerous sight. Like the tentacles of a vast and luminous ochtar, they enmeshed the Ossiarch, slipping between bone and soul to test Kynlac’s wards.

Elarin added her own incantations to the invocation. Lumineth runes branded the air, bright as the Perimeter Inimical in the clinging gloom. Numinous waters boiled and hissed, the surrounding ether suddenly thick with clinging mist.

Like a prismcrafter etching stone, Elarin fashioned an arcane lens to magnify and focus the energies of her calling into a piercing beam of Hyshian brilliance. With a high chant, she turned it upon the Ossiarch’s

chest.

The runic spear of light ground against Kynlac's wards. Nadirite ribs blackened and bubbled, oozing like tar across the webwork of tangled bone. Elarin was tempted to add more strength to her arcane working, but to destroy the Soulmason now risked alerting Echaros to her true motives.

She must act with subtlety and refinement. Fortunately, that was where Lumineth sorcery excelled.

Echaros was quick to seize upon the weakening wards. Insubstantial tendrils of rune-laced water slipped into the crack, prising apart Kynlac's defence like the shell of a stubborn clam. Elarin could almost feel Echaros' elation as the Soulmason's protective spells peeled back, Kynlac laid bare as fractured bone.

A smile tugging at her lips, Elarin glanced to Echaros. The Soulscryer's face showed no emotion apart from focused intent, but there was a spark in his eyes Elarin had not seen before, neither anger nor fatalism nor desperate hunger, but an odd species of hope.

Strange satisfaction spread through Elarin's chest, light as the brush of soft wings. Although she did not trust Echaros, she could not deny that, together, they had done what neither could do alone. Lumineth and Idoneth, side by side, as Teclis had intended. Echaros had spoken of hate unending, but this showed the two races of aelves had common ground, that they might still accomplish great things.

Despite her misgivings, Elarin found her own excitement mirrored in the Soulscryer's obsidian eyes. With a shared nod, they turned back to the Ossiarch.

And found nothing.

Kynlac's wards were little more than a tattered shroud, mist too stubborn to yield before the unconquered sun. And still, the Ossiarch yielded nothing, the interior of its mind bare as a pillaged crypt, empty of all save echoes.

'I-I do not understand.' Echaros shook his head as if to deny the truth of their eyes.

Kynlac gave a rasping chuckle, its voice seeming to come from all around them. 'I have stood before the cannibal magi of Splinterspine, climbed the ten thousand nested crypts of the necropolis ziggurat of Sadovar, sat with psychopomps and fading gods alike. I have crafted legions, woven kings

and queens.’ It touched the ring of eyes that circled its skull like a terrible crown. ‘My maxillary panopticon was a gift from Nagash himself. Did you think I would be overmatched by a pair of *dabblers*?’

With a shout, Echaros threw himself at the Ossiarch’s seemingly barren mind, his incantations lashing Kynlac like storm rain beating on the crenellations of a mighty battlement. Power poured into the void of Kynlac’s thoughts, but there was nothing to grasp, nothing to manipulate.

Elarin gathered herself, ready to help part the consuming shadows, only to shake her head, breath heavy in her lungs as she realised the depths of the Mortisan’s power. Even bound, even assailed, they remained in Shyish.

And in the Realm of Death, only corpses ruled.

Elarin had spent her life studying sorcery, building upon the knowledge of a hundred generations. Even so, she found she felt as if she were back in the Inscribed Citadel, attempting to defend an overambitious thesis against collected centuries of knowledge. Then, as now, she could not but fail.

But there was wisdom to be found even in ruin. Uiharan had taught her that.

She understood now that Kynlac could not be moved by runes or incantations, it answered to a higher power.

‘Enough.’ She touched Echaros’ arm.

‘We have him.’ Rather than whirl on her, the Soulscryer sagged, shoulders rounding. ‘Kynlac is defeated.’

‘There can be no true defeat,’ Elarin replied slowly. ‘Not for him. Not for any of them.’

Kynlac said nothing. Only watched them, grinning its terrible skull grin.

‘How can he keep the truth from us?’ Echaros asked, his voice almost pleading.

‘His mind is not his own. He belongs to Nagash.’ Elarin gestured towards the Ossiarch. ‘They *all* do.’

‘Then how do we break him?’

Elarin’s jaw felt tight as coiled rope. She understood what must be done, but the chasm between knowledge and action was something she was not sure she cared to bridge.

Sensing something in her hesitation, Echaros leaned in. ‘What is it? What have you seen?’

‘It is too dangerous.’

‘More dangerous than *this*?’ Echaros flicked dismissive fingers at the chorrileum, the Ossiarch, the thousands of tons of cold stone above them. ‘Do you not look for the truth, Loreseeker?’

His question seemed to burn to the heart of her. Elarin *had* come for the truth. It was what had brought Chariel’s death, along with hundreds of others, lost to the dead, to the Idoneth.

She thought of the survivors. With Sennareth in command, the Lumineth salient would become a stolid, static thing, its aelves hiding behind walls, thinking themselves safe – just as their kin on Hysh had thought before the Necroquake tore their world asunder.

Elarin was willing to sacrifice her life to prevent Nagash’s return. Was it any different to sacrifice her soul?

Death was inevitable, inescapable, but it did not control her.

‘Necromancy.’ She met Echaros’ questioning gaze. ‘To control the dead, we must use the tools of the dead.’

‘And what do *you* know of necromancy, aelf?’ Kynlac shifted amidst the smothering enchantments, its bearing not afraid so much as surprised.

‘Enough.’ It was Elarin’s turn to grin, her smile sharp and cold as harsh syllables tangled around her tongue. It was like plunging her face into oil.

Echaros stepped to her side, his chant threading her own. They plucked at cords of amethyst energy, odours of bone, dust and salt-rimed wind sharp in Elarin’s nose.

It was nothing like when she had raised the skeleton. That had been an idle experiment, rooted more in curiosity than need. Now she stood at a conflux of realm lines, in an ancient and terrible citadel, her body almost thrumming with death magic. It was more difficult *not* to draw upon such power.

Even so, she and Echaros’ incantations were clumsy, rudimentary things. A master necromancer such as Kynlac would have shrugged them aside like cobwebs had not the Ossiarch’s defences been battered to ruin by their arcane assault.

Grown canny over millennia, Kynlac dodged through the shadowed recesses of thought, seeking to lose them within a forest of memories stretching across a hundred lifetimes. She and Echaros tracked it like gryph-hounds, drawn to the unfamiliar scent of fear.

If there was one thing Elarin had learned in her time at the citadel it was how to separate intellectual chaff from true knowledge. She deployed this

talent with ruthless efficiency, peeling away the layers of obfuscation until nothing but Kynlac remained, pure as a bodiless soul.

Even now, the Ossiarch sought to resist, to destroy itself rather than betray any secrets. Elarin would grant its wish, although not before learning what she needed to know.

‘Tell us of Marrowscar.’ Elarin spoke with the voice of Kynlac’s master. Words that could not be ignored.

‘It is a necromantic locus, raised in the ancient days.’ Kynlac spoke as if every word were a bared blade. ‘The centre of a vast web, spikes of deathly purpose driven through the realms themselves, a resonant focus for my master’s greatest work.’

‘The Necroquake,’ Elarin whispered.

‘A great nexus, like the one in Nagashizzar,’ Kynlac replied, hands scrabbling at its face as if to keep the words from spilling forth. ‘To focus power into the black obelisks and bring about a final release.’

‘Is that why the aether around this place is devoid of spirits?’ Echaros asked.

‘Drained during the ritual.’ Its nod was quick, almost irritated. ‘It was why you aelven flotsam were able to take Marrowscar so easily.’

‘That was why my experiments failed.’ The Soulscryer shook his head, voice rueful. ‘The nexus was drained, weak. It must be rebuilt, reinvigorated.’

‘Is that why Naxia sought the soul reservoir?’ Elarin asked, ignoring Echaros’ surprised glance. Powerful as Elarin’s necromantic enchantments were, they were brittle, tenuous things. She could not afford to let Kynlac slip free before learning what she needed to know.

‘It can rekindle the locus, mend the broken web.’

‘Or rebuild a chorrileum and save my people’s souls?’ Echaros asked.

‘Or cause another Necroquake.’ Elarin’s scalp tingled with apprehension. ‘Or raise a dead god.’

‘That was our hope.’

‘How many souls does the nexus require?’ Echaros asked.

Kynlac turned its many-eyed gaze upon the Soulscryer. ‘A legion.’

Elarin whirled on him. ‘You would doom not only your people, but all living beings.’

‘Only if I fail.’ His reply came cold as a winter sea. ‘And I shall not.’

Apprehension was a dark gallows tree, twining leafless branches through Elarin's thoughts. Now that Echaros knew how to reinvigorate the nexus, she was sure he would forge on with or without her. Far better for Elarin to convince the Soulscryer that he still needed her. That way, at least she could act before things spiralled out of control.

'The weaving of souls. Your sorcerers create constructs that last millennia,' Echaros continued, desperation whetting his tone to razored sharpness. 'How do you keep the energy from bleeding away?'

Kynlac brought its teeth together with an amused clack. 'Come closer and I shall tell you, little aelf.'

Echaros tightened the spiritual bonds, the burst of coruscating energy drawing a chattering hiss from the Ossiarch.

'Answer me, creature.'

And Kynlac did.

Although more advanced than Echaros in her studies of necromancy, Elarin had little knowledge of soul magic. The differences between Ossiarch and Idoneth were as deep as an ocean gulf, but they both manipulated the same spiritual energies.

Elarin had but to glance at Echaros to see the tenor of his thoughts. The Soulscryer leaned in, dark eyes lustrous in the gloom, his thin lips drawn back from his teeth in an almost predatory snarl. Elarin did not need to plumb the full depths of his research to know the Idoneth played with dangerous forces. Whatever Echaros planned, it benefitted Elarin for him to rely on her rather than the ancient Mortisan.

Desperation bled around the edges of his snarl. In that moment, Elarin knew the Soulscryer would never relent, never stop until his people were safe. It would have been an admirable quality in other circumstances.

Here, it was just a threat. A threat Elarin needed to crush.

'Hurry.' She ground the word through clenched teeth. 'I cannot hold him.'

'The necromantic locus.' Echaros spoke quickly, urgently, words tumbling out in a rush. 'How can it be used to maintain a renascent balance?'

But Elarin could not allow Kynlac to answer. Feigning exhaustion, she let her enchantments slip ever so slightly. It was a minor fraying, barely more than a stutter, but the Mortisan seized upon it like a bit of fallen aetherquartz.

The Lumineth had never successfully captured a Mortisan because all had

destroyed themselves rather than be taken. Now that Elarin had given Kynlac a chance, she expected much the same.

The Soulmason's eyes blazed bright, its bony frame seeming almost to writhe in the half-light.

'No!' Echaros sought to reinforce the unravelling sorceries, but desperation made him sharp, and the snarls compounded, multiplying throughout the tangled weave.

Amethyst fire limned Kynlac's monstrous form. It spread along the bars of the Ossiarch's cage, boiling away the Idoneth sorceries before spreading to the bone reef.

Ossified coral burned bright in the gloom. Echaros stood like a high priest, arms raised before the altar of some dark and alien god.

It would have been easy for Elarin to flee, to turn her back upon Echaros and let the Soulscryer's hopeless quest consume him.

And yet, something held her back.

It was not that Echaros' demise would certainly bring the swift slaughter of Elarin and her comrades; rather, it was something small, a bit of cold realisation that cut her justifications like a reaping scythe.

But for the accident of birth, the failings of a young and untested god, Elarin might have been Echaros.

In his position, she could not see herself doing any less.

Teeth bared, she took the Soulscryer's arm, dragging him away from the spreading flames. He struggled in her grip, but Elarin was not only a sorceress, she had also trained with the Bladelords of the Loreseeker Temple, strength and reflexes honed by their pitiless tutelage.

With a twist of her hip, she drove a fist into Echaros' midsection, doubling the Soulscryer over. In the few heartbeats it took him to regain his breath, Elarin had dragged Echaros free of the burning chorrileum, Kynlac's howling laughter pursuing them like a vengeful shade.

'What did you do, Lumineth?' He tore free of her, arms wide, fingers splayed like the talons of a hunting hawk.

'Saved your life.' Elarin crossed her arms, secure in the knowledge Echaros would not strike her down.

He needed her. Elarin had seen to that.

Panting like a horse fresh from a gallop, Echaros lowered his hands, gaze crawling to the remains of the skeletal chorrileum.

‘It was an abomination,’ Elarin said. ‘Like Kynlac.’

‘I know.’ Echaros’ shoulders rounded. ‘But abominations are all that remain to me.’

‘Not all that remains.’ Elarin stepped towards the Soulscrier, not close enough to touch, but close enough to catch and hold his attention. ‘We have accomplished much together.’ She spoke as if concluding a final argument. ‘There is no reason we cannot continue.’

‘You would aid me?’

‘I already have.’

‘What of our assault upon your people? The death of your comrades?’

‘I can neither forgive nor forget what your people have done, but to turn my back upon you would be to render all their sacrifices in vain.’ A familiar flicker of pain sparked in Elarin’s chest. Whatever the Soulscrier planned, her place was here – to advise, guide and exterminate, if necessary. ‘But if I aid you, it will not be as a prisoner, a pawn. I must be free to pursue my studies unfettered as my limbs.’

‘This I can do.’ Air hissed between his teeth. ‘But the others will not allow the release of your comrades.’

‘I understand.’ Elarin swallowed against the urge to smile. ‘May I speak with my companions in private?’

‘Out of the question.’

‘I do not plan escape, but I cannot say the same for my followers,’ she replied. ‘If I am to convince them to remain peaceably, I cannot have Idoneth peering over my shoulder, weapons bared.’

Echaros frowned, but did not immediately respond, apparently considering Elarin’s words. He had shown himself to be logical, if not necessarily reasonable.

After a long moment, he gave a stony nod. ‘So long as none of you attempt to leave the holding tower.’

‘That is agreeable.’

‘Come, Loreseeker. We have much work to do.’ He turned away in a swirl of singed robes, stalking down the hall.

Elarin did not follow.

After a moment, Echaros paused, glancing over his shoulder, back straight, expression settling back to its customary severity.

Elarin met his glare with one of her own.

The Soulscryer bared his teeth, dagger-like fingers flexing at his sides.

'Please.' It was almost a snarl.

'As you wish.' Elarin sketched a brief bow, hurrying to catch up with the Idoneth. He said nothing as they walked, did not even glance her way. But Elarin cared not. Let the Idoneth nurse his wounded pride. She had what she wanted.

For now, at least.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The surviving members of Elarin's band were housed in the Hollow Tower. A pinnacle of seamless stone without window or aperture, its featureless grey expanse was dour even amidst the tomb-like walls of the citadel. The only entrance door was composed entirely of carved nadirite hands; long, bony fingers twisted around one another in a snarled death grip. It boasted neither latch nor bar, nor any hinges Elarin could see, the whole appearing not so much a gate as the leavings of some brutal abattoir.

A pair of Namarti stood to either side of the skeletal door, expressions blank, barbed swords at the ready. If not for the subtle rise and fall of their chests, Elarin would have been hard-pressed to distinguish them from the shadows of the tower.

'This way, Lumineth.' Arach gestured with one of his weapons, a long serrated blade with a wicked-looking gut hook on the end. The Drowned Prince had kept his weapons bared as he led Elarin through the snarled passages of the keep. Although Echaros had granted her freedom, such trust did not extend to allowing her to move about the citadel unaccompanied. With Scyllene and Voltach in close counsel with the Soulscryer, the task of escorting Elarin had fallen to Arach.

Bared blades were not the limit of the Thrallmaster's disdain. Arach had

made a point of halting at every door and guard post to exchange whispered words with the Namarti, as if to show Elarin her time meant nothing to him.

Normally, such sullen disregard would have rankled her, eager as she was to continue her study of Marrowscar. In this case, however, she had been happy to forestall her inevitable meeting with Celastir and Kyris, using the delay to prepare herself for what she expected to be a brutal conversation.

Elarin's composure seemed only to further irritate Arach. With a disgusted sneer, he hammered on the door with the pommel of his blade, ignoring the Thralls to either side. It was a testament to the Idoneth's cruelty that they treated their kin such. Withered and weak though they might be, the Namarti were yet aelves.

They could take a lesson from the Lumineth. More than one, in fact.

As one, the nadirite hands released their grip, fingers fluttering like vault spiders as they crawled over and around one another. It was as if Arach had turned over a rock to reveal a host of squirming insects, all fleeing the sudden burst of light and attention. The door did not open so much as deconstruct itself, the rasp of metal on metal loud in Elarin's ears as hundreds of skeletal hands skittered back into the holes arrayed around the frame of the door.

Suppressing the urge to peer inside the shadowed recesses, Elarin stepped through the gate. When Arach made to follow, she turned, fixing him with her most imperious glare.

'I would speak with my comrades alone.'

'Do you take me for some eyeless trench scuttler?' He gave an ugly laugh. 'I will not sit on my claws while you plot escape.'

'I have given Echaros my word.'

Arach bared sharpened teeth, then spat at Elarin's feet. 'Thus to Lumineth honour.'

'What of the honour of your leader?' She ignored the disgusting display, unwilling to lower herself to the Thrallmaster's level.

That seemed to strike a chord with Arach, his grin becoming more snarl. 'Echaros does not rule me.'

'I see.' Elarin gave a thoughtful frown. 'And what of the Namarti? Do *you* possess the means to raise your fallen kin?'

He scowled. 'Do not toy with me, Lumineth.'

'Only those who deceive themselves find insult in truth,' Elarin replied.

‘Echaros may not rule you, but you *are* beholden to him. I mean to assist the Soulscryer in mastering this place for the good of both our peoples.’ She drew herself up. ‘But I shall do *nothing* until I am permitted to speak with my comrades... *alone*.’

Arach’s blade flashed in the dim light, so quickly Elarin did not even have time to register the movement before the sharp edge lay against her throat.

‘Dead,’ he whispered, eyes rolling back in their orbits to reveal pale white. ‘Dead, dead, dead.’

Elarin met the Thrallmaster’s empty gaze, muscles rigid as stone. In that moment, she knew with cold surety that should she falter, even for a heartbeat, Arach would not hesitate to cut her down.

‘You may have fooled the others, but I know you, Lumineth. I know *all* your kind.’ He leaned in, filed teeth so close to Elarin’s face she could feel his breath on her cheek, sharp and salty like the kelp her mother used to dry on the racks next to their villa. ‘Scyllene, Voltach, even Echaros – for all their knowledge and power, the Isharann always cleaved close to Aighmar, seldom venturing far. I, however, have travelled the whirlways to many realms – from the Obsidian Desert of Aqshy to the blinding waters of the Shimmersea.’

‘As a reaver, skulking from town to town, preying on the defenceless.’ Although the Thrallmaster’s blade was sharp at her throat, Elarin would not quail before his bluster. ‘How many innocents died by your hand? How many souls did you steal?’

‘You accuse *me* of butchery?’ His laugh was an ugly, painful thing. ‘I have seen your crystal prisons – humans and duardin broken to the yoke of enlightened dominion. I watched cities burn, scoured from the earth by your Vanari legions, the ground etched with searing runes.’

‘We act to stop the spread of Chaos,’ Elarin replied. ‘Sometimes sacrifices are necessary.’

‘We are all slaves to necessity.’ He increased the pressure on the blade, and a thin bead of Elarin’s blood crept down the edge. ‘Only *I* do not pretend my hands are clean.’

‘Kill me and you doom us all.’

‘Oh, I *will* kill you.’

Elarin had just begun to speculate if she could summon a battle spell before the Thrallmaster slit her throat when Arach abruptly stepped away,

his smile like jagged flint.

‘Today, tomorrow, when you die hardly matters to me.’ He jabbed his knife at the open doorway. ‘Go. Conspire with the other thieves. It will do you no good.’

Not trusting herself to be civil with the Thrallmaster, Elarin turned on her heel, back prickling with the concern Arach might bury his knife in it. Not for the first time – nor the last, she suspected – Elarin reflected on the precarity of her situation. For all their faults, it was not wise to discount the Idoneth. They might be cruel, withered things, but they were yet aelves, possessed of the same intellect and acuity as all Teclis’ children.

Six Namarti waited inside, silent and still as those beyond the gate. To Elarin’s relief, they did not attempt to bar her passage, only nodded at the stairs spiralling up into the gloom.

Now she had more time to study the interior of the Hollow Tower, Elarin noted more architectural peculiarities. Sharply square where the outside was round, it sloped gently inward as Elarin ascended, as if she rose through the inside of some vast, empty obelisk. Bone and wood scaffolding covered the walls, numerous platforms hanging from ropes of twisted sinew. It had the look of a construction site or shipyard, although Elarin could not even guess what manner of structure the Ossiarchs had sought to build *inside* a tower.

Studying the walls, she noted a series of strange carvings. Lacking the hard angles of Ossiarch sigils, they drew her attention, familiar in their curves and lines. Elarin ran her fingers across the stone, feeling the raised edges.

It came to her in a flood of cold recognition. These were Lumineth runes.

Though it had been reversed and deconstructed, rendered strange by the cold art of the Ossiarchs, Elarin could not help but recognise the fractured mandala that spread along the tower’s high inner walls.

Elarin snatched her hand back, gazing up at the empty interior. No, not empty, not quite. Like some dark mirror, the runes were reversed; perhaps the tower was as well. Like a distant rider coming into focus, Elarin understood.

It was a spire. The interior of the Hollow Tower had been perfectly shaped to mirror one of the aetherquartz towers the Lumineth had erected to bleed energy from the Necroquake. Only the spires had failed.

Perhaps this was the reason.

Back at the gatehouse, Elarin had sensed Marrowscar's connection to Hysh. The Hollow Tower was a dark twin to the Lumineth's spires. Could the connection have been used to undermine their network of towers?

A low hiss from one of the Namarti tore Elarin from her dark considerations. She glanced back, to see the Thralls watching her. One gestured at the scaffolding, teeth bared. Elarin hesitated. For all her desire to study the tower, she and her companions were still prisoners here. It was one thing to aid Echaros in his ambitions, it was quite another to allow the Idoneth knowledge of Marrowscar's connection to Hysh.

With a regretful sigh, Elarin left her revelations behind.

Celastir and the others were being held in a shallow cell roughly forty feet above the ground. Cut directly into the wall, it was perhaps twenty paces wide and half as deep. There were no bars, no door, the height and the smooth, unmortared stone of the surrounding wall conspiring to thwart escape more effectively than any cage. Even Kyris could not scale such an unforgiving cliff, nor could any leap the broad distance between the cell and the nearest scaffold. Those foolish enough to attempt such a feat would be easy targets for the score of bow-armed Reavers stationed along the stairs.

As Elarin approached, two of the Namarti turned a wheel of wood and black iron. Connected to an intricate system of pulleys, it raised a small platform, barely big enough for Elarin to stand upon. One of the Namarti thrust its chin towards the stand, and Elarin stepped upon it, grasping the ropes for support.

It was a testament to their feelings of betrayal that none of the Lumineth in the shallow depression even raised their eyes as Elarin's platform was winched over to the mouth of their cell.

'I bring good tidings.' She stepped onto the cold stone, searching among the bowed heads.

'I am glad you are well, Loreseeker.' Celastir leaned against the back wall, arms crossed across her broad chest.

'Better than well.' Elarin wended her way through the others, noting with no small relief they were beginning to take interest in her words.

'The nexus has been destroyed?' Kyris rose from among a small knot of Sentinels, her question sharp as her gaze. 'The Idoneth have been made to pay for their transgressions?'

'Not as such.' Elarin glanced away. 'But I discovered the source of the

soul reservoir's vision.' She raised calming hands as Celastir pushed off the wall. 'An Ossiarch Soulmaster named Kynlac. The Idoneth were keeping it prisoner down in the depths of Marrowscar. They sought to question the abomination, but I destroyed it.'

'Is that why you have been imprisoned with us?' Kyris asked.

'I am no prisoner.' Elarin could not keep the excitement from her voice. 'The leader of the Idoneth has granted me freedom, and I believe, with time, I can convince Echaros to—'

'At what price?' Celastir asked.

Elarin frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'The Idoneth give nothing for free,' she replied. 'You have destroyed their prisoner, undermined their plans. Why would this Idoneth sorcerer set you free?'

'Echaros seeks to preserve his people,' Elarin said. 'They are refugees, fleeing the destruction of their home. This may be all that remains of the Aighmar.'

'Good.' Kyris grunted.

Elarin turned to the former High Sentinel. 'The raid was a mistake. They thought we planned to assault Marrowscar.'

Celastir gave a sharp laugh. 'We did.'

'I have made peace with the Idoneth.' Elarin ignored her bodyguard's derision. Both Celastir and Kyris had succumbed to emotion – she knew she must bind their raw feelings with bonds of logic. Straightening, Elarin turned to regard the survivors of her band.

'The Idoneth wish only to be left alone. They will defend this place from the dead. Not allies, but also no threat to us, either.' It was not a lie, not quite. Echaros might seek only to reinvigorate his tattered people, but Arach and the others seemed dangerous. If the future proved Elarin false, then she had lied in service of preventing unnecessary bloodshed, and that would have to be good enough.

'What of the nexus?' Celastir asked.

'The nexus is a tool, its purpose shaped by the hand of the wielder,' Elarin said. 'Without the Soulmaster's malign influence, it is merely a place of power.'

Kyris narrowed her eyes. 'Shyish is full of other Ossiarchs. What is to prevent another from claiming this citadel?'

‘The Idoneth.’ Elarin drew in a slow breath. ‘And me.’

‘So you *are* working with them.’ Celastir shook her head, disappointment writ in every line of her face.

Elarin regarded the others, throat tight. For all their skill and discipline, they were warriors, not scholars, they could not understand the complex subtleties of the forces at play. She would need to speak quickly, decisively, or they would lose all trust in her.

‘I am working with Echaros only to learn more about this place.’ She swept her gaze over the others, willing her voice to project the calm assurance of Lord Regent Chariel. ‘When I have discovered what I need to know, I will render the nexus useless.’

‘And the Idoneth?’ Kyris asked.

‘If all goes to plan, we shall be blameless in Marrowscar’s destruction,’ Elarin said. ‘Once this citadel is useless, the Idoneth will be faced with the choice of accepting our aid, or facing extinction. They may be broken, twisted things, but they are still our kin.’

‘And if they accept your generous offer?’ Kyris asked. ‘You will convince Prince Sennareth not to execute the lot of them?’

Celastir sniffed. ‘*That* I would like to see.’

‘Leave Sennareth to me.’ In truth, Elarin had no idea how she would convince the prince to forgive the Idoneth for the attack, but if all went as she hoped, there would be no need. The Idoneth would remain in Marrowscar, a ward against the Ossiarchs.

‘I can destroy the nexus and see us freed,’ Elarin continued. ‘All I require is your trust.’

Kyris glanced to Celastir, doubt written clear on her angular features, but the bodyguard only shrugged.

‘My life is yours, as always.’ She bowed her head. ‘Trust is irrelevant.’

The remainder of Ildirin’s veteran Wardens moved behind the Bladelord, mimicking her genuflection. It was clear they had come to view Celastir as a leader. Good. Such loyalties would make what Elarin had to do much easier.

Kyris studied Elarin through heavy-lidded eyes, her posture that of a captured white lion pacing its cage. Elarin was not concerned. Reservations aside, it was not Kyris’ choice to make. For all her hatred of the Idoneth, the Sentinel was still responsible for her followers, still a soldier, still a

Lumineth.

She would do as ordered.

After a long hesitation, Kyris bowed. Even so, the Sentinel did not lower her eyes, staring as if to peer into Elarin's very thoughts. Veins of discomfort coiled along Elarin's spine. She was not in the habit of lying to other Lumineth, but to tell the truth would only lead to arguments, and there was no time for disunity.

'Wait here.' She nodded to the assembled warriors. 'I shall work towards your release.'

'As you wish, Loreseeker.' Kyris' tone belied her respectful words.

With a nod to Celastir, Elarin turned back to the platform, tugging on the rope to alert the Namarti she was ready to depart. She did not look back at the others as she was winched across the divide, the lies heavy in her chest. Frowning, Elarin wondered if Chariel had felt the same discomfort. Although the Lord Regent had shared much with Elarin, she had kept her own counsel on many things. Such was the burden of leadership, a weight Elarin now had to bear alone. She told herself this deception was not only in service to her people, but also to protect the lives of her comrades.

It was the logical choice, the correct choice, the *only* choice.

In the end, they were all slaves to necessity.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Elarin was surprised to find Voltach waiting for her outside the tower. The Tidecaster stood quietly, head tilted as if in thought, the hint of a smile on lips the colour of a fresh bruise. He was alone, without the small cadre of Namarti that seemed to perpetually accompany their full-souled brethren.

‘You are to be my minder?’ Elarin approached the Tidecaster as she would an unknown crevasse, wary of what it might contain.

‘Arach seems to have had his fill of you, Loreseeker.’ Voltach leaned in as if they shared a private joke. ‘Although I suspect you may have come out better without his company.’

‘You do not like the Drowned Prince?’

Voltach raised an eyebrow. ‘Do you?’

Elarin was surprised to find a bit of mirth bubble through her thoughts – not enough to provoke a smile, but certainly enough to reconsider her assumptions about the Aighmar Idoneth.

‘Our esteemed Soulscryer requests your presence at the northern barbican. Apparently, some stubborn snarls remain in Marrowscar’s energetic flow.’ Voltach made a vague gesture reminiscent of a noble trying to recall some bit of courtly ephemera. ‘Something about “phantasmally recombinant channels”. I am not clear on the exact detail, but if you would consent to

accompany me, I am sure Echaros will explain himself at *length*.'

Elarin did not know whether to acknowledge or ignore the Tidecaster's jest. Although his asides seemed to be rooted in genuine derision, she could not quite shake the feeling Voltach was somehow testing her.

'Of course.' She nodded. 'I am at Echaros' service.'

'Are you indeed?' He chuckled, turning away in a swirl of singed robes. 'Truly, we live in unprecedented times.'

'You are not like the others.' Elarin matched the Tidecaster's long strides.

'Am I not?'

'They are more...' She searched for a word that would not give offence. 'Sombre.'

He shook his head, sighing. 'Arach, Scyllene, Echaros – they believe we can be saved.'

'And you do not?'

'Look around you.' Voltach spread his arms. 'I am sure Marrowscar possesses many fine qualities, but alas, a surfeit of hope is not among them.'

'I have oft grappled with similar concerns.' The words slipped out despite Elarin's misgivings. 'We came to Shyish to prevent Nagash's return, but it seems inevitable. Even so, that is no reason to surrender.'

Voltach cocked his head. 'Do I appear to have surrendered to despair?'

'You seem to have accepted defeat as inevitable.'

'Inevitable, yes, but not imminent. When hope is extinguished, every day represents a victory of sorts.' He nodded to a pair of Namarti guarding a door of iron-banded bone. They quickly opened the portal, and he ducked inside, one hand raised to conjure a ball of swirling blue light. The hall beyond threaded the keep's outer wall, only wide enough for them to walk single file. Voltach took the lead, the shifting glow of his light casting watery shadows upon the walls.

'Tidecasting is not like soul magic,' he continued. 'We do not manipulate spirits, but currents of emotion. The ethersea is not a thing, but a sense memory of a place long gone. A basin of collective longing filled with the waters of a world consumed.'

Unlike the other Aighmar, the Tidecaster seemed strangely forthcoming. Elarin leaned in, curious despite her burgeoning misgivings.

'And you control this ethersea to move from place to place?'

‘It cannot be controlled.’ Voltach’s laugh seemed almost genuine. ‘Water will take the shape of any container in which it is placed, but it never truly conforms. Wind and wave, storm and squall, it is the same everywhere. To sail upon the sea, whether real or surreal, one must conform to *it*.’

Elarin could only shake her head, imagining what Master Lesaris would make of such unstable cosmology.

As if sensing her humour, Voltach turned to regard her. ‘Does my calling amuse you?’

‘No,’ she hurriedly replied. ‘It is only that Lumineth sorcery possesses far more... structure.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Holy Teclis created initial runic structure in the Age of Myth, all fundamental aelemental forces ascribed and linked within a branching mandala of relational cosmology, everything circumscribed by the breadth of his eternal wisdom...’ Elarin paused, noting that Voltach’s eyes narrowed at the mention of Teclis.

‘I am sorry if I gave offence, Tidecaster.’ She offered an apologetic bow. ‘I know your people’s fraught history.’

‘I take no umbrage. Teclis means nothing to me.’ He sniffed, smile returning. ‘I am more interested by this... runic mandala. Is it the one you inscribe upon the earth?’

‘That is but one aspect,’ Elarin said, rising to the heady rush of arcane discussion. It had been months, if not years since her thoughts had turned from sorcery’s more practical, and brutal, applications. ‘As with your Isharann, there are many schools of Lumineth Scinari. While we Loreseekers work with arcane runes, it is the Calligraves who write upon the realms themselves.’

‘Like Master Lesaris.’

‘He is one of our greatest, ancient and powerful in his craft.’

‘I can attest to his prowess.’ Voltach gave a respectful nod. ‘To hold back the force of the ethersea, even for a few moments...’

‘Such feats require preparation.’ Elarin swallowed against a momentary flush of disdain, memories of Lesaris’ betrayal flaring bright in her recollection. If not for the Calligrave’s inflexibility, the Lumineth might have seized Marrowscar. She could not help but wonder what might have happened had Echaros and the others become *her* prisoners.

‘Lesaris was aware of our coming?’ Voltach asked.

‘We had been preparing a foray against Marrowscar.’ Elarin held up a hand to forestall Voltach’s reply. ‘We *thought* it an Ossiarch citadel. Master Lesaris had begun to inscribe geomantic runes across the local realm lines to interdict the citadel’s power. When your people attacked, he merely repurposed the dampening mandala.’

‘But your people were ready for us.’

‘Not as such.’ Frowning, Elarin shook her head. ‘We have been in Shyish long enough to never let down our guard, but had I not been—’

Elarin caught herself, suddenly aware Voltach had gone perfectly still. His eyes glittered with interest, chips of polished obsidian amidst the shifting shadows. Quick as a sea wind, the Tidecaster’s tenor had shifted from conversation to interrogation.

He leaned in like a stalking lynx, grin almost predatory.

‘Had you not been *what?*’

Elarin took a step back, any sense of amity chilled by the Tidecaster’s unblinking scrutiny.

‘I fear we have tarried too long.’ Elarin tried for Master Lesaris’ cold indifference, jaw tight, her smile perfunctory, at best. ‘Echaros does not strike me as one who enjoys being kept waiting.’

‘Let us be on our way, then.’ Voltach turned away, his air of menace dissipating like a crashing wave.

It did not, however, dispel the unease that made a hard fist in Elarin’s stomach. The Idoneth might look like Lumineth, they might even occasionally act like Lumineth, but it was perilous to forget they were not her people. Their thoughts charted strange courses, swept by tides and histories of which Elarin remained painfully ignorant.

Celastir and Kyris’ concerns surfaced like storm-sunk wreckage. Echaros might have relaxed his grip, but he still held Elarin and her companions. Any sense of kinship must be weighed against the threat of death. Elarin only hoped she possessed the shrewdness and resolve to contend with such dire accounting.

The door to the barbican was blessedly mundane. Beyond, the chamber opened into a wide vista of winches and murder holes, every foot calculated to deal final death to any who would seek access to the gate’s inner workings.

It made her wonder what Ossiarchs need fear.

Elarin shifted from foot to foot, discomfited at the thought of implacable legions arrayed across fields of ancient bone and stone, grinding against one another with the relentless patience of glaciers.

‘Loreseeker.’ Echaros rose from what looked to be a collection of funeral urns, each sealed and marked with sigils in the Bonereapers’ strange script. He glanced at Voltach, seeming almost surprised by the Tidecaster’s presence.

‘Arach was to watch her.’

‘The Drowned Prince found pressing business elsewhere.’ Voltach’s grin was barren as wind-scarred stone. ‘I volunteered to escort our guest here.’

An expression of momentary unease ghosted across the Soulscryer’s gaunt features. Elarin would have missed it, but she found herself becoming more attuned to Echaros’ moods. It was clear he had only the most tenuous grasp of his fellow commanders, or perhaps the Idoneth were simply errant by nature.

Elarin set her shoulders against an uncomfortable flutter of memory. Had she been a similar pebble in the boot of Lord Regent Chariel?

Echaros nodded to Voltach. ‘You may go.’

The Tidecaster lingered for a moment, just long enough to give lie to Echaros’ order.

‘I look forward to continuing our conversation, Loreseeker.’ He lingered on the last word like a warrior running a whetstone across a treasured blade. ‘Perhaps under circumstances more... amenable to discussion.’

With one last nod to Elarin, Voltach ducked through the barbican door.

‘What did Voltach mean by “discussion”?’ Echaros asked.

‘He was curious about the nature of Lumineth runes.’ Elarin returned a thin smile. ‘As are you.’

The jibe seemed to ease Echaros’ concerns, as Elarin had hoped it would. Despite their differences, the Idoneth appeared no strangers to political intrigue. With neither the discipline nor reason of the Lumineth, Elarin could only imagine the dangers such machinations might conjure among the lightless depths of their undersea courts.

‘You called for me?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Echaros seemed momentarily taken aback, but quickly recovered, burgeoning suspicion undermined by arcane curiosity.

‘Kynlac spoke of reinvigorating Marrowscar. Without the soul reservoir, I thought to reconnect the citadel to Shyish.’ He gestured her closer, turning to inspect the wall behind the funerary urns. Set into the stone was a circular seal, its face inscribed with Ossiarch glyphs. ‘This is the point where two of the realm lines converge. One from the sea, one from land.’

Indeed, Elarin had but to step forwards to feel the hum of power emanating from the conflux. No doubt it reinforced the gatehouse’s various defensive enchantments. And yet, none of the power seemed to be flowing into the fortress itself.

Echaros nodded at her tight-jawed scrutiny of the seal.

‘It is as if the energy is being swallowed up,’ he said. ‘One moment here, the next, gone like water spilling off a great cliff.’

‘The realm lines form the foundations of Shyish itself.’ Elarin shook her head. ‘Such power can neither be created nor destroyed.’

‘Which means it is being siphoned somewhere.’ Echaros seemed almost excited by the prospect. Elarin could not fault the Soulscrier, as she could not help but feel curiosity kindle in her own breast.

‘But where?’ She knelt, closing her eyes as she laid a hand against the seal. The metal was strangely warm, the sigils rough against her palm. She whispered seeking incantations, spells that would tease apart the snarled weave of necromancy to reveal the arcane basis of the enchantment.

But the Ossiarch wards resisted. Woven from the stuff of spirit and bone, they sought to ensnare her in tenebrous coils of shadow, dragging her towards the funereal void of the necromantic nexus. The last time she had dived this deep it had left her corpse-cold, almost dead had not Celastir pulled her back.

She sculled against the necromantic current, spitting warding runes into the callous dark. It devoured them like it devoured everything. No... Elarin’s incantations were not swallowed, so much as lost against the endless expanse of night, rendered insignificant by time and scope beyond mortal reckoning. She tried to fortify herself, but there were no directions, no sense of here or there. There was naught she could do but watch, horrified, as her sense of self bled into the hungry void.

Death was all around Elarin, just as it had been inside her all along.

Dimly, she sensed a glimmer of movement in the dark, not so much seen as felt. Like a drowning woman, she flailed at it, desperate for even the

smallest fleck of perception. Something moved near her, something far more accustomed to the inky depths than Elarin.

Echaros. She recognised him even as his enchantments took hold, dragging her up from the void like an angler drawing in a prize catch. Where Elarin had sought to strike at the darkness, to break and batter it, Echaros slipped through the Stygian vastness, a shadow among shadows.

Drawing strength from the Soulscryer's example, Elarin turned her sorceries not out, but in. Rather than combat the darkness, she let it move her. Together, they crested the ebon tide of night like a ship running ahead of a storm. Shadows parted, the emptiness filled with sudden sound, and sense, and light.

Elarin felt a strange sense of buoyancy, a subtle glow that started in the tips of her fingers, spreading like morning sunlight until it illuminated the whole of her.

Only when Echaros gave a startled grunt did Elarin open her eyes to find the light was more than in her thoughts. The gatehouse glittered like sunmetal, the jagged lines of bars and winches and murder holes picked out in harsh relief as if they stood bare to the sky at midday. Elarin could feel Echaros' hand on her shoulder, his grip tight but not painful, the physical connection serving to buttress them against the pull of the nexus.

Power flowed through the barbican. Sigils flickered brightly, their light not the lamented glow of funeral lanterns, but the eye-watering brilliance of daybreak. It filled Elarin, simultaneously thrilling and heartbreaking in its familiarity.

In that moment, she knew where the realm lines' necromantic power had been diverted.

'Hysh.' Elarin blinked against stinging eyes. 'They sent it to Hysh.'

'I don't understand.' Echaros' words echoed in her thoughts, his hand still heavy upon her shoulder, the tangible contact bridging their arcane connection.

Rather than reply, Elarin showed him.

The first traces of Nagash's dark designs came to Hysh, as all things do, in the form of signs and portents. Always a place of symbolism, death magic infiltrated the Realm of Light like pollen from some dark and terrible bloom. Unkind clouds crawled across the sky, bone pale against the glare of the Perimeter Inimical. Breezes curled heavy with dust and ash, hints of

half-remembered funeral dirges just at the edge of perception. Night never truly came in Hysh, but the twilight that passed for dark came tangled with hungry shadows. Caught by the fading light, they bent and cavorted, fingers stretched to talon sharpness by the spectre of some long-dead sun.

Still working to undo the scars of the Spirefall, the Lumineth had been hard-pressed to respond in force. Mighty Teclis foresaw a clutching wave of bone and spirit, but the aelves had just begun to knit the tattered remnants of their once mighty kingdoms back into a gleaming whole. So they had erected spires of purest aetherquartz. Raised by careful hands, the monolithic pillars pierced the realm lines and loci of Hysh like prismatic needles thrust into the meridians of an ailing king.

It had not been enough.

The gathering of power at Shyish's nadir had been beyond even the seers' wildest predictions, a hurricane of amethyst sorcery that uprooted the very fundamentals of reality, boiling away large swathes of Hysh as bits of the Realm of Light disincorporated into the pure brilliance from which they had been forged. Great runes were cut into the hinterlands, desperate Calligraves and Cathallars working to shore up the failing walls of reality. Then the dead had come.

Corpses clawed from ancient graves, entire battlefields stripped of their fallen as former enemies rose, old hatreds heated in the forge of Nagash's will, shaped and beaten into singular purpose, a blade aimed at the heart of Hysh. The barriers grew thin as gossamer, unquiet shades slipping from aether to air with the ease of swimmers surfacing after a long dive. Unbelieving, overwhelmed, there had been nothing to do but fight and die, and in so doing add to the ranks of the invaders.

The Inscribed Citadel was but one of many things the dead had taken. Necessary sacrifices. Irreplaceable. But then again, everything the Lumineth built was such. It was their blessing, their curse. When everything was singular in its perfection, how could one choose what to preserve and what to cast into the cold depths of eternity?

Elarin's visions came quick as windblown leaves, scenes skittering by without regard for time or order – fallen towers, cities gone silent and empty, the corpses of their erstwhile inhabitants yoked to Nagash's bitter greed. She had not seen Uiharan fall, had not seen her colleagues, her teachers, her friends taken. Their bodies and souls had been rent by

Ossiarch magic, only to be reassembled into new and terrible forms.

Echaros' grip tightened on her shoulder, the Soulscryer seeming to sway in the wind of her dire recollections. But it was not the tempest of Hyshian devastation that raged in the Idoneth sorcerer's heart, but a storm of his own making.

In sharing her suffering, Elarin had opened herself to Echaros' own. She saw black-shelled fortresses scoured by bilious warpfire, old and hallowed vaults breached by gnawing fangs. Hunched forms skittered in the firelight, crawling from abyssal cracks and twisted burrows to scuttle through rents in the fabric of the realms themselves.

Unlike Elarin, Echaros had fought. While she had possessed neither the power nor training, he had been a young Isharann just coming into the fullness of his talent. He had stood, side by side with the enclaves' Akhelian princes, weapons raised in silent exultation, the high battle cries of Namarti blending with the shrieks and snarls of deep-sea predators. Biovoltaic energy flashed amidst the ocean depths as levelled voltspears warred with skaven warp lightning, spasming bodies backlit by flashes of crackling brilliance.

There had been no acceptable losses for the Idoneth. Every Akhelian who was swarmed by dark-furred bodies; every Isharann consumed by the ratmen's vile sorceries; every Namarti who fell, never to rise again – each was the result of years of training and arcane fortification, guttering spirits buttressed by scores of stolen souls.

Echaros had watched them wink out, one by one.

Elarin felt his hopeless fury. It enfolded her, smothering her in the memory of that terrible moment when the Aighmar chorrileum was breached, a thousand thousand souls swept into the ether in a bright, shrieking tide, their essences forever lost to the torments of a dark and petulant god.

She felt a scream building in her throat. Raw and red as a fresh wound, it burst from her, echoed by Echaros' high wail. They stood transfixed, cut by unburied memory.

Echaros snatched back his hand, breaking the connection. Elarin gasped like a drowning victim brought back to sudden consciousness. She doubled over to vomit a torrent of ethereal brine, ghostly seawater curling like smoke at her feet. Slowly, her gaze crawled to Echaros. The Soulscryer glowed with a dim radiance, slowly fading as Elarin's dire recollections

receded.

At last able to find her breath, she pushed to unsteady legs to lay a hand upon the Ossiarch sigils.

Power flowed through ancient conduits, Marrowscar's towers, gates, walls seeming almost to thrum with amethyst light. Elarin could feel the fortress about her, a teeming nest of old cruelties piled like kindling at the foot of a vast and terrible pyre. Dimly, she sent a questing tendril of power along the aetheric flow, and felt the citadel respond, chains of dark iron shifting as one of the fortress' heavy doors shifted on hinges long unused.

Echaros' tall shadow fell across her. 'Are you injured, Loreseeker?'

'I am well, just drained.' Elarin quickly willed the gate shut in the hopes none had noticed its creaking progress. She stood, swaying as if the move had disoriented her.

Echaros caught her, his touch surprisingly gentle. She let him guide her towards a nearby stone bench, collapsing upon it with an exhaustion not wholly feigned.

They sat for a minute, side by side, as the echoes of the shared vision faded.

'That was... difficult. I am grateful for your assistance.' Echaros pressed a hand to his forehead, wincing. He glanced to the Ossiarch sigils, his smile cold but earnest. 'It seems we have cleared the impediment.'

Elarin returned a tentative grin. Echaros either did not or could not see she had manipulated Marrowscar's energies. She considered telling the Soulscryer of her rudimentary control over the citadel's defences, but decided against it. Elarin had peered into the Soulscryer's memories, plumbed the root of his ambitions, just as he had hers.

She understood Echaros better, but that did not mean she trusted him or his fellow Idoneth.

The ability to open Marrowscar's gates was a powerful boon, one she might refine with practice. If the Deepkin proved themselves, Elarin could reveal the secret to Marrowscar's arcane fortifications. If not, such knowledge would aid her escape.

The door to the gatehouse burst open, several Namarti stalking in, jagged blades at the ready.

Echaros waved them to calm. Although the Thralls lowered their swords, Elarin could feel their eyeless scrutiny upon her.

The Soulscryer addressed the Namarti in their high, liquid tongue. Although the words were unfamiliar to Elarin, she could discern no threat in Echaros' tone or bearing. At his nod, two of the Thralls bowed and slipped away, the remaining pair seemingly unmoved.

'I have told them to spread the word that you have done our people a service.' Echaros turned to her, something approaching satisfaction on his normally severe features. 'I cannot release you, but you need not be a prisoner. These two Thralls will accompany you, for your protection and ours, but after... this' – he gestured at the gatehouse – 'I do not believe you are a threat.'

'My thanks.' Elarin returned a modest bow.

'Clearing the realm lines is but the first step,' Echaros replied. 'We must return power to the necromantic locus if we are to have a chance at regrowing my kin's withered souls.'

If Echaros' promises awakened any hope in the Namarti, they did not show it – their faces impassive, their every movement instilled with the careful wariness of lifelong servants. It made Elarin wonder: if the Soulscryer's plan succeeded and the Namarti became as their full-souled kin, what ripples might spread through Idoneth society?

If handled properly, such upheaval might provide opportunity for the Lumineth. The chance to guide their fallen kin back to the light presented a heady draught indeed, one Elarin could not but seek.

'Such a great undertaking will require much spiritual energy,' Echaros continued, frowning as if in thought. He looked to Elarin, expression guarded. 'More than we possess, perhaps.'

'You speak of raids?' Elarin asked.

'The lands surrounding this place are barren,' he replied. 'If we send parties through the ethersea, it will weaken the forces here. Will your kin assault again?'

Elarin shook her head. 'Not if Prince Sennareth commands. They will fortify the lands already held, but I doubt they will venture far abroad unless you strike at them.'

'I have no intention of harming your kin.'

She regarded him for a long moment. It was clear the Soulscryer believed he spoke true, but the same could not be said for his comrades.

'What of Arach?' Elarin asked.

‘The Drowned Prince may think himself a king, but he cannot strike without my support and that of the other Isharann sorcerers.’

‘And these souls?’ she pressed further. ‘From whom will they be taken?’

‘Human villages, ships, even some of the more intelligent dead possess energy that can be harvested.’

The idea of Idoneth reavers ravaging the Ouroboran Coast did not sit well in Elarin’s thoughts, but she understood the necessity. The Lumineth had inscribed entire cities to stop the spread of Chaos through Hysh, sacrificing untold lives to ensure the safety of the Realm of Light. Was the destruction of a few doomed villages any different?

‘You can abide such means?’ Echaros asked.

Hands clenched inside the sleeves of her robes, Elarin nodded. In truth, it was not the thought of stolen human souls she found unsettling. Rather, what troubled her was how *little* concern she felt.

She tried to imagine what the others would say – Celastir, Lesaris, even Chariel – but their concerns were as castles of sand, washed away by the promise of returning Teclis’ wayward children to their rightful place.

After untold centuries, at last, the Lumineth would not stand alone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Elarin stood in the courtyard, thoughts troubled as the Namarti prepared for war. Although she knew Marrowscar's walls to be straight as temple columns, the Ossiarchs' grim parapets seemed almost to loom over her, adding to the oppressive weight of her consideration.

It was one thing to condemn a settlement to death. Far different to watch the executioners honing their blades, silent as death, while Arach stalked among them, checking straps and stances. Voltach presided over preparations like some sadistic magistrate eager to pass sentence. Any lingering affinity Elarin felt for the Tidecaster was drowned by the sheer delight on his face as the Idoneth raiders marshalled behind the cruel sweep of Marrowscar's high walls.

If anything, the citadel seemed to approve of the coming bloodshed.

Elarin glanced to her two Namarti minders. If either held any desire to go reaving with their kin, they hid it well, swords bared, eyeless faces lacking any emotion beyond focused attention. Elarin might be free to move about the citadel, but she had no doubt they would act quickly should she show the slightest hint of betrayal.

She wondered what it must be like to be raised as a servant, a Thrall – denied the power and privileges of your betters through accident of birth. It

was a heavy consideration, and all the more reason for her to assist in freeing the Namarti of their terrible burden. Despite their blank faces, their guttering souls, despite their slave collars, the binding runes cut into their flesh, they were aelves, and as such deserving of respect.

‘I would know the names of those who stand by my side.’ Elarin turned to her guards, voice gentle as if she spoke to an agitated gryph-hound.

If the Namarti heard her, they gave no sign.

‘What are you called?’ she tried again.

‘They will not answer you.’ Scyllene’s gravelly voice brought Elarin quickly about.

The Soulrender was armed and armoured as she had been when the Idoneth descended upon Chariel’s forces. An imposing figure, to be sure, lurelights glimmering like deep-sea diamonds amidst the spines and ridges of Scyllene’s articulated carapace, the razored curve of her talúnhook promising a swift end to any who stood in her way. Even so, Elarin could sense a strange reticence in the Soulrender, a feeling almost approaching regret as Scyllene’s gaze drifted to the two Namarti.

‘You care for them?’ Elarin phrased it as a question, although it was not.

‘They are my charges, if that is what you mean.’ Scyllene eyed her, expression dubious. ‘It is my duty to preserve what remains.’

Sensing the Soulrender’s burgeoning irritation, Elarin changed tack. ‘What do you think of Echaros’ plan?’

Scyllene narrowed her eyes. Such was her scowl Elarin thought the Soulrender would turn away. Instead, she gestured towards the Namarti on Elarin’s right.

‘Hakos.’ Scyllene nodded to the other. ‘Skria.’

Elarin glanced back, confused.

‘Their names,’ the Soulrender added with a rueful sniff. ‘At Blackfire, Hakos struck the head off one of the ratmen’s abominations, his own chest crushed by the beast’s death throes.’ She took a step towards the tall Namarti, running light fingers along his ribs. ‘One of my better works. You can hardly see the scars.’

‘And Skria.’ She turned. ‘Eldest daughter of Iskarn Erathos, Lord of the Unfathomable Gulfs. Brave, strong, clever as any Akhelian king, she might have succeeded her father.’ Scyllene sucked air through her teeth, one finger tracing Skria’s rune-etched collar. ‘But for this.’

The unfairness of it was like a sharp jab to Elarin's stomach. The Lumineth, too, had distinctions of birth, but it did not mean their fates were etched in stone. Even the lowest smallholder could rise to prominence, with intelligence, grit, and no small degree of luck.

'I was born by the ocean.' Elarin found herself talking, not sure what brought the words bubbling up. 'My family were sailors, trading along the Shimmersea. My uncle owned a small ship, at least until they were both lost in a storm.' She glanced to the Namarti. 'Then we had nothing.'

'And that makes you like them?' Scyllene's lip curled.

'No, I simply meant... ' Elarin searched for the right words.

'You understand very little for someone who claims wisdom.'

'The first step upon the path to enlightenment is recognising how little you know,' Elarin replied.

Scyllene's laugh was the rough croak of a startled crow. 'Then you are well on your way, Loreseeker.'

Lurelights glittering in the dull grey light of Shyish's perpetually overcast sky, the Soulrender turned away. A lucky move, indeed, as a ball of flame arced down to explode in the place Scyllene had been standing but a moment before.

Elarin caught a glimpse of a fleshless visage, white bone limned in flames of pale blue, its skeletal grin almost exultant as it struck the hard stone of the courtyard. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the flash, wards sparking like flint on steel as the explosion rolled over her. Although it did not pierce Elarin's runic shield, such was the force that it drove her to one knee.

Strong hands seized her shoulders, Hakos and Skria dragging Elarin back into the shadow of an overhanging buttress as another rain of flaming skulls fell upon the courtyard. Namarti were flung from their feet, skin crackling in the necrotic flames as they tumbled through the air like bonfire sparks.

Even amidst the raging tumult, Elarin could pick out Scyllene's lurelights. Bright as aetherquartz, they gleamed and flashed as she slipped between the falling skulls; but even the veteran Soulrender could do little to staunch the crimson ruin. Namarti surged back to their feet sporting missing limbs and gaping wounds, only to be smashed to the uncaring stone by the next barrage.

'Ossiarchs on the approach!' Arach's call was almost jubilant as he led a

pack of Namarti towards the gatehouse. They swarmed up the scaffolding like reef spiders, pale aelven fingers finding purchase on even the smallest cracks. There, they joined the line of whisperbow-armed Reavers upon the battlements, already returning fire.

Elarin shook free of her minders' hands, arms spread as she smothered the necrotic flames about her with a wave of pure energy. Like blown candles, the fires waxed for a moment, only to gutter on the surfeit of power.

Voltach strode amid the smoking ruin, seemingly unconcerned. Swirls of etheric energy trailed his every move, a gathering wave that bore him up and to the crest of the high wall, ready to unleash the intangible fury of the ethersea upon the Bonereapers.

Unsure of her role, but needing to do something, Elarin cast about for Echaros. She found the Soulscryer near one of the citadel's tall central towers, and made for him. Skria gave a low hiss, but a level glare seemed to convince the Namarti that Elarin would not be restrained. Sharing a sightless glance, she and Hakos followed behind.

'This isn't right.' Echaros shook his head as Elarin jogged up. 'I sensed nothing.'

'Nor I.' She frowned at the surrounding fortress. 'It's this place. It must be. The Ossiarchs built Marrowscar, it hungers for their return.'

'But the lands are empty.' Echaros' words came clipped, unbelieving. 'How could they gather such a force?'

'You forget, this is *their* citadel. We only occupy it,' Elarin replied. 'Naxia must have travelled along one of the realm lines, hidden by the flow of necromantic energy. My people remain behind walls, shielded by spells and wards. Prince Sennareth no longer contests the Ouroboran Coast. The Ossiarchs are free to do as they will.'

As if to echo Elarin's dire words, there came a resounding crack from behind. She spun to see Marrowscar's wide, nadirite-bound gates flung open, bars and buttresses shattered by a slab of dark stone inscribed with blazing necromantic sigils. It tumbled through the courtyard to strike the citadel's inner wall, unleashing a rain of rubble from on high.

Through the shattered gates, Elarin at last spied the horror that had unleashed such devastation upon the defenders. A dozen terrible war machines towered over the ranks of Mortek Guard, armatures of sinew and sculpted bone, long catapult arms pointed at the walls like accusatory

fingers. Supported by scores of undulating, centipedal legs, they scuttled forwards as Bonereapers swarmed across the ossified scaffolding, winching back the arms to unleash another devastating volley.

Elarin could almost see the fell power rising from the things, like waves of heat from sun-parched badlands. But it was not the rush of cursed energy that drew her attention. Rather, she felt her sorcerous gaze tugged towards one particular catapult by the feel of something old, something familiar.

‘To the gate!’ Echaros raised an arm as if to urge the surrounding Namarti forwards.

‘The crawling catapults are a distraction.’ She gestured towards the advancing Ossiarchs. ‘Naxia is the true threat.’

‘You know she is here?’ There was no fear in Echaros’ voice, only cold concern.

‘*I feel her.*’

To his credit, the Soulscriber did not question Elarin, only turned to Hakos to issue a string of orders. The Thrall sprinted off, presumably to gather more defenders.

A sharp boom was their only warning as another of the cursed steles hammered into the tower above their heads.

Skria shoved Elarin, hard. The push sent her stumbling from the path of a chunk of fallen masonry. It struck the Namarti at the juncture of neck and shoulder, crushing her to the ground in a spray of blood and shattered bone.

Echaros stepped over Skria’s corpse without even a downward glance. ‘Defending the walls is useless unless we destroy that vile artillery.’

With effort, Elarin tore her gaze from the Thrall’s broken body. ‘You have not the forces to battle both Naxia and strike for the Ossiarch catapults. Release my comrades.’

‘They cannot be trusted.’ Echaros’ dismissal was quick as a sword thrust.

‘They can be trusted to fight Ossiarchs,’ Elarin replied coolly. ‘We were charged with battling the dead. My comrades are Lumineth – they have not forgotten their duty.’

‘And when the battle is over?’ Echaros asked.

‘Would you rather contend with a few dozen of my people’ – Elarin stepped close – ‘or a legion of Bonereapers?’

Echaros’ jaw pulsed, desperation and mistrust warring in his shadowed eyes.

‘Naxia destroyed my home, slaughtered my comrades. You saw what the Ossiarchs did to those in the Inscribed Citadel.’ Elarin sought and held the Soulscrier’s troubled gaze. ‘She *took* them. Nothing remained, not even bodies, not even souls.’

It was a calculated argument, aimed like an arrow into the heart of Echaros’ concern. Elarin knew he feared for his people, would do anything to hold them back from the brink of annihilation. She knew because the same fear had made a home in her own soul.

After a long moment, the Soulscrier nodded.

‘I will have their equipment brought to the tower.’ Echaros’ voice held no doubts, only the calm certainty of command. ‘Strike quickly. I shall gather the others.’

Elarin dashed towards the Hollow Tower, Echaros’ shouted orders spreading among the Namarti. When she arrived, the door was open, the two Namarti guards having absented their now superfluous posts to join the defence. Two more Thralls waited by the winch, something akin to impatience in their sallow faces as Elarin hurried up the scaffold stairs. They were quick to propel her across the gap, already working to raise a larger bridge as she stepped among her comrades.

Veterans of a long and brutal conflict, they stood in loose order, no doubts, no panic in their pale eyes as Elarin quickly relayed the situation.

‘Our weapons?’ Kyris asked.

‘Arriving presently.’ Elarin turned as the bone causeway was raised, grinding against the lip of the prison cell.

‘And what of after the battle?’ Celastir fell in beside her, the Bladelord’s presence an uncomfortable reminder of Skria’s brutal death.

‘We shall see.’ Elarin slipped past the Namarti, her gaze alighting upon a knot of Thralls at the tower entrance, their arms full of arcbows, blades, shields and glittering sunmetal plate. Without a word, they deposited the equipment in a glimmering pile, before turning away as if glad to be rid of it.

The Lumineth armed themselves with practised skill, slipping on helms and weapon belts before turning to help their comrades tighten armour straps. Elarin cast about for her staff and sword, finding them apart from the haphazard heap, both leaning against one of the tower walls as if placed

with care.

Taking up her weapons, she drew Glimmerdark, the blade's prismatic sheen seeming to amplify the glow of her comrades' arms.

There was no need for orders, Elarin only glanced to Kyris and Celastir in turn, her gaze returned with terse nods. They came forth from the tower in loose order, spread wide to frustrate the Ossiarch bombardment.

Elarin could not see Echaros, but there was fighting near the front gate, knots of howling Namarti hacking at the packed ranks of Bonereapers who sought to force their way through the shattered portal. No newly risen rabble, these, the Morteks' swords were sharp, their eyes filled with baleful green flames. Like waves crashing on jagged stone, pale bodies fell away, hacked and pierced by ancient grave blades.

But the Idoneth's foes were not the only ones who could rise again.

Like an oracular crab, Scyllene darted among the fallen, each touch of her hand breathing new life into broken bodies. Seeing the Soulrender's power, Elarin could not help but wonder what it would be like to see death as little more than an inconvenience.

Satisfying, perhaps, although certainly not worth trading her soul for a Namarti's stolen animus.

'*Sethai! Alaithi!*' Kyris shouted the runes for air and mountain. Responding to the former High Sentinel's command, the surviving Wardens raised gleaming shields to form a broad wedge, Celastir and Elarin at the tip. Kyris' Sentinels formed up behind in loose order, arrows nocked and ready.

They moved across the courtyard at a measured jog, not one foot out of place; swords, shields, and bows held at precise angles. Although rightly feared for their martial prowess, the true strength of the Lumineth lay not in blade nor spell, but the careful discipline with which they fought.

Elarin's brutal incantations subdivided the space between Lumineth and Ossiarch, filling the air with humming arcs of light. At her call, they scythed through the tightly packed ranks of the Morteks. Locked shields and dark plates of articulated nadirite absorbed most of the arcane force, but enough slipped through to cut bone and rend spirit.

Elarin had not intended her sorceries to wreak havoc among the Bonereapers, only to disorder their phalanx. Moving with remorseless discipline, they were quick to redress ranks, but not quick enough.

The Lumineth hit the Ossiarchs like a forge-bright sword thrust into oil.

Elarin swayed from the point of an obsidian spear, then hammered her staff into the upper edge of the Mortek's raised shield. Imbued with arcane power, her staff crackled with brilliance, bowling the Ossiarch back a step. Careful as a seamstress stitching silk, Elarin threaded Glimmerdark into the gap between shield and helm. The prismatic blade obliterated the Mortek's skeletal face, the pale light of its eyes lost in the radiance of her assault.

More came from either side, seeking to overwhelm the Lumineth before they could penetrate too deep.

They fell with arrows in their eyes, their throats, the gaps between plates.

Like a bladed corona, Celastir's long sword licked out around Elarin, sweeping aside nadirite blades to strike deep into ossified hearts. More than once, Elarin felt the heavy sword whip by, close enough to stir robes, but never did it bite. Celastir fought not like a warrior, but as an artist, each glittering stroke painting a final death across the roiling canvas of battle.

More Morteks swarmed from beyond the gate. Dark armoured forms closed around the Lumineth, cutting off escape.

Just as Elarin had intended.

The Sethai Alaithi formation was made for swift charges. Like an avalanche, it cast the mountain's fury into the heart of the enemy, only to disperse like wind, breaking opposing ranks and cutting the foe apart from within. The Lumineth pressed forwards, the prow of a sleek warship cutting through waves.

But this sea had no end.

They burst through the mass of Ossiarchs swarming the gate only to find another phalanx awaiting beyond, spears levelled. Ten, twenty deep, the callous detachment of the Bonereapers' slow advance was belied by a thousand grinning skulls – the army Elarin's vision had foretold.

Elarin was about to order her warriors back, when the Idoneth arrived.

Namarti streamed from the gate, their high, keening war cries like the shrieks of unquiet shades. The heavy blades of the Thralls might be meant for defending their enclaves from the depredations of great sea predators, but they were equally effective at hammering aside shields and carving through plated joints.

At their fore came Arach, a sinuous blade in each hand. Amidst the eyeless Thralls, Voltach moved like the conductor of some vast and watery

orchestra, each sweep of his arm conjuring waves of spectral energy. They surged around the Namarti, lending an otherworldly grace to their flowing movements.

Elarin watched as Arach leapt the slash of an Ossiarch spear, seeming almost weightless in the ghostly swirl of the ethertide. His vault took him over the foremost ranks, to land behind in a welter of flashing blades.

Ossiarchs swarmed about Arach like ants from a kicked hive. For a moment, the Thrallmaster almost disappeared beneath the press of armoured forms.

From the battlements above, Reaver whisperbows unleashed a volley. Packed close as they were, the Ossiarchs could neither dodge nor raise their heavy shields. Dark arrows slashed through hollow skulls and bony joints, swift as rakerdarts.

Arach rose like a cliff at low tide, blades almost invisible as he dispatched the wounded Morteks. As if aware of Elarin's gaze, he turned to grin at her, then raised one sword in a flippant salute before diving back into the fray. Namarti poured into the breach, flowing among the Ossiarch phalanxes like water through cracked stone. Elarin picked out Echaros among the Thralls, tall and straight-backed as he directed the Namarti with wide sweeps of his razor-tipped fingers.

Bonereaper formations turned to meet the new, greater threat. As if guided by some cruel and bloody hand, the strange tides of battle flowed away from Elarin, leaving her small force in a brief eddy.

With a creaking groan, the Ossiarchs' great catapults unleashed another rain of burning skulls. It arced overhead to fall atop Marrowscar's high battlements, a score of Namarti Reavers writhing in necrotic flame.

Elarin turned to the others. 'We must destroy those vile things before they bring the fortress down upon the defenders.'

'Not an unwelcome outcome.' Hatred coiled in Kyris' every word.

'If the Idoneth fall, so do we.' It was Celastir who replied, ever the pragmatist.

Kyris' grimace held the disgust of a woman forced to stomach spoiled meat. Fortunately, the Sentinel's anger was not proof against logic, and she gave a grudging nod.

'We cannot take them alone.' Celastir motioned towards the nearest catapult, its spider-like legs warded by a line of Mortek Guard. The skeletal

ranks were patrolled by a pair of massive four-armed skeletons, their heavy blades long as war lances, plates of inscribed nadirite nested within their bony carapaces. Although Elarin could not see Naxia, she could feel the Soulreaper's presence, burning like a bright afterimage at the edge of her vision.

Anger filled Elarin's thoughts, the urge to charge so hot and pure she felt as if she could scatter the Ossiarchs like a falling star. But Celastir was right – that way held only death.

It took an act of singular will for Elarin to tear her gaze from the catapult. She could feel the eyes of her comrades upon her, cautious, judging. It took no sorcerous insight to read the reservation etched upon their battle-worn faces. With their foes engaged, they could win free, perhaps even battle their way back to the Lumineth encampment. Perhaps the Idoneth would win, perhaps Naxia did not possess the knowledge to effect Nagash's rebirth, perhaps Elarin could convince Prince Sennareth to return.

Perhaps.

'We must find Echaros.' Elarin swept her staff through the air, as if to dispel any lingering miasma of doubt. 'Only together can we fell these abominations.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



‘Bring them back.’ Echaros hissed the order through clenched teeth, his face mere inches from Scyllene’s. ‘Arach and Voltach need more Thralls to overwhelm those cursed catapults.’

‘The spiritual energy harvested from the Ouroboran Coast raids is almost spent.’ The Soulrender moved not at all, unyielding as Marrowscar’s high walls. ‘Unless you wish me to use more... *rarefied* souls.’

Echaros ran his tongue over his teeth, considering. Elarin had not broached the topic of souls harvested from the Lumineth. Far purer than human and duardin dross, he had kept them in reserve, to use in future experiments, or as leverage should the Loreseeker develop sudden qualms about their shared endeavours.

She seemed willing enough to aid him, and her small band of warriors had proven quite valuable in blunting the Ossiarch advance. Even so, Echaros doubted their tenuous arrangement would long survive the realisation Scyllene had sheared the souls from Elarin’s former comrades on his order.

Another crackling explosion set a flood of flaming skulls tumbling across the battlements. The necrotic salvos seemed almost possessed of some malign intellect, the way they veered to impact stretches with the highest number of Namarti. Far beyond the range of even the strongest

whisperbows, those damned catapults would decimate his remaining warriors before the Bonereapers even mounted another attack.

Echaros bared his teeth, desperate fury slithering in his gut. There was no good choice.

There were never any good choices.

‘Do it.’ He turned away, hands at his side, fingers hooking with the desire to rip and tear. With a snarl, he pushed down the familiar fury. Too many of Echaros’ kin had succumbed to such hopeless rage, hurling themselves at superior foes. It was tempting to give into the twist of anguish that coiled within every Idoneth soul, pure or broken. Formless memories lurked between the cracks in his thoughts, hazy recollections of the endless torments, the endless pleasures his soul had suffered before Teclis had worked his pompous will upon the hungry void.

Rage would not serve Echaros’ people. The Aighmar needed a leader who could walk the line between sea and storm, keen sight fixed upon not only the present, but the future too. Echaros did not know if he was such a man, but he was all that remained.

More Thralls surged from Marrowscar’s tomb-like halls. Echaros held them back with a wave and an arcane command. Arach and Voltach could hold the walls well enough. It would not do to simply trickle to their aid. If Echaros struck at the Ossiarchs’ heart, it would be not as a wave, but a hurricane of razored ice, cold and calculated.

Echaros could hear his people dying, the crack of bone, the thud of falling bodies, the forlorn cries of the wounded. As a Soulscryer, he was privy to each individual death, the spread of darkness as souls winked out, forever lost. Nothing he could do now would save the fallen. He could only ensure their sacrifice was not in vain.

Jaw tight, every muscle straining, he held firm. The Aighmar chorrileum had burned, just like Echaros’ poor facsimile. It was not as if he had ever trusted Kynlac’s whispered promises, and yet, it had been difficult not to see the possibilities.

If anything, that was the cruellest cut – neither death nor destruction, but his malignant inability to douse the last sparks of hope that guttered in his breast.

Just when it seemed his bones might break from the strain of holding still, Scyllene came stalking up with a small army of rekindled Namarti in tow.

‘Fine souls indeed.’ She favoured him with a rare smile. ‘I was able to raise twice the number we expected. If your pet Loreseeker fails to perform, we should take care to preserve every ounce of her spirit.’

Echaros ignored the Soulrender’s attempt at humour. Some folk simply lacked the foresight to peer beyond the immediate.

He led them from the gate in a keening swarm. As hoped, the Ossiarchs had busied themselves trying to pin down Arach’s raiders, but with Voltach’s etheric tides, they slipped around the edges of the assault, harrying the flanks like a school of ravenous snapjaw eels. Not enough to turn back the Bonereapers, but sufficient to distract them.

Souls glittered like coins tossed into a murky fountain – the fading glow of Namarti; the strange admixture of spirit that comprised the Morteks’ piecemeal souls; the bright gleam of Elarin’s Lumineth almost eye-watering by comparison. There, within the blazing inferno of the Ossiarchs’ crawling catapult, Echaros picked out the swirl of captured spirits that could only be the soul reservoir.

He had heard both Kynlac and Elarin describe the Ossiarch relic, but to actually *see* the artefact sent prickles along Echaros’ arms. Even at this distance, he could feel the thing’s power, not scores of souls, but hundreds, perhaps even thousands. Enough to replace those he had lost taking Marrowscar, enough to rekindle the necromantic nexus at its heart, perhaps even enough to realise his ambitions.

The urge to lead his Namarti forwards was almost overpowering, but the line of heavily armoured Morteks and their giant skeletal minders gave Echaros pause. More, the reservoir was likely to be held by the Soulreaper herself, and Elarin had painted this Naxia as a truly formidable foe. They would win nothing with a head-on charge – far better to move obliquely, to hit the Ossiarchs from an unexpected quarter.

Such was the Idoneth way, after all.

Echaros cast about for Voltach, and found the Tidecaster amidst a knot of Thralls, focused on guiding the pitch and pull of the ethereal breakers that battered the Ossiarch ranks.

A hiss from Scyllene caught Echaros’ attention. He followed the Soulrender’s scowling gaze to see Elarin and her comrades on the approach, their wedge formation carving through the disordered Ossiarch ranks.

‘Naxia is near the catapult,’ Elarin called as they came within shouting

distance.

‘I know,’ Echaros replied, ignoring the disdainful glares of the Lumineth at Elarin’s back. Kyris, the slight, dark-cloaked woman with the triple-stringed bow looked as if she wished to put an arrow in Echaros’ eye. Not to mention Elarin’s broad-shouldered bodyguard, Celastir. She regarded the Idoneth with a wariness usually reserved for venomous insects. Echaros spared them not a moment’s concern. They might despise him and his kind, but even the most arrogant Lumineth would not be so foolish as to strike in the midst of such a desperate conflict. He could weather their hate so long as they did as they were told.

‘We can strike for the catapult,’ Elarin continued. ‘Together, we may be able to break through the—’

Echaros silenced her with a chop of his hand. ‘There is a better way.’

He turned away before she could respond, gesturing for Elarin and the others to follow as he hurried towards Voltach. The Lumineth fell in, careful to keep their distance from the Namarti, who did the same. It was probably too much to expect the two forces to work together, but such cooperation would be unnecessary if Echaros’ plan worked.

He waded into the spectral gyre swirling about the Tidecaster, Scyllene and the Namarti close behind.

‘Soulscrier, so glad you deigned to join our humble endeavour.’ Voltach spread his arms as if ushering Echaros into a feast hall.

‘The catapult.’ Echaros had no patience for the Tidecaster’s mockery. ‘Send us there.’

Voltach arched one thin eyebrow. ‘*All* of you?’

Arach glanced back to where the Lumineth hesitated at the edge of the ghostly maelstrom.

‘Yes.’

‘Excellent.’ Voltach’s laugh was the ring of a blade being drawn from its scabbard. He sketched a low bow, steeped in insincerity. ‘But illuminate the path, wise one.’

Teeth bared, Echaros gestured the Lumineth forwards. ‘You are in no danger from the ethertide.’

After a moment of frowning scrutiny, Elarin nodded. Her bodyguard followed immediately, the others only deigning to set foot upon the ghostly waves once the Loreseeker was fully immersed.

Echaros turned his attention to the shifting tides, seeking to discern a path amidst the shadowed welter of combat. The Ossiarchs had warded their catapult well, Naxia's enchantments like a breakwater raised against the crashing whitecaps of Voltach's sorcery. But although the Bonereapers might be their equal in soul magic, they did not know the sea as the Idoneth did.

The Soulrender's enchantments were sealed tight as a tomb, great cyclopean wards stacked one upon the other; but even such ancient power was not proof against Echaros' sight. No matter how thick the wall, no matter how secure the stone, water always found a way through. Concentrating, he slipped around the edges of the Ossiarch wards, arcane perceptions flowing through the gaps between spells. It took only the tiniest crack, inevitable in such a hastily erected fortification. Like a hunting fangmora eel, Echaros slipped through.

'There.' A wave of his hand illuminated the path.

'As you wish, Soulscrier.' This time, there was no mockery in Voltach's tone.

Echaros glanced back at the Lumineth. 'Brace yourselves.'

The ghostly waves closed about their heads. As always, there was a moment of disorientation, a feeling of movement coming not from without but within, as if Echaros' soul had shifted place, his body hurrying to catch up.

The battle became a distant, shadowy thing, struggling shapes seen through the surface of a dark reflecting pool. Echaros held out a hand to steady Elarin, the Loreseeker's grateful nod stirring an unfamiliar warmth in him. After despising the Lumineth for so long, it was unsettling to feel anything approaching kinship with Teclis' haughty progeny.

He led them through the murk, head high, footsteps unerring even amidst the churning maelstrom. There was a slight sense of wrongness as they slipped through the Ossiarch wards, a feeling of crushing weight in the pit of Echaros' stomach, as if he had breached the depths of some vast and terrible mausoleum.

Then they were behind the Ossiarch lines.

Used to such disorientation, the Namarti were quick to move. Thralls hit the ground at a sprint, jagged blades arcing down as they carved into the back of the unsuspecting line of Morteks, their charge heralded by a flight

of arrows from Reaver whisperbows. Echaros paid the conflict no mind. The Namarti were but another distraction, a means to clear the way to their true objective.

Scyllene followed the Thralls, talúnhook darting between their slashing blades, lurelight raised high to rip the souls from the fallen. The Ossiarch spirits were strange, misshapen things, cobbled together from bits of soulstuff. Hardly a fine harvest, but they would suffice.

It took a moment for the Lumineth to get their bearings. The line of Wardens barely had their shields up before the first of the giant skeletal warriors descended upon them. Surprisingly quick for its size, the four-armed creature rained blows down upon the disoriented warriors, knocking several to the ground.

They were quick to re-form ranks, the move almost reflexive as the Sentinels behind unleashed a volley, arrows clattering from the nadirite plates embedded in the abomination's carapace of woven bone. Although none of the glittering shafts bit deep, they were enough to force the thing back a step. Celastir was quick to step into the gap, her wide-bladed sword sweeping down to cut a chunk of bone from the titan's leg. It tried to slip away, but the Bladelord was relentless. Although she wielded but one blade to the skeletal giant's four, she was able to deflect its arcing blows long enough for the downed Lumineth to find their feet.

The Loreseeker straightened, moving to assist her beleaguered comrades, but Echaros held her back, grip firm but careful, lest his talons pierce flesh.

'We have not the numbers to fight them all.' He twitched his head towards the catapult, the reservoir's soul-light glimmering like a beacon from within the massive, skittering abomination.

Elarin cast a glance back at the others, her expression pained.

'Let your comrades hold the line. That is what they are for.' It was a struggle for Echaros to keep the irritation from his voice. Was the Loreseeker truly blind to the prize that awaited them?

Of course she was. What use did the Lumineth have for souls?

'Naxia. The one who destroyed your home.' Echaros shifted tack, nodding at the catapult. 'Remember, she is there.'

The change in the Loreseeker was almost instantaneous, anger hardening her expression into something cold and fierce.

Much better.

A pair of blade-armed Morteks leapt from the catapult to bar their approach. Normally, Echaros would not have concerned himself with such dross; the shoal of scryfish surrounding him would have torn them to flinders before they got within ten paces. But his scryfish were gone, lost in the conflagration of warpfire that had consumed Aighmar.

Lips drawn back from his teeth in a disgusted snarl, he ducked the swipe of the first Mortek, reaching up to drag his claws down the Bonereaper's arm. Cultured bone was no match for razored alloplex fangs, the force behind the blow enough to sever the skeletal arm. Echaros followed with a quick gouging jab with his other hand, aiming not for the Ossiarch, but the web of necromantic energy that gave it unnatural life. It was like sweeping his hand through mist, the claws tearing up great swirling eddies of soulstuff.

Wasteful, but necessary.

The Mortek dropped like a severed banner, bones rattling to hard stone.

Echaros glanced over to see Elarin had finished the other with a series of sweeping cuts. Together, they made for the catapult.

Unlike mundane artillery, the thing was far from defenceless. Impossibly fast, it lashed out with a great spider-like leg. The sharp tip would have pinioned Echaros had not Elarin shouted a protective ward, the gleaming rune sparking like hammered steel as it buckled under the onslaught.

The catapult turned like an angry crab, forelimbs spread as it sought to trample the two of them. Echaros hopped from the path of a descending limb, then reached out to hook his claws into the bone. The catapult raised the leg, shaking it to dislodge Echaros, but his claws were sharp and his grip was firm. Like a stubborn insect, he climbed the leg, leaping to the catapult's wide central platform before it could bring any of its other limbs to bear. His thought was to destroy the creature's workings, let it fall so that Elarin might aid him in confronting Naxia, but Echaros was surprised to find the Loreseeker already rising, a spiral of golden energy lifting her from the earth to alight gracefully atop the high stand.

Her arrival proved fortuitous, as Naxia rose from behind the catapult's skeletal workings. Necromantic energy crackled and flared around the ancient Soulreaper, her every move grinding pale amethyst sparks into the air. There was no surprise in her bearing, nor did the long, curved scythe remain still for a moment. It swept out in a wide arc, too low to duck, too

high to leap. Echaros was forced to the edge of the platform.

Implacable as age, Naxia followed the blow with a blast of necrotic energy. With the soul reservoir in her possession, there was no ward Echaros could summon that would be proof against her power. Instead of seeking to deflect the spiritual assault, he moved with it, bleeding force from the blast even as he let it spin him around.

He did not strike back. Rather, Echaros focused on the Soulreaper's necromantic animus, the subtle shifts of soul energy that presaged each of her assaults. With a grin that was almost feral in its intensity, Echaros swayed away from another swipe of her hooked scythe, then bent almost double to avoid the following blast. If Naxia felt any fury at his evasions, it did not show on her skeletal features.

No matter. Echaros did not require the Soulreaper's fury, only her attention.

Elarin's crystalline blade carved one of the coral-like twists from the wide crest of Naxia's helm. The Soulreaper did not lose a step. Pivoting like an acrobat, she brought her scythe around in a tight arc that would have laid open Elarin's midsection had not the Loreseeker managed to interpose her staff at the last moment.

Harsh light flared as nadirite met sunmetal. Shielding his eyes with one hand, Echaros darted in to drag his claws across the Soulreaper's exposed back.

His talons cut deep furrows into her armour. Although they were not long enough to pierce the heavy plate, the wounds they inflicted were not only physical. Pale mist bled from the slashes, spiritstuff dispersing like breath in midwinter.

The Soulreaper stumbled.

Elarin was quick to exploit the weakness, staff hammering down on Naxia's scythe, her blade sweeping in behind to strike amethyst sparks from the Soulreaper's heavy vambraces.

Echaros dropped to one knee to aim a slash at Naxia's leg. Again, his talons cut misty tracks across the formless shadow of her soul.

She kicked out, armoured foot catching Echaros in the chin. Bright fires curled at the edges of his vision as he sprawled back across the rib-like spars of the platform. Disorientated, he managed to fling out a hand to catch himself, claws gouging furrows in the bone.

In his clearing vision, he saw Naxia turn on Elarin. The Loreseeker's wards crumpled like burning leaves before the sheer power of the arcane assault. Bolts of necrotic force tore great gaping holes in the protective mandala, even as the terrible scythe rose and fell, fast as a brine scorpion's sting.

At Naxia's side, the soul reservoir flared. Its power washed over her. Bone knitted, nadirite flowed like water to smooth over the gashes in the heavy plate.

Realisation flowed over Echaros in a bitter tide. He and Elarin might wound the Soulreaper, but they could not destroy her, not while she could draw upon such overwhelming spiritual force.

Head swimming, he pushed to his feet, the undulating movements of the living catapult causing the ground to buck and shudder beneath him. He could not focus on the combat, Naxia and Elarin's strikes blurring across his muddled vision. But Echaros did not need eyes to see that which he sought.

It burned like a star, a sun, a dying god bright with the light of a thousand entombed souls.

Echaros hurled himself at the pale conflagration, arms spread, clawed hands grasping.

The haft of Naxia's scythe drove the wind from Echaros, the pain of bruised ribs sharp and sudden. Breath whistling through clenched teeth, he scrabbled at the gleaming conflagration, seeking to wrest it from the Soulreaper's side.

A gauntleted fist closed about his throat. Naxia lifted him from the ground as easily as if he had been hollowed out. Dimly, Echaros was aware of Elarin. She struck at the Soulreaper, each blow of her prismatic sword glittering in his vision like a burning brand.

Echaros felt Naxia's grip falter, and dragged in a racking breath. His instinct was to claw at her arm, talons tearing at bone and soul, but even dangling above the precipice of unconsciousness, some small part of Echaros' mind remained fixed on the goal.

His limbs felt loose and wooden, his tongue seeming to fill the entirety of his mouth. Still, he mustered the strength for one final clutching grasp. He felt his talons sink into bone and sinew, severing the ropey tendons that bound the soul reservoir to Naxia's armour.

It was as if he had ripped the heart from her. Echaros tumbled to the

ground, clutching the soul reservoir to his chest like a newborn. He saw Naxia stumble back as wounds reopened. Robbed of the flood of spiritual energy, her soul-light guttered.

Elarin's blade cut deep into the Soulreaper's pauldron.

This time, the nadirite did not regenerate.

Emboldened by the small victory, Elarin rained blows upon the Ossiarch. Although a brutal weapon on the offensive, the Soulreaper's scythe was less effective in fending off the rapid strikes of sword and staff. War spells tore burnt glittering holes in the air, runes flashing from Elarin's lips as her blade licked out again and again like a tongue of crystal flame.

And still, the Soulreaper did not fall.

Naxia weathered the assault like an ancient dolmen battered by storm and wind, still upright long after its makers' bones had become dust.

Almost imperceptibly, Elarin's strikes began to slow, her body seeming to sag as her exertions took their toll.

Even bereft of the soul reservoir, Naxia was a terrible foe. Now, the Soulreaper began to return slashes of her own, unnatural vigour proof against such tawdry concerns as exhaustion.

Desperation came sharp as the pain in Echaros' ribs. Numbly, he turned the soul reservoir over in his hands, seeking the numinous bonds that held back the flood of spiritual energy.

That old spider Kynlac had not parted with many secrets, but Echaros had learned enough to draw upon the power held within the relic. He braced himself for a flood of soulstuff, and was still almost overwhelmed at the burst of pure necromantic force.

Echaros did not shape the coruscating beam of energy so much as thrust it in Naxia's direction. It struck the Soulreaper between the shoulders, lines of amethyst force crackling across the nadirite plates of her armour.

The Soulreaper dropped to one knee.

Echaros poured more power into the attack. It took everything he had just to keep from being destroyed himself. The soul reservoir had healed Naxia before, but he hoped this was too much. The Soulreaper's spirit was like a torch held before a maelstrom. She struggled against the torrent, her ancient will battered, but unbroken.

Somehow, Naxia began to rise.

Elarin reared up like a vengeful revenant. Seeing her lurch towards the

Soulreaper, Echaros bit back his killing chant, the flood of death energy slowing to a trickle. Naxia turned towards him, seemingly unaware of Elarin's unsteady advance.

The Loreseeker had discarded her staff, sword clutched in two hands as she reversed the blade, then stabbed down. With all the Loreseeker's weight behind it, the crystalline blade sunk deep into Naxia's chest, severing bone and spirit.

Like a suddenly shuttered window, the baleful glow fled the Soulreaper's eyes.

Panting, Elarin drew her sword out, and Naxia slumped to the ossified ribs of the platform, limbs splayed as if she had fallen from a great height.

Blade held high, Elarin gazed down at Echaros. For a moment, he thought she would strike. He could almost see the war within her troubled eyes. Echaros' death would spell doom for the Aighmar survivors and win her the soul reservoir, all but ensuring Lumineth dominance over the Ouroboran Coast.

He could not even fault the Loreseeker. It was what Echaros would have done.

He closed his eyes, wondering what it would feel like when Slaanesh claimed his soul.

A hand closed about his wrist, dragging him to his feet. For a moment, they were face to face, her breath hot on his cheek. Echaros met Elarin's dark-eyed gaze, a mix of sentiment bubbling up within him – relief that she had not cut him down; even gratitude, certainly. But there was something else, an unfamiliar fondness that swam beneath the surface of his mind, sending ripples through his every thought.

Elarin's gaze flicked to their clasped hands, as if suddenly aware of their closeness.

‘Are you injured?’ Her voice was soft.

‘No.’ Echaros opened his mouth, unsure of what else to say. Heart hammering in his ears, throat dry as a beach at low tide, he was about to speak when the crawling catapult lurched as if to throw them from its back. They broke apart to clasp the lines of woven sinew that bound the catapult together.

And the moment bled away, lost like a crashing wave.

‘We must go.’ Elarin bent to retrieve her staff. ‘But first...’

Shifting, she hacked her blade into the catapult's throwing arm, again and again, each strike cleaving ossified flecks from the terrible machinery. The catapult shuddered beneath them. Its legs struck a ragged cadence, robbed of their hideous coordination. Like a lightning-struck tree, the heavy length of bone slowly toppled from its terrible perch to crash amidst the battling Morteks below.

Together, Echaros and Elarin leapt from the catapult, stumbling away before it could crush them beneath its falling weight.

The destruction of their leader seemed to have taken the fight from the surviving Ossiarchs. Spears lowered, shields locked, they were withdrawing, packs of Namarti loping in their wake, picking off any who strayed from formation.

Of those who had followed Echaros into the Ossiarchs' strength, only a scattering of Namarti and half a dozen Lumineth had survived. Echaros was happy to see Scyllene among their number, less so to see Celastir and Kyris.

'That was foolish to charge in alone.' The Bladelord's scowl was so deep it seemed etched into her blood-streaked face.

'I was not alone.' Elarin glanced to Echaros, who gave a tired nod.

'Your mistress held her own well enough.'

'Naxia could have slain you both.' Celastir shook her head.

Kyris gave a rasping grunt. 'Only one of those deaths would I mourn.'

'Be that as it may.' Echaros pushed from Elarin to stand on unsteady legs. 'We have beaten the Ossiarchs.'

'We have driven them back.' Scyllene stepped up, studying Echaros' wounds with a practised eye. 'But they are not beaten.'

Echaros drew in a frustrated breath, only to wince at a stab of agony from his ribs.

Scyllene was quick to begin mending the wound, the pain receding to a dull throb before fading entirely.

'You fought well, Lumineth.' Echaros turned to the survivors, a smile uncomfortable on his lips. He could afford to be gracious in victory, especially when he held the key to preserving his people.

'The soul reservoir.' Elarin nodded at the relic in Echaros' hands. 'A small thing to carry such weight.'

'What will you do with it, Idoneth?' Celastir's tone was guarded. Echaros could not but note the Bladelord had not lowered her weapon.

‘Ask your mistress,’ Echaros replied, expecting Elarin to curb her body-guard’s ire, but the Loreseeker only stared, mouth working, her expression one of wounded surprise.

With a start, Echaros realised she was not looking at the soul reservoir, but Scyllene’s lurelight.

‘What is it, Loreseeker?’ Kyris stepped to her side.

‘The souls in there.’ She pointed at the brilliant lantern, shock bleeding into narrow-eyed wrath. ‘They are Lumineth.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Elarin could not find the words, her tongue heavy with recrimination. She had known, she had *always* known; and yet it had been easy to overlook.

The Idoneth fed on mortal souls, humans, duardin, orruks, even the piecemeal souls of Ossiarchs. They had ambushed the Lumineth warhost, would have slaughtered them if not for Lord Regent Chariel's sacrifice. How many dead had been left behind? How many bright souls for the harvest? And yet, Elarin had not believed, had not *wanted* to believe, the Idoneth capable of such an atrocity.

'All this time...' She shook her head, hands tight on her weapons. 'I aided you – I *saved* your life – only for you to do *this*.' She flicked her blade at the glimmering lantern, bright as starlight in the sallow Shyishan gloom. Even a few days ago, Elarin would not have been able to distinguish the souls' provenance – perhaps that was what Echaros had counted on. But she had spent enough time observing Idoneth soul sorcery to recognise her people.

They were nothing like the wispy mist of human souls, nor did they possess the crafted aura of Bonereaper animus. The Lumineth spirits glimmered like aetherquartz, as if bits of the Perimeter Inimical had been torn from the firmament of Hysh.

Eyes stinging, throat dry as tanned leather, she regarded the stolen souls. Warriors, comrades... Had she known them? Had she called any friend? Could Chariel's essence be twined among those strands of lambent brilliance?

Even in her cold rage, Elarin could not ignore her part in this. She had let curiosity blind her. Fool that she was, Elarin had convinced herself the Idoneth were better than they were, that she could help them. But although they looked like aelves, in the end they were no better than Ossiarchs, their society based upon doom, and suffering, and death.

'Why?' she asked, her voice barely a whisper. The hurt of Echaros' betrayal was eclipsed by the understanding that she herself had allowed it.

'I have never lied to you.' To his dubious credit, the Soulscryer did not attempt to deny the obvious. He straightened, severe features taking on an almost sorrowful cast. 'My goal has always been the salvation of my people. I would have preferred another way, but it was a matter of survival. I had no choice.'

'No.' Elarin slashed Glimmerdark as if to cut Echaros' flimsy justification from the air. She pointed the blade at him. 'You *chose* this. *Chose* to steal my people's souls. *Chose* to use them.'

'You would have me sacrifice Idoneth lives?' Anger threaded Echaros' words, as if *he* were somehow the victim. 'You ask me to choose between existence or extinction? How nice it must be to be brought into a world of light, secure in your own coddled superiority. Such high-minded privileges were not afforded to my people.' Echaros took a step towards Elarin but his hands remained at his side, fingers hooked as if to savage the space between them.

'Have you ever held a Namarti newborn?' His eyes shone fierce and sharp. 'Heard its weak cries, *knowing* it will die if you do not take another's soul? Have you seen the spirits of your ancestors cast screaming into the ether?'

He took another step, almost face to face with her. Celastir made as if to step between them, but Elarin held up an arm. The Soulscryer was terrifying in his rage, but Elarin felt no fear. It was as if she were detached from the fury, a silent observer watching some child's shadow play.

'Can you recall the blissful tortures of Slaanesh?' he asked, voice low and furious. 'Are your dreams ravaged by half-remembered cruelties? Is your every waking moment measured against the inescapable knowledge that the

dark god remembers you, that it still hungers for you? That, one day, it will have you once again?’

The moment stretched between them, tight as a wind-caught banner.

‘I used Lumineth souls to save my people,’ he continued. ‘I regret the necessity, but I will *always* choose my people. Do not pretend you would choose a stranger over a comrade.’

‘I *did*.’ Elarin’s words were barely a whisper, but they struck Echaros like a thrown stone. He took a step back, anger dissolving into confusion.

‘Look around you.’ Elarin waved her blade at the tangled corpses spread across the battlefield. ‘A score of *my* people lie dead. They did not fight for glory, for souls, for survival. They fought to help *you*.’ She tapped the tip of her blade on the front of his breastplate.

Echaros made a low, aggrieved rattle. Elarin tensed, ready to respond in kind if the Soulscryer lashed out. But instead of striking her, he paused, expression unreadable, almost as if her words had actually pierced his cloak of self-pity.

‘Mistress.’ Celastir’s warning whisper pulled Elarin from her scrutiny of the Soulscryer. Other Namarti had joined the survivors of the assault on the Ossiarch centre, drifting over in their dozens, their scores, to form a growing ring around Elarin’s few surviving comrades.

‘So your pet Loreseeker has finally grown a spine.’ Arach slipped through the massed Namarti, sinuous as a hunting eel. ‘Now will you admit this was a mistake?’

Echaros turned, seeming to gather himself.

‘The Loreseeker has aided me in unravelling Marrowscar’s mysteries,’ the Soulscryer replied calmly. ‘She and her troops fought alongside us.’

Elarin did not fail to note he had left out that she had also destroyed Naxia and saved his life.

‘And will they continue to do so?’ Voltach spoke from among the ranked Namarti, careful not to expose himself.

Echaros turned his gaze to Elarin. ‘Will you?’

‘Not while you hold our people’s souls hostage,’ Elarin replied.

The Tidecaster chuckled, still not showing himself. ‘Then it seems we are at an impasse.’

‘The Lumineth are a threat.’ Arach almost snarled the words. ‘Let me take them.’

Celastir stepped in front of Elarin, the sweeping tip of her blade pointed at the Thrallmaster.

‘I am curious.’ The Bladelord’s grin did not reach her eyes. ‘Your sorceries can raise the dead. But can they reattach heads?’

Arach’s laughter was the cry of ravens tussling over a fresh kill. ‘Oh, I *am* going to enjoy this.’

He stepped forwards, a pair of hooked blades seeming to leap into his hands. Behind, the gathered ranks of Namarti raised blades and bows. For all their skill, Elarin was under no illusions concerning her chance of survival. The Idoneth outnumbered them hundreds to one. It seemed a sad, worthless death, but Elarin could see no way free.

‘Arach, no.’ Echaros raised a warning hand, his scowl jagged as a sea cliff. ‘I order you to—’

‘You order *nothing!*’ The Thrallmaster turned on him. ‘Your promises, your experiments, your lies. What have they got us?’ He grinned his predator’s grin, cold and mirthless. ‘Little more than a lingering death. And now you would side with these arrogant fools against your own people?’

He shook his head. ‘Stand aside, Soulscrier. Or you die with your pets.’

‘Come, Drowned Prince.’ Echaros spread his arms, his own smile no less terrible. ‘And let us see who joins our fallen kin.’

He stepped back to join Elarin. Although she glanced his way, the Soulscrier’s attention remained fixed on Arach, either unable or unwilling to meet Elarin’s gaze.

‘Alaithi!’ Kyris called. The few surviving Lumineth slipped into mountain formation. Immovable, defensive, the message was clear enough. Kyris expected them to die.

Elarin straightened, head high as the Thralls closed in around them. She would not beg. If the Idoneth wished to claim her soul, they would have to prise it from her cooling corpse.

‘*Stop.*’ It was not Echaros who spoke, but Scyllene. Talúnhook waving like a banner pole, the Soulrender inserted herself between the advancing Namarti and Elarin’s ragged band. She held her lurelight high, the shimmer of Lumineth souls casting all in swirling illumination.

Arach paused, head cocked, an uncharacteristic expression of bemusement on his cruel face.

‘Don’t tell me you, too, have fallen for Lumineth lies.’ Arach looked at

Echaros. ‘One fool is bad enough.’

‘I care nothing for them.’ Scyllene glanced back at Elarin and the others, lip curling. ‘I simply do not want to watch more of our people die needlessly.’

‘Your concern is touching,’ Arach replied, grinning at Celastir. ‘But I think I shall be all right.’

‘You are like hungry harrowcrabs, caught in a snare because you cannot release the bait.’ Scyllene threw up her hands. ‘Look around.’ She gestured at the tangle of fallen Ossiarchs. ‘Why squabble over Lumineth spirits when there are souls for the taking? Every moment we delay, more slip away.’

‘Then see to it, Soulrender.’ Arach raised his blades. ‘And let us deal with this.’

‘Say the word, Loreseeker,’ Kyris whispered, arcbow drawn, ‘and I shall silence that one’s flapping tongue.’

Elarin hesitated. Scyllene had shown her nothing but disdain, and yet the Soulrender’s words held more than simple expediency. She seemed to care for the Namarti, but Elarin could not believe the Soulrender so soft-hearted she would balk at a few losses, especially if it removed the Lumineth threat.

Elarin studied Scyllene. The Soulrender had all the charm of a prism stalker, her sharp-edged armour concealing no kind intentions. Unless...

Scyllene had said she did not wish to watch more of her people die needlessly. Could she have meant the Lumineth as well?

‘Enough of this!’ Arach skipped forwards, blades licking out. Celastir moved to meet him, but before the two could cross swords, Scyllene hurled her lurelight to the stone. It exploded in a burst of radiance, arcs of spiritual energy twisting through the gloom to spiral up into Shyish’s sullen sky. A moment, and they were gone, little more than pulsing afterimages fading from Elarin’s vision.

‘There.’ The Soulrender spoke to the stunned crowd. ‘The Lumineth souls are free. There is no need for more violence.’

‘Old fool.’ Arach spat the words at her. ‘You would toss away gains so easily.’

‘She wastes *nothing*.’ Echaros stepped to her side, facing down the pack of Namarti. ‘Stand down, Thrallmaster.’

‘You do not command me.’ Arach pointed a blade at him. ‘You are no

Akhelian king.’

Echaros did not retreat. ‘Neither are you.’

For a moment Elarin thought Arach would gut the Soulscryer, then Voltach’s laughter rang from amidst the crowd of Namarti, dark and deep as a midnight sea.

‘He has you there, prince!’

‘Voltach! Where are you, coward?’ The Thrallmaster whirled. ‘Show yourself!’

‘This has gone far enough.’ Echaros raised a clawed hand, addressing not Arach, but the Namarti behind. ‘Return to Marrowscar. See to your duties.’

‘Stay where you are!’ Arach paced before the throng, his fury seeming almost to blister the air. ‘The first to flee will find my blade in their back!’

The Namarti hesitated. Elarin was acutely aware of just how many Thralls there were. They crowded the trampled battlefield in their hundreds, still more before the fortress gate and upon the battered battlements. Their sightless gaze seemed to press in around her with almost physical weight. If the Namarti decided to act, there was nothing anyone could do to stop them.

The Thralls seemed to waver, swaying like sea kelp in the tide. Neither the Soulscryer nor Thrallmaster seemed to notice, their attention fixed firmly upon the other, a battle of wills neither cared to lose.

At Echaros’ side, Scyllene nodded towards Marrowscar. It was a small thing, barely a twitch, and yet its effect on the Namarti was instantaneous. Almost as one, the Thralls turned back towards the fortress, small groups breaking off to gather the wounded.

Absent his shield of Thralls, Voltach was suddenly exposed. If this bothered the Tidecaster, he gave no sign beyond an amused shake of the head.

‘If you two are quite done posturing, I have work to do.’ With an irritated grunt, Scyllene followed the Namarti.

‘Allow me to accompany you, honoured Soulrender.’ With a bow, Voltach fell in beside, and the two Isharann sorcerers walked away as if there were not half a dozen arrows aimed at their backs.

‘This is not over.’ Arach held his blade before Echaros’ face.

The Soulscryer did not flinch. ‘I sincerely hope not.’

With a disgusted snarl, Arach spun on his heel and stalked away, stopping occasionally to vent his rage upon one of the fallen Ossiarchs. Only when

the Thrallmaster had gone some distance did Celastir lower her blade. Although her gaze remained wary, there was a thoughtful cast to her expression.

‘She released them.’ The Bladelord’s words were soft, her expression uncertain.

Elarin could understand the impulse. Even her short time amongst the Idoneth had given rise to complicated feelings. They were cold, aloof, even cruel, their society built upon the death of others. And yet, she could not deny the glimmer of nobility: thin, but bright as sunlight refracted through dark waters.

Echaros turned back to them, an almost sorrowful twist to his thin lips.

‘You have done us a service, and I have repaid it... poorly.’ He spoke slowly, as if tasting each word and finding it bitter. ‘Naxia has been destroyed and her legions turned back, but in Shyish the dead seldom remain quiet.’

‘An understatement.’ Kyris gave an amused sniff. ‘Any other banalities you care to pass on, Idoneth?’

Elarin raised a hand to quiet the Sentinel. ‘How can we trust you?’

‘It was an act of desperation. If there had been another way...’ Echaros folded his arms, hands slipping into the sleeves of his robes as he regarded her. After a long moment, he grunted, as if in affirmation to some silent question. ‘I release you, Loreseeker. You and your companions may return to your people, if that is your wish.’

Unable to help herself, Elarin glanced back down the coast. Although she could not see the Lumineth war camp, she could well guess what sort of welcome awaited her.

‘And if we do not wish to depart?’

Celastir started. ‘Loreseeker, I do not—’

Elarin silenced her with a hiss that brooked no more discussion.

Echaros gave a thoughtful frown. ‘You would return with me to Marrowscar. Not as prisoners, but my guests.’

‘What of our weapons?’ Elarin asked.

‘You may keep your arms so long as you give me your oath not to use them on my people.’

‘And Arach?’ Elarin asked. ‘How will you deal with him?’

‘He is nothing without the Isharann. A brigand without a home, a reaver

without a ship.’

‘Do not believe this sump eel, Loreseeker,’ Kyris whispered below her breath. ‘He mutters platitudes while planning our doom. Do not forget what they did to Ildirin, to Chariel.’

Elarin studied the Soulscryer. Had Echaros appeared contrite, even remorseful, she would not have trusted his words. Instead, he had the pinch-faced look of a man forced to part with treasured heirlooms, eyes narrowed, jaw tight, as if every concession were a dagger drawn across his flesh.

Kyris was right, Elarin could not trust the Soulscryer. She had no doubt he would sacrifice everyone and everything to achieve his ambitions. The question was, were the Idoneth’s goals worth dying for? More, what might Elarin achieve by aiding him?

When she had come to Marrowscar, the Deepkin had been reavers, remorseless harvesters of souls. Now, she understood the dire roots of their hunger for mortal essences, just as she understood Echaros’ desire – no, his *obsession* – with saving his people, no matter what dark paths he needed to tread.

Elarin knew something about obsession, enough to understand she could not simply turn her back upon Echaros and the others. If they were cruel and cold, it was only because need had made them that way. Elarin swallowed as memories of Skria rose through her churning thoughts. The Namarti clearly thought little of Elarin, and yet she had sacrificed her life to protect her.

If such glimmers of nobility were evident even among the most scarred of the Idoneth, what might they achieve when she helped free them from the shackles of their ancient curse?

Elarin glanced back to her comrades. They had followed her to Marrowscar, fought and died at her command. Such loyalty had value, but even it was eclipsed by the promise of what she and Echaros stood to achieve.

Elarin had slain Kynlac, destroyed Naxia; whatever sepulchral cruelty the Ossiarchs sought to unleash had been thwarted. It would be wise to depart, to return to Sennareth and hope her deeds here would be enough to expunge the prince’s ire. Perhaps if she apologised and acknowledged Sennareth’s right to command, he might even allow her to retain her position.

Allow.

The thought of returning to that arrangement filled her like a high summer day, hot and oppressive. She was not a soldier, and certainly not the lapdog of a self-important noble with pretensions of glory. She was a Loreseeker, sworn to discover what was hidden, to unearth secrets and mysterious lore, to push the bounds of knowledge, no matter the cost.

‘I will not compel any of you.’ She turned to regard her companions. ‘But I intend to remain with the Idoneth.’

With the look of a woman marched to the gallows tree, Celastir gave a rueful shake of her head, then moved to stand behind Elarin.

Kyris studied the both of them for a long moment, her expression unreadable.

‘My responsibility is for the lives of my soldiers.’ She waved her arcbow at Marrowscar. ‘Only death awaits us there.’

‘Death awaits us everywhere,’ Elarin responded softly.

Kyris shook her head, grey eyes downcast. ‘I am sorry, Loreseeker, but I can follow you no longer. Not if you work with *them*.’

‘Be well, then.’ Elarin stepped forwards to clasp her arm, leaning in close. ‘And give my regards to Prince Sennareth.’

The shadow of a grin flitted across Kyris’ thin lips. ‘I do believe I will.’

She nodded towards the surviving warriors, who, with one last lingering look at Marrowscar, turned to jog across the broken plain.

‘Do you think they will make it back?’ Elarin asked.

Celastir frowned, considering. ‘I would give them better odds than us.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Elarin leaned on the rail of sculpted bone, cool against her forearms. She had ascended one of Marrowscar's high, crenellated towers to think. No, that was not right.

She had come to reflect.

The nexus was prepared, the soul reservoir primed and ready, all was in place. And yet, try as she might, Elarin could not dispel the vague sense that something was terribly wrong. She understood the necromantic powers at play – inasmuch as such a thing were possible – but there was still the Hollow Tower, and Marrowscar's strange connection to Hysh.

More than once, Elarin had considered revealing her knowledge of Marrowscar's workings, the Hollow Tower that served as a dark and terrible mirror to one of the aetherquartz spires the Lumineth had erected in Hysh. But there never seemed to be a good time. She believed Echaros would not abuse the connection to her home, but Elarin did not trust the others, especially Voltach and Arach.

Marrowscar must have sapped the Realm of Light's arcane foundations, leaving the Lumineth open to the devastation of Nagash's Necroquake. She had no desire to place such power in the hands of the Idoneth. If there were an answer to the Idoneth's plight, it did not lie in Hysh, and it *certainly* did

not lie in Nagash's callous manipulation of realm cosmology. Even in her desire to find the truth, Elarin was not so foolish as to believe she could walk where the God of Death had trodden.

Echaros had called in Scyllene, even Voltach. The former had called them fools, the latter mad, but both had helped. They had no choice.

And so the ritual had been wrought. Scores of permutations, hundreds of variations nested within arcane frameworks so maddeningly complex they transcended mortal comprehension. Elarin had pushed the bounds of her runic lore, weaving Lumineth runes with necromantic incantations, the whole threaded by the fluid upswell of Idoneth magic and a flood of Ossiarch souls.

They had studied the aethereal framework, tested every formulation and postulate a dozen times. All seemed remarkably solid for something cobbled together from a muddle of unconnected sorceries. But there was no way to test it, no way to know for sure.

Not until they performed the ritual.

Echaros had been keen to begin immediately, but even such single-minded focus had to yield to exhaustion. To attempt such a massive undertaking, one needed to be prepared in mind, body and spirit. Rest and meditation were required at the very least.

So Elarin found herself gazing out to sea, as if the ocean might serve as balm for her troubled thoughts.

If anything, the Dwindlesea left her more uneasy. The sky was flat and grey, so close in shade to the water below Elarin could not tell where one ended and the other began. It was as if Shyish sought to remind her that even the sea was no proof against the ravages of eternity; that one day, aeons hence, it would dry up and blow away, the cliffs and undersea crevasses planed smooth by time, empty of even the memory of life.

But not of death. *Never* death.

No wind stirred the ocean, the steady pounding of waves eclipsed by the terrible scratch of bone on stone. Skeletal fingers scrabbled on uncaring cliffs. Jaws clacked. Spines bent and twisted in unending efforts to worm free of their craggy tombs. Elarin wondered if it was but the mindless skitter of insects, or if the dead retained any spark of understanding. If so, did they consider themselves prisoners? Or guests?

The thought made her smile, although not in mirth.

‘Have a care.’

Only when Celastir laid a hand on her shoulder did Elarin realise she had been leaning over the balcony rail, body arced as if in preparation for one final dive.

‘Apologies.’ She pushed back, shaking her head. It felt as if the whole of Shyish awaited the outcome of the ritual. Elarin sniffed at the idea, amused by her own supposition.

Now *that* was arrogance.

Composing herself, she nodded to Celastir. ‘I would walk a bit.’

‘You should rest.’

As if Elarin could sleep.

She raised an eyebrow at her bodyguard’s suggestion, then turned away with a tilt of her head.

‘Come.’

Celastir fell in a step behind, close as a shadow and far more deadly.

They walked Marrowscar’s high battlements, the broken peninsula beyond still piled with Ossiarch bones. Groups of Namarti ranged across the battlefield, heaping the armoured skeletons into mounds of twisted bone and nadirite. These were then soaked in oil and set alight with apparent relish. Thralls ringed the pyres like pilgrims come to witness a religious rite. They swayed before the rising flames, shadows stretching out across the cracked earth.

Elarin watched them for a long while, unable to keep herself from wondering what changes the ritual would work upon them. Without their need for souls, their need for death, what might the Idoneth become?

The question prickled along her spine, an unfamiliar feeling of lightness in her chest. It had been so long that Elarin hardly recognised the emotion.

Hope.

Smiling softly, she descended to Marrowscar’s main courtyard. Rows of Namarti wounded were arrayed parallel to the stretch of shadowed wall. Elarin assumed these were the ones Scyllene had judged worthy of saving.

The Soulrender herself moved among the rows like a merchant surveying a recent shipment of exotic goods. A pair of Namarti followed close behind, armed with pen and parchment rather than their usual weapons.

‘I thought you were supposed to be resting.’ Scyllene’s scowl did not waver as Elarin approached.

‘I am not tired.’ A lie, but one Elarin thought would suffice, at least until Celastir shifted at her side.

‘You’re as bad as Echaros. He has been running the calculations, again.’ Shaking her head, Scyllene glanced to Celastir. ‘Can’t you drag her to bed?’

The Bladelord made no reply. Although bound by oath, she had made no secret of her distaste for Marrowscar, the Idoneth and for the ritual as a whole. A fact which, strangely, seemed to endear Celastir to Scyllene.

The Soulrender waved as if to brush them both away. ‘There is work to be done.’

‘My apologies for troubling you.’ Elarin offered a slight bow, only to pause, surprised as she recognised the Namarti behind Scyllene.

‘Hakos?’ She could not keep the tremor from her voice. ‘Skria?’

The Namarti turned at the mention of their names, but gave no sign they recognised Elarin.

‘You brought them back?’ Elarin said.

‘Of course I did.’ Scyllene nodded at the rows of dead Thralls. ‘As I would have the rest of these if you and yours hadn’t been so precious about the souls of your dead.’ She shrugged. ‘I suppose the blame should fall on me for believing Echaros.’

‘And do you?’

The Soulscryer fixed her with a jaundiced glare. ‘I am still here, am I not?’

‘So is Arach.’

‘Arach is a minnow playing at being a shark,’ Scyllene replied, turning away with an irritated twitch of her head. ‘Now, leave me to my work.’

‘Of course.’ Elarin glanced at Skria. ‘Soulrender, if I may beg one more moment of your time?’

Scyllene paused, but did not turn.

‘Well, not yours, exactly.’ Elarin turned to the Namarti with what she hoped was a warm smile. ‘I wish to convey my gratitude to Hakos and Skria.’

‘What cause would give a Lumineth need to thank a Namarti?’ Scyllene looked back, seemingly interested despite herself.

‘During the battle, one of the Crawler’s stones hit a tower.’ Elarin felt Celastir’s scrutiny, hot as forge fire against the back of her neck. She had not told her bodyguard how close she had come to death.

‘I would have been killed had not Skria pushed me from the way, and been

crushed herself,' she continued. 'I owe her my life.'

Skria straightened. Although her scarred face held no expression, she turned to face Elarin, whispering a few words back to the Soulrender.

'What did she say?'

Scyllene chuckled. 'That if your gratitude were a dagger, she would gladly draw it across your throat.'

Elarin shook her head. 'I-I do not understand.'

'You look at the Namarti and you see broken, pitiful things. You think we abuse our Thralls? That they resent us? Perhaps. But know this, Lumineth.' Scyllene stepped close, her words little more than a breathless hiss. 'We do only as we must. Only as we were *made* to do. And all of us, from the highest Akhelian king to the lowest Thrall, will neither forgive nor forget what was done to us by your traitor god.' She gestured towards the pair of Namarti. 'They suffer most of all. The cruelties we must inflict upon our kin are rooted in Teclis' failure. So be on your way, before I give Skria leave to return your thanks more personally.'

Celastir stepped forwards, one hand on her sword hilt, but Elarin waved her back. Feeling the beginnings of a flush creep up her neck, she turned away, forcing herself to maintain a dignified pace even though she wished to be gone from the sight of the Soulrender and her Namarti.

Like a mocking refrain, Elarin could not help but hear her earlier question: without their need for souls, their need for death, what might the Idoneth become?

This time, however, the feeling that filled her was not hope.

'You should have told me about the incident in the courtyard.' Although Celastir's voice was even, Elarin could not help but detect a note of reproach.

'I hardly see how that is relevant,' she said without turning. 'You and the others were still imprisoned, there was nothing you could do.'

It took Elarin a few steps to realise Celastir had stopped. She turned, the surprise of her encounter with Skria blossoming into momentary anger. Elarin knew such fury was misplaced, that it was uncharitable and unkind to direct it at Celastir. The Bladelord had done nothing but serve her.

Fury dissolved into chagrin. 'I am sorry. Our time among the Idoneth has been... trying, and I spoke without thought.'

'Think nothing of it.' Although her expression did not change, Celastir's

tone held the slightest breath of amusement. ‘Unlike the Namarti, I can forgive.’

‘Thank you.’ Elarin offered the Bladelord a slight bow, more to hide her growing consternation than any true gratitude. It was distinctly unsettling to have her bodyguard empathise with a Namarti Thrall forced to save the life of someone she despised. But such concerns were eclipsed by a larger anxiety swirling in Elarin’s thoughts. Until now, she had been focused on the necromantic nexus and the flood of souls the ritual would unleash, but had given no thought to the Hollow Tower.

Elarin straightened, unease finding a home in her breast.

‘What is it?’ Celastir gripped her blade hilt, as if the threat were merely physical.

‘Come. I will explain.’ Elarin turned, hurrying towards the tall, empty tower that dominated Marrowscar’s inner courtyard.

‘This citadel is not only a powerful locus of Shyishan realm lines, it also served as an inflection point for Nagash’s invasion of Hysh.’ Elarin kept her voice quiet, but urgent.

‘How is that possible?’ Celastir asked.

‘You are familiar with the Tower of Prios?’

‘I am told Holy Teclis erected it to protect Hysh from the flood of death magic.’

Elarin nodded. ‘It stood at the centre of a great mandala of aetherquartz spires. Spread across the breadth of the Realm of Light, they were to serve as a buttress against the Necroquake. But instead of shielding Hysh, they only managed to lessen the effects. We did not understand why, until now.’

Elarin paused, gazing up at the Hollow Tower. It stood like a spear thrust from the hard stone, seemingly untouched by the barrage that had torn great chunks from the other structures and surrounding walls. It seemed that such a large structure could only have escaped the Ossiarch bombardment through impossible luck.

Luck, or intent.

‘You suspect this prison has something to do with the Necroquake?’ Celastir’s tone betrayed her scepticism.

‘Not a prison, an absence,’ Elarin replied. ‘I believe it to be an arcane nadir, a dark mirror crafted to leech energy from our spire network. The more power we gathered, the more accumulated in this... hollow.’ She

shook her head, throat tight. ‘The bleed from our spires might have even strengthened Nagash’s invasion of other realms.’

‘But the Necroquake has ended. Nagash was destroyed atop Mount Avalenor.’

Elarin made for the tower. ‘The Necroquake may have ended, but the connection to our realm remains.’

‘And Marrowscar is the key to this connection?’

‘Before you and the others were freed, Echaros and I worked to unsnarl a tangle of necromantic wards in the citadel’s gatehouse. We were successful, but when I touched the enchantments, I felt... Hysh.’

The tower door stood open, unguarded by Namarti now there were no prisoners to secure. It made sense – why protect an empty shell?

Elarin strode into the echoing shadow. She rapped her staff upon the ground, golden light flickering around the vast expanse of the tower. The bone scaffolding remained unchanged, as did the empty interior. Now Elarin was looking for them, she could pick out details on the stone – sharp, almost crystalline angles; sweeping buttresses; the perversion of Lumineth runes etched in perfect negative.

One of the aetherquartz spires had been erected near the Inscribed Citadel. Master Uiharan had overseen the construction, bringing Elarin and the other initiates along to marvel at the perfection of Teclis’ supreme design. No mere feat of arcane engineering, it would save them from doom, protect Hysh even as the other realms unravelled before the ravages of death. She had not questioned the plan, then. What right did a mere archival acolyte have to doubt the will of the gods? Mighty Teclis was infallible.

Now, Elarin was not sure.

‘I thought the necromantic locus was the key, but it is only part of the puzzle,’ she said. ‘This whole place is a perversion of our holy mandala, a deathly shadow of Hysh’s radiance.’

‘Echaros’ ritual is doomed to failure, then.’ Celastir said.

‘Worse.’ Elarin gazed up at the darkened recesses of the tower, the chill of the place seeming to seep into her bones. ‘If this tower is what I believe, Echaros’ ritual will not imbue the Namarti with true souls, but rather devour what little they have left. I cannot even begin to fathom the effects it will have on Shyish... or Hysh.’

‘We must destroy this terrible place.’ Celastir drew her blade, bright in the

gloom.

‘The stone is warded. Even sunmetal would barely scratch it.’ Elarin gave a sad shake of her head. ‘It was why the Idoneth kept you here.’

‘Then we must stop the ritual.’

For once, Elarin was in full agreement. ‘I shall speak to Echaros—’

‘And what will the Soulscryer do?’ The voice, familiar in its cold, almost mocking affect came from behind them. ‘Hand over the citadel, the ritual, the soul reservoir to you?’

Feeling as if she were deep underwater, Elarin slowly turned to see Arach’s hard-edged silhouette in the tower doorway.

The Thrallmaster lounged in the shadowed entrance, picking at his nails with the tip of a long-bladed kris knife. Like a coil of glistening silk, his snapjaw eel twined about his legs as he pushed from the wall, shark-toothed grin bright in the reflected light of Elarin’s staff.

‘I think it is time we had a talk, Loreseeker.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN



‘Step aside.’ Elarin drew herself up. ‘I have no time for games.’

‘All I have is time.’ Arach’s grin caught the reflected light of Elarin’s staff. ‘Time to watch my crews slaughtered. Time to see Echaros swoon over some self-important conjurer. Time to watch as you play your little games.’ He clucked his tongue, eyes dead above a jaunty smile. ‘You take me for a fool, a blood-drenched ravager. But you forget, I was once a prince.’

‘Gods spare me from noble pretentions.’ Elarin took a step towards the door, only to flinch back as Arach’s kris knife thudded point first into the ground at her feet.

‘You rebuke *me* for pride?’ Two more daggers blurred into the Thrallmaster’s hands, seeming to leap from the profusion of weapon harnesses that criss-crossed his tattooed chest. ‘Look to yourself, Lumineth. I did not lead a warhost to your doorstep.’

‘You were happy enough to raid us. To steal our souls.’ Days of repressed anger came rushing out in a hard-edged torrent of words. Elarin had endured quite enough of the Thrallmaster’s posturing and threats.

‘And had we not? Had we bowed down before the great and noble lords of Hysh?’ False deference dripped from Arach’s tongue, sharp as the blades in his hands. ‘Would you have been content to let us simply remain in

Marrowscar?’

There was no answer Elarin could give. None, at least, that would satisfy Arach. Even had the Idoneth proffered peace, their hunger for souls made them anathema to the Lumineth cause.

‘No.’ He gave an ugly laugh. ‘I thought not.’

‘I am not like the others.’ Elarin straightened, painfully aware of the Thrallmaster’s opalescent blades.

‘Yes, you wish only to guide. To teach.’ Arach nodded. ‘To control.’

‘No.’

‘You really believe that, don’t you?’ He cocked his head, slipping a half-step closer as if to study Elarin’s face.

‘I do.’ She had not even entertained the possibility the Thrallmaster could be turned to her cause.

‘Then you are more dangerous than I thought, Elarin the *Illuminated*.’ He spoke her title like a curse.

Shapes moved behind Arach, a dozen Thralls, swords and bows at the ready as they spread into a loose semicircle. It had been foolish of Elarin to assume the Namarti spoke with one voice. No doubt these were the most bloodthirsty and loyal of Arach’s crews – Elarin doubted even Scyllene could restrain them once violence began.

Celastir interposed herself between Elarin and Arach, long blade slipping into a defensive position.

Elarin laid a hand on Celastir’s shoulder, the Bladelord’s posture rigid as a fortress gate. There was still one thing that might spare them a bloody conflict.

‘We are under Echaros’ protection,’ Elarin said.

‘Echaros cannot even save his own people.’ Arach cocked his head. ‘What makes you think he can protect you?’

‘You do not understand.’ She made to slip by Celastir, but the Bladelord moved to block her path. Frustrated, she waved her staff at the Hollow Tower. ‘We misunderstood the purpose of Marrowscar. It is not a locus of energy, but a vortex. Echaros’ ritual could doom you all.’

‘Echaros’ ritual? Don’t you mean *your* ritual? I always thought it odd how you appeared so suddenly after the battle with *exactly* the knowledge our Soulscryer required. The Lumineth could not best us with arms, so you attempted guile.’ He raised a knife in mock salute. ‘You earned Echaros’

trust while your forces withdrew, allowing the Ossiarchs to do your work for you. Now, you seek to finish the job by corrupting our ritual?’

‘The Ossiarchs are our enemy, too,’ Elarin said.

‘And we destroyed many of them on your behalf, did we not?’ Despite the smile, anger rimed Arach’s words with cold fire. ‘I know your mind, Loreseeker, just as I know all you Lumineth. The Idoneth are stunted brutes, savages fit only for the deepest, darkest places. Poor, pitiable things, better to end their suffering.’

‘I am trying to *help* your people.’

‘We do not require your help!’ Arach almost shrieked the words, eyes like chips of obsidian fire. ‘Nor do we require your pity. You Lumineth think you know what is best for all, that you are the wisest, the greatest.’

Elarin glanced past Arach, hoping to see other movement behind the door. Surely, the commotion must have garnered some attention. But the only ones who entered were more of Arach’s Namarti, whisperbows raised, jagged arrows nocked and ready.

As if sensing her thoughts, Arach gave an ugly chuckle. ‘Hoping for aid? Alas, Echaros can see nothing but the ritual, Scyllene is surrounded by Thralls, and Voltach, well...’

‘I am here.’ The Tidecaster stepped from behind a knot of Namarti, hands raised like some street-corner magician flourishing after a disappearing trick.

Elarin blinked, surprised. Despite his menace, Voltach had always seemed a pragmatist, more concerned with the moment than any deeply held motivation.

‘You are with Arach?’ The question seemed almost to slip from her.

‘Not exactly.’ He replied as if they were discussing crop yields. ‘It would be perhaps more correct to say I am against *you*.’

‘Why?’

Voltach shrugged. ‘I can no more blame you for Teclis’ failings than can I those grunting, hairy humans for the follies of their hammer god.’ He held up one finger. ‘My motives are more... transactional. Namely, you Lumineth possess things I desire – knowledge, power, souls. The others might bargain for them, but I have always believed it is simply easier to take.’

With a glance at Arach, the Tidecaster shook his head, smirking as if in

response to some private joke. ‘Perhaps I *am* with the Drowned Prince, after all.’

‘You are an Isharann sorcerer,’ Elarin said, almost pleading. With Celastir’s skill and her magic, they might have been able to battle past Arach and his Thralls, but Voltach’s appearance made victory impossible. ‘Surely, you must see what this place truly is, what Echaros’ ritual will do.’

‘The ritual?’ Voltach frowned. ‘Oh, it will fail, I assume.’

Arach chuckled. ‘Once Echaros abandons his foolish quest, we can begin truly rebuilding our numbers. And the souls of your people will take us *far*.’

‘Look around you, Loreseeker.’ Voltach gestured at the shifting shadows. ‘There was never any hope here. No matter the question, this wretched tomb holds but one answer. Death.’

Elarin shook her head, but could not deny the upswell of cold realisation that drowned all argument. For all his twisted reasoning, the Tidecaster’s logic made cruel sense. Elarin had let hope blind her to the reality of their situation. Marrowscar had never been the answer. How could she have ever believed Ossiarch necromancy could set right what even the gods could not?

Hubris.

She blinked back tears, jaw tight against the urge to scream her fury into the chill air. As if to taunt her, images flashed through her thoughts – an inky vortex, lines of death magic threading the coast like veins on the leg of a corpse, the rattle of deathless laughter. It had been a vision that set her on this path, one she thought rooted in Ossiarch schemes. But destroying Kynlac and Naxia had changed nothing. It was the Idoneth who would unwittingly unleash Nagash’s rebirth upon the Mortal Realms.

And Elarin had aided them.

‘We would much prefer you fought,’ Voltach said. ‘It will make it *so* much easier to convince the others we found you trying to undermine the ritual.’

Hand tight around the haft of her staff, Elarin reached for Glimmerdark. She and Celastir might not be able to fight their way past such odds, but Elarin was a Loreseeker, and knowledge could be stronger than force of arms.

She pointed her blade at Arach. ‘Stand aside.’

He grinned. ‘No.’

Arach’s daggers glittered like falling stars, seeming almost to leap from

the Thrallmaster's hands, only to find Celastir's blade waiting. She slapped both to the ground with almost contemptuous ease, her body like a twist of windblown silk. Arrows sparked from Elarin's wards, but she had no time to reinforce them. Her attention was on the tower.

It was an arcane sink, a hole bored into the interstitial framework of the Mortal Realms, tying Shyish to Hysh, if only in the most esoteric terms. Elarin had felt the connection in Marrowscar's gatehouse, and again as she worked on the ritual, but she had not dared draw upon it, not consciously.

Now, she opened herself up to the flow of stolen energies. In an eye-blink, the tower was filled with soundless light. The smallest portion of Hysh's reflected brilliance, it was yet enough to make Elarin's eyes water. Celastir spun away from the lambent glow, still slashing even as she raised one arm to shield her face. But they were both Lumineth, raised in the searing glow of the Realm of Light.

The Idoneth, however, were creatures of the deeps, used to lightless grottos and shadowed seas. Nothing in their sad, wretched lives had prepared them to be suddenly thrust into Hysh's holy radiance.

Arach shrieked, little more than a flailing shadow as he tumbled back amongst the Namarti. But there was nowhere to run – every facet, every buttress, every stolen Lumineth rune in the Hollow Tower *gleamed*.

Voltach covered his eyes with the sleeve of his robe, already calling upon the ethertide. Elarin had worried the Namarti would not be affected, rendered proof against the glare by their lack of eyes. But the light of Hysh was more than physical. It suffused the air, the body, the very soul, illuminating every sense, mundane and magical.

The light of Hysh was powerful, but brief; already fading as Elarin grabbed Celastir's shoulder, guiding the Bladelord through the tangle of stunned Idoneth.

Even blinded, Arach somehow marked their presence.

'Your tricks won't save you, Lumineth! You think I have never fought blind?' Arach's words dripped with the fury of a wounded predator. He came at them, sabre in hand, quick as a diving prism hawk, but Celastir swept his thrust aside and drove him back with a heavy kick to the chest. Arach tumbled, landing on his feet, legs gathered for another spring.

But Elarin and Celastir were through the tower door. She slapped her hand to the cold stone, calling upon her knowledge of Marrowscar's arcane

defences.

Skeletal hands swarmed from holes in the stone like ants from a kicked hill. Backlit by the fading light, they crawled over and around one another, nadirite fingers interlaced to form a web of shadow. Arach thrust his sabre through a gap in the closing door, only to have the hands reflexively close around it, holding the blade firm even as the last gaps were sealed.

‘That will not hold them long.’ Celastir’s voice was strangely calm. ‘We must flee.’

‘A moment.’ Jaw tight, Elarin wove a spear of invisible force.

‘What are you doing?’ Celastir asked.

‘Jamming the gate.’ With an ugly smile, Elarin drove the arcane wedge into the door’s inner workings. With Voltach inside, she was not sure that even that would hold them, but hopefully the tower’s wards would make it difficult to escape.

She turned towards the stairs that led deeper into the fortress.

‘The main gate is that way,’ Celastir said.

‘I need to speak with Echaros,’ came Elarin’s breathless reply. ‘The ritual must be stopped.’

‘Can you get to him before Arach and the others escape?’ Celastir caught her shoulder. ‘Do you even know where he is?’

‘The nexus room.’ Elarin tried to shake free, but the Bladelord’s grip seemed forged of iron.

‘And will he listen?’ Celastir spoke softly.

‘He must.’ Elarin’s answer was pure reflex. Echaros was Idoneth, but he was no fool. She had proven herself, done all she could to aid his people; he trusted her. Elarin glared at Celastir’s hand, then met the Bladelord’s troubled gaze. ‘Our lives will mean nothing if the ritual is completed. Everything we have fought for in Shyish will be undone.’

As if to punctuate her dire prediction, the tower door gave a rattling boom, skeletal hands flexing as if some great and terrible beast had thrown its weight against the gate. Elarin did not wait for the next assault, already hurrying down the stairs to the catacombs.

There were Namarti about, bands of pale-skinned Thralls, iron collars ugly in the Shyishan half-light. Elarin found herself tensing as they drew near, unsure if they were Arach’s minions, or Scyllene’s. The twin gods must

have been watching, for the Namarti paid them scant attention. Elarin could have used her knowledge of Marrowscar's arcane defences to cast wide the gates and portals, but such an exercise in power would have revealed abilities she might need later. So she waited for the Namarti to open the doors. Grown used to Elarin's presence, the guards passed them by with grudging nods and the occasional unfriendly snarl.

Echaros was in the nexus chamber, he could be nowhere else.

'Elarin!' He turned as they stepped from the swirling darkness, something near a smile on his gaunt and haggard face.

'See that none come through the portal,' Elarin whispered to Celastir, then paused. 'Try not to kill any if you can help it.'

With a nod, the Bladelord turned to face the glistening pool, sword at the ready.

'All is ready.' Echaros clasped his hands together, apparently blind to Celastir's bared blade. His eyes glimmered fever bright in shadowed hollows, the Soulscryer's appearance almost skeletal in the pale, flickering soul-light.

Elarin regarded him, trying to frame her words, aware every moment that passed brought more danger from Arach. There was no time for circumspection.

'Now that you are here, we can begin.' Echaros turned away, thin fingers ghosting over the tapestry of runes painstakingly etched into the dark stone.

'No, we cannot.'

He paused, half turning, a confused frown tugging at the corners of his pale lips. 'We have been over this. There is no way to test the arcane framework without performing the ritual itself, but I am confident—'

'It is not that.' Elarin shook her head. 'Our calculations were wrong. The ritual is flawed.'

Echaros' hands fluttered like trapped moths. 'I do not understand. Our framework is sound, the enchantments carefully crafted. We have enough souls, and the nexus will hold.'

'The nexus is not my concern.'

'Then what is?' Confusion blossomed into irritation.

'The Hollow Tower.'

'An empty ruin.' He almost spat the words. 'Hardly worth consideration. Our sorceries will not even touch it.'

‘They will,’ Elarin replied.

‘How?’ He spread his arms. ‘How can you know this?’

She drew in a slow breath. ‘Because this place is connected to Hysh...’

Echaros listened, jaw tight, as Elarin explained how the Hollow Tower would invert the ritual. The cruel energies of Shyish would damn the Namarti rather than saving them.

‘Impossible.’ Echaros’ hands hooked into claws at his sides.

‘Why would I lie?’ She stepped close to the Soulscryer, searching his furious gaze for a flicker of sense. ‘I have done all I could to help your people, but this is not the way. It was *never* the way.’

He swallowed, expression hardening. ‘How long have you known?’

‘We will find another path.’ Elarin took his hand, holding tight. ‘All is not lost. We have achieved so much. This is not an end, but a beginning.’

‘How *long* have you known?’ This time, the question came as an accusatory hiss.

‘I would have told you sooner, but Arach and Voltach were—’

‘What else have you kept from me?’ He pulled his hand from Elarin’s.

Elarin considered lying. She had kept things from Echaros, but only for his own good.

Apparently mistaking her hesitation for confirmation, Echaros rounded on her, suspicion bleeding into cold bitterness.

‘You do not understand.’ Elarin could not keep the tremor from her voice.

‘If so, it is only because *you* did not let me.’ True anger rimed the Soulscryer’s words, doubly hurtful because they rang true.

‘I did only as I thought best.’ She tried to temper her reply. ‘You forget, my comrades and I were your prisoners.’

‘You came here. To us.’ He flicked taloned fingers at the fortress surrounding them. ‘I spared your lives, your *souls*, when the others would have happily taken them.’

‘There will be time for recrimination later.’ Elarin desperately wanted to explain herself, to soothe Echaros’ paranoia, but Arach and the others could arrive at any moment. She gestured towards the obelisk, and the black orb upon its apex. ‘You would feed your people’s souls to the void. Worse, if I am correct, the ritual will not only doom those in Marrowscar, but unleash devastation upon Shyish as a whole, perhaps Hysh as well.’

‘Now, I understand.’ His smile was a cold, ugly thing. ‘You raise no

qualms when risking Idoneth lives, but when *your* realm faces danger, suddenly the peril is too great.'

'That is unfair.' A flush crept up Elarin's neck, her own temper stubbornly refusing to be leashed. 'My people have *died* alongside yours.'

'A handful of soldiers, quick to flee back to your kin,' he replied. 'Hardly a noble sacrifice.'

'I remained.'

'Yes, you did.' His grin took on an almost mocking cast, eyes suddenly canny. 'To what end, I wonder? Was this your plan all along? Take what you could from us, never intending to follow through with the ritual?'

Elarin threw up her hands. 'I am trying to *save* you, fool.'

'We do not require your salvation,' Echaros hissed. 'Or your pity.'

Elarin could only shake her head, stunned. She fought to marshal her arguments. Echaros' anger and suspicion would yield before her, boiled away by the truth of Elarin's vision. She drew a quick breath, ready to pick apart the Soulscryer's sullen contempt.

Then the first Namarti charged through the gate.

The flat of Celastir's blade caught the Thrall on the side of the head, sending it sprawling across the tiled floor. Two more came tumbling out, heavy swords arcing down, but the Bladelord was already out of the way, little more than a glittering ghost as she threaded the sweeping strikes, reaching up almost casually to grasp the nearest Namarti's arm and, with a twist, send it careening into the other.

Quick as a spear-thrust, Arach's snapjaw eel darted from the shadows, the Drowned Prince close behind. He swung a length of barbed chain at Celastir, the Bladelord managing to duck the strike, careful to keep her sword free of the entangling links. But Arach was quick to follow. Eel snapping at her legs, the Thrallmaster stabbed at Celastir with a wickedly pointed dagger, searching for joints and gaps in her armour.

'What is the meaning of this?' Echaros looked from Elarin to the fight, anger giving way to shock. 'What have you done?'

'Arach and Voltach attacked us in the tower,' she replied, willing the Soulscryer to believe her, and all the while knowing he would not. Dully, Elarin realised it was neither bitterness nor paranoia that drove the Soulscryer's anger.

It was hope.

Cruel and pernicious, it had taken root in his heart, coiled roots twining through his every thought, every ambition, binding him to singular purpose. Echaros would never abandon the ritual.

Celastir was forced back as more Namarti pressed through the portal. Although Voltach had yet to materialise, Elarin knew the Tidecaster could not be far behind.

There was no other choice.

Glimmerdark whispered from its scabbard. The prised angles of the ancient blade broke the pale light into sprays of rainbow colour as Elarin pressed the edge to Echaros' throat.

'What are you doing?' There was no fear in his eyes, just cold anger.

'Taking the only path left.' She caught his arm, drawing the Soulscryer close even as she kept pressure upon the blade.

'Stand down!' Elarin had to shout the command twice before Arach deigned to notice. Panting, he raised his blade, and the Namarti fell back.

'So the Lumineth finally reveals her true nature.' Voltach stepped from the shadows, arms crossed.

'Go on, slit the fool's throat.' Arach laughed, pointing his dagger at Elarin. 'His death will be quicker than yours, that I promise.'

'And *far* quicker than all of yours.' Elarin gripped Glimmerdark's hilt tighter. 'Unless there is another Aighmar Soulscryer who can lead you through the ethersea?'

'I will die content,' Arach replied, 'my last thoughts buoyed by memories of your screams.'

Echaros hissed as a thin runnel of dark blood crept down Elarin's blade.

Voltach coughed. 'Fortunately, the Thrallmaster does not speak for us all.'

'Stand aside,' Elarin said. 'I will release him when we are free of Marrowscar.'

'We will hunt you down,' Voltach said.

'Perhaps,' Elarin replied. 'Perhaps not.'

'Then let us get on with it.' Voltach bowed, gesturing towards the portal like a courtier presenting a new wing of his manor.

Arach snarled. 'I will not allow—'

'You *will*.' Voltach's good humour dissolved like morning mist. 'Unless you plan to walk from Marrowscar.'

Shaking with fury, the Thrallmaster stepped aside, his Namarti parting like

a bladed sea.

Carefully, Elarin edged through the ranks. Celastir followed close behind, blade at the ready. Then they were through the shadowy door, Echaros in tow.

They hurried through the fortress catacombs. This time, Elarin did not bother to hide her control over Marrowscar's defences. Gates flew wide at her nod, only to lock and bar themselves after they had rushed past. Surprised Namarti reached for weapons until a threatening hiss from the Soulscryer set them backing away. Echaros watched the display, his jaw pulsing each time Elarin bent the ancient fortress' wards to her will.

'More lies,' he whispered, shaking his head as Elarin marched him up the spiralling tower stairs and onto the battlement. 'All along I thought you were my prisoner, but you could have escaped at any time.'

'I wished to remain,' Elarin replied.

'What a fool I was.'

Elarin ignored the Soulscryer, leaning over the battlement to gaze down at the water below. Normally, it would have been suicide to leap from the cliffs. Even with Elarin's wards, the waves would grind her to paste against the jagged cliffs. But no wind stirred the dark water, the sea flat as a sheet of tempered glass. With luck and a bit of sorcery, she and Celastir would be far away before the Idoneth managed to bypass Marrowscar's necromantic defences.

Celastir glanced down the cliff. 'The Deepkin are at home beneath the waves. We shall not escape that way.'

'Arach and the others will have more things to worry about than our flight,' Elarin responded, already reaching out to the cruel sorceries that bound Marrowscar's wards. She had hesitated to turn them upon the Idoneth, hoping Echaros would present a better option. But her trust had been misplaced.

'You should kill the Soulscryer,' Celastir said.

Elarin gaped at her. 'I gave my word we would release him.'

'You wish to stop the ritual?' She nodded at Echaros. 'That would stop it.'

Elarin squeezed her eyes shut as if to blind herself to the Bladelord's brutal logic. It was one thing to slay an enemy on the battlefield, but to kill in cold blood? So much had passed between them, it was hard not to regard Echaros as a colleague, a comrade, perhaps something more.

As if sensing her hesitation, Echaros twisted in her grasp. Talons raked across her cheek, a curtain of blood falling across her vision. Half-blinded, she tried to hold on to the Soulscryer, only to receive a bloody gash along her forearm, the pain of her wounds echoed by the anguish that it had been Echaros who caused them.

Celastir's armoured form swam like a shadow at the edge of Elarin's reddened vision, but the Soulscryer moved quickly, putting Elarin between himself and the Bladelord even as he scrambled back along the battlement.

Celastir caught Elarin's arm, steadying her as she wiped the blood from her eyes to see Echaros sprinting away.

'I can still catch him.' The Bladelord took a few hurried steps, only to pause as a hollow boom echoed through the courtyard below. Elarin could hear running footsteps on the stairs, the high keen of hunting Thralls threaded with Scyllene's rough commands. A heartbeat, perhaps two, and they would be on the battlement.

'They are coming.' Celastir faced the tower, blade at the ready.

An arrow hissed by Elarin's cheek. She glanced down to see a dozen Reavers sprinting across the courtyard below, more arrows already arcing through the air.

Celastir twirled her blade, cutting two that would have pinioned Elarin, but the Namarti were relentless. Another arrow sliced across Elarin's pauldron, a third slashing through her cloak.

She glanced after Echaros, only to see the Soulscryer's shadow join the ascending Namarti's as he all but threw himself down the stairs.

'A moment and they will be on us.' With an irritated grunt, Celastir grabbed Elarin's shoulder, spinning her around. 'If you control Marrowscar's wards, use them now!'

The Ossiarch enchantments were not kind. They would fall upon the Idoneth like a tidal wave, wounding, killing. But Echaros had left her no alternative.

Chest tight, Elarin wove the chants that would unleash the necromantic wards upon any living thing within Marrowscar. She could feel them take hold, the gathering weight of death magic almost pulsing in her vision. Pained shrieks rose through the clamour of Namarti battle cries. Although Elarin did not see the Thralls suffering, she could feel them fall as the ancient Ossiarch wards blazed bright with murderous energy.

She hoped Scyllene could raise the fallen, but feared she could not.

‘We need to jump!’ Celastir shouted.

They leapt from the wall, Elarin already weaving the spells that would shield them from impact. Even so, the cold of the Dwindlesea almost took her breath away. She dived beneath the chill surface, sorceries gathered about them like a glistening soap bubble. They swam, far and fast, every stroke buoyed by Lumineth enchantments. Elarin thought she saw the shadow of arrows hitting the water, but it hardly mattered.

The Idoneth did not follow. Not yet, at least.

Half an hour saw them soaked and shivering a few miles down the coast. Although Celastir said nothing, the Bladelord’s stiff manner and tight-lipped glances made her point clearly enough. Without a word, she looked back to Marrowscar, perched like a carrion crow atop the broken cliffs, then turned to walk in the direction of the Lumineth camp.

Elarin did not argue. It was the only path available.

She hung her head, burning with helpless shame, the sullen rasp of breath sharp in her ears. She had thought to save the Idoneth, win her people an ally, and frustrate Nagash’s return. For a moment, it had all seemed possible. But she had been mistaken.

It was like her Defence of Principles at the Inscribed Citadel, only this time there were none to balm her shattered nerves. Uiharan was dead, Chariel was dead, Celastir despised her. There was no winning, no chance of true success.

All that remained for Elarin was to choose *how* she lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Echaros *hurt*. Teeth gritted against the urge to scream, he flexed his hand, not willing to let the others see his pain, his weakness. And it *was* weakness that had brought him to this wretched state. He had been foolish to trust the Loreseeker, to believe she acted out of any motive save self-interest. Elarin had seemed different, but ultimately the Lumineth were all the same – arrogant, self-important, blinded by the unshakeable belief that they alone were the arbiters of truth. And why not? They were Teclis’ favoured children, heirs to the twin gods’ power and wisdom. The Idoneth were a mistake, a failure relegated to the dark and hidden places so they might be overlooked, forgotten.

Drawing in a ragged breath, Echaros pushed to his feet. In time, he knew the pain would fade – the physical pain, at least. He had felt Slaanesh’s hunger, the chained god’s eye upon him, its rough and sibilant voice whispering of a thousand tortures, a thousand delights. Slaanesh remained bound, for the moment. In that regard, at least, Teclis had not faltered. But one could not restrain such unknowable power forever. Echaros had slipped free of the dark god’s caress, but, as always, he had come away with the knowledge it was but a temporary reprieve. In the end, his soul belonged to Slaanesh. It would *always* belong to Slaanesh.

‘You should rest.’ Scyllene laid a hand on Echaros’ shoulder as he swayed.

‘I am well.’ Echaros straightened, pulling free of her grip. ‘The ritual will take time. We should begin.’

‘And Elarin?’ Arach asked. The Thrallmaster was sprawled across one of the chamber’s iron chairs, seeming not in the least discomfited by its hard edges. They sat in some manner of council chamber, a collection of chairs and tables high in one of Marrowscar’s towers, overlooking the fortress approach and the Dwindlesea beyond.

Echaros turned to stare out one of the tower windows, hands pressed into the small of his back.

‘Survival first, then vengeance.’

‘She will run back to her people,’ Voltach said. ‘They may return.’

‘Will the Lumineth welcome her?’ Scyllene asked.

‘Why not?’ Arach leaned forwards, suddenly interested now there was blood in the water. ‘She brings them a trove of secrets, both Ossiarch and ours.’

Echaros was glad the Thrallmaster did not see him flinch. A painful barb, but deserved. Even now he could not believe things had unravelled so quickly. Elarin had saved his life, fought alongside the Idoneth, offered her knowledge, her power to their cause; and like a wide-eyed trench minnow sculling into the maw of a dragon angler, Echaros had been drawn relentlessly to her glittering lure, blind to the threat beyond the light. Even now, a small part of him believed the Loreseeker had acted in good faith as she held her blade to his throat.

‘We should strike before the Lumineth marshal their forces,’ Arach continued.

‘They were ready last time. Made aware at the last moment by the coming of the ethersea.’ Voltach cracked his knuckles, grinning. ‘This time, I will be more circumspect.’

Echaros raised a hand. ‘I will not risk dividing our forces, not until the ritual is complete.’

Arach made a disgusted rattle in the back of his throat. ‘More wisdom from our far-sighted Soulscryer.’

‘Enough bickering.’ Scyllene rapped her fist on the low stone table. ‘If Echaros’ ritual is a success, we would have Namarti no longer, but an *army* of Akhelians.’

‘If.’ Arach managed to imbue the word with an ocean of scorn.

‘We must attempt it, at least.’ Scyllene raised her hands. ‘Or all this will have been for naught.’

Arach sat back, the very model of childish petulance. ‘I grow weary of squatting in this wretched place.’

‘And you, Voltach?’ Echaros asked.

The Tidecaster tapped his chin, considering. ‘How long will the ritual require?’

‘If all goes well? A few days, perhaps.’

‘And if it does not go well?’ Arach asked.

‘Then we will not have to worry about the Lumineth,’ Echaros replied, ‘for we will all be dead.’

Voltach blew out a long breath, fingers drumming on stone. With a word, he could deadlock them. Scyllene was with Echaros, but a tentative ally at best. Given time, the Soulrender’s natural caution would outweigh her faltering hopes.

Voltach met his gaze. ‘You still believe this will work?’

‘I do.’ Echaros gave a quick nod. ‘The arcane framework is strong.’

‘And what of the reversal Elarin was babbling about?’ the Tidecaster asked.

‘If Marrowscar is somehow connected to the Realm of Light, then the danger will be there.’ Echaros shrugged. ‘And I care nothing for the fate of Hysh.’

That earned a smile from Arach.

The Tidecaster made a show of deliberating, no doubt enjoying the attention. Despite the recent conflict, the choices remained the same: a grand gamble, or death by a thousand tiny cuts. Given what he knew of Voltach’s temperament, Echaros suspected he could guess which way the Tidecaster would bend.

‘We should attempt the ritual.’ Voltach spoke just as the silence began to verge on unbearable. ‘I have always wanted to best a god.’

‘And after?’ Arach asked.

‘After...’ Echaros’ words came cold as wind-driven hail. ‘We sweep the Lumineth into the sea.’

‘Then I had best prepare my crews.’ With a nod, the Thrallmaster pushed up from his chair and strode from the room.

Echaros looked to the other Isharann.

‘Are you sure you are ready?’ Scyllene asked.

He offered her a hollow smile. ‘I shall not fail.’

Although the Soulrender did not seem convinced, she acquiesced to follow Echaros and Voltach down into the bowels of Marrowscar, a dozen Namarti in tow. The nexus chamber bore little evidence of the conflict that had occurred just a few hours earlier.

Runes covered every bit of open space. Inked, etched and carved, they glittered in the gloom like sun-dappled coral, the air bright with collected power. The vortex swirled in silent shadow, constrained by the net of aelven sorceries. Elarin’s absence weighed heavily on Echaros, not because he missed the Loreseeker, but because she would not be there to buttress the ritual. No matter, they had woven the wards together, strong as the citadel walls above.

In that, at least, Elarin had not failed him.

The three Isharann took up position around the black sphere that marked the eye of the necromantic nexus, the Namarti arraying themselves in a rough circle.

With a glance to his comrades, Echaros carefully removed the soul reservoir from a fold in his robes. Even with the relic sealed, he could feel power radiating from it, trapped spirits struggling against the fetters of Ossiarch enchantment. Once he breached the warding sigils, there would be no going back.

Echaros was surprised to find the decision did not weigh upon him. After so much struggle, so much sacrifice, the culmination of his work was almost a foregone conclusion.

And, unlike Elarin, Echaros would not hesitate.

Necromantic sigils guttered as he turned the soul reservoir in his hands, peeling away the layers of wards. Like a failing dam, cracks appeared in the arcane facets of the reservoir, soul-light shining forth as if from holes in the firmament. They came as a trickle, a rush, a torrent as the wards gave way. Echaros could hear Scyllene and Voltach chanting, feel their words like a tightening grasp, the weight of their incantations lending strength to his own whispered call.

He did not attempt to control the spiritual energies, only to direct them towards the nexus. It swallowed the power, hungry for more. Runnels of

shadow flowed along the floor, slipping past Echaros to coil around the Namarti behind. He could feel their souls wax, bonfire hot against his back.

It was working.

Although tears pricked his eyes, Echaros did not turn. He let his sorcerous senses expand, grasping for the Shyishan realm lines that fed the ancient citadel. Freed of any geomantic blockages, those from the sea crackled with sorcerous force, adding their power to the steady flow swirling within the nexus. Raising his hands, Echaros grasped for those spreading to the north and south of Marrowscar. It was as if he had touched a maddened fangmora eel, its electrical charge thrumming through muscle and bone. Brightness filled his vision, sparks ground from chattering teeth with every word of power. He could see his bones, shadows beneath translucent skin, backlit by impossible light. It was not the lambent half-light of Shyish, the bruise-purple glow of amethyst energy swathed in ageless shadow. Rather, it was a pure white-gold brilliance unsullied by cloud or horizon, a formless, eternal glow that seemed to penetrate the deepest recesses of Echaros' thoughts.

He wondered for a moment if, perhaps, Elarin had been right. Then the light stuttered and died, a hungry shadow spreading to fill the hollowed void. Echaros' gasp was echoed by the other Isharann, the high screams of the Namarti providing an agonised chorus.

Hours slipped by, time seeming to condense to a tiny, glimmering point as they sought to harness the energy flowing into Marrowscar and bend it to a singular purpose. Echaros had no sense of how long they had remained in the nexus chamber. Time meant nothing, their progress tracked only by the steady accumulation of power. Waves of death energy pulsed across the coast. Coaxed forth by the steady chant of Echaros and the other Isharann, each came larger, more powerful than the last. They would ravage the land about Marrowscar, but Echaros had no concern for any outside the fortress' high walls.

Perhaps once, but not any more.

Slowly, the nexus filled with power, from Shyish or Hysh, Echaros did not care. And yet, despite his most insistent sorceries, there did not seem to be enough.

'Something is blocking the realm lines.' Echaros cast his arcane gaze down the coast, thoughts tearing down geomantic paths as he sought the obstruction.

Lumineth runes burned through his mind, scars upon the land, holding firm against the spreading weave of Echaros' ritual. Carved upon the Ouroboran Coast, they blocked the flow of death energy from the south, robbing his ritual of the last burst of power. He flung himself at the glittering mandala, fingers crooked as if to gouge the runes from the hard stone. But even the full force of his sorcery could not scour the hated wards from his sight. They burned themselves into his eyes, cruel afterimages dancing along the corners of his vision.

'Lesaris.' Voltach's voice was an accusatory hiss. 'I knew I should have murdered that old geomancer.'

Echaros could only shake his head. Somehow, the surviving Lumineth had arrayed themselves across one of the realm lines, choking off its power. He gnashed his teeth, tearing at his robes in fury; the runic mandala was well made, the work of a true master.

The Namarti jerked and twitched, shadows twisted into unnatural shapes as the power of the frustrated ritual burned through them. The soul runes on their foreheads burned like miniature suns. For a moment they stood shadowed against the scintillating glare, and then their physical forms simply boiled away, spirits pulled into the shrieking gyre that spread from the eye of the nexus.

The ritual's power spread across the land, sinking into stone, sending waves of death magic across the sky. Half-finished, it was a terrible thing, an amalgamation of aelven and Ossiarch sorcery buoyed by the power of a thousand captured souls. Echaros could feel the dark energies crashing along the Ouroboran Coast, empowering the necromantic fundamentals of the Realm of Death.

'We cannot complete the ritual.' Panting, Echaros turned to the others. 'Not while the geomantic runes remain.'

Voltach's grin was tired, but earnest. 'Then it seems the Drowned Prince will get his wish after all.'

'I can hold it, for now at least.' Echaros regarded his fellow Isharann, his chest tight. He had been weak, trusting, and suffered for it.

Now there was no choice but to be strong.

'Go.' He gestured at Scyllene and Voltach. 'Destroy the Lumineth before they destroy us.'

'With pleasure.' Voltach bowed, hurrying from the nexus chamber.

Scyllene lingered for a moment, her expression unreadable.

‘Go!’ Echaros shouted, the strain of dividing his attention almost too much to bear.

With one last backward glance, Scyllene stepped through the portal, leaving Echaros alone with his ritual.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



‘It has begun.’ Elarin could feel the terrible pull of death magic even before the first waves of amethyst sorcery washed over them. Grasping Celastir by the upper arm, she spoke a bubble of gleaming runes about them, sparing their souls from the hideous riptide of Echaros’ ritual.

Wind-driven ash filled the sky, the air thick with the dust of a thousand unquiet graves. Whipped into a crashing frenzy, chill breakers hammered the Ouroboran cliffs, the steady roar of waves almost eclipsed by the scrabbling shrieks of those they unearthed. Imprisoned no longer, skeletons tumbled from the dark stone in their hundreds, their thousands, jagged outlines flickering with bruise-purple fire as they dived beneath the waves, spreading from the shore like some vile migration.

The ground shuddered like a plague victim. Elarin would have been thrown from her feet if not for her grip on Celastir. All around, more undead heaved themselves from the dusty earth – a horde of terrible, gap-toothed grins birthed like grave maggots from the dry, churning soil. Overhead, Elarin could make out the pale shadows of spirits and revenants. Drawn to the inexorable pull of death magic, they swirled in dire murmurations, a hideous carrion host searching for prey.

Elarin felt the same heart-stopping terror as when the Necroquake had

ripped through Hysh. But unlike Nagash's dark invasion, this terror was rooted in Elarin's failure. Like an ethereal wave, the ritual's power spread along the Ouroboran Coast, dark energies flowing along Shyish's deathly topographies like ink spilled across a page.

Even as Elarin's mind reeled with the dire implication of Echaros' cruel mistake, she could sense the ritual was incomplete. Something had blocked its spread, an arcane breakwater standing firm against the ghastly tide. She turned her attention south, the pale golden glitter of Lumineth geomancy calling her like a distant beacon.

'There.' She raised a trembling hand, even knowing Celastir did not possess the ability to see Master Lesaris' runic shield. To her credit, the Bladelord did not hesitate. Together, the two of them pressed forwards, bodies angled against the wind, their progress buttressed by Celastir's seemingly endless strength and Elarin's protective sorceries.

Ragged forms stumbled from the swirling gloom. Eye sockets glittering with witchlight, they raised ancient blades, their movements rendered quick, almost lifelike, by the rising tide of necromantic force.

Celastir cut them down in their scores, necrotic fury circumscribed by the careful measure of the master Bladelord's gleaming slashes. But, as always, the undead did not aim to win through skill, but implacable determination. Endless as ocean waves, they broke against Celastir's defence. For every skeleton beheaded, every rusted blade struck from bony fingers, there were a dozen more, and more, and more.

Spectres swooped from the twisting clouds above. Faces contorted with ancient fury, they dived and slashed at Elarin's wards, scrabbling at the runes with scythes and long, hooked talons. She sent beams of perfect light slashing through the swarming mass. Spectral vestments boiled away, shrieks of rage choked as ghostly bodies were dissolved by the burning radiance. Those who managed to find a crack in the enchantments were dispatched with Glimmerdark. Glowing with a life of its own, the prismatic blade carved through translucent scythes, pallid flesh shattering into sprays of variegated brilliance.

Back to back, Bladelord and Loreseeker held firm against the horde. Even so, Elarin could not help but note their progress had stopped. The Lumineth wards still glowed along the coast. A mile distant, perhaps two, safety was tantalisingly close, but they would never reach it, not with the gleam of

Elarin's Hyshian sorcery calling every risen abomination for miles around.

A cold certainty worked icy fingers along Elarin's spine. This was the end: the last Loreseeker of the Inscribed Citadel drowned in a sea of necromantic dross. A coda wrought by foolish pride. The unfairness of it all seemed to resonate through her, suffusing her flesh with a strange and righteous indignation.

Elarin had warned Chariel, Lesaris, Sennareth, even Echaros; had sought only to avert the catastrophe that even now wracked the Ouroboran Coast and perhaps Hysh as well. Now, as always, her sorceries were bent towards light, towards justice. But it seemed the harder Elarin strove, the deeper the darkness grew.

Master Sennareth had been right. Necromancy held no answers for the living, Elarin had learned as much at Marrowscar when she had unleashed the ancient fortress' defences upon the Idoneth. She had but to look around to see the horrors death magic wrought upon the land... and now she was once again poised to grasp at the dark promise it offered.

Unfortunately, no other path remained. If Elarin rebuked her knowledge of necromancy, neither she nor Celastir would ever reach the Lumineth host. They would be pulled under by the vast deathly tide, their unquiet shades joining those that swarmed amidst the roiling clouds.

They must warn the others. No matter the cost.

'Sheathe your blade.' Although soft, Elarin's words cut through the shrieking din. Celastir glanced back, confusion writ across her scarred features.

'We cannot—'

Elarin repeated the command, already working to unravel her own wards. The runic mandala sputtered to quiescence. Runes faded to the colour of cold iron before winking from existence.

Lips tight, eyes hard, Celastir sheathed her blade.

And the dead came rushing in.

Notched blades cut empty air, talons closed on mist. Elarin drew upon the flood of necromantic force. Shaping the amethyst wind into a shroud, she drew it around herself and Celastir, the chill like mist from a winter sea. She could feel it settle upon her, seeping through flesh and bone to infiltrate her very soul. Elarin's movements felt sluggish, her vision blurred. She leaned upon Celastir, the Bladelord barely holding herself upright.

They were not dead, not quite, but close enough as to make no difference.

Swathed in funereal shadows, the shades and walking corpses could not distinguish Elarin and Celastir from the raging gyre of necromantic energy. Had there been a necromancer nearby, Elarin's tattered illusions would have never held. Fortunately, the dead that surrounded them were of a lower order, motivated by nothing save cold malice.

Spectres and skeletons dispersed like windblown leaves, shambling off to inflict their dire attention on some other living soul.

If any remained.

Arms around one another, Celastir and Elarin made for the light. It was slow-going, the flutter of their muted souls bound by every sluggish heartbeat. Elarin's teeth chattered, her arms and legs numb. She could barely feel Celastir, the Bladelord a murky blur in the corner of her dimming vision.

Soon, all that remained was the glow of Lesaris' runes. Elarin's anxieties fell away, her hopes, her plans fading to a dull roar of helpless reproach. All that mattered was the light, and that she continued moving. It felt as if she had been dead for aeons, her life but a fragile shadow consumed by the endless march of time. All around her, Shyish burned with death magic: storm, rain, wind-driven ash nothing compared to the amethyst vortex that spread across the coast. And still, somehow, Elarin moved forwards.

The arrow almost took her in the throat.

It slashed down from the low wall, a bright streak against the encroaching gloom. Elarin did not duck the missile so much as fall flat, her legs unable to support her weight. Freed from the tangled weave of her sorceries, the cloak of necromancy dissipated, wisps of death magic dispersing into the roiling breakers that crashed against the Lumineth wards.

Dimly, she felt herself gripped under the arms. A bleary glance showed Celastir, teeth gritted, strained tendons picked out against pale skin as she dragged Elarin towards the wall. The guards must have noticed the glimmer of sunmetal on the Bladelord's breastplate, for no more arrows winged down from the battlements above.

It was a feat of Lumineth engineering that they were able to construct a wall of any height from such poor materials as found in crypts. Blocks of unmortared stone rose in jumbled panoply. This close, Elarin could see names etched onto them – tombs and gravestones pillaged by desperate

Lumineth masons.

A moat of sparkling runes fronted the structure, running up the walls to extend the fortifications' protection against aethereal assault. A fine decision, as it were, for a flash of amethyst lightning revealed swarms of spectres twisting in the air above. Even as Elarin watched, one hurled itself against Lesaris' wards and was consumed in a burst of coruscating brilliance, burning like parchment tossed into a bonfire.

Ropes were tossed down as Elarin and Celastir approached, half a dozen Vanari Sentinels rappelling down the uneven stone to surround them.

'Loreseeker?'

Elarin did not recognise the speaker, but by the grace of Teclis, he recognised her. She tried to stand, only to fall back against Celastir, who rocked back on her heels. Strong hands caught them, and a rope was fastened firm around Elarin's chest. She was quickly hauled back up the wall, to lie gasping atop the rough battlement, her limbs prickling as life flowed back into them.

The buzz of conversation surrounded her. Through tone, Elarin recognised they were asking questions of her, but she could not make out individual words over the hammer of blood in her ears. When their interrogation elicited no response, two of the Sentinels jogged off down the wall, the others plying Elarin with a waterskin. The water was warm and tasted of grave ash, but it might have been the Lord Regent's special reserve for the relief it brought to Elarin's cracked lips and dry throat.

Someone laid a wet cloth across her brow, blessedly cool.

'Celastir?' She cast about blindly.

Hands pressed her back down, concerned shadows swimming in her vision.

'The Bladelord is here, Loreseeker,' a voice said. 'She is resting.'

'Good.' Elarin fell back against the cold stone, unable to do more than breathe. She had made herself as the dead, and it had almost killed her.

Slowly, she was able to gather her thoughts back into some semblance of order. Although the tingling numbness had mostly fled her limbs, Elarin did not yet trust her legs to support her weight.

So she waited, unsure of the welcome she would receive from her kin.

The gods, it seemed, were still with her, for it was Kyris who arrived first. The former High Sentinel wore the cloak and armour of a scout

commander, the only evidence of her erstwhile command the waxwood arcbow she had always carried. Elarin had not expected Sennareth to restore Kyris to her high position, but to make her a mere strike leader was tantamount to open contempt for her ability.

It seemed the role of Lord Regent had done little to cure the prince of his petulance.

‘You survived.’ Kyris’ tone betrayed nothing, her eyes shadowed beneath lowered brows.

Elarin nodded. ‘As did you.’

‘It was not easy.’ Kyris pointed at the storm raging beyond the walls. ‘Although not as bad as that.’

‘The Idoneth have begun the ritual,’ Elarin replied. ‘I tried to stop Echaros, but there were too many.’

‘You did what you could.’ Kyris’ smile was perfunctory, at best. ‘Although our numbers are replenished, I fear you will find little aid or solace here, Loreseeker. Reinforcements arrived from Cera Niall.’

She left the implication unstated.

Sennareth rules.

As if to drive home the Sentinel’s point, a quartet of Wardens hurried up the stairs, their breastplates emblazoned with the three diamonds of Prince Sennareth’s home city. Elarin recognised Mathren at their head.

‘The Loreseeker and her bodyguard are to come with us.’ The sharp-chinned High Warden pushed past Kyris.

‘They may not be fit to travel,’ Kyris replied.

‘Then we shall carry them.’

Elarin waved away the proffered hands, pushing to her feet with only a modicum of dizziness.

‘Your weapons, Loreseeker.’ Mathren held out her hand.

Kyris coughed. ‘She is no threat to—’

‘It is the Lord Regent’s order.’

Elarin drew in a slow breath. No matter how Sennareth had achieved the position, he was Lord Regent now, and his commands carried the force of holy laws.

‘Keep them safe, please.’ She handed over her staff and sword, nodding for Celastir to do the same.

‘Of course, Loreseeker.’ The officious High Warden seemed almost

insulted by Elarin's entreaty, thin lips twisting into a sullen smile. She took the proffered weapons nonetheless, passing them off to the other Wardens, who formed up around Elarin and Celastir as they were led down the stairs.

'Are we prisoners?' Elarin asked.

Mathren did not turn. 'That remains to be seen.'

They were guided across the expanse of the Lumineth camp. Girded by high walls and warded stone, it retained the straight-angled planning of a well-kept force. Although the diamonds of Cera Niall far outnumbered the survivors of Chariel's command, Elarin was heartened to see that, despite their penchant for gems and intricate fineries, Sennareth's reinforcements comported themselves like warriors.

Good. They would need every competent soldier if they were to survive.

Sennareth had occupied Lord Regent Chariel's old pavilion, the familiar lines and fabric marred by a profusion of pennants, medallions and banners proclaiming the prince's dubious merits. From the abundance of gold-chased honours, it seemed Sennareth considered merely waking up in the morning a notable victory.

He had dispensed with the war table, choosing instead to pack the interior of Chariel's tent with hordes of fawning courtiers, their brocaded silks and intricately filigreed armour at odds with the maelstrom raging beyond the camp walls.

All conversation ceased as Elarin was led into the pavilion, her progress across the thick carpet marked by flights of whispers. Even so, she held her head high, back straight beneath the onslaught of scowling approbation.

Elarin sought out familiar faces among the gaggle of courtiers, but found little to console herself. She spied Kuonor near the back of the crowd. Although he still wore the honours and rank of Steedmaster, the broad-shouldered cavalryman seemed strangely subdued, his usual bravado masked by an air of distinct discomfort, as if he had been cast into a pit of stinging gem scorpions.

Perhaps he had.

'Loreseeker Elarin the Illuminated.' Prince Sennareth lounged in a high-backed throne atop a three-stepped dais. A far cry from Chariel's simple camp chair, it was an elaborate affair, all scrollwork and gold leaf, cut gems glittering like stars amidst the dark wood. Although helmetless, Sennareth wore a suit of articulated battle plate, diamonds winking amidst the dark

blues and burnished gold of Cera Niall. Like some barbarian chieftain passing sentence, he had laid his blade across his knees, bare sunmetal bright even amidst the collected finery.

Master Lesaris stood at the base of the dais. Unlike the others, the old Calligrave seemed unchanged, hands folded in the sleeves of his robes, dark, weathered features impassive as ancient stone. Lesaris said nothing as Elarin approached Sennareth's throne, only stood stiff-backed and cold, his gaze heavy as a broken oath.

Against her better judgement, Elarin bowed. Sennareth was Lord Regent, after all, and she must honour the rank, however little she respected the one who held it.

'It seems your time among our fallen cousins taught you humility, at least.' His smile cut at Elarin. 'I must confess, however, I am surprised to see you here, especially given the reports we received from *Sentinel* Kyris.' He lingered on the former commander's diminished rank, as if to grind the point deeper.

Elarin did not respond. Let Sennareth gloat. For someone who prided themselves on subtleties, the prince was surprisingly blunt.

'Last I heard, you had found yourself a...' Sennareth paused, as if considering. '...*comrade* amidst those murdering savages.' He gestured as if to part the pavilion's heavy curtains. 'Tell me, is this your doing?'

'In part, yes.' Elarin's admission seeded another crop of whispers among the prince's court. 'The ritual was meant to rekindle the souls of the Idoneth Thralls.'

'Why would you want to do that?'

'They are aelves, Lord Regent,' Elarin replied, undaunted. 'But for a cruel twist of fate they might be Lumineth.'

More whispers, a faint chuckle, abruptly silenced as Sennareth cast a hawkish glance towards the crowd. He leaned back, eyes twinkling.

'And how is that working out?'

'The ritual was correct, but the foundations flawed.' She kept her hands at her sides, careful to keep her words flat, informational. 'I have discovered a great danger.'

'Another tale of doom?' Sennareth chuckled. 'Loreseeker, you are beginning to sound like a Sigmarite preacher.'

Rather than reply, Elarin nodded towards the roof of the pavilion.

‘A fair point.’ Sennareth steepled his fingers. ‘And what, pray tell, lies at the root of this particular storm of annihilation?’

Elarin swallowed. To explain the ritual’s underpinnings would be to admit her own culpability in the devastation. A glance to Sennareth was enough to quash her concerns about guilt. The prince would blame Elarin whether she told the truth or not. Better to give her former comrades the knowledge they would need to resist the ritual’s power.

Better to hold nothing back.

The pavilion was quiet as Elarin spoke. Knowing Sennareth would seek to undermine her, she did not digress, running through the events since she and the others had infiltrated Marrowscar – the nexus, Kynlac, the soul reservoir, the battle with Naxia and, finally, the ritual itself. It was tempting to expound upon her motivations, if only to buttress her logic for aiding the Idoneth, but ultimately Elarin let her actions speak for themselves. If the others could not see the value of healing their accursed kin, then they were larger fools than Elarin suspected.

Through it all, Sennareth watched her, his expression guarded. Despite his personal feelings towards Elarin, she had no doubt the prince wished to retain his new command – something that would become difficult if the ritual were allowed to proceed unhindered.

After she had finished, Sennareth sat quietly for several heartbeats, head cocked. It was almost long enough for Elarin to begin to believe the prince was considering her words. That tiny flame of hope guttered when he spoke.

‘A fine tale, Loreseeker. Almost as fine as the one you told Lord Regent Chariel.’ He stood, blade in hand. ‘But unlike our dear departed leader, I am not so easily led astray.’

He pointed the blade at her. ‘Since the beginning of this campaign, you have flirted with dark powers. Without concern for provenance or motive, again and again you have cast all caution to the winds – delving into Ossiarch sorceries, leading our forces into an ambush, consorting with Idoneth reavers.’ With each accusation, Sennareth took a step down the dais, ending up with his blade hovering a mere handbreadth from Elarin’s throat. ‘Now you expect us to *join* you in this folly?’ He shook his head.

‘There is no other choice...’ Elarin began, only to fall silent as the prince’s blade twitched closer.

‘By your own admission, our geomantic runes are the only thing holding back the flood of necromantic energy,’ he continued. ‘And you would have us abandon this position of strength to march across a necrotic wasteland ravaged by roaming packs of dead? Even were I to believe this drivel, such an assault is tantamount to suicide.’

He spun on his heel, voice suddenly warming as he addressed the crowd. ‘I say now as I said then. Loreseeker Elarin has been corrupted by this terrible place. Though I have no doubt she truly believes her words, the fact remains that her actions reek of one fallen to dark purpose.’

There were murmurs of assent from the throng. Only Kuonor looked unconvinced, but if the Steedmaster had doubts, he did not voice them, standing rigid, fists bunched at his sides, teeth bared like a newly bridled stallion.

Seeming to bask in the approval of his lapdogs, Sennareth turned to point his blade at Elarin once more.

‘Loreseeker, although it pains me to do so, I must cast you from this warhost.’

He might as well have run his blade through Elarin’s chest.

‘In light of your past service, and the fact you held good intention, no matter the outcome, I believe you would be best served by help and healing,’ Sennareth said. ‘You are to return to Hysh, there to be escorted to the Cathallar monastery near the Pit of Cathartia so your condition may be assessed and treated. Meditation, privation, reflection upon your wrongs – these will serve you in good stead, Loreseeker.’

Elarin felt the strength drain from her, her vision swimming as she fought to stay upright. In sparing her life, Sennareth had pretended to show kindness, but this was a fate far worse than death. Such monasteries were not places of healing – they were prisons, remote and well-guarded locations to secrete those deemed too important or troublesome to simply execute.

Elarin’s gaze roamed the pavilion, seeking something, anything to hold on to... only to settle on Lesaris.

The Calligrave said nothing, his craggy face harsh as the sea cliffs beyond the wall.

‘Master, please.’ Elarin’s whispered entreaty filled the space behind Sennareth’s accusation. Even with Sennareth as Lord Regent, Lesaris’

words would carry weight.

He shook his head, expression almost regretful. ‘How are we to believe you, Loreseeker?’ The Calligrave raised his hands as an errant gust made the pavilion poles creak ominously. ‘When you, by admission, are the architect of this horror?’

Elarin could not deny Lesaris’ words, so she simply bowed her head. ‘I was mistaken about the cause, but not the outcome. Had Naxia managed to secure Marrowscar and free Kynlac, we would be facing far worse than this.’

‘My apologies, Loreseeker.’ Sennareth gave a mocking tilt of his head. ‘I was unaware we were in the presence of a hero.’

‘I know the ritual. I can stop it.’ It was all Elarin could do not to shout at the prince, her cheeks hot with helpless fury. ‘Marrowscar is connected to one of the aetherquartz spires. What we are seeing will be mirrored somewhere in Hysh. As it spreads here, so will it devastate our home.’

‘The spires protected us from the Necroquake.’ Although Lesaris spoke as if reciting by rote, his expression was troubled.

‘They blunted the effects,’ Elarin replied. ‘But they did not protect us.’

‘Teclis himself crafted the Tower of Prios,’ Lesaris said. ‘The whole network of spires was by his holy design.’

‘Those of Cera Niall may not understand,’ Elarin said. ‘But all who marched with Chariel saw our homes devastated.’

There were some desultory nods from the back of the crowd, but those few of Chariel’s officers who had survived were quickly drowned out by the prince himself.

‘You dare question Holy Teclis?’ Sennareth’s voice dripped with overwrought surprise. Like a stage protagonist delivering lines to a rapt audience, he gave a sorrowful shake of his head. ‘Truly, you are lost, Loreseeker.’

Elarin could not but stare at the prince, his gambit clear. Teclis was a god, but he was not perfect: the Idoneth were proof enough of that. But by admitting as much, Elarin would be branding herself a heretic. Either way, she was damned. All that remained was to choose the means of her demise.

Elarin chose conflict.

‘Had the Lumineth marched instead of hiding behind our spires, we might have prevented the Necroquake. Now, we are poised to make the same

mistake again.’ Although soft, her words struck the assembled nobles like a fistful of thrown daggers. She turned to the crowd, those closest shrinking back as if her very attention might contaminate them.

‘These walls will not hold. These runes will not suffice.’ Elarin slashed a hand through the air. ‘We shall be swept from Shyish. The Ossiarchs will reclaim Marrowscar. Nagash will be reborn, and we shall have failed *utterly*.’

‘Remove this traitor from my presence.’ Sennareth’s nod brought a pair of Wardens from the rear of the pavilion. They reached to take Elarin by the arms, only to fall to their knees, hissing in pain, as Celastir surged forwards to twist their reaching hands into uncomfortable joint locks.

‘Loreseeker Elarin is a fool, but she is no traitor.’ The Bladelord spoke through gritted teeth, the Wardens groaning at her feet. ‘You would do well to heed her words.’

‘I thought to spare you, Bladelord, but it seems the Loreseeker’s corruption has spread.’ Sennareth sighed, appearing almost bored as he waved his blade at Celastir. ‘Take them both.’

Wardens moved through the crowd, nobles parting like tall grass as the armoured warriors descended upon Elarin and Celastir.

‘You don’t understand.’ Elarin tried one last plea, her gaze focused on Lesaris. ‘If the ritual is left unchecked, it could—’

Pain exploded across her skull, the carpeted floor suddenly soft against Elarin’s cheek. Vision swimming, she pushed to her knees, one hand pressed to a spreading bruise just above her ear. Sennareth stood above Elarin, blade still raised from where he had hammered the flat against the side of her head.

Releasing her grip on the Wardens, Celastir surged forwards, only to stop as Sennareth rested the point of his blade on Elarin’s throat. The pavilion had grown silent, faces twisted in a strange mixture of shock and loathing. Although Master Lesaris’ mouth had fallen open, the old Calligrave said nothing as Sennareth shook his head.

‘Enough.’ The prince’s words came low and threatening. ‘*I* am Lord Regent. *I* command this army. And I will hear no more from these traitors.’

Rough hands grasped Elarin’s shoulders, hauling her up. More reached for Celastir, who twisted away, her gaze flicking to Elarin.

She gave the slightest shake of her head. There was no way out, and she

would not see warriors harmed for following their commander's order. Teeth bared, Celastir allowed herself to be taken, the two of them held side by side as Sennareth mounted the low dais to gaze down at them from his throne like a small and petulant god.

Elarin spoke softly to Celastir. 'You did not need to defend me.'

'I did. Now more than ever,' the Bladelord replied. 'Simply because I disagree with your choices, does not mean I do not *understand* them.'

'Thank you.' Tears pricked the corners of Elarin's eyes.

'*Silence.*' Sennareth's command cut through the low whispers. 'It seems you have mistaken my mercy for weakness...'

The prince's voice faded into a murky babble of condemnation. Although Sennareth continued to pass judgement, Elarin barely noted his words, the scene so surreal as to be almost dreamlike. Her vision had been clear, her motives pure – how had everything unravelled so quickly?

She blinked against the swirl of encroaching fog, gazing around the pavilion, eyes seemingly unable to focus. At first, it seemed as if Sennareth had struck Elarin hard enough to muddle her wits. She almost dismissed the swirl of phantom currents. Carried along the gusting breeze like ocean spray, the faintly luminous tides settled across the assembled nobles, suffusing everything with a faintly surreal air, as if seen through rippling water.

So subtle was the sorcery that Elarin almost doubted her own arcane senses. Had she not spent so long among the Idoneth, she would not have recognised the ethersea for what it was. But she knew the sea aelves' touch, just as she knew Voltach's tidal enchantments.

It should not have been possible. Master Lesaris' wards shielded the Lumineth war camp from hostile sorcery. Echaros' ritual must have sapped their power. Hammered by the driving hail of death magic, the wards could not keep out more subtle enchantments. More, Voltach seemed obsessed with the old Calligrave. Just as she had made a study of Idoneth magic, the Tidecaster must have learned something about Lumineth sorceries. Somehow, he had discovered a way to circumvent the overtaxed runic wards.

'Prince.' Her warning came as a rough croak. 'The Idoneth come.'

Sennareth paused mid-monologue, surprise bleeding into outraged fury. 'How dare you—'

He gave a little cough, glancing down at the foot or so of opalescent steel that had emerged from his throat. With a bemused expression, Sennareth gently touched the blade, as if to assure himself of its reality. Frowning, the prince opened his mouth to speak, but all that emerged was a dribble of bright crimson.

Elarin turned to Celastir. ‘The Idoneth have come for our souls.’

With a nod, the Bladelord shrugged free from the grasp of her two captors, hands snaking down to draw their sheathed blades before either had registered her escape.

Sennareth slumped forwards to reveal the spear pinning him to his throne. Thrust through the wooden back and the prince’s unarmoured neck, it was a strike that required supreme strength and skill.

A cry went up from the assembled courtiers, blades leaping from scabbards as several rushed to aid the dying prince. Those who mounted the dais received only death, knives flickering from the watery gloom to nest in throats and eyes.

The horrified nobles drew back, weapons raised against the unknown assailant.

Arach stepped from the deepening shadows, movements loose and languid. The Thrallmaster left his spear in the throne, settling instead for a hooked hatchet and long, chisel-tipped knife, perfect for close-quarters slaughter.

‘I told you I would find you.’ He smiled his shark-toothed smile, gaze pinioning Elarin like a ballista bolt. ‘Now, let us end this.’

Laughing, the Drowned Prince raised his arms, a horde of keening Namarti surging from the liquid shadows behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The Namarti fell back, pinioned by a shaft of perfect light. Elarin might have moved on to the next, but she knew Scyllene would have the Thrall up and fighting again in an eye-blink unless Elarin destroyed the wretched creature.

Throat tight, she swept the glittering beam across the Namarti's chest, reducing it to blackened bones. It would not rise again – not as an aelf, at least.

The futility of the conflict did nothing to undermine its necessity. Elarin wanted to shout at the Wardens and Namarti, but knew neither would listen.

Without her staff or Glimmerdark, Elarin was forced to rely on sorcery alone. She hurled bolts of sizzling light into the packed ranks, vivisectioning Thralls with arcs of golden radiance.

'Loreseeker, we must strike back!' That from Kuonor. The Steedmaster had been quick to leap to Elarin's side once the fighting began, drawing with him a dozen of Sennareth's guard. There was no doubt in their expressions as they looked to Elarin. The Idoneth assault had freed her from bondage more surely than the word of Teclis himself, sentence commuted by the sheer necessity of survival.

She looked around. The command pavilion was in tatters. Slashed silk and

ruined banners dangled from canted tentpoles, the whole appearing like nothing so much as the ribs of some beached leviathan.

Those few of Sennareth's court who had weathered the initial assault fought with the desperate fury of cornered beasts. Small knots of razored finery drowned in a sea of pale flesh. Through rents in the pavilion, Elarin saw the Idoneth had assaulted the camp at many points. Although the veterans of Chariel's command reacted quickly, their scattered phalanxes glimmered like candles raised against a storm. Unused to the lightning-quick strikes of the Idoneth Reavers, Sennareth's reinforcements seemed to have been caught by surprise. Elarin could see Wardens and Sentinels dashing between fallen tents, gold filigree spattered with blood, faces grim.

As loath as she was to admit it, their only hope lay in forming the Cera Niall warriors into some semblance of defence; but without Sennareth there was no one to call them all to order, and no time to name another Lord Regent.

More Namarti came. Elarin's crackling call sent an arc of light slashing through half a dozen Thralls, who tumbled back, pallid flesh scorched by the searing light. An arrow flicked past her face, a dozen more trailing behind.

The tides of battle shifted, and she could see Arach flit amidst the murky shadows. The Thrallmaster moved like smoke on water, near-supernaturally fast as he hooked a thrust out of the way, then stepped in to butt a dark-haired noble in the face. As the Lumineth stumbled back, Arach looped an arm around his shoulders, almost companionable as he slipped his dagger into the noble's neck.

Elarin raised a hand to cast a bolt of searing light at Arach, but the Thrallmaster was already gone, one more pale shadow in the roiling melee. It was tempting to seek him out, except the Thrallmaster was but the crest of the wave. The Lumineth could slaughter Namarti until the sky cracked and the realms fell to ash, but so long as the Idoneth's Isharann sorcerers remained there would be no end to the shrieking throng.

Voltach, Scyllene, Echaros. Elarin needed to winnow them out.

'Celastir, ward me,' she called. 'I must concentrate.'

Stepping past Elarin, Celastir's blades wove a tapestry of crimson-flecked carnage. She beheaded a scarred Thrall, sword cutting just above the Namarti's iron collar. At the same moment, her other blade licked out to

deflect a heavy overhead slash from a hooked sword, her backswing taking the Thrall's arms off at the elbows.

It took a singular effort of will for Elarin to turn her attention from the battle. She closed her eyes, fingers working through arcane permutations as she whispered cants of seeking.

Beyond the pavilion, she could sense the flicker of Namarti souls. Packs of Thralls moved among the tents and pavilions, keening like the damned as their jagged blades cleaved shields and glittering mail. They did not form battle lines, but rather slipped like minnows among the ethereal waves. Flowing around the scattered Lumineth phalanxes, they melted back into the gloomtide at the slightest hint of resistance, only to strike again from an entirely different direction.

Elarin ignored them, searching for the telltale glimmer of Idoneth magic.

It was like trying to find a leaf in a maelstrom. Echaros' ritual raged beyond the Lumineth wards, vast and terrible torrents of death magic lashing Lesaris' runic mandala. Within the circle of golden runes, Idoneth tidal sorceries crashed like gale-driven waves, wreathing the conflict in liquid shadow. Even Elarin's enhanced senses could discern nothing amidst the uproar. Scyllene's soul magic wavered like refracted sunlight, seeming to leap about with no regard for time or distance. And Voltach, as always, concealed himself with swirling tides.

There was simply too much arcane force for her to sift anything from the tumult. The Tidecaster was like a ghost, slipping through the ethereal eddies, swift as a darting minnow, his power evident only after he had moved on. If Elarin but knew where Voltach would strike, she could move to meet the Tidecaster, but he seemed to act without pattern, unleashing waves of arcane despair that crumpled the Lumineth defenders.

Teeth gritted against a shout of frustration, Elarin shook her head. She could no more track Voltach than she could chart the gusts of a maelstrom. She could not follow his movements, nor did she know where he would be.

Except she did.

Dark satisfaction rose through the smothering weave of despair. In their conversations, the Tidecaster had revealed little save grinning nihilism. Voltach affected not to care for his people, his future, even his life, but that was not completely true. He did care for one thing.

Defeating Lesaris.

Elarin could not fathom the roots of the Tidecaster's obsession. Perhaps he saw the old Calligrave as a rival, or hungered for vengeance. Voltach certainly seemed petty enough to resent the Calligrave tearing his cloak. For once, motive hardly mattered. All Elarin needed to do was find Lesaris, and that was simple enough.

The master Calligrave gleamed like the Perimeter Inimical. He had retreated from the pavilion at the first sign of danger, seeking support among his warrior-acolytes. Now, he strode across the battlefield, the glow of freshly inscribed runes almost blinding against the gloom.

Elarin's eyes snapped open. 'Kuonor, take the guards, find Kyris and rally what forces you can.'

The Steedmaster grunted, eyes downcast. 'I will not abandon you again.'

'There is no time for discussion.' Elarin spoke quickly. 'I can cut the head from this serpent, but you and the others must survive or it will all be for naught.'

Although Kuonor looked far from convinced, he gave a quick nod to the remainder of the prince's guard. 'Vanari, *Senlui!*'

The Steedmaster's shout surged like electricity through the assembled Lumineth, who formed into a loose wedge. Elarin was pleased to note the Cera Niall Wardens followed Kuonor's command without question.

Perhaps there was hope for them, yet.

Kuonor's mount might have been long dead, but the Steedmaster yet knew how to marshal a charge. They hit the Namarti ranks like a falling tree, scattering Thralls in all directions. Although caught off guard, the Thralls did not buckle. More of the deathless Idoneth pushed in from the back, swarming the flanks of the Lumineth formation despite terrible casualties from pike and arcbow.

Elarin turned towards Lesaris, summoning an arc of arcane force. Perfectly transcribing the distance between herself and the Calligrave, it cut a path through the struggling Namarti. Elarin dashed through the opening, Celastir close behind. If not for the Bladelord's slashing swords, they would have been quickly overwhelmed, but Celastir's blades seemed almost alive. Twin edges of leaping gold, they flitted amongst the Namarti like darting prism hawks, nesting in chests, stomachs and the gentle curves where neck met shoulder.

Thralls gave way before their advance, reavers in search of easier prey.

Wardens and Sentinels stumbled from the gloom, no doubt drawn to the glow of Elarin's sorcery. Some bore the triple prism hawks of Illium, others the diamonds of Cera Niall, but no matter their colours, their faces held the same look of grim determination. They joined the growing lines, falling into order with the easy competence of long training.

'Loreseeker.' The relief in Lesaris' rough voice was almost palpable as he gazed down at Elarin, high daethar shoes adding to his height. Elarin was gratified to note the Calligrave seemed to carry no doubts as to her motives. Lesaris might be harsh as the slopes of Mount Avalenor, but he lacked the ambitious arrogance that infected so many Lumineth.

'The Idoneth Tidecaster, Voltach,' she said without preamble. 'He is responsible for this' – she waved a hand at the shifting currents – 'but has concealed himself within the gloom.'

'How do we find him?' Lesaris asked.

'We do not.' Elarin's smile came sharp as a storm wind. 'He will come to you.'

She turned to Celastir. 'Take charge of these warriors and find Arach. I must remain with Lesaris.'

'My place is with you.'

'Voltach is a coward. He will not strike while we are warded by pike and bow,' Elarin said. 'And only you can face Arach in combat.'

When the Bladelord still hesitated, Elarin drew in a slow breath. For all her skill, Celastir's swords would be little use against Voltach. Although Elarin wished to protect the Bladelord, Celastir had earned her trust.

More, she had earned an apology.

'I have been wrong. I should have heeded your counsel – about the soul reservoir, the Ossiarchs, the Idoneth, everything. Now, I must make amends.' She caught and held the Bladelord's gaze. 'I trust your sword. I need you to trust my magic.'

Lips pressed into a thin line, Celastir nodded. 'If you die, Loreseeker, I will personally hunt down your unquiet shade.'

'I count on it.' Elarin clapped her on the arm, then turned away.

'When will this Voltach strike?' Lesaris asked.

'I cannot say. But when he comes, I shall be ready,' Elarin replied. 'This arcane confusion can work for us as well.'

Crossing her arms, Elarin concentrated on dulling the glow of her wards,

masking the telltale glimmer of sorcery within nested shadows.

‘And what shall I do?’ Lesaris asked.

Although she hated the foolish pride that had brought her to this moment, there was no other answer Elarin could give.

‘Kill Idoneth.’

Lesaris turned away, aetherquartz charms clinking as he sketched golden runes into the air. Although Elarin possessed no small skill in rune magic, the Calligrave’s inscriptions soon moved beyond even her ability to parse. So complex as to be rendered almost unintelligible, his mandala settled across the nearby Namarti like a gossamer shroud. Wherever it touched, bloody rents stained pallid flesh, skin splitting like poorly sewn seams to reveal blood and bone beneath. Thralls writhed like landed fish, crooked fingers pawing at the liquid air as their bodies seemed to fold in on themselves. A few quick breaths and nothing remained but a swathe of churned and bloody earth.

Even though they were Elarin’s enemy, it was hard to see Lesaris simply erase the Namarti. Wincing, she wondered if Skria had been among the fallen.

Fortunately, Voltach wasted little time.

The Tidecaster struck from behind. Without warning, the ethereal gyre behind Lesaris took on shadowy substance, Voltach’s sorcerous assault twining from the ghostly waves. The surge of sorcerous energy struck Lesaris’ wards with hurricane force. Although the glittering shield held, the Calligrave was knocked back, tottering on his high shoes, one arm thrust out for balance.

There was no smile on Voltach’s face as he slipped among the numinous currents, barely a blur as he wove a net of tidal sorceries. Elarin expected him to assault Lesaris’ wards, but rather than seek to overwhelm the Calligrave’s enchantments, Voltach spun a cocoon of arcane force around the old master. Elarin was tempted to strike, but the Tidecaster was yet on the move, a difficult target even with his attention focused on Lesaris.

The Calligrave attempted to burst free of Voltach’s crushing prison, but he may as well have been struggling against the ocean. Buttressed by the power of Echaros’ ritual, the Tidecaster simply stared at Lesaris, his gaze deep as an undersea chasm.

Lesaris brought a hand to his throat, seemingly unable to breathe.

Wisps of dark ether pooled about Voltach, the ghostly shadow of undersea creatures sculling through the air as he dropped his hands to his side, every muscle rigid as the shimmering bubble of arcane force tightened around the Calligrave.

At last, Elarin struck.

She did not bother with subtlety. Hands pressed together as if in prayer, she thrust at the Tidecaster, anger lending strength to her incantation. It was a crude, unlovely spell, a smear of brilliance more reflex than careful craft. So focused was Voltach upon his prey, he did not notice the flicker of light until it was almost upon him.

Dark shapes twisted in the flowing ether, finned shadows burning away as the Tidecaster's marine wards buckled beneath the sheer fury of Elarin's assault. He spun, too late, and the lance of brilliant energy struck him in the shoulder.

'You!' Snarling like a wounded shard lynx, Voltach reached for Elarin, streamers of liquid darkness unfurling from his spread fingers. They battered her wards, curled and twisted like the tentacles of some nightmare kraken. Had Voltach been fixated on her alone, Elarin could never have withstood the onslaught, but with his attention divided, she was able to fend off the creeping tendrils.

Elarin cast a desperate glance at Lesaris, but the Calligrave still stood transfixed, breathless as he sought to free himself from the crushing pressure of Voltach's vortex.

The Tidecaster's grin returned, not cruel, but satisfied. There was no malice in his eyes, only a calm detachment, his smile that of an artist preparing to add a final brushstroke to his masterpiece.

Elarin raged against Voltach's enchantments, but the Tidecaster was simply too strong. No matter her skill, Voltach had a virtually limitless well of power to draw upon. Elarin would not best him.

Not with sorcery, at least.

With a shout, she spread her arms, runes crackling as she swept the questing shadows aside. They would be back in a moment, ready to rend and tear, but a moment was all Elarin needed.

She took four quick steps towards the Tidecaster and drove her fist into Voltach's grinning face.

He reeled back, more surprised than injured. Elarin was quick to follow.

Sharp pain shot up her arm as she hit him again. His head snapped back and she worked a hand into the front of his robes, dragging him up so she could hit him again, and again.

Her knuckles were a crimson mess before he fell in a crumpled heap, robes splashed with dark blood.

‘Loreseeker.’ Voltach drew in a rasping breath. One of his eyes was already swollen shut, but his remaining one twinkled with mirth. ‘Well played.’

‘This is no game.’ Elarin stood above him, fists clenched, chest heaving.

‘Then what is it?’ Voltach’s chuckle quickly became a rasping cough, blood bubbling from between the Tidecaster’s missing teeth.

Elarin did not get the chance to answer.

Light enveloped Voltach, burning up from within to scour flesh and turn bone to ash.

Arms spread, Master Lesaris unleashed the full force of his ancient sorceries upon the fallen Tidecaster.

‘Stop!’ Elarin shouted. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Killing Idoneth.’

In the time it took Elarin to draw in a shocked breath, Voltach was gone. Erased.

Frowning, Master Lesaris stared down at the smudge of scorched earth.

Elarin opened her mouth, but there was nothing to say. The Calligrave was right. No matter how she might wish it were not true, there was no redemption for the Idoneth.

Not now, perhaps not ever.

With Voltach destroyed, the ethertide began to ebb. Spectral currents eddied and slowed, the crash of phantom waves dying as the sorceries unravelled. The hunting calls of Namarti bled into a mournful wail. Freed of the obfuscating mists and shadows, the Lumineth began to shine once more. Phalanxes linked together; flights of gleaming arrows pierced deep into Namarti ranks. Some Thralls held the line, slashing wildly even as they hurled themselves upon the growing wall of pikes. There was no coordination to the assault, only wild desperation – bodies cast into the cruel tides of battle to buy time for their comrades to escape.

Chanting, Lesaris joined the assault. Runes scarred air and stone, strengthening the Lumineth advance even as they seared the shrieking

Thralls. Elarin could not bring herself to partake in the slaughter. Those Namarti who fought were outnumbered, their fellows slipping back into the fading ethereal current, there to be swept back to Marrowscar – the last arcane journey they would ever make.

Panting, her blades slick with gore, Celastir stepped from the fading gloom.

‘Arach?’ Elarin asked.

‘Slipped away.’

‘No matter.’ She sighed, shoulders rounding. ‘They have but one place to go.’

Elarin watched as a wedge of Wardens broke from the line, Kuonor at its head. The broad-shouldered Steedmaster swung a wide-bladed axe, lips peeled back from blood-flecked teeth as he hacked at the retreating Thralls. Arrows streaked down from atop the wall, Kyris’ grey-cloaked form visible amidst the blue and silver of Sennareth’s Sentinels. The ranks were scattered with soldiers, the hawks of Illium and diamonds of Cera Niall battling side by side with no regard for allegiance. For all the blood this day had brought, it seemed to have forged the disparate forces together.

The last of the Namarti slipped into the dwindling shadows, the roar of conflict replaced by the cries of the dead and dying. Like a killing wave, the Idoneth had withdrawn, leaving only corpses and destruction in their wake. Surveying the ruined camp, Elarin could not tamp down the flood of apprehension that filled her thoughts.

The Lumineth might stand victorious, but the only true winner was death.

‘Fools, all of them.’ She felt as if there were a silken cord around her throat, drawing tighter with each breath. She reached for anger, determination, grasping for the faintest shadow of hope. But all that rose through the bubbling tumult was sorrow.

Lumineth, Idoneth – so different, and yet alike.

This day may have doomed them both.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



‘Burn them.’ Elarin regarded the piled Namarti bodies, swallowing against the tightness in her throat. ‘Burn them all.’

With a nod, Kuonor turned to the assembled Vanari, already shouting for torches and oil. Elarin watched him go, knowing this was only the first of many painful trials ahead. Though she had come to understand the Idoneth’s broken perspective, empathy was a blade that could only wound her. If Elarin hoped to stop Echaros’ mad ritual before it spread beyond the Ouroboran Coast, she would need to be cold as the Dwindlesea.

The Idoneth were her enemy. It was foolish to believe they had ever been anything else.

But first, there were other challenges. Although recent victory may have brought the surviving Lumineth together, Elarin knew it would only be a matter of time before old rivalries surfaced. She must act before the first cracks appeared.

‘Lesaris?’ Elarin glanced to Celastir.

‘I believe the Calligrave is near the outer wall, reinforcing the wards.’ The Bladelord shifted, hand dropping almost possessively to the hilt of her two-handed sword – recently returned along with Elarin’s staff and Glimmerdark.

‘Of course.’ Elarin wasted no time. She moved through the ruined camp as if bearing orders from Teclis himself. Wardens stepped from her path, often with a bow. Word of her role in Voltach’s death had spread quickly. If any of the few surviving Cera Niall commanders recalled Elarin had recently been branded traitor and heretic, they wisely remained silent.

Lesaris and his acolytes roamed the circle of glittering wards. Like masons reinforcing fractured stone, they buttressed flagging foundations, patched cracks and carefully replaced unstable runes with fresh enchantments. Elarin had often watched Lesaris practise his craft. Even so, she was still amazed by the nested complexities he wove into the protective mandala. Tempted as she was to interrupt the Calligrave’s work, Elarin waited until he had shored up the last of the arcane fundamentals.

After all, Lesaris’ enchantments were all that contained the ritual’s power.

‘Ah, Loreseeker. I expected you sooner.’ With surprising agility, Lesaris hopped from his stilted perch, landing with barely a flutter of robes.

‘There was the matter of the Idoneth dead,’ Elarin replied. ‘Even Ossiarchs can do little with pyre ash.’

Lesaris studied Elarin for a long moment. Once, she might have wilted before the elder Calligrave’s slit-eyed scrutiny, but now she felt nothing. It was not that Elarin considered herself equal to Lesaris’ regard, rather that she simply did not have time for such faint-hearted posturing.

‘This is but a stopgap.’ She gestured towards the circle of runes. ‘Sooner or later the ritual will overwhelm even your wards.’

‘I could summon others of my order.’ Lesaris crossed his arms within the sleeves of his robes. ‘We could contain this necrotic tumour. Cut the realm lines and it will wither.’

‘How long would that take? Weeks? Months?’ Elarin asked. ‘This is no mere geomantic disjunction. The vortex within Marrowscar is powered by *thousands* of souls – it feeds upon Shyish itself. This will quickly grow beyond our power to contain.’

‘And how do you know this?’

‘I aided in its creation.’

‘That was foolish.’

‘It was a risk,’ Elarin conceded. ‘One that could have righted an ancient wrong.’

The lines on Lesaris’ craggy face deepened into a pensive scowl. ‘And

what do you think now?’

‘It hardly matters what I think,’ Elarin said. ‘Either we act, or we die.’

‘Without constant maintenance, these wards will not hold.’ Lesaris turned a sceptical eye towards the storm of necromantic energy. ‘If we push for Marrowscar, we shall have but a day or two before this abomination breaks free.’

Elarin studied the network of glittering sigils, already beginning to fray. She could almost feel Lesaris digging in, resistance to change overwhelming the Calligrave’s reason. She needed to strike fast and true, before Lesaris’ opinion became immovable as his runes.

‘I mean no insult, master,’ Elarin said, giving a slight bow to soften her next words, ‘but it seems to me your protective mandala will not hold even *with* you and your apprentices’ help.’

Lesaris’ eyes narrowed, but it was only a brief flash of temper, passing across the Calligrave’s lined face quickly as wind-driven leaves. Although tempted to mollify Lesaris’ injured pride, Elarin suspected any praise would be perceived as manipulative. The Calligrave knew his abilities, and their limits. The best argument Elarin could make raged beyond the fluttering circle of wards. So she remained silent, refusing to bend before the master’s cold-eyed scrutiny.

‘We would be under assault the moment we marched.’ There was no anger in Lesaris’ tone, only the academic disdain of a scholar discovering a potential flaw in his calculations. ‘Attacked both physically and spiritually.’

‘Celastir and I made it through,’ Elarin said. ‘I can teach you and your colleagues the wards and counter spells necessary to stave off the worst of the ritual’s effects.’

‘You would have us learn necromancy?’

‘I would have you learn how to better defend against it.’ Elarin fought against the urge to raise her voice. Time was slipping through her grasp, every moment bringing them closer to damnation. ‘This is Shyish. If we are to win, if we are to *survive*, we must adapt.’

The Calligrave turned away in a swirl of robes. ‘I have seen quite enough of your *adaptation*.’

‘You are correct, master.’ Elarin stepped in front of him, cheeks reddening. ‘Just as you were correct about the soul reservoir. Had I destroyed it, the relic would not have fallen into Naxia’s hands. I chose to study the nexus

and the Hollow Tower, and to aid Echaros. I thought myself motivated by compassion, the hope I could help free our Idoneth kin from their ancient curse.’ She shook her head, sighing. ‘Now, I know my motivation was rooted not in pride, but hubris.’

Lesaris frowned, seeming to consider her words. The mere fact he had not stormed away conjured the smallest glimmer of hope in Elarin’s breast. The Calligrave might be prideful, but he was not petty.

Breath hissing through clenched teeth, Elarin held Lesaris’ dark-eyed gaze. ‘I was wrong to think I could master necromancy, that I could dabble in death and come away untouched, that I could do what the gods themselves could not.’ She motioned towards the storm raging beyond the glittering wards. ‘And this is the result.’

The ancient Calligrave drew himself up, a head shorter than Elarin, but somehow still staring down at her. ‘If you are seeking absolution, you have come to the wrong place.’

‘Not absolution.’ Elarin glanced to her hands, bunched before her in tight fists. ‘Chariel, Ildirin, even Sennareth... I shall bear them for the rest of my life.’ She looked up, drawing in a slow breath. ‘All I ask is that you not add more to the tally.’

‘I will not engage in necromancy, not even at the peril of my own life.’

‘I would not ask you to, master.’ Elarin shook her head. ‘But my studies have unlocked other secrets, runes and incantations that can shield us from this flood of death magic.’

‘You are sure of this?’

‘I helped design the ritual.’ Despite the flutter of excitement in her chest, Elarin kept her expression contrite.

‘If we *were* to march...’ Lesaris spoke slowly, his words the creak of an ancient fortress gate grinding open. ‘With Prince Sennareth slain, there is no one to lead.’

‘I had hoped you would assume the mantle of Lord Regent.’ Elarin raised a calming hand. ‘Temporarily, of course.’

That brought a genuine chuckle from Lesaris. ‘War is for warriors.’ He flicked his hand at the wards. ‘My weapons are sign and sigil, my legions a constellation of runes. I would never be so bold as to command Vanari.’ He regarded her, eyes suddenly canny. ‘But I suspect you already knew that.’

Elarin had, but there were forms to follow. Lesaris was the most senior of

the remaining commanders, he must be at least given the opportunity to decline.

‘Very well.’ Elarin nodded as if the matter were decided. ‘Some of Sennareth’s nobles remain. If they are anything like their prince, I am sure they will leap at the chance to lead.’

Lesaris clucked his tongue. ‘Sennareth’s folk might be keen enough in the courts of Cera Niall, but they have little experience in Shyish.’

‘Then one of Chariel’s officers?’ Elarin asked. ‘Kuonor and Kyris have the experience.’

‘The Steedmaster would break us against their walls. Kyris has been to Marrowscar, but holds her Sentinels in too high regard. I doubt she would risk them in an assault such as this.’ Lesaris wrinkled his nose. Elarin could see the old Calligrave had discerned the path of her thoughts, but could not quite bring himself to accept the inevitable.

Time to give him a push.

‘I have been to Marrowscar. I know its defences, both mundane and sorcerous. I may even be able to bypass the worst of them.’ Elarin drew herself up. ‘More, I know the Idoneth. Scyllene, Arach, Echaros – I know their strengths, their weaknesses, their ambitions. They may seem unified, but the only thing that holds them together is fear of damnation.’

‘So, once again you have come for my blessing, Loreseeker.’

‘I have come to do my duty.’ Elarin kept her voice level. ‘You know I do not wish to lead, but there is simply no better choice.’

‘And what of the others?’ Lesaris cocked his head. ‘The last Lord Regent did declare you traitor, after all.’

‘If you believe me a threat, then send me away,’ she replied. ‘I will accept any punishment you deem appropriate.’

One of Lesaris’ white eyebrows crept up his forehead. ‘I have no interest in meting out penance. The other commanders, however...’

‘There is no time for deals and politicking.’ Elarin cut a hand through the air. ‘We must fight as one.’

The old Calligrave sighed. ‘On that, at least, we agree.’

‘Then you will support me?’

He frowned. ‘It would seem I have no other choice.’

Elarin would have preferred Lesaris recognise the truth of her words, but if she could not have the Calligrave’s respect, she would happily settle for his

aid.

‘It might be best if you convened a council of officers,’ she said.

Lesaris gave a stone-faced nod. ‘May Holy Teclis watch over us.’

Although Elarin muttered agreement, as the Calligrave strode away she could not help but wonder if she truly cared to call the god’s attention. Her final words to Voltach bobbed like flotsam upon the shadowed recesses of her thoughts. This was no game, she’d told him. The Lumineth fought for the very survival of their race. And yet, were their struggles not shaped by the desires and ambitions of the gods? Nagash sought to claim dominion over death. Tyrion, Teclis, Sigmar and other gods opposed him, but their alliance was one of convenience, and temporary at best. Their plots and struggles were stones cast upon the surface of a still pond, consequences rippling far beyond the initial impact and, all the while, the corruption of Chaos lurking below the murky surface.

What was this to them if not a game?

Feeling a flush creep up her neck, Elarin pushed down the dark thoughts. Such questions would see her branded a heretic, or worse. Game or not, she must play or be damned.

The surviving officers gathered with surprisingly little consternation, any nascent complaints quelled by Lesaris’ glare. Elarin found herself in the ruins of the command pavilion, unsettled by how few remained.

Of Sennareth’s nobles, only High Warden Mathren held any command of note, the rest of the upper echelons having died with their prince. Kuonor, astride one of the mounts of the fallen, led the surviving Dawnriders, his beard freshly oiled, his long dark mane combed and braided into a tight queue. The Sentinels had fared better, their mobile style of combat allowing them to react quickly to the Namarti assault. Sennareth had named one of his own as High Sentinel – the dark-haired noble Elarin had seen Arach slay in the initial assault. Although the loss of every Lumineth was a sorrow, her demise cleared the way for Kyris to reassume her former rank.

The Cera Niall Sentinels raised some complaints to Kyris’ reinstatement, though they were merely perfunctory. All respected her skill and leadership.

It was an easy obstacle, one Elarin had placed first to prepare the others for a more difficult choice. Phalanxes were redressed, commands combined and lower officers promoted from among the rank and file. Although the

others worked quickly to solidify the Lumineth force, Elarin could all but see the pall of anxiety that hung over them. A breath, a careful pause, gaze flicking around the room as one or another officer stopped just short of broaching the question that crouched at the forefront of all their thoughts.

‘And for acting Lord Regent’ – Lesaris spoke as if the topic were academic – ‘I propose Loreseeker Elarin.’

She had expected an uproar, bared blades and voices raised in furious accusation. Instead, the Lumineth commanders simply stared at her, the collective weight of their gazes almost more than Elarin could stand.

She cast her arguments into the sea of silent regard – the same she had made to Lesaris. Only now, they sounded callow and self-serving. It was as if she stood back in the high archives of the Inscribed Citadel, trembling before the scrutiny of a dozen masters. But this time, Elarin’s failure would doom them all.

When she had finished, the assembled commanders watched her. Silence stretched between them, the congress of haggard faces and hollow eyes somehow more unbearable than open condemnation.

‘You will lead us back to Marrowscar?’ It was Kuonor who spoke first. Although his voice still boomed, the Steedmaster seemed smaller, sharper than the bellicose cavalryman Elarin remembered.

‘I will.’ She nodded.

‘Good.’ He seemed to look through Elarin. ‘Let us be finished with this.’

It would never be done, not until the stars went dark and the Mortal Realms faded from memory, but Elarin knew better than to reply. Instead, she busied herself with martial ephemera.

‘How many Dawnriders remain?’

‘Just over fifty,’ he replied.

Not nearly enough, but it would have to suffice.

‘All mounted?’ she asked.

Kuonor bared his teeth. ‘It seems the Idoneth care little for the souls of horses. Most were spared.’

‘It saddens me so many Dawnriders were lost.’ Although they would be of little use against Marrowscar’s walls, Elarin would need their speed during the march. ‘We will see them avenged.’

The old Kuonor would have pounded his fist against the table, shouting approval. Now, he merely sat back, arms folded across his chest, gaze fixed

firmly on the ground.

‘And you, Kyris?’ Elarin turned to the High Sentinel.

She drew in a slow breath, looking not to Elarin, but Celastir.

‘Can she be trusted?’

Elarin could not quite hide her surprise. Although Celastir had never seemed particularly close to the High Sentinel, several days as prisoners of the Hollow Tower must have forged some bond between the two.

The Bladelord’s gaze flicked to Elarin, then back. ‘She can.’

‘Then I support you, Loreseeker.’ Kyris offered the slightest of bows. ‘For what it is worth.’

Elarin turned to Mathren. ‘And what say you, High Warden?’

Mathren had sat silently through the proceedings, hands folded in her lap, her expression that of a woman forced to endure amateur theatre.

‘I know what you think of us.’ She spoke slowly, as if weighing each word. ‘Cera Niall – a rich and petty city, spared the worst horrors of the Necroquake. But our warriors fought at Avalenor, at Illium, all across Hysh. We may not have suffered as your people did, but that does not mean we have not suffered.’

She stood, gaze sweeping over the ruins of the camp before finally coming to rest on Elarin.

‘Sennareth was our prince, not our god,’ Mathren said. ‘I believe he was right to consolidate our strength. I also believe he let personal feelings cloud his judgement.’

‘So you are with us?’ Kuonor asked.

‘If I were to march the Cera Niall forces back to Hysh, you would all die.’ The smallest of smiles ghosted across Mathren’s pinched lips. ‘So, yes, we are with you. As we have *always* been with you.’

‘And we are grateful.’ Elarin sketched a low bow, an act which seemed, if not to satisfy Mathren, then to mollify her at least. With a respectful nod, she settled back into her seat.

‘When do we depart?’ Kuonor’s question surprised Elarin. It seemed there would be no acclamation, no acceptance.

Elarin held the position of Lord Regent only through lack of opposition.

‘As soon as possible,’ she replied after a heartbeat. ‘The ritual will only grow in strength the longer we wait.’

‘Then we had best be about it.’ The Steedmaster pushed up from his camp

chair, nodding to the others.

They filtered out in ones and twos, lost souls gathering their new commands. All around, the terrible howl of death magic rent the air. Soon enough, only Lesaris and Celastir remained.

‘That went smoother than expected.’ Elarin looked to the ancient Calligrave, unable to uproot the uneasiness that had made a home in her heart.

‘As you said, there was no better choice.’ He returned a thin smile. ‘Forgive me, Lord Regent, I must prepare for the march.’

With a bow, the Calligrave departed.

‘What do we do now?’ Elarin turned to Celastir.

‘You are Lord Regent.’ The Bladelord shrugged. *‘Lead.’*

Elarin sought to centre herself, to prepare for the sacrifices she would need to make, but her doubts only seemed to multiply, the mantle of Lord Regent providing no solace. If anything, it magnified her uncertainty – a lofty yet lonely role, one in which victory begat only more conflict.

She thought of Teclis, of Sennareth, of Chariel. The former Lord Regent had sacrificed Elarin’s home, her friends and teachers. And yet, the whole of the Inscribed Citadel was but a drop of blood compared to the torrent Elarin was preparing to shed.

Elarin could not fathom the will of the gods, yet she was beginning to fathom Chariel’s burden.

Far too late to make things right between them, but perhaps enough to forgive.

Elarin drew in a deep breath, hands tight on staff and blade.

‘I am ready.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Shyish *crawled*. Skeletal limbs churned the dry earth, almost manic in their struggles to tear free of the accursed stone. Above, the sky roiled with spiteful clouds, unleashing not rain, but torrents of wind-driven ash upon the Lumineth advance. Beyond the high cliffs, Elarin could barely make out the Dwindlesea, pounding breakers made visible only by the scrum of witchlight-infused bones each wave deposited on the shore.

Elarin had helped craft Echaros' ritual, but her knowledge of the rite's arcane fundamentals did nothing to prepare her for its more terrible effects. Had she not known better, Elarin would have thought them caught in one of the Necroquake's aftershocks. Fortunately, the devastation was contained, if only for the moment.

The Lumineth army moved in a tight square, gleaming shields locked, pikes levelled, arcbows at the ready. It was as if they marched into a jungle of bone, carving through a scrabbling morass of skeletal vegetation. Such was the animating force of Marrowscar's nexus that the dead it raised had to be hacked limb from limb before they ceased to pose a threat. The ground was littered with clutching hands, snapping jaws, partially dismembered torsos that crawled and twitched. Whenever the press became too much, Elarin would call for the phalanx to part so Kuonor's Dawnriders

could charge through the gap, scattering the shambling horde before wheeling back to the protection of the massed Lumineth spears.

Wraiths and banshees flew overhead, sprays of golden sparks raining down upon the aelves each time one slammed against Master Lesaris' wards. Elarin had told the ancient Calligrave all she could about the ritual, and he had adjusted his runes to blunt the spiritual pull. Faces pale, foreheads daubed with sweat, Lesaris and his acolytes sketched golden sigils upon the hateful ground. They moved with the frenetic energy of festival dancers, limbs blurring through sorcerous permutations as they sought to shore up the Ouroboran Coast's geomantic foundation.

Despite their heroic efforts, Elarin could feel the ritual tugging at her soul. Waves of power flooded over the Lumineth as if they waded within a numinous sea, footing made slick and treacherous by the constant flow of energy towards the Marrowscar nexus. Muscles trembling, Elarin spat wards and counter spells into the howling gale, seeking to divert it around the small phalanx of razored brilliance.

'The tower!' Kyris' call was almost lost against the hateful shriek of wind. The Sentinel's cloak whipped about her, but her shoulders were set, her stance firm as she lifted one hand to the horizon, Marrowscar's high tower just visible against the slash of violet thunder. Although it was too distant to make out any Namarti upon the walls, Elarin's heart sank as she beheld the peninsula upon which the cruel fortress squatted.

The broken ground was lost beneath a sea of skeletal forms. Hordes of lesser undead lapped at the fortress walls, urged on by a core of Morteks arrayed across the thin strip of land. They had their backs to the Lumineth, pressing up the peninsula, seemingly sure-footed even amidst the maelstrom of death magic. There was fighting near the citadel. Groups of Ossiarchs armed with wide shields and ladders of woven bone sought to lead their skeletal fellows up and over the walls.

So the Idoneth yet fought.

Elarin did not know if the realisation filled her with relief or sorrow. It would be easy to battle the Ossiarchs – they were the enemy, had *always* been the enemy – but understanding the necessity of her confrontation with Echaros did nothing to undermine Elarin's growing anxiety.

She felt Celastir tense at her side, and raised a calming hand. 'Not yet.'

The Bladelord's grimace deepened, but she held back from the conflict.

Although Celastir's skill would have been of great use on the advance, Elarin had purposely kept her from battle. Echaros, Arach, and Scyllene yet survived, and she would need Celastir sharp once the Lumineth had breached the walls.

'Shall I clear us a path, Lord Regent?' Kuonor reined up. The Steedmaster's face was streaked with ash, the shimmer of his armour dulled by layers of accumulated grime. His grin had returned, but while no less wide, it carried a new sense of wariness.

Mathren hurried up, several guards in tow. The High Warden had been in the thick of the fighting, and it showed. She wore the resolute scowl of a woman marching to her doom, accented by a spreading bruise over one eye.

'Do we engage?'

Elarin chewed her lip, considering. Although they seemed not to have noticed the Lumineth advance, Elarin had no doubt the Morteks would react quickly. To send in the Dawnriders would be like casting a spear into the sea. Even with Naxia destroyed, the Bonereapers were bound to singular purpose, cold and relentless in its pursuit. The Lumineth could drive them from the field, but that would mean advancing up the peninsula under fire from Marrowscar's walls. Far better to hem both forces in and wait for them to weaken one another. Unfortunately, such a plan would require time. Time the Lumineth did not possess.

Elarin blew out a ragged sigh. For once, it would be nice to have something other than bad choices.

'We fight, but on our terms, not theirs.'

Elarin gestured at the low ridge that marked where the long spit of stone extended from the coast. 'Wardens in the front, buttressed by Lesaris' wards, Sentinels among the rocks. Kyris, wait for my signal. The Ossiarchs have no archers. They will pay for that oversight.'

'And my riders?' Kuonor asked.

Elarin allowed herself a small grin. 'I need you to get their attention.'

With a nod, the Steedmaster wheeled his mount towards the undead host. The other Dawnriders reacted like a flock of starlings, seeming to follow Kuonor's charge through instinct alone. The Steedmaster was once more in his element, lance couched, dark queue streaming in the wind as he and his surviving warriors cleaved through the staggering hordes of necromantic flotsam.

If only the Ossiarchs could be swept aside so easily.

Cresting the low rise, the riders struck the back of the Ossiarch formation. Kuonor's cavalry had taken pains to burnish their armour, brushing the ash from their horses' coats and polishing shields to a mirror sheen. There was little enough light to catch, but what tepid radiance pierced the storm clouds was magnified a thousandfold, the Dawnriders seeming almost to disappear in the reflected brilliance.

It was a small thing, a gleaming arrow fired into a storm of nadirite and sculpted bone. Kuonor carved deep into the rear ranks, lancing down a score of Morteks before the Ossiarchs had even registered the charge. Had their enemies been capable of fear, the sheer shock might have spread panic through the formation, but the Bonereapers only swept callously aside, leaving the destroyed and wounded as the survivors re-formed to face the assault. A hedge of nadirite spears sprouted on either side of the Dawnriders. Hemmed in by heavy shields, Kuonor shouted for his riders to fall back.

There was little a few score riders could do against such a terrible force. However, the point was not to wound the Bonereapers, but to draw them back into a killing field.

The surviving Dawnriders pelted over the rise, several hundred Ossiarchs in grinding pursuit. And the Lumineth were there to meet them.

Elarin stood amidst the Vanari phalanx. Although they were mostly veterans of Chariel's command, Elarin did see a scattering of Cera Niall warriors among the ranks, their faces no less resolute than those who had fought in Shyish since the beginning. Ash streaked their shields, bright armour blackened by soot and wind-driven dust. Borrowed from Kyris' scouts, heavy cloaks of mottled greys and blacks concealed all but the most extravagant movements.

Seeing the ranks arrayed around her, Elarin could not restrain an upswell of bitter mirth.

For once, Shyish's endless gloom would aid the Lumineth.

The two phalanxes met with the clattering roar of hail upon steel. Elarin lashed out with spell and blade, seeking gaps in the Bonereaper lines. Although roughly equal in size, the Ossiarchs were buttressed by the shambling press of newly risen dead. They pressed forwards in a scrabbling mass, only to meet Lesaris' wards.

Bright flame scoured the skeletal ranks, bone and ancient nadirite reduced to little more than charred slag. Lesaris himself moved along the line like a wading heron. Wherever he paused, bright runes sprang up, almost blinding amidst the gloom. And yet, the dead seemed without number.

‘Lord Regent?’ Mathren called as the Lumineth line began to bow beneath the sheer press of skeletal bodies. Elarin cast her eyes to the broken ground along the rise. Shadows slipped among the jagged boulders to either side of the conflict, the dead’s singular focus blinding them to all save their intended prey.

‘Now!’ Elarin shouted.

Signal flags waved, Sentinels rising from behind their shadowed perches to unleash a flashing volley upon the ranks of dead. Kyris and her archers were masters of their craft, but they could have been conscripts fresh from training – the dead were packed too tightly to miss. Sunmetal shattered ancient skulls, razored arrows diving into the gaps between steel and bone. The Ossiarchs tried to turn to meet the new threat, but their phalanxes were strong only from the front, and they could not wheel without presenting a flank to Elarin.

Slowly, the Ossiarchs began to give ground.

‘Give the order to advance.’ Elarin spoke softly, but firmly.

Celastir turned, eyes wide. ‘If we abandon the line, we’ll be surrounded.’

‘It must be done.’ Crouching behind walls and wards had not saved her people from the Necroquake, nor had it spared them from the devastation of Echaros’ ritual.

Her ritual.

‘Do it.’ She spoke without meeting Celastir’s gaze, worried the Blade-lord’s judgement might be too much to bear.

‘*Alaithi!*’ At Celastir’s shouted call, the two wings of the Warden phalanx bent back to form a tight square, undead flowing into the suddenly empty space.

‘*Senlui!*’

Loyal to their Lord Regent, the Lumineth left the safety of warded stones to press into the Ossiarch advance. They marched, and they died. But, at last, the Bonereapers seemed to hesitate in their siege. The Lumineth assault pulled more and more dead from the walls, a skeletal wave reinforcing hard nadirite phalanxes.

‘Forwards!’ Elarin abandoned her warding spells to unleash arcs of searing brilliance among the knots of armoured Bonereapers. Another wave of necromantic energy washed from Marrowscar, but Elarin did not relent, chanting through chattering teeth, through blurring vision. She saw a Warden stumble, a Sentinel throw out a hand to steady herself on a nearby rock. Some leaned upon one another for support, others simply pushed forwards, eyes fixed upon Marrowscar’s high wall, their movements as slow and jerky as the dead they faced.

At last, the Ossiarchs pulled back, allowing the lesser dead to harry the Lumineth advance while they re-formed their phalanxes. Finally, the path to Marrowscar stood open, barred by little more than a scattering of skeletal chaff.

With a ragged shout, Elarin led her warriors towards the citadel. They moved over the broken stone at a stumbling run, a wave of undead shambling in their wake. The Warden to Elarin’s left fell, an Idoneth arrow seeming to sprout from his bloodied throat.

‘Shields high!’ Mathren called, her gaze flicking between the Namarti Reavers on the wall and the approaching line of Ossiarchs.

The Lumineth made it to the base of Marrowscar’s gatehouse, the closest Ossiarchs perhaps a hundred paces behind. The gate had been scarred by blades, harrowed by flame and burning pitch, but it remained intact. Several Wardens sought to raise one of the discarded Ossiarch battering rams, but Elarin waved them aside, muttering a prayer to Holy Teclis as she laid a hand against the callous iron of the gate.

The Idoneth had warded themselves against Marrowscar but, knowing Echaros’ obsession with the ritual, Elarin would have bet her blade the Idoneth sorcerers had no time to master the ancient citadel’s defences.

She could feel the pulse of amethyst energy running through Marrowscar, the fortress’ arcane protections buttressing its physical walls. Elarin could yet sense gaps in the enchantments, places where she could prise apart the wards and work her will upon stone and steel. Her chant was a glittering blade, runes sharp as knives as she carved through the layers of protective enchantments. Dimly, Elarin heard the cries of her warriors as arrows slashed down from above, the renewed clash of sunmetal on chill nadirite as the Ossiarchs once again pressed forwards. Trapped against the walls, assaulted from behind and above, even Lumineth ranks could not hold for

long.

Eyes squeezed shut, muscles rigid and trembling, Elarin poured all she had into the heavy iron gate. She almost cried out with joy as she felt the metal tremble, ancient chains slipping like serpents through the stone eyelets above.

Slowly, the doors ground open.

Lumineth poured into Marrowscar's courtyard, a glittering flood that sent the few Namarti defenders scuttling away. They were quick to seize the gatehouse, but could not close the gate as the Ossiarchs pressed in close behind. Although a phalanx of Wardens barred their entrance into the citadel and Kyris' Sentinels continued to harry their flanks, the Lumineth could not seem to shift the bone-armoured ranks of Morteks.

'Celastir, take twenty Wardens and follow me,' Elarin called back, voice almost cracking with relief. 'Mathren, can you hold the gate?'

'These walls will fall before we do, Lord Regent.' The High Warden favoured Elarin with a sideways glance, her tone flippant, as if the battle did not balance upon a knife's edge. Although she knew Mathren's confidence was a deliberate front, Elarin found it reassuring nonetheless.

'Lesaris, ward the gatehouse as best you can.'

The Calligrave returned a sober nod, pale eyes already scanning the fortifications.

Celastir awaited at the head of a small group of Wardens, their cumbersome spears exchanged for short stabbing blades, daggers and throwing knives belted at their sides.

Orders given, Elarin wasted no more time. She turned from the conflict as if she had no doubts concerning the outcome.

If only the forge-loud hammer of her heart could be so easily calmed.

Most of the Namarti had retreated to the towers and walls, the occasional arrow winging down from above as if to remind the Lumineth they did not control Marrowscar. Elarin led her warriors across the hard-packed earth of the courtyard, taking care to remain within the shadow of the wall so that the Wardens' shields could ward against shafts.

The courtyard was empty apart from a few scattered groups of Namarti. Injured and dying, they had been dragged from the wall by their comrades, no doubt so Scyllene could fan the guttering flames of their souls back to

life.

Elarin sought for and found the Soulrender. Without the obfuscating tides of Voltach's sorcery, Scyllene glimmered like a pearl cast upon obsidian sand. Gone was her uncanny grace, replaced by a sense of harried exhaustion as she hurried from Thrall to dying Thrall. Some she raised, some she ended, each Namarti sent on their way with a sad shake of her head and a gentle pat on the shoulder.

'She is alone,' Celastir whispered.

Elarin's whole body seemed to tense at the implication. Without Scyllene, the Idoneth would crumble, Namarti shifting from common to irreplaceable. And yet, Elarin found herself shaking her head.

'Echaros is our target.' Although Scyllene's death would have dealt a crushing blow to the Idoneth, such was the weight of necessity that no one questioned Elarin's order. Faces grim, they slipped along the wall, Scyllene fading into the murk as they made for the nexus.

A dozen Namarti stood before the locked gate, blades at the ready. They had piled refuse and broken stone into a passable wall, but while the barrier might have proven an impediment to lesser archers, it was little more than a nuisance to Elarin's veterans.

The nearest guard collapsed, a dagger jutting from the blank expanse of skin where an eye might have once been. Celastir vaulted over the low wall, the heads of the two closest Namarti hitting the ground before she did. Wardens swarmed into the breach, their shorter blades deadly in the brutal closeness of the resulting melee. Less than five heartbeats later, the last Namarti had fallen, the quick assault having claimed but three of Elarin's Wardens.

Elarin jogged across the intervening space and slipped over the makeshift wall. No stranger to assaulting fortifications, Wardens lined up to either side of the gate.

'Can you open it?' Celastir asked.

'That remains to be seen.' Elarin moved up to touch the gate. The nadirite was chill to the touch, seeming to leech the warmth from Elarin's hand. Fortunately, it seemed Echaros had not managed to bend the ancient citadel wholly to his will. Eyes squeezed shut, Elarin applied the full force of her power to the Ossiarch wards. Almost grudgingly, the lock turned and the gate swung slowly open.

Silently, the Wardens rushed across the courtyard and down into the catacombs, Celastir at their head. After a few breaths of silence, Elarin heard the whispered call that meant the interior was clear. Even so, she entered with weapons at the ready and a killing spell on her lips.

Nothing moved in the shadows, the whole still and silent as a grave. Warily, they descended. Always threatening, the sombre halls of Marrowscar had become almost hostile under the effects of Echaros' ritual. Darkness seemed to edge in around them, gnawing at the thin circle of light. The air hung thick with dust, but was also somehow thin, as if they traversed the highest peak of Mount Avalenor. It felt as if there were a stone upon Elarin's chest, each breath more difficult than the last.

Far worse than the physical strain of the ritual was its spiritual effects. This close to the nexus chamber, it was all Elarin could do to keep the souls of her comrades from being torn from their bodies. Waves of deathly power washed over them as the ritual waxed towards completion, every amethyst breaker stronger than the last.

Elarin abandoned her own wards, letting the runes flicker and die as she whispered chants of solidarity, her thoughts filled with mountains, and ancient stone, and locked doors. Even so, she could do little to combat the dread that filled her. Drip by drip, it wore at the foundations of her resolve, an ageless, formless void that threatened to cast all her hopes to ruin.

It was almost a relief when the Namarti attacked.

They had nearly reached the portal when the Thralls rushed from a side passage, the creeping shadows seeming to swallow the telltale patter of footfalls. Elarin saw a Warden cut almost in half. Another had her parry swept aside, the backswing of the Thrall's jagged sword cleaving deep into her chest. The hallway descended into confusion. A tangle of shadows struggled in the gloom. There were no war cries, no shouts, the battle silent but for the clatter of blades and the occasional pained grunt. Arrows flickered across Elarin's vision, only to be swallowed in darkness.

A Namarti lunged for her. She batted the Thrall's sword aside with her staff, then slid Glimmerdark into the creature's chest. The Namarti dropped its blade to claw at her. Blood slicking her hand, Elarin tried to wrest Glimmerdark free, but the Thrall was too close. Its fingers raked across her cheek, her forehead, seeking her eyes. Searing runes leapt from her tongue, the smell of scorched flesh sharp in her nose as the Namarti fell away, little

more than a smoking husk.

Panting, she cast about for more Thralls, but none remained. Although half their number were down and almost none of them had escaped unmarred, the Lumineth stood victorious.

At least until Arach stepped from the darkness ahead.

‘He said you would come.’ The Thrallmaster waved a thin blade at Elarin. As if summoned by his words, more Namarti emerged from the shadows. A glance back was enough to chill Elarin’s soul. There were Thralls behind as well. Arach must have sacrificed the initial Namarti to guarantee the remainder could surround their enemy. At Elarin’s nod, the Lumineth survivors formed a tight knot in the centre of the room, back to back, weapons at the ready.

If anything, the move seemed to amuse Arach.

‘I thought no one, *no one*, could be so foolish as to seek a wounded allopex in its lair. It seems I owe Echaros an apology.’ He clucked his tongue, frowning. ‘Pity you won’t be around to hear it.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Elarin expected the Thrallmaster to charge. Reavers of all stripes depended largely on speed and ferocity, and Arach had shown himself no different.

Instead, he hurled his sword.

It was a clumsy throw, blade spinning end over end towards Elarin's face. She crossed blade and staff, ready to deflect the sword, only to realise too late that the Thrallmaster had drawn daggers from one of the straps criss-crossing his tattooed chest.

One, two, three knives glittered in the dim light, flung so quickly Arach's arms seemed to blur. A mere distraction, the sword rebounded from Elarin's crossed guard, but she could not move her weapons fast enough to defend against what followed.

Celastir's blade licked out, sweeping the first dagger from the air. The second rebounded from the Bladelord's pauldron as she stepped in front of Elarin. It seemed the third had been deflected as well, at least until Elarin heard Celastir grunt, crimson dripping from the chainmail on her side.

Even the Bladelord was not quick enough to parry Arach's next attack. As if emerging from a pool of purest shadow, his snapjaw eel lunged from the side, jaw closing on Celastir's arm. She tried to twist away, only to have the beast wrap itself around her torso, its slick, muscular body pinning her

blade to her chest.

It was the same attack Arach had used to defeat High Warden Ildirin. Only this time, Elarin could intervene.

She set a burst of light hissing towards the eel's pale eyes. Little more than a flicker of Hyshian brilliance, it was still enough to surprise a creature used to dark sea trenches. It flinched back, and Elarin was quick to strike. Before Arach could close the distance, Glimmerdark flicked out, slashing deep into the creature's rubbery hide. It tried to slip away, only to have Celastir hook her arms around its thrashing bulk. Teeth bared, the Bladelord was jerked about, but she held the writhing beast long enough for Elarin to drive Glimmerdark into the beast's bony forehead.

With one last hateful hiss it fell away, disappearing back into whatever underwater hell spawned such monstrosities.

Arach's mad shriek cut through the clatter of combat. Eyes burning like obsidian flame, he raised a trembling hand, fingers hooked as if to rend the space between them. As though summoned by the Thrallmaster's cold fury, Thralls surged forwards.

If Celastir's wounds bothered her she gave no sign, expression calm as she cut down the first of the charging Thralls. They came from all directions, faces twisted with wordless hate. Elarin ducked the sweep of a jagged blade, Glimmerdark licking out to etch a bloody line across the Namarti's ribs. It followed with a heavy downward slice, but Elarin stepped from the path, spinning to hammer her staff into the Thrall's left knee. It dropped, hissing, and she finished it with a quick chop to the back of the neck.

Two more filled its place. Behind, Elarin could see others in the darkness, jostling to strike. A Sentinel fell, cut down by one of the Thralls' wicked blades. Another stumbled back with an arrow in her throat, still slashing even as she sunk to her knees.

Casting a bolt of searing energy into the pale ranks, Elarin searched for a way out. A pool of shadow marked the nexus' entrance. Perhaps twenty paces away, it might have been across the Dwindlesea. The distance swarmed with keening Idoneth. Wherever Elarin looked, she saw Namarti: two score, three, an impossible fight even had her Wardens been fresh.

Rather than engage, Arach slipped among the seething mass of Thralls. He had drawn a long saw-toothed polearm from his back, darting in to cut at exposed wrists and ankles.

Through it all, the Thrallmaster sang.

Although his words were in the high, fluid tongue of the Aighmar Namarti, Arach delivered them with a mocking lilt, each refrain punctuated by a slash of his polearm and the cry of a wounded Lumineth. The Thrallmaster held her gaze throughout, grinning his predator's grin as he cut down her warriors.

It was clear he intended for her to watch them die.

Elarin stepped back, trying to gather her thoughts long enough to work a more powerful enchantment. It was like trying to weave in a hurricane. Deathly winds plucked at the threads of her spell, snarling them into an unrecognisable mess.

Barely a handful of Lumineth remained, harried on all sides. Elarin gasped in the darkness, the air seeming too thin to fill her lungs. Even Celastir seemed to bend beneath the inexorable flood. Wounds marred the Bladelord's armour, deep slashes and cuts that stained the ash-streaked plates a muddy brown.

Elarin could not help but cry out as the last Warden fell. It seemed the cruellest irony that she could come so far only to fall just short of absolution. She cared nothing for herself or her legacy. Damnation was a small price to pay if only she could stop the horrors Echaros was about to unleash. She cast about for something, anything to stop the slaughter.

But there was nothing around her save death.

The ritual neared completion. A terrible killing wave, it gathered at the edges of her perceptions, a crackling torrent of death energy preparing to consume everything that stood before it. There was no salvation, no forgiveness. There was only survival.

Like the toll of a great funeral bell, necromantic energy pulsed through the air, the ritual's power expanding to fill the whole of Elarin's senses. She could not see, could not hear, could not seem to move her legs except to fall towards Celastir.

Almost by reflex, Elarin dropped her staff to paw at the Bladelord's blood-slick pauldron, dragging Celastir back into the unsure shelter of her failing wards. Their souls flickered amidst the tumult, the wavering glow like a candle under glass, consuming what little air remained as it slowly dwindled.

All around them, Namarti burned.

Although Elarin squeezed her eyes shut, she could not blind her arcane senses to the spiritual tumult. Weak as they were, both she and Celastir possessed full souls, able, if just barely, to resist the ritual's pull. The Thralls were as insects swept up in a spring flood. Elarin saw their stolen spiritual energies peeled away like wisps of gossamer, the half-runes etched into their pale flesh burning bonfire bright in the hungry darkness. Backs arched, hands clutching at the air, the maelstrom swallowed their screams, just as it tore away their emaciated souls, leaving nothing but smoking husks behind.

Elarin could not save them, could barely save herself. She began a prayer to Teclis, only to stop halfway.

What could her god do for those he had already failed?

Like a receding tide, the ritual's power ebbed. It would come again, soon. Elarin drew in a ragged breath, finally able to open her eyes. Although tempted to reinforce her wards, she knew the reprieve was temporary. This close to the nexus, her arcane defences would be as walls of sand, swept aside by the next wave of death magic.

She glanced to the Bladelord. Celastir's face was drawn, partially concealed by a curtain of auburn hair that had pulled loose from the clasp. Although her jaw was tight and her lips pale, her eyes held the grim determination of one who has seen the end and accepted it.

'Are you well?' Celastir's voice was a rough croak, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of her mouth.

'Well enough.' Elarin glanced towards her discarded staff, but a wave of dizziness convinced her it was better to leave the weapon where it lay.

'The nexus.' Elarin spoke through cracked lips, the two of them swaying as they turned towards the churning mass of shadows.

Celastir nodded, baring bloody teeth as they limped towards the nexus gate.

Elarin noticed the Thrallmaster a moment too late. She was already turning as Arach reared up, shrieking like a damned revenant, a gore-streaked hatchet clutched in one hand. Blood drowned the seas tattooed on his scarred flesh, his dark eyes glittering with a mix of hatred and madness.

Celastir's blade swept up, only for Arach to hook the edge with his hatchet. Dragging it down, he lunged like a striking eel, burying jagged teeth in the Bladelord's exposed throat. Celastir dropped her blade to crash

a fist into the Drowned Prince's head, but he only scrabbled at her arm, drawing it close in a brutal death grip.

Elarin pushed away from the struggle, not out of fear, but to give herself room to swing. More beast than man, Arach snarled as one possessed, he and Celastir locked in a bloody embrace.

Elarin hacked down with Glimmerdark, a heavy two-handed blow that sent the crystalline blade through Arach's neck. Celastir broke free of the dying Thrallmaster, his head falling away. Arach's body stumbled back, taking one unsteady step before collapsing limply atop the carpet of tangled corpses.

Elarin paid him no mind, her attention on Celastir.

The Bladelord clapped a hand to her ravaged throat, blood squeezing between pale fingers as she sought to stem the crimson flow. Elarin caught her as she fell, easing her back against the tunnel wall. Hurriedly, Elarin tore a long strip from the hem of her soiled robes, pulling the Bladelord's hand aside so she might apply a rudimentary bandage to the wound on her neck.

'Go.' Celastir's eyes sought hers. 'I have suffered worse than this.'

'No, you haven't.'

A smile ghosted across the Bladelord's bloodied lips. Elarin moved to begin binding Celastir's other wounds, but her bodyguard pushed her hands away.

'I will be *fine*.' She gestured towards the shadowed gate. '*Go*.'

Elarin frowned at the wounded Bladelord. Celastir might survive her injuries, but she would not weather the next wave of necromantic energy.

She glanced back at the dead Namarti. No, worse than dead. Their souls had been consumed, drawn into the hideous swirl of dark power, forever damned.

Live or die, Elarin could not allow Celastir to end like this. There seemed no way to preserve her, and yet the tangled bodies gave Elarin an idea.

'Hold still.' She leaned in.

Although Celastir's eyes widened in surprise, she made no move as Elarin laid a hand on her forehead.

The enchantments came quickly, Elarin's hand sure despite her shaky breath, her trembling legs. She traced a finger across Celastir's forehead, the smell of scorched flesh sharp in Elarin's nose as the rune magic seared

the Bladelord's skin.

A moment and it was done. Elarin sat back to regard her handiwork.

'What have you done?' Celastir rasped, reaching up to touch her bloodied forehead.

'All I can.' Elarin touched the rune Alaithi she had carved into the Bladelord's skin, infusing the mountain sigil with all the arcane stability she could muster. She only hoped it would serve better than the runes that warded the Namarti's wretched souls.

'Remain here.' Elarin pushed herself up, wobbling only a little. 'I will return for you when it is over.'

When Celastir made no reply, Elarin feared she was already gone. Relief prickled along her neck as she saw the Bladelord's chest move, her breath slight, but steady.

Knuckles white on Glimmerdark's hilt, Elarin turned towards the nexus gate. She skirted the tangle of bodies, gaze fixed on the pool of shadows. She could not bear the sight of golden armour glittering amidst the blood. The Vanari who had followed her here had been damned for their loyalty.

The darkness was cool against Elarin's skin, almost refreshing after the dusty, attenuated air of the catacombs. A momentary feeling of motion, and she stepped into hollow silence.

The nexus room remained much as she remembered, the great obsidian orb at its centre surrounded by Ossiarch sigils. A web of Idoneth sorceries radiated across the room. Buttressed by Lumineth wards, it was a net cast over a churning sea, flexing with the swirl of necrotic power.

It was as if Elarin stood in the eye of a storm, the ritual's deathly howl reduced to little more than a distant mutter, its fury dulled by the funereal quiet of the nexus itself. Suddenly free of the constant push and pull of amethyst magic, Elarin nearly stumbled to her knees.

'Come to claim victory?' Echaros rose from behind the orb, seeming almost to emerge from the void itself. Darkness clung to him like a cloak, wisps of shadow trailing his every movement, as if the Soulscryer moved through a deep nightmare sea. His eyes were little more than bruised hollows in a face reduced to skeletal thinness. Elarin could see bone and sinew beneath attenuated flesh, each motion presaged by a flicker of amethyst energy.

She could only shake her head. 'What have you done?'

‘I could ask the same of you.’ Echaros’ chuckle was the rattle of dry leaves. He took a step towards her, arms spread. ‘Tell me, was this your plan all along?’

‘How could you think I would want *this*?’

‘The Ossiarchs are beaten.’ The false humour drained from his voice. ‘You and I are here at the end... together. Just as you wished.’

‘It did not have to be like this,’ Elarin said. ‘We could have—’

‘Spare me your platitudes. I desire them no more than your pity.’ He pointed razored fingers at her. ‘There was no other way this could end. But you knew that from the beginning, didn’t you?’

‘No, I...’ Elarin swallowed, unsettled by the Soulscryer’s accusation. She had held back information, had destroyed Kynlac rather than allow the Soulmason to share all its secrets with Echaros. She had not known where everything would lead, not consciously, of course, but perhaps...

No. The response came in Chariel’s voice, in Uiharan’s. This was not Elarin’s doing. She would not get swept up in Echaros’ paranoia.

‘I warned you of this. Of all this.’ She gestured at the orb, the Ossiarch sigils. ‘It was *you* who chose this path, not I.’

There was no humour in Echaros’ laugh. It was a terrible sound, a mad paroxysm of mirth, dripping with pain and bitter reproach. Almost subconsciously, Elarin took a step back, distancing herself from the Soulscryer.

At last, the shuddering cackle seemed to run its course. Echaros lifted a finger, casually flicking a bloody tear from the corner of one eye.

‘What a tiresome burden you Lumineth bear.’ He advanced on her, voice dripping with mockery even as his fingers hooked into killing claws. ‘Always needing to be correct.’

A whip of crackling energy lashed from the Soulscryer’s outstretched hands. It would have set Elarin’s bones aflame had she not hurled herself to the hard tile.

Gasping against the impact, she reached for her own enchantments. They slipped from her grasp, dulled by the pure death magic that suffused the nexus chamber. Blood pounding in her ears, Elarin rolled to her feet, only to stumble back as Echaros’ talons raked her shoulder.

Glimmerdark cut empty air. The Soulscryer slipped aside, almost a shadow as he darted around Elarin’s strike to carve a line of bright fire along her

thigh. She tried to cut at him, but he was too close, his razored talons screeching across her breastplate, tearing bloody links from her mail. It was all Elarin could do to keep Glimmerdark between them.

‘Poor Elarin.’ He spoke from the spreading darkness. ‘Wrapped in so many lies you have even begun to believe them yourself.’

Pain blossomed across Elarin’s cheek as Echaros traced a finger along her jawline.

‘We shall cut the falsehoods away. Soon you will see clearly as I do.’ He slashed at her wrist and would have severed tendons had not Elarin driven him back with a looping cut from Glimmerdark.

She stood, panting in the dark, her hands wet with blood, numbness creeping up her left leg. Even at full strength she would have been hard-pressed to overcome Echaros, imbued as he was with the power of thousands of stolen souls.

Elarin was a sailor fallen overboard on a storm-tossed sea, soon to be lost beneath the waves. She was tempted to strike at the nexus itself, but knew the orb would only absorb her feeble assaults. Nor could she remove the buttressing Lumineth runes without releasing a massive wave of death energy. With Marrowscar tied to the spires of Hysh, the resulting surge would devastate not only the Ouroboran Coast, but also whatever region of the Realm of Light was twinned to this terrible citadel.

‘Fear not, Lumineth. I have come to *save* you.’ Echaros stalked the shadows. Although his tone was mocking, bitter hurt threaded the Soul-scryer’s words.

A desperate idea bubbled through the cracks in Elarin’s mounting hopelessness. Marrowscar was tied to Hysh, a means of weakening the spire network.

But such a bridge went both ways.

Elarin hurled Glimmerdark at Echaros. He skipped aside, laughing. But the blade was not an attack, merely a distraction to open a path to the orb. Gathering her remaining strength, Elarin threw herself at the circle of icy darkness, runes crackling from her chapped and bleeding lips even as her arms sank into the chill surface of the orb.

‘What are you doing?’ Echaros slashed at her back, talons cutting through armour to score the flesh beneath, but Elarin did not relent.

Incantations poured from her like blood. At first, they found no purchase

upon the nexus. Elarin was up to her shoulders in shadow, hurling enchantments into the void. A heartbeat, and she would be lost to shadow, her soul riven by the deathless torments of Nagash's realm.

Then her fingers brushed against something solid. Warm to the touch, it seemed to curl about her grasping hands. Like a whaler hauling in a prize catch, Elarin heaved, bending until she felt as if her spine would snap.

A network of glimmering lines spread across the circumference of the orb. Perfectly straight, they intersected one another at oblique angles, subdividing and confining the darkness within a net of pristine brilliance.

Elarin could feel Echaros tearing at her, frantic in his efforts to rip her from the spreading mandala of radiance. There was no pain, only a terrible chill that seemed to suffuse Elarin's limbs. Numbed lips stumbled over intricate cants, her throat dry as a tomb, her tongue seeming to fill the entirety of her mouth.

None of it mattered.

For a moment, Elarin brought Hysh to the Realm of Death.

It was only a glimmer, barely a fleck of the Realm of Light's holy brilliance – small, but bright enough to make her eyes water. Cupping the mote of radiance in her hands, she turned to Echaros, who recoiled from the sudden glare, one hand raised to shield his eyes, the other hooked as if to tear the light of Hysh from Elarin's grasp.

She saw him, then, every curve of his emaciated body picked out in brutal detail by the harsh glare. Echaros had tied himself to the ritual, cast his body and soul upon the necromantic pyre that even now roiled about them. It was a terrible act, with a price the Soulscrier would pay for eternity. And yet, even after all that had passed between them, Elarin understood Echaros.

In his place, would she have done any less to save her people?

But such empathy only made Elarin's task all the more cruel. There was no separating Echaros from the ritual, no salvation to be had. Elarin had hoped to use her knowledge to save the Idoneth. In the end, it could only destroy them.

She raised the glow of Hysh, voice rough as she spoke the runes that would end the ritual.

Howling like a newly risen shade, Echaros hurled himself at her. For the briefest of moments, their eyes met. It might have been the glare but Elarin thought she saw her own tears mirrored in the Soulscrier's dark eyes.

Blinding radiance filled the nexus chamber, Echaros' ravaged outline lit by the searing glow. He fell away, his cry lost amidst the exultant roar of a thousand souls set free from necromantic bondage. Equal, opposite light pierced the darkness, driving back the shadows, breaking one wave into a thousand thousand ripples, fragmented so they might do little harm. Free of the ritual's oppressive chains, the captured souls flitted back into the aether, the great gyre of ghostly forms fading like late afternoon sun. Elarin slumped back. Numbness crystallised into purest agony. She would have screamed, had not the very act of drawing breath sent pain arcing along her ribs. She worked to master the hurt, lips moving in runic centring chants. Slowly, the pain of fresh wounds faded to a dull ache – not gone, but bearable. For the moment, Elarin could at least push to her knees without losing consciousness.

It seemed to take ages to scan the nexus room. The outpouring of Hyshian energy had scoured the Ossiarch sigils, etching them with arcs and hachures, rendering them inert. Of the orb, there was no sign. The plinth stood empty, its shadowy occupant having faded back into the deathly realm from which it was drawn.

Elarin found Echaros on the scorched tile. The Soulscryer had fallen on his side, seemingly robbed of his necromantic strength. Even so, Elarin bent to retrieve Glimmerdark before she approached him.

She nudged Echaros with the blade, and he shuddered, rolling over.

No power remained in the Soulscryer's ravaged form, his haggard features echoed by the weak flicker of his soul. Breath rapid, gaze distant, he absently scratched at the scored tiles, as if still seeking to tear Elarin apart.

She knelt next to him, only to tense as Echaros turned his head, seeming to focus on her.

'Why?' Elarin asked.

It was a poor question, and yet it seemed the only one that mattered.

Echaros bared his teeth at her, lips moving in silent response.

Elarin leaned closer, straining to parse the Soulscryer's words. But all she heard was the mutterings of a damned soul.

Her legs suddenly weak as wet parchment, Elarin sat back, regarding the Soulscryer's now motionless form, watching as his soul slipped into the aether. A mixture of sorrow and relief spread through her. She rose on shaky legs, Glimmerdark before her like an elder's walking cane. Even

should Elarin wish to mourn, there was no time.
The dead were gone, if only for the moment.
Now, she must turn her attention to the living.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



‘Hold.’ Elarin raised a hand as if to press back the phalanx of Wardens. ‘Perhaps I can speak with the Idoneth.’

Kyris’ scowl showed exactly what the High Sentinel thought of Elarin’s idea, but she nodded for her archers to lower their arcbows. The surviving Idoneth had barricaded themselves in one of Marrowscar’s high towers. Elarin was content to let them remain while her forces secured the rest of the fortress and hunted down the scattered dead.

But, although she wished it were not so, the time had come. ‘All you are likely to earn for your trouble is an arrow in the neck,’ said Celastir. Bandaged and salved, one arm in a sling, the other folded over a crutch, the Bladelord still insisted on hobbling after Elarin. Fresh skin covered the cuts on Celastir’s face and hands, the result of a positively heroic effort by the Lumineth healers. The only visible wound was the rune Alaithi carved into the Bladelord’s forehead, still scabbed and raw. Although the healers had offered to erase the sigil, Celastir had refused, seeming to regard it as a strange badge of honour.

Elarin could not disagree.

She squinted at the canted tower in which the surviving Idoneth had barricaded themselves. Perhaps a hundred Namarti, the dying gasp of a

once mighty people. Apart from this, the Lumineth had secured Marrowscar. Once the hordes of undead had been robbed of their animating power, the surviving Ossiarchs had been scattered by the Lumineth advance. No doubt they would continue to trouble the Ouroboran Coast, but without Naxia and Kynlac, the remaining Morteks were but an irritation.

Elarin chided herself. It was foolish to underestimate the Ossiarchs. She made a note to speak to Kuonor and Lesaris about setting a watch upon the coast, both physical and arcane. But, for the moment, all that stood in the way of victory was a beaten Soulrender and a handful of Thralls.

‘We have suffered losses enough,’ Elarin said. ‘I would rather spend time than lives.’

‘I am less worried about the Namarti than Scyllene,’ Kyris said. ‘The Soulrender is a pit adder, waiting for us to come close.’

Elarin pursed her lips, considering. ‘With the nexus destroyed, no souls remain for her to draw upon. If I know Scyllene, she has used her stores to keep the surviving Namarti whole.’

‘And *do* you know Scyllene?’ Celastir asked.

‘I know that she does not wish to watch her people die.’ Elarin made to cross her arms, only to wince as the scars on her back twinged with pain. Echaros’ claws had cut deep, proof of how little she truly knew of the Idoneth.

‘You would set these reavers free, Lord Regent?’ Mathren spoke for the first time. A skilled courtier, the High Warden had phrased her dissent as a question but her opinion was clear enough.

Elarin glanced to her commanders, seeing only drawn faces and shadowed eyes. They had been through much, suffered much. It would be cruel to ask them to let their enemies walk free. The destruction of the nexus and conquest of Marrowscar was not an end, but a beginning. There would be more conflict in the days ahead.

In the end, Elarin was Lord Regent – the decision, and the burden, were hers.

‘I will go, alone.’ She fixed the others with a level gaze. ‘Stand ready to assault at my signal.’

‘As you say, Lord Regent.’ Mathren’s bow was stiff, but the High Warden turned to order her phalanx back to cover.

‘I should accompany—’ Celastir began, but Elarin shook her head.

‘You would be a liability.’ Although harsh, she knew the Bladelord could not deny the truth of her words. ‘My wards will keep me safe enough.’

Celastir narrowed her eyes, but acquiesced to be escorted back to the safety of the Lumineth shield-wall with only a modicum of disdain.

With a deep breath, Elarin checked her protective runes, then crossed the courtyard into the Namarti killing field.

An arrow sparked from her wards, consumed in a glittering arc of golden light.

‘Do not waste your ammunition,’ Elarin called back. ‘I have come to talk.’

Another arrow burned.

Elarin waited.

After half a dozen more missiles crackled to gleaming ashes, Elarin heard the rattle of chains. The tower gate ground open to reveal Scyllene flanked by a pair of Namarti. Even in the shadow of the gate, Elarin could not help but recognise Hakos and Skria. The glimmer of relief Elarin felt at seeing that the two Namarti had survived was quickly eclipsed by the realisation she might yet watch them die.

Although the Soulrender was armed and armoured, Scyllene’s head was bare. Her lined face was steeped in bitterness, her expression one of helpless fury. Elarin studied the flicker of sorcery twisting around Scyllene’s body. Barely a shadow of the Soulrender’s former power, her single remaining lurelight hung dark and empty.

‘You hold nothing we desire,’ Scyllene called. ‘Save a quick demise.’

Elarin had to try. ‘Quit the tower, and you shall go free.’

‘Ah, freedom. How magnanimous.’ Scyllene gave an ugly smile. ‘And just where would we go, wise Loreseeker?’

‘You need not flee this coast,’ Elarin said. ‘We could use allies. In return, you would have our friendship and protection.’ She took a few slow steps towards Scyllene, close enough to see the glitter of desperation in the older aelf’s eyes. ‘There may be other Aighmar survivors. This need not be the end of your people.’

‘So we would become Lumineth pets.’ Scyllene glanced to Hakos and Skria. ‘What say you?’

Skria responded with an aggrieved burst of Namarti invectives. Hakos merely spat at Elarin’s feet.

Scyllene’s expression turned cold. ‘Seems as if you have your answer,

Lumineth.’

Elarin shook her head, regret settling upon her shoulders like a heavy cloak.

‘Then I have done all I could.’

It was an easy thing to send a blade of light through the nearest gate chain. Severed links clattered to the stone, followed by the crash of the heavy counterweight as the gate mechanism was rendered inoperable.

Although the Idoneth were quick to react, they were not as quick as Kyris’ Sentinels. A score of arrows whipped past Elarin. Skria was just raising her bow when the first caught her in the shoulder. The impact half spun the Namarti, opening her up to the next dozen shafts.

It was small solace that at least Skria did not suffer. Hakos managed two stumbling steps towards Elarin, blade raised. His legs gave out before the blow could fall.

Scyllene screamed – a sound of such agony Elarin could not help but retreat a step.

Bloodied and staggering, half a dozen arrows jutting from the joints of her armour, the Soulrender charged.

Calmly, Elarin conjured a weave of gleaming strands, sending it towards Scyllene with a quick twist of her hand. It wrapped about the Soulrender and drew tight. Curses and counter spells hissed from Scyllene’s bloodied lips, but what little power remained to the Soulrender could not overcome the smothering weave of Elarin’s sorcery.

‘Leave her,’ she said, as Mathren charged past at the head of a wedge of pikes. The High Warden nodded without breaking stride. The Vanari parted around the struggling Soulrender, driving through the open gate and into the shadows beyond.

Although Elarin steeled herself against the sounds of slaughter, she could not ward herself against Scyllene’s frantic howls. Eyes squeezed shut, Elarin made a fist, drawing the net tight to choke the Soulrender’s cries. After a few ragged gasps, Scyllene slipped into unconsciousness.

A mercy for them both.

The Namarti fought to the last, but Elarin had expected nothing else. She attempted to console herself with the fact she had tried to save them, but it provided little solace.

A pair of Wardens bent to retrieve Scyllene. Elarin spun on her heel,

striding back across the broken courtyard. As the last sounds of struggle began to die down, she found herself wondering if the Thralls saw this death as any different than the ones before. Surely, they must fear such a final end.

Or perhaps they welcomed the relief it brought.

‘You cannot keep her alive,’ Celastir said as Elarin walked up, Scyllene in tow.

‘She may possess information of use to us.’

‘This only prolongs the inevitable.’ Celastir fixed Elarin with a searching look. ‘Scyllene killed our people, stole their souls to patch up her miserable kin. Preserving her life makes you appear weak, ruled by emotion rather than sense.’

‘I know.’ Elarin glanced back to Scyllene – unconscious, her head lolling with every jostling stride. ‘I only require... a moment before the end.’

Celastir gave a grudging nod. ‘You had best be quick about it, then.’

Elarin had Scyllene brought to one of Marrowscar’s remaining towers. Chains of sorcery were replaced with mundane ones, warded to blunt the meagre power that remained to the Soulrender.

Waiting for Scyllene to awake, Elarin walked the outer walls. Vanari had begun to remove the slain Thralls and pile them outside the keep. Pyre smoke twisted up into a slate-grey sky, soon lost amidst darkening clouds. The sounds of activity within the keep faded as Elarin gazed out to sea, eclipsed by the crash of waves and the ceaseless scrabble of skeletal limbs. Even now, the dead lay unquiet in their rocky prison, unable to cease their endless struggles.

Elarin gripped the battlement, hands tight upon the ancient stone fortifications.

At last, Marrowscar belonged to the Lumineth. Once repaired, cleansed and properly warded, the fortress would provide a bulwark against the myriad threats of Shyish. The irony was not lost on Elarin – in pushing for advance, she had secured exactly the defensive fortifications that had so captivated Lesaris and Prince Sennareth.

‘Lord Regent.’ A Sentinel came jogging up. ‘She is awake.’

Elarin nodded, chest tight as she descended to the courtyard. It was as if she marched to a Defence of Principles, only now she was the interrogator.

She did not know why she sought answers from Scyllene. Celastir was certainly correct – speaking with the Soulrender would only prolong both their suffering. And yet, Elarin had never been able to leave well enough alone.

An excellent trait in a Loreseeker, not necessarily a Lord Regent.

‘They are gone?’ Scyllene asked without preamble.

Elarin nodded.

The Soulrender blew out a shaky breath. ‘Why do I remain?’

‘For your crimes against the Lumineth, you are to be made an example of.’ There was no point in equivocating.

‘And what of your crimes against *us*?’

‘That was your choice.’ Elarin pulled up a chair so she could sit across from the chained Soulrender. ‘Yours, Echaros’, Arach’s, Voltach’s – all of you. I held out my hand, again and again, and every time you slapped it away.’

‘Your hand?’ Scyllene scoffed. ‘You mean you held out a slave collar.’

‘Take a moment to look past your bitterness.’ Elarin shook her head. ‘You know we could have worked together, could have helped one another.’

‘If you truly believe that, then you are more of a fool than I thought.’ Scyllene shifted with a rattle of warded chains. ‘Our paths were set long before our birth, shaped by failures beyond our control. Only Teclis is to blame.’

‘We can be more than our past,’ Elarin said.

‘Can we?’ Scyllene peered past her, as if her gaze might pierce the fortress walls to reveal the piled corpses of her kin.

Elarin studied the Soulrender for a long moment. Then, with a soft sigh, she stood, turning away.

Nothing remained for her here. Nothing but the inevitable.

‘I shall make it quick.’

‘Quick? Death is but the beginning of my torments.’ Scyllene gave a jagged laugh. ‘At least I shall not suffer alone.’

Elarin kept her back straight, her pace measured, but she still could not escape the feeling that she fled the room, Scyllene’s mockery hot as a fresh brand.

Celastir and Master Lesaris awaited her outside, their expressions cold as the storm clouds rolling in from the Dwindlesea. Elarin paused, feeling the

wind shift, trading smells of pyre ash for the heavy tang of salt and stone.

‘We have secured the surrounding coast.’ Lesaris offered a slight bow. ‘Steedmaster Kuonor is riding down the last few stragglers.’

Elarin nodded. ‘Well done.’

Lesaris made as if to look past her. ‘And the Soulrender?’

Elarin returned a solemn look. ‘There is nothing more to say.’

‘It might be better if she is executed in public,’ Lesaris said with a thoughtful frown. ‘To show how we deal with our enemies. Also, it will give the Vanari closure to see justice for both Chariel and Sennareth.’

Closure. The idea made Elarin want to laugh. Still, she was bound by the strictures of her role. Mercy would benefit no one.

‘Gather the Vanari,’ Elarin said to Celastir. When the Bladelord hesitated, Elarin favoured her with a tired smile. ‘I am in no danger at the moment. Pass along my orders, then rest. I shall need your skills again soon enough, I fear.’

‘Yes, Lord Regent.’ Celastir straightened, her expression unreadable. She looked about to say more, but her gaze flicked to Lesaris and she settled for a stiff bow, before turning on her heel. As the Bladelord limped away, Elarin glanced over to see the smallest of smiles had nested at one corner of Lesaris’ lips.

‘Does something amuse you, Master Calligrave?’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘Only I do believe that is the first time I have heard your bodyguard use your new title.’

Elarin studied the Bladelord’s back, shaking her head. She had always possessed Celastir’s loyalty. It was a strange feeling to have earned her respect.

They stood silently as the courtyard filled with Vanari, the hundreds who had survived the battle – mostly a mix of Wardens and Sentinels, Kuonor’s Dawnriders still absent. Cavalry would be one of the first things Elarin requested from Hysh. They would require more mobility to hold the coast.

That is, if the courts affirmed her role as Lord Regent.

‘I have sent a missive recommending you retain your position.’ Lesaris spoke as if reading her thoughts. ‘The other commanders agree.’

Elarin turned, unable to conceal her surprise.

‘I find I have... misjudged you.’ Lesaris did not meet her gaze, only stood, arms folded, no expression on his deeply lined face. ‘I mistook your

curiosity for weakness, thought you blinded by ambition.’ He turned as if to take in the ancient citadel. ‘But it seems you saw the most clearly of us all, Lord Regent.’

Elarin bowed low as she could given their new difference in rank.

Any warm feelings she had were washed away as Scyllene was led to the hastily constructed platform at the centre of the courtyard. As if to presage the Soulrender’s imminent demise, there came a threatening rumble from the clouds overhead.

Despite the chains, Scyllene walked as if attending a court function rather than her own execution, not even a glance spared for the ranks of stone-faced Vanari. There were no shouted curses, no acknowledgement of the doom that lay before her. Scyllene merely knelt, beaten but unbroken.

Elarin would expect nothing else. She was an aelf, after all.

Back straight, Elarin mounted the platform. Any of the other commanders would have gladly ended the Soulrender, but it seemed cowardly not to perform the deed herself.

Elarin’s mouth was dry as a crypt. ‘Do you have any final words, Scyllene?’

The Soulrender did not meet her gaze. ‘Yes, but there is no one here worth speaking them to.’

Glimmerdark rose and fell – a clean kill, if little else.

Elarin forced herself to watch as Scyllene’s body was carried away to be burnt with the others. The Vanari saluted her, other commanders offering congratulations and affirmations of loyalty. She waved away the well-wishers, leaving the courtyard in the direction of the high walls, drawn by the sounds of wind and wave.

The nexus was gone, the ritual broken, Nagash’s return forestalled. Elarin had won, but she found herself unable to feel the victory, only the terrible weight of a thousand tiny failures. If she had but acted sooner, spoken with more confidence. If she could have reached Echaros. If he had only trusted her.

All gone. Leaves buried beneath winter snows, returned to the earth come spring.

Elarin could not help but wonder if Scyllene had been right. If there had ever been a chance for any of them.

Dully, Elarin climbed to the high wall overlooking the water. Hard and

cruel as the Ossiarchs who had made it, the battlement was a blunt, callous thing, but it would serve the Lumineth well enough. Overhead, the sky had taken on a violent cast, dark as Elarin's mood, slivers of cold salt air slipping through her robes.

Beyond, the Dwindlesea seemed to stretch into infinity.

Elarin had spent her life by the sea, but she would never look upon it again without thinking of those who dwelt within its shadowed recesses. Bound to a broken existence, the Idoneth were shaped by inescapable history – their struggle futile, inevitably doomed. And yet, they had no choice but to continue.

Elarin had once thought the Lumineth free of such shackles. Now, she was not so sure.

On the cliffs below, a skeleton managed to worm free of the stone. It clutched at the rock, fleshless jaws stretched in a soundless cry, though in triumph or anguish, Elarin did not know.

The next wave came crashing in, and the skeleton was gone.

Elarin leaned forwards to squint at the churning surf, but the sea had swallowed the ancient bones.

There came a flash from overhead, the bright glare of lightning fading to darkness long before the roll of distant thunder.

Elarin the Illuminated lifted her face to the sky, breathing deep as it began to rain.

Once she had thought of returning home, perhaps working to rebuild the Inscribed Citadel so that a new generation of scholars might study within its illuminated walls. Now, she knew there would be no such quiet end for her.

Elarin's recollections of Hysh seemed but half-remembered dreams. She did not belong there, not any more. Shyish had claimed her comrades and her enemies, just as it had claimed her.

Contrary to its name, nothing ever truly died in the Realm of Death.

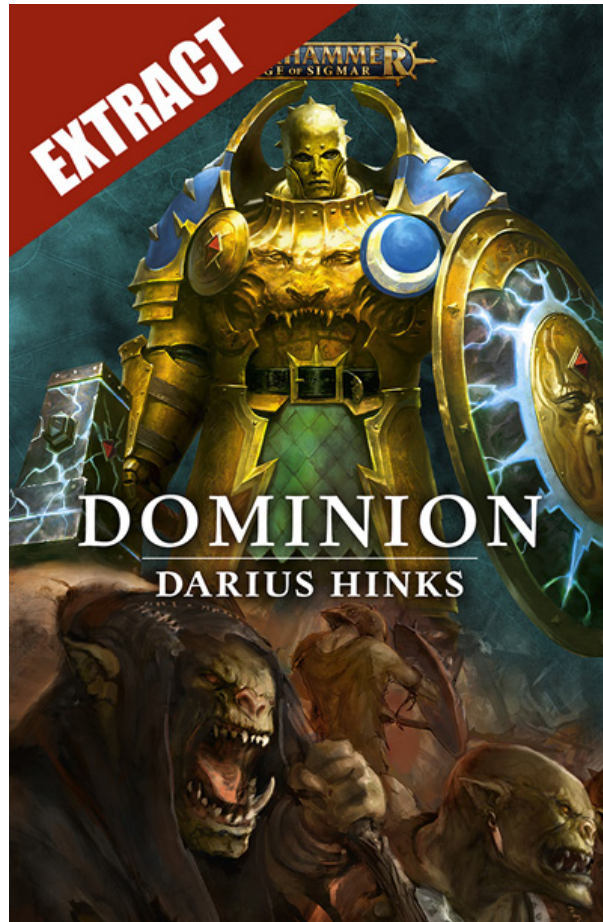
Chariel, Arach, Scyllene, Echaros – they and all the countless others would follow Elarin for the rest of her life.

And beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Dicken's first story for Black Library was 'The Path to Glory', and he has since penned several more tales set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novella *The Red Hours*, and short fiction for the anthologies *Gods & Mortals* and *Myths & Revenants*. He has been an avid reader of Black Library novels since he found dog-eared copies of *Trollslayer*, *Xenos* and *First and Only* nestled in the 'Used Fantasy/Sci-fi' rack of his local gaming store. He still considers himself an avid hobbyist, although the unpainted Chaos Warband languishing in his basement would beg to differ. By day, he studies old Japanese maps and crunches data at The Ohio State University.

An extract from *Dominion*.



The city grumbled and lurched, almost hurling Niksar from the wall. He was perched on a broken lintel, looking down over one of Excelsis' most unwelcoming streets – a rain-lashed warren of lean-tos and hovels that looked discarded rather than built. The Veins had always been one of the poorest parts of the city and, during the tremors of recent months, several streets had caved in, opening craters and revealing the coiled horrors that wormed through the city's foundations.

Excelsis was besieged. Not just by tribes of greenskins but by the land itself. Walls groaned as grubs devoured the mortar. Sewers flooded as lizards spilled from drains. Slates tumbled from roofs, hurled by screeching, feathered rodents. Nothing was stable. The ground stirred, constantly, and every shattered flagstone revealed something repulsive. It was like being on the deck of a sinking ship. And this close to the city walls, the tremors were even more violent.

Niksar looked over at Ocella, hoping she was nearly finished. Ocella was only standing a dozen feet away but he could barely make her out through the mounds of rubbish and debris. He was sure it must be dawn by now, but the light clearly had better places to be. Niksar could sympathise.

As far as he could tell, the exchange was going as planned. The street was deserted and Ocella was talking eagerly to her contact, showing no signs of alarm. She had promised Niksar this would be an easy job. She was meeting a dockhand to buy information, tipped off by one of her pets, and as usual she wanted Niksar on hand in case there was a disagreement. Niksar almost wished there would be so he could shift into a different position, but it all seemed to be going swimmingly. The dockhand was a weaselly old salt Ocella had met on several previous occasions. He was hunched and

wizened but Niksar guessed he was probably no older than thirty. Life beyond the city walls was brutal. It took its toll on everyone who sailed the Coast of Tusks.

The dockhand kept glancing up and down the rubble-strewn alley, peering through the rain, clearly nervous. Niksar could see why Ocella had asked him to hide himself up on the wall.

Ocella twitched and threw back her head. Then she laughed. Her laugh was peculiar, a kind of ‘haw haw’ that reminded Niksar of a coughing dog. The more he worked with her, the stranger he found her. He knew she was wealthy, but she wore filthy animal skins and a tattered cloak of greasy feathers. She looked like she had never slept under a roof. She wore a crooked feather headdress and had dozens of tiny bird skulls plaited into her hair that clattered as she moved. And she moved constantly. It was hard to be sure of her age, covered as she was in muck and feathers, but Niksar guessed she was around twenty years old. Despite that, she held herself like a palsied crone, always flinching, spitting and scratching. She leant constantly on a staff carved from a wing bone. The bone was taller than she was and as she talked it juddered in her hands, shaking rain from the beak at its head.

The meeting continued to be uneventful and Niksar’s attention wandered. He had never mentioned it to Ocella, but the role of lookout did not really play to his strengths. He thought about the deal they were hoping to make tomorrow with an armourer over on Quadi Street, then his thoughts ranged into the distant future as he returned to his favourite fantasy. He pictured himself rising from the squalor he had endured for the first twenty years of his life. The city was on the verge of collapse, but his own fortunes had never been better. He was close, this time. Close to really becoming someone of importance – someone who did not have to scrape by to survive. So many of his schemes had come to nothing, but working with Ocella had gained him an incredible collection of artefacts. Strange as she was, he had to agree they were a good team. And, because Ocella thought everyone else in the city was trying to kill her, Niksar could not see their lucrative relationship ending soon. Visions of opulence and power filled his head.

His daydreams were interrupted by movement near his hand. A beetle wriggled from beneath a stone and pounced on a plump, slow-moving grub.

The beetle locked its mandibles around its prey and swallowed it whole. Once it had finished eating, the beetle took a few steps, then paused, as though remembering something. Niksar leant closer, fascinated, knowing what would come next. Sure enough, the insect juddered and fell onto its side, twitching and trying to stand, then its carapace burst, revealing a mass of teeming larvae. Mature burrow grubs sacrificed themselves so that their young could start life with a hearty banquet. Niksar grimaced as the larvae devoured their host. There were so many it only took a few seconds.

The land is always hungry, thought Niksar, remembering the words of an old Thondian song.

A loud bang echoed down the alleyway, followed by the acrid smell of gunpowder. Niksar cursed in surprise and leapt from the wall, drawing his sabre and pointing the blade into the rain.

Ocella stumbled away, and for a moment Niksar thought that his golden goose had been shot. Animals shifted under her furs and glossy eyes stared out at the drizzle, panicked by the noise. Then he noticed that the docker had a hole in his forehead. The man wheezed quietly and crumpled to the ground.

‘Sigmar’s teeth,’ muttered Niksar. In all the times he had worked with Ocella, his presence had been a formality. She was crippled by paranoia but there had never actually been any need for a bodyguard.

The alleyway was empty, but the sound of the gunshot would have carried to all the nearby streets. Passers-by might come to investigate. Or even the city watch.

‘Niksar!’ cried Ocella, staggering away from the corpse, hysterical, waving her staff at the shadows.

‘Damn!’ he spat, rushing to her side and staring at the dead body.

Ocella looked everywhere but at him, her eyes rolling loosely in sunken sockets. ‘Why weren’t you looking?’ She laughed, making the haw haw sound again. ‘The lookout who doesn’t look!’ Her straining eyes made it clear that she did not really find the situation amusing. She reached under her furs, trying to calm her rodents and birds.

Footsteps echoed towards them and Niksar hauled Ocella behind a lean-to.

‘It came from that direction,’ he muttered, peering through the shadows. He tried to shove her further back but she gripped him like a terrified child.

‘I told you,’ she whispered. ‘They’re after me.’

‘Who?’ demanded Niksar, but before she could answer a figure strode into view, splashing through puddles, silhouetted by the dawn. ‘It’s a guardsman,’ muttered Niksar as he saw a Freeguild uniform replete with a polished breastplate and a broad, feather-plumed hat.

‘A soldier?’ Ocella wiped drool-sodden hair away from her mouth and tucked it behind her ears. She tried to look less panicked but her mouth refused to stop twitching. ‘Here? No one comes here. That’s specifically why I chose here. Here is where people aren’t. If you ask anyone about here, they will—’

‘Niksar!’ cried a familiar voice.

Ocella gasped and stared at Niksar. ‘Did you sell me out?’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘You? I thought I could trust you.’

Anger pounded in his temples. ‘Of course I didn’t sell you out. Just because I fight for glimmerings doesn’t mean I’m a—’

‘Niksar!’ cried the soldier again, pointing a pistol his way and stepping close enough for Niksar to make out a face. It was a young woman in her mid-twenties with an angular, proud face and large, dark eyes. She was tall, broad-shouldered and powerful looking.

Niksar lowered his sword in shock. ‘Zagora?’

‘Who is it?’ hissed Ocella, swaying and stumbling as she tried to look.

‘My sister. She won’t hurt...’ Niksar’s words trailed off as he looked at the docker’s corpse. ‘Zagora,’ he demanded, striding out of his hiding place. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Saving your life.’ She was reloading her pistol as she strode past him towards the docker.

Niksar’s rage was starting to be replaced by concern. His sister had forged an impressive career in one of the city’s Freeguild regiments. She was risking a lot by coming here and associating with the likes of him and Ocella – never mind shooting dockworkers.

‘What are you talking about?’ he asked, following her over to the body.

Zagora dropped to one knee beside the corpse, avoiding the quickly spreading pool of blood, and ripped the man’s doublet open. Then she stepped back, bumping into Niksar.

‘What?’ He pointed his sword at the corpse, expecting something to leap at him. His pulse quickened as he saw the tattoos that covered the dead man’s chest.

‘The Dark Gods.’ Zagora made the sign of the hammer across her chest as she stared at the crudely inked symbols. She turned to Niksar, her expression neutral. ‘What have you got yourself mixed up in, little brother?’

Niksar shook his head. ‘That can’t be right. I was just here as a—’

‘There are purges happening today. Did you know? This morning. Right across the city.’ She pointed at the dead man. ‘Because of this. Because of him.’

There was a clattering sound behind them followed by the splash of running feet. Niksar whirled around to see Ocella weaving off through the darkness with surprising speed, her head held low. Niksar considered chasing her but his sister shook her head.

‘You really don’t want to be seen with that woman.’ She nodded in the opposite direction, to the other end of the alley. ‘This way.’

Niksar hesitated, looking at the crumpled corpse. ‘My fee.’

‘Do you realise how bad this is? Even for you?’ Zagora waved at the crumbling buildings. ‘The city is falling apart. This really is not the time to be seen with cultists. Can’t you see what’s on his chest? The man’s a heretic. If you so much as touch him you’ll be strung up outside the White Angels’ tower, feeding gulls with your innards.’

Niksar stared at the corpse again. The tattoo was so repulsive it was hard to look at. The shape was simple enough – a fish-like swirl with a circle in its lower half, but it was the details that made his head hurt. The design was covered in intricately inked flames and scales that were morphing into screaming faces. The faces were partly human, but partly something else, something that Niksar could not quite explain but that filled him with inexplicable terror.

He nodded weakly and let his sister lead him away. As soon as they emerged onto one of the wider streets, Zagora stopped running and adopted a confident, nonchalant stride, ignoring the glances that came her way. She was dressed in the gold and red of the Phoenix Company, one of the regiments formed in the wake of the city’s recent hardships. She cut an impressive figure and people scattered at her approach, ducking back through the doors of their crooked, tiny shacks.

‘I had no idea.’ Niksar’s pulse was still hammering at the memory of the tattoos. People had been put in the gallows just for looking at symbols like that. ‘How did you know? Ocella has always seemed like a reputable—’

Zagora glanced at him. ‘Reputable?’

Niksar licked his lips. ‘Reputable might not be the right word. But I’d never have dreamt she was involved in anything to do with... I can’t believe she would knowingly involve herself with cultists. I didn’t think—’

‘You didn’t think at all. You rarely do. Did you ask her where she met that docker?’

‘There’s not much point asking her anything, to be honest. She generally just—’

‘You could end up swinging from a rope.’ Zagora glanced around and lowered her voice. ‘Me too, if anyone saw what happened back there. Or if that witch decides to talk.’

‘She won’t.’ Niksar spoke with more confidence than he felt. ‘And she’s a fool, not a witch. And I’m the only person in the city she trusts. She won’t want anything to happen to me.’

Zagora shook her head and continued down the street. ‘I heard about this from someone in my regiment, Niksar. I dread to think who else has heard about it. That docker’s linked to a cult called the Mirrored Blade. And then, when I heard he was selling things to someone called Ocella I remembered that *you* worked with someone called Ocella. Aren’t you two partners?’

Niksar took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. ‘Not partners, exactly. That’s not the word I would use. I’m just her muscle, really.’ Niksar was slender and wiry, but he was good with a sword and he had grown up on the streets, so what he lacked in bulk, he more than made up for in speed and nerve. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘there’s no real harm done. Thanks to you. You’ve got me out of a mess, Zagora. I won’t forget it.’

They turned onto one of the city’s main thoroughfares leading towards a large market square. The city was as unsteady as Ocella, but life continued. Lots of the traders were already setting up whalebone awnings and unloading their wares, attracting a crowd of peevish-sounding gulls that battled against the rain.

‘You might not be out of the mess yet,’ said Zagora. ‘This morning’s purges are being organised by witch hunters.’

‘The Order?’ Niksar stumbled to a halt.

Zagora waved him on. ‘We need to put some distance between us and that body.’

Niksar shook his head as he stumbled across the square. The Order of

Azyr were hard-line zealots, killers who hunted down anyone considered a threat to the Sigmarite faith. Their methods of extracting information were famously inventive and as the assaults on the city grew worse, the fanatics gained even more power, striking without censure at anyone they deemed suspect.

‘And you need to stay away from that woman,’ said Zagora.

They left the square and hurried through the growing light to the edge of the Veins. Finally, after walking in silence for half an hour, they left the slum stacks behind and headed out into the wider, cleaner streets of the Temple Quarter with its grand stormstone facades. The buildings here were sturdy and well-made, and they were still mostly intact. Even here, though, there were cracks in the road that revealed ominous, sinuous shapes beneath. As they wound higher, up through the levels of the city, they began to catch glimpses of the bay and the city’s hulking bastion walls, lined with garrisons and siege cannons. Beyond the rain-whipped harbour and the bobbing masts of the ships, Niksar saw the Consecralium: the forbidding keep of the White Angels. It was probably the city’s last hope of survival. But it might also be his final resting place if this ever got out.

Zagora saw his troubled glance and paused. They both leant against a wall to catch their breath.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘There’s so much going on at the moment that your idiocy will probably go overlooked. You’ve promised me you’ll have nothing more to do with her. And I killed the dockhand. So he’s not likely to talk. And I’m sure you weren’t so stupid as to be seen in Ocella’s company. As long as there’s nothing linking you to either of them the Order won’t come looking for you.’

Niksar frowned.

She studied him. ‘*Is there something linking you to them?*’

He looked at the Consecralium again, imagining the White Angels spilling from its depths, nailing the faithless to walls. ‘There... Well... Possibly.’

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the wall.

‘Ocella didn’t usually pay me with glimmerings,’ he said, referring to the prophetic stones used as currency in Excelsis. ‘We had an arrangement. I kept her safe and then we shared the objects she... procured.’

Zagora looked amused. ‘You kept her safe?’

‘She’s still alive.’

She laughed. ‘How you’ve made a career as a hired sword is beyond me. I saw you up on that wall. You were looking off into nowhere when I shot the docker. Lost in a daydream. Like always.’

‘I’m not the dreamer.’

She ignored the jibe. ‘Did you keep all the “objects” Ocella gave you?’

‘Why wouldn’t I? I knew she was odd but I had no idea she was a cultist.’

‘I don’t know if she’s a cultist. But she certainly doesn’t worry about whose company she keeps. I’ll be amazed if she survives the day. This is not the time to be involved with dubious societies. Did you keep *everything* she gave you?’

‘Yes. My plan was to sell them as a collection. I need to raise a lot of glimmerings, you see. I have a problem with—’

Zagora held up a hand. ‘One problem’s enough for now. I can imagine how many other disasters you’re working on.’ She looked out at the harbour and the churning clouds. ‘Everything might still be fine. If you’d sold any of those things people would be talking about them. But if you’ve still got them stashed away, no one knows you have them. You have to get back to your rooms. Destroy everything that connects you to Ocella. What are we talking about? A couple of weapons? Some jewellery?’

Niksar massaged his temples, avoiding her gaze. ‘It might be easier if I show you.’

‘I don’t want to see them. Just get rid of them. And quickly. If the witch hunters find you in possession of that stuff, Sigmar help both of us.’

‘I can’t just throw it all away. I need to sell those things, Zagora. You don’t understand how much trouble I’ll be in if I don’t.’

She waved at the distant fortress overlooking the bay, and the bodies hung in cages at its walls. ‘More trouble than being taken to the Knights Excelsior?’

Niksar slumped against the wall. ‘I’m dead.’

She stood and hauled him to his feet. ‘If you were, my life would be so much easier.’

‘What *is* all this stuff?’ gasped Zagora.

They were standing in Niksar’s crowded lodgings on Sortilege Street, right on the outskirts of the Trade Quarter. It was a single room, ten foot by ten, and Niksar’s furniture consisted of three items: a bunk, a wardrobe and a

crooked table littered with half-empty wine bottles and dirty crockery. Next to his bunk was a pile of armour, sacks, bones, weapons, cases and books that he had just emptied from the wardrobe.

Zagora shook her head. 'This didn't all come from that witch, surely?'

Niksar nodded. Then he headed over to the table, poured two cups of wine and offered one to Zagora.

She shook her head. 'The day's barely started.'

'That's what I'm worried about.' He emptied one of the cups into the other and downed the contents. 'No,' he said, wiping his beard on his sleeve. 'Not all of this came from her.' He winced. 'Damned if I can remember which things didn't, though.'

Zagora tapped the pile of objects with her boot, as though expecting it to move. 'What were you thinking? Even I can see how dangerous these things are. Look at those markings. None of them are Sigmarite. These things were made by people who worship other gods, Niksar. The *wrong* gods. And you kept them all here, in your wardrobe? What were you going to do with it all?'

He shrugged. 'Different things.' As he studied his collection, he forgot about his desperate situation and remembered the various plans he had been working on. He nodded to one of the bottles. 'That oil can turn *anything* into amber bone.'

'Then why are you living in this hovel?'

'I don't know the correct method yet. But Ocella has a contact on Harbinger Street. He promised her he knows what to do. She has these creatures in her furs that tell her things. We just need to get our hands on a few—'

'And that?' interrupted Zagora, pointing to a mouldering, severed hoof.

Niksar grinned. 'Saltim's Talisman. A devotee of Saltim would give me anything for it.'

'Have you ever *met* a devotee of Saltim?'

'No, not exactly, but I once spoke to a man who—'

'You're deluded. You always have been. Don't you see? You're obsessed with getting rich and you're the poorest person I know. These things are mostly junk, brother.'

'You don't understand, Zagora. It doesn't really matter what these things are. They were just a means to an end. We were going to use them to

acquire something *really* special. Something that would have changed everything. Ocella was talking to that dockhand about an artefact called an aetheric alkahest. A kind of alchemical talisman that would enable us to—

‘I don’t want to hear it. Listen to yourself. You sound like a lunatic. Don’t you see? All these talismans and *alkahests* will just land you in trouble. Like all your other ventures. They’re the reason you’re in this mess.’

Niksar wanted to argue but the thought of the witch hunters stilled his tongue.

‘We have to shift all of it,’ said Zagora. ‘And quickly.’

Niksar sat heavily on the bunk. ‘It’s not that easy. I have debts, Zagora. Debts you can’t imagine. To people you don’t *want* to imagine. Some of this stuff was very expensive. If I don’t sell it I’m ruined. Worse than ruined. Getting my hands on the alkahest was going to be my salvation.’

She waved at his grimy amberglass window and the streets outside. ‘It’s happening today, Niksar. The Order are making their move this morning. Half my regiment have been talking about it. The Grand Conclave say these tremors are because of Chaos cults – heretics working somewhere in the city. They’ve given the witch hunters orders to arrest anyone who even looks suspicious. What if they come here and see all this? Even I feel like putting you on a pyre.’

‘What if they don’t come here?’

‘Ocella knew your name. I’m guessing she also knew where you lived. And there’s a dead cultist lying in an alley waiting to be discovered.’

Niksar was always careful but there was no way he could guarantee his name would never come up. He looked at the pile of ephemera Ocella had given him. It was valuable stuff. Ocella seemed uninterested in most of the objects she procured and she had passed things on to him that far exceeded his normal fee. There were furs from the Thunderscorn Peaks, ivory from the coast of Kald, a feathered headdress from the Myassa Basin similar to the one Ocella wore. And there were weapons of such exotic design he could not even place their origin. This was the haul that would have made him. He had so many plans. This was going to be his chance to clear all his debts and start again.

His sister sat next to him. ‘Look, I was being unfair earlier. I know how good you are with that sword.’ She tapped her polished breastplate. ‘Why don’t you join the Phoenix Company? Captain Tyndaris is always on the

lookout for good men.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘We could try to convince him you are one.’

Niksar shook his head. ‘Everything has always gone so well for you. You always come out clean and smiling. How? How do you do it?’

She nodded at the objects next to his bed. ‘By not chasing wealth, Niksar, that’s how. It’s a race you can’t win. I serve the city. I serve the God-King. And I let the rest go.’

Niksar wanted to mock her but he could not bring himself to. He knew her better than he knew anyone and, unlike most people, she actually meant what she said. She just wanted to do good. To lead a worthy life. Her worldview really was that simple. It was impressive and maddening at the same time.

‘I’m in hock to every moneylender in the city,’ he muttered. ‘If I don’t sell this stuff they’ll kill me just as surely as the Order.’ He reached for the wine bottle but Zagora moved it out of reach.

Niksar was about to argue when a scream echoed across the rooftops. Even the rain could not dampen the shrill, awful nature of the sound.

Niksar wandered over to the window and wiped some of the muck from the amberglass. There was another scream and the sound of gunfire, followed by rattling swords and the crash of breaking wood.

Zagora joined him at the window as flames blossomed across the Veins, battling against the rain, no more than half a mile from Niksar’s lodgings. Birds erupted from rooftops and dogs started howling. Some of the flames bobbed away from the building and Niksar realised they were torches; torches in the shape of twin-tailed comets. As the light banked and flashed he caught glimpses of screeds nailed to boards and wooden, hammer-wielding effigies.

‘Zealots,’ he whispered.

Zagora nodded. ‘They’re already out looking. Maybe your docker friend was being watched.’

‘He wasn’t my friend.’

Screams rang out from another direction and flames billowed from another cluster of slums. The sounds of fighting echoed through the early morning stillness.

‘We have to move fast.’ Zagora turned back to the pile of objects. ‘You can’t be found with these things.’

Niksar felt like he was being crushed. His breath came in gasps. But he nodded, grabbed a sack and began shoving things into it. Then he paused and looked around. 'Perhaps we could just set the place on fire? People would blame it on the zealots.'

Zagora glared at him. 'Think how many rooms are crammed into this building. And how close it is to the other side of the street. The fire wouldn't stay within these four walls. It would spread. People would die. It would be our fault. And we're *not* zealots.'

'I sometimes wish I was,' muttered Niksar, stuffing things into the sack. Zagora grabbed another bag, and within a few minutes they had almost cleared the floor.

A chorus of shouts came up through the floorboards, followed by the sound of splintering wood.

Niksar and Zagora froze, staring at each other. They ran back to the window and saw filthy, rag-wearing figures filing through the streets, carrying clubs and brands. Some were already outside the building and were hammering on doors. There was a witch hunter waving them on, carrying a pistol and wearing a tall, peaked hat.

'They have your name,' whispered Zagora. 'They must. Why else would they have come straight here? It can't be a coincidence.'

'Damn it,' muttered Niksar. 'I really am going to have to destroy everything.' Part of him had been hoping that his sister might still be wrong.

Zagora gripped his arm. 'We can't just march down the stairs with all this. Is there another way out?'

Niksar shook his head, then looked at the window. 'Maybe. There are bits of old storm-engine stuck on the walls. Old Collegiate machines. They're not in use any more but they're pretty sturdy. We might be able to climb up them.'

Zagora looked at the two large sacks they had filled. 'With those?'

He frowned. Then the sounds of fighting and yelling grew louder as people rushed into the lower levels of the building. 'It's that or the noose. Or worse...'

They quickly threw the remaining objects in the sacks and looked around the room.

'Are you sure this is everything?' Zagora nodded at some rubbish heaped

under the table. ‘What about in there?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Niksar. Then he cursed. ‘Wait. There is something.’ He lifted the bed onto two legs and nodded at the floor underneath. ‘There. There’s a loose board. There’s a glimmering under it. She rarely paid me with augur stones but she said this one was special.’

Zagora crept past him and lifted the board but when she looked at the polished stone she hesitated, staring at it.

‘Quick!’ snapped Niksar.

Zagora muttered something, reaching out for the stone, but the moment she touched it her body jolted as though she had been kicked. She cried out in surprise.

‘What is it?’ demanded Niksar, trying to bend down and hold up the bed at the same time. ‘What are you doing?’

His sister seemed unable to reply, muttering and gasping as though she were in pain. Then, with another incoherent cry, she dropped to the floor and curled up into a tight ball, hugging the stone to her chest.

‘Zagora?’ Niksar tried to see her face but it was turned away from him. ‘What in the name of Sigmar are you doing?’

She mumbled something. Her voice sounded odd, more growl than speech. Then she started to shiver.

‘What are you playing at?’ Niksar held the bed with one arm as he dropped to his knee and reached for her. His hand was inches from her shoulder when he snatched it back in alarm. There was light coming from under her cuirass, splitting the gloom of his chamber with thin, white lines, gilding the dust motes. He shoved her over onto her back. Her eyes were wide and rolled back. Her mouth opened and closed silently.

There was a bang from the hallway outside and voices approached, shouting and cursing. A woman screamed. Swords clattered.

‘They’re here!’ whispered Niksar, dragging his sister from under the bed and trying to hold her still. She stared past him into the dancing lights, convulsing and groaning. Niksar had never seen such a violent reaction to a glimmering. Augur stones induced witch-sight, showing miraculous glimpses of the future, but that usually amounted to little more than a vague premonition of rain, or a warning about a card game. He had never known one to light someone up. Zagora’s skin was glowing. She looked like one of the aetheric lanterns made by the Collegiate Arcanum. It was cool in the

room but her face was beaded with sweat.

Footsteps hammered down the corridor outside and the sounds of fighting increased. Niksar heard breathy chanting and a deep voice bellowed through the door.

‘Open up! Now! For the most holy Order of Azyr!’ Embers billowed through the wood as someone kicked the other side.

Niksar filled a cup of wine and hurled it in Zagora’s face. She coughed and finally focused on him.

‘I saw it,’ she whispered, gripping his arm.

‘Saw what?’

‘Gnorl’s Feast.’ She squeezed his arm, her eyes bright. ‘I was there. On the Faithful Tor.’

Niksar felt as though there was a stranger in the room with him. His sister seemed transformed. Or possessed.

‘Tor?’ he said. ‘What are you...?’ But before he could finish, more embers billowed around the door as another kick jarred its frame. ‘We have to go.’ He hauled Zagora to her feet. ‘Can you walk?’

Her eyes clouded and she looked confused. She seemed to have forgotten who he was.

‘Zagora!’ he snapped, nodding to the door. ‘The Order of Azyr. Remember?’

She nodded. Then shook her head, staring at him, clearly confused. ‘What just happened?’

‘You’re asking me?’ He handed her a sack and then led her over to the window. He wrenched the latch back and the hinges screeched as he pushed the window open. ‘Let’s talk about it later,’ he said, helping her out. He glanced back at the buckling door. ‘If we can.’

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To Mom, who never complained about me spending all my

allowance on tiny plastic elves.

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