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AGE OF SIGMAR



SOULSLAYER

A GOTREK GURNISSON NOVEL

DARIUS HINKS

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Your Celestial Highnesses

About the Author

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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.



SOULSLAYER

A GOTREK GURNISSON NOVEL

DARIUS HINKS



Your Celestial Highnesses,

Please forgive the break in correspondence. I have been traversing the wastes of Chamon, caught up in another one of the Slayer's ludicrous obsessions. I have never known anyone who can invest so much in an idea and then abandon it so easily. His much-vaunted partnership with the Solmund Company of Barak-Urbaz has already ended in disaster. For a while, he was grudgingly impressed by the Kharadron magnate Lord-Admiral Solmund, calling him sound-headed and trustworthy. The pair spent several months working on a scheme to revive an ancient duardin kingdom called the Khazalid Empire. They claimed they were going to 'drive the forces of darkness from lands that are rightfully ours' but, of course, it all came to nothing (like so many of Gotrek's endeavours). Gotrek ended up denouncing Solmund as a 'snotling-fondler and an oathbreaker'. The disagreement originated in a Kharadron drinking hall after several days of ale-fuelled 'planning'. A fight broke out, but when Gotrek sobered up, I managed to convince him to leave the sky-port rather than 'knock it on its arse'. I have yet to uncover the details of the argument but the two duardin seem equally bent on killing each other if their paths ever cross again.

Despite severing ties with the Kharadron, Gotrek has not abandoned his vague idea of 'fixing' the realms. He has decided that the only way to honour his long-dead ancestors is to behave as they would have done in the Mortal Realms. Gotrek considers this a great revelation and he is infuriatingly evangelical about his 'new' plan. But, as far as I can tell, it makes no difference. His goal is to lock horns with anyone who disagrees with him, which is what he's been doing since the first day I met him.

All of this is a long-winded way of asking you to ignore my previous requests for aid. Now that Gotrek has severed ties with the Solmund Company, I am quite capable of monitoring his progress and protecting the rune embedded in his chest (which we are all so keen to see brought safely to Azyr). At present, we are headed south-west, away from the relatively stable core of

the Spiral Crux, to a gods-forsaken backwater known as the Incendiary Coast. I sense that Gotrek has a particular destination in mind but he is refusing to share it.

As I am sure you are aware, the military situation in Chamon is as mercurial as the landscape. The armies of Chaos are dominant, of course. These are still very much their lands, and the Realm of Metal teems with daemon-worshipping sorcerers and skull-taking warlords, but... the local greenskin tribes are increasingly a thorn in their side and many duardin, both mountain-bound and skyborne, still manage to carve out a life for themselves in the shadow of the Ruinous Powers. In some places, such as the aforementioned Barak-Urbaz, the duardin are even thriving.

The pleas for help in my previous missive were the result of delirium, brought on by injuries, and I apologise for their hysterical tone. I assure you, all is now well. Please refrain from sending any more agents of the order to assist me. Their arrival would only complicate matters and antagonise the Slayer (it does not take much). I will contact you as soon as I learn more about his purpose at the coast. Until then, I remain,

*Your most loyal and faithful votary,
Maleneth Witchblade*

CHAPTER ONE

‘Gotrek has to die.’ Drymuss leant closer to Maleneth. ‘Everything else has failed.’ The witch hunter was handsome, for a human, with broad, strong features and the relaxed air of an idle prince. His indolence was an affectation, of course. Beneath his peaked hat and his cloak, he was a knot of righteous muscle. Maleneth had killed enough people to recognise a master of the craft. Drymuss smiled, trying to look amiable, but it was the smile of a predator. She had heard his name mentioned several times before she had left Azyrheim, usually in hushed whispers. Drymuss burned first and asked questions later. The Order of Azyr only used him when subtler methods were no longer an option. He leant back against a tree stump, his face gilded by firelight as he sipped his wine, studying her with lidded eyes. ‘Don’t blame yourself.’

She looked past him, out across the sea. They were near the cliff’s edge and, as dusk turned to night, the Amethystine Ocean blazed in defiance, resisting the dark, flaunting its grandeur like a preening bird. Its cocktail of alloys and chemicals simmered in the gloom, trying to compete with the stars that were blinking into view overhead. The colours in the waves were vibrant even at this distance and embers spilled from the breakers, drifting to the clifftop, whirling around Maleneth like errant spirits. ‘I don’t blame myself,’ she said. ‘He’s not what I thought he was.’

Drymuss frowned. ‘He’s just like any other Fyreslayer. Bigger perhaps. And undoubtedly peculiar. But he’s still just a hairy, duardin lump. Without that rune in his chest he’d be nothing. He could easily have died the day

you met him in... Where was it, a Fyreslayer gaol in Aqshy? They certainly had no problem capturing him. Were they called the Unbak lodge?’

Maleneth continued watching the embers drift around the hollow, thinking back to the Fyreslayer Halls of Censure where she had first seen Gotrek.

‘I thought the same as you,’ she said, ‘when I first met him. He was so confused he mistook me for a daemon. He thought everyone was a daemon, in fact. His head has taken so many hits his mind doesn’t work as it should. And I imagine he was a boorish oaf even before that. He fights like a drunk even on the rare occasions he’s sober. He takes no pride in his kills and he dedicates them to no god. He doesn’t even realise he’s in thrall to gods. He thinks he’s their equal. No’ – she laughed – ‘not equal. He thinks he’s superior to them. That they have no value at all.’ She waved the little bottle Drymuss had given her, letting the light catch on the twin-tailed comet etched into the glass. ‘He thinks gods are fools, and that the rest of us are fools too – and that he’s the only one who isn’t a fool.’

As Maleneth spoke, her hatred of Gotrek simmered up from her chest. She needed to be careful around a snake like Drymuss, but her anger caught her unawares and she found herself warming to her theme. ‘He’s so uncouth, he can’t even grasp the value of faith. It’s beyond his intellect. He thinks he can just crack heads with anything that gets in his way and end up on top.’ She paused, as bewildered as she always was when she thought about the Slayer. ‘And he’s right, damn him. That’s the worst thing. He *does* come out on top. Whatever the realms throw at him he blunders through, spilling beer and breaking wind while his enemies flounder. And this is the most absurd part – half his enemies end up adopting him as a saviour. It’s maddening. Gotrek is the one person who doesn’t value religion and everyone decides that he must be some kind of divinity himself. He’s an ugly, pig-headed idiot but he’s the only person I’ve met who actually seems able to...’ She cut herself off before she said too much, taking a deep breath to calm herself.

Drymuss studied her, his eyes glinting under the brim of his hat. ‘*What* is he able to do, Maleneth Witchblade? What do you think he is?’

This was a dangerous moment. Maleneth could see the pistols under his cloak. He would attack her the moment he sensed her allegiance had shifted. Her aelven reflexes would give her an advantage over his sluggish, human muscles, but she only had knives and he had guns. She preferred the

odds to be weighted more heavily in her favour. And they soon would be. She would not need to play this out for much longer.

‘I think Gotrek’s an obstacle,’ she lied. ‘I think the only way we’ll ever get that rune to Azyr is by cutting it from his chest. That’s what I’ve said all along. And that’s why I requested help. I just need a way to kill him.’

He continued watching her closely and she sensed he was unconvinced. He nodded at the bottle he had given her. ‘That will do it. We’ve studied your letters. And I’ve conducted *thorough* interviews with people who’ve encountered Gotrek Gurnisson. That rune he stole from us has made him resilient. Unnaturally resilient. As you pointed out, even your Khainite toxins may not be enough to stop his heart. But that tincture I’ve given you is no normal poison. It will ossify him, Maleneth. His flesh will harden and turn to bone but the rune will remain unharmed. We’ll pluck it from his remains like a jewel from ashes. Collegiate Arcane scholars spent months refining the recipe. And I tested it myself on various unrepentant apostates. It will turn him to bone, Maleneth, you can trust me on that. And perhaps then, as he dies, he will finally understand his place, finally see how insignificant he is compared to Sigmar Heldenhammer. All you need to do is pour those few drops down his throat before he wakes up.’

The sound of Gotrek’s snoring ripped through the darkness, as if on cue. The Slayer was further up the coastal path, slumped in the back of a cart tethered to a pair of ironbacks that were almost as cantankerous as he was. It was rare for the Slayer to sleep, but after three weeks of traipsing down to the coast they had found an abandoned stash of barrels filled with something that smelled like bilge water. Gotrek had described it, through grimaces, as ‘tolerable’, and then proceeded to drink the lot. He had been unconscious for nearly two days.

She sighed, wondering how much longer she would need to keep up her act. She was not the Sigmar-botherer Gotrek always described her as, but lying to an agent of the order set her teeth on edge. People like Drymuss excelled at rooting out untruth.

‘What is it?’ he said, attempting another smile. ‘Are you hesitant to kill him?’ He shrugged. ‘It wouldn’t be so strange. You’ve spent a long time in his company. And you’ve been through a lot together. From what I hear, Gotrek has saved your life on several occasions. Perhaps you feel you owe him something?’ He looked into the fire. ‘Or perhaps you’re just afraid of

him?’

He was trying to goad her. It was a common witch hunter technique. Drymuss hoped that, by making her angry, he might trick her into revealing some kind of heretical misbelief. But she was not a hedge witch trying to summon luck from chicken guts. She was a covenite sister, an assassin without equal, hardened in the Murder Temples of High Azyr. She shook her head. ‘I’m not afraid, Captain Drymuss. Of anything.’ She mirrored his hard smile. ‘I’m a Daughter of Khaine.’

‘Khaine?’ Amusement flickered in his eyes. ‘You mean Morathi-Khaine?’

Maleneth hesitated, confused by the name. Morathi was the High Oracle of her sisterhood. She interpreted Khaine’s will. But Maleneth had never heard the two names combined like this and she sensed, from the gleam in Drymuss’ eyes, that it was more than just a slip of the tongue. There must have been some kind of political change, some shift in power that she was unaware of.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ he laughed.

She tried to mask her confusion. ‘I know everything I need to know. I know how to survive and kill, and I know how to serve.’

‘Serve who?’ He gave her a look of exaggerated sympathy. ‘The realms are changing, Maleneth. Your own people are changing. And you know nothing about it because you’re traipsing through the wilderness after Gotrek, caught up in his ridiculous feuds. You’re being left behind. Use the tincture. Kill him. He could wake up at any time. You said he rarely sleeps.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Or I can do it if you lack the nerve.’

Maleneth was about to argue, but then she realised she had kept Drymuss occupied long enough. She relaxed. The danger had passed. She looked over at the cart. ‘You can’t kill him. And I lied when I said *I* would.’

Unease flickered in his eyes as he sensed that he might not be holding all the cards. ‘What are you talking about?’ Drymuss frowned and looked down at his hand. He grunted, trying and failing to move his arm. ‘What?’ His voice sounded odd as the muscles in his throat contracted, already stiffening, already turning to bone.

Maleneth leant towards him, holding up the bottle. She turned it upside down to reveal that it was empty. ‘Expertly made. I assume, from the way you knocked back that wine, that the poison was completely tasteless.’

Drymuss’ eyes widened in shock but when he tried to speak, only a

strangled gargle emerged.

‘Consider this my resignation from the Order of Azyr,’ said Maleneth, lying back to gaze up at the stars. ‘I rescind my commission.’ The captain’s body made an odd creaking noise as it turned to bone, and Maleneth thought about how much danger she had put herself in by killing him.

You’ve betrayed the only people who could have given you a route back into Azyr. You claim you’re going to become a powerful figure in the sisterhood. You claim you’re going to take my place. But how can you return now? You’re a bigger fool than I thought. The voice only existed in Maleneth’s mind and it came from an amulet hanging at her neck. There was a vial of blood mounted in the amulet and the blood was a prison, containing the tormented soul of Maleneth’s former mistress. ***What will they do when they hear Drymuss has gone missing? They sent him here looking for you. They sent him here at your request. Why would you be such a fool as to tell the order where you are and then kill the first envoy they send? Even for you, that’s absurd.***

The sounds of the dying witch hunter merged with the crackling of the fire and the crashing of waves to make a pleasantly soothing sound. ‘I changed my mind,’ said Maleneth, closing her eyes. ‘I can’t let them kill Gotrek to get that rune.’

Why in the name of the Murder God not?

‘You know exactly why. You’ve seen everything I’ve seen. You’ve seen how people follow him. You’ve seen how fearless he is. How unique. How he faces down everything in the realms.’ She had to drag the words from her throat. ‘He’s what they all think he is – some kind of damned hero. He’s going to make a difference. He’s already made a difference.’

Absurd, said her mistress, but the fire had gone from her words. She was only arguing through habit. They both knew the irritating truth: Gotrek had to live.

Maleneth battled the sleepiness that washed over her but it was no use. She slipped into a dream of embers and smoke.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Valaya’s arse.’ Gotrek was laughing. ‘What’s this?’

Maleneth woke with a start. It was dawn and her leathers were damp with dew. The fire was out and Gotrek was silhouetted by the rising sun. ‘What’s what?’ she groaned, stretching her stiff limbs and patting herself down to check for her weapons and poisons.

‘Did you *whittle* this?’ Gotrek was peering at the ossified remains of Captain Drymuss. ‘Is this how you spend your time if I have a nap? Have you got a bloody *hobby*?’ He tapped the pale shape with his axe and it crumbled, forming a powdery heap around his boots. ‘Typical cack-handed aelf work. Neither use nor ornament.’

Maleneth sighed, trying to summon up the energy to endure another day of Gotrek. She stood, dusted herself down and looked out at the sea. It was sullen now, the colours less dazzling, but the daylight revealed peculiar shapes circling in the currents. She had noticed them several times over the last few days. There was a weird alchemy to the whole of the Incendiary Coast. Along with the metallic fish that lived in the sea, she had caught fleeting glimpses of humanoid forms. They were like the shadows of swimmers, but there were no swimmers. She was not altogether surprised by such inexplicable sights. The further they travelled away from the heartlands of the Spiral Crux, the more unpredictable the Realm of Metal became. She needed to convince the Slayer to turn around. They needed to find something approximating civilisation or they would end up in kingdoms where science and logic no longer held sway.

Gotrek was picking his way round the hollow, kicking at Drymuss' discarded bags and weapons. He showed no signs of being hung-over. His tall crest of hair was crooked from where he had slept on it and his beard was matted with grease and stale beer, but the glint was back in his eye. He radiated a rude vitality that told Maleneth they would be spending another day charging down the coast looking for trouble. The Slayer alternated between bouts of despondency and periods of wild fervour. Since hatching his latest idea he had been infuriatingly excited.

'These aren't your things,' he said, picking up Drymuss' travel bag and rummaging through it. He grunted as a Sigmarite icon fell out.

'Wait,' said Maleneth, rushing over.

Gotrek held the bag away from her as he plucked out a bundle of letters. 'What's this?' He squinted at the elegant script. 'That's your writing. I'd recognise your spidery scribble anywhere.' He looked from the letters to the icon that had fallen from the bag, then to the pile of dust that had used to be Captain Drymuss. Then he turned to Maleneth, his expression darkening. 'Still trying to betray me. Even now.' Colour flushed into his cheeks and his enormous biceps flexed as he tightened his grip on his axe. 'Writing to your friends in Azyr, planning to hand me over like a fatted calf. Trying to make me a weapon for that thunderstruck farm boy, Sigmar.'

Maleneth muttered a curse and backed away.

Now do you see? You let him live and look where it's got you. He'll have your head for this.

Gotrek clanged his axe against the golden icon in his chest. 'If you want the bloody rune, come and get it.' He nodded at her knives. 'Stop farting about. Show some backbone. Stop writing asinine letters and fight me.' His mood had turned from amiable to apoplectic in an instant. He dropped the letters and stamped around the hollow, swinging his axe, his furious eye locked on Maleneth. 'Let's get it over with. Once and for all. You've been looking for a way to kill me since the day we met. Why don't you actually do something about it? Aren't you supposed to be an assassin? You don't seem very good at killing things.'

Maleneth imagined what it would be like if she really could rid herself of the Slayer. There were still poisons she had not tried. Perhaps one, transmitted on a carefully placed blade, could work. But she knew she would not try. The time for murdering Gotrek was past. She had too much

invested in him now. The moment she had killed Drymuss, she had severed all ties with the Order of Azyr. Her only hope of success now lay with the angry, swearing brute who was currently looking for an excuse to remove her head. ‘I killed *him*,’ she said quietly.

‘Eh?’ Gotrek was shouting. ‘Who?’

She waved at the pile of broken bones. ‘Captain Drymuss. One of the most senior witch hunters in the Mortal Realms. He came here looking for you.’

‘Because you bloody told him to.’

‘True. But then I changed my mind.’

Gotrek halted, glaring at her. He was a mountain of muscle, broader than any duardin she had ever met and covered in brutal-looking tattoos, but he still had to look up at her, a fact that never ceased to amuse her. ‘What are you talking about, witch? Changed your mind about what?’

‘About you. And about Blackhammer’s Master Rune. I don’t think you should go to Azyr. I think it would be a mistake. And, much as I’d like to see it done, I don’t think they should cut that rune from your ribs.’

Gotrek’s eye was still flashing but he lowered his axe and stopped pacing. ‘This is your compassionate nature coming out, I suppose?’ He gave her a caustic grin, revealing crooked, ruined teeth. ‘Or is it because we’re such good friends?’

She sheathed her knife, sensing that the danger had passed. They were back to their usual sparring. ‘I despise you, Gotrek Gurnisson, with a passion I would hitherto have thought impossible. I hate you more than I have ever hated anyone. I would not call you friend if we were the last people left walking the Mortal Realms, but...’ She hesitated. It pained her to be so open with him.

‘But what?’

‘But you *are* different from the rest of us.’ She pointed at him. ‘Note that I said *different*, not *better*. And I don’t know why the gods have made it so. Perhaps it’s because you were not born in these realms. Perhaps it’s because you’re from, what did you call it? The Karaz Peak?’

‘Karaz-a-Karak. The Everpeak, and don’t mangle its name with your aelven tongue.’

She shrugged. ‘You say you were born in another world. In another time. Perhaps that’s why you overcome enemies the rest of us can’t. Even Sigmar’s Stormcast Eternals can’t do what you do.’

Gotrek was about to yell again when he registered what she had said. He grunted, at a loss to know how to respond. He clearly had not expected compliments.

‘Do you mean what you said before?’ asked Maleneth. ‘About honouring your ancestors?’

‘Aye.’ He stared at the brazier in the head of his axe, studying the glowing embers. ‘It’s to my shame that I didn’t see it earlier. I have to be worthy of them, even here, even in these wretched hells you call the realms. *Especially* here, where so much needs to be set right.’ He began swinging his axe and pacing again, but he was no longer thinking about Maleneth. She could see the gleam of excitement back in his eye. He was thinking about his plans to purge the realms of evil. ‘My old oaths died with my home.’ He looked out across the sea. ‘I was hiding behind them. I’m here now, in your worlds, and I must do as my father would have done, and his fathers before him. I must be as true as every *dawi* who came before me. *Dreng tromm*. How else can I hope to join them? How else can I hope to remember them? What would Kazador Thunderhorn have done if he were here? He would have hunted down every *grobi* scum until his last breath. What would Gorim Ironhammer have done, faced with all these daemon-worshipping cretins? Would he have thought only about seeking his own doom? Or his own failures? No! He’d’ve cleaved some bloody skulls! He wouldn’t have rested until either he or they were dead. Think of all my kin, from Gurni Hammerfist to Thorgrim Grudgebearer. They’re all here, now, in me. Gone but not forgotten. Through me, the *dawi* have to right these wrongs. Because the alternative is leaving it to the bloody gods. And trust me, all Sigmar wants is to swap one brutal regime for another. You’ve seen what his Stormcast Eternals are capable of. They’re all cracked. Imagine if they really did reclaim the realms – things would be even worse than they are now.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘All that time I was trying to find a purpose in these new worlds. And now I see that I already have a purpose. The same purpose I always had. The purpose of all *dawi*.’ Gotrek had climbed to the lip of the hollow and was looking at his fyresteel axe, staring into the brazier. ‘Grimnir tried to rob me of my doom,’ he said, returning to an old grudge that Maleneth had never quite managed to grasp. ‘But I’ll find a new one. I’ll hunt down every *grobi* and orruk, every cultist and warlord, every

troggoth and troll. And, as I do it, I'll teach these bloody duardin how to be dwarfs.'

Gotrek was about to say more, then stopped and glared at Maleneth, annoyed at himself, perhaps, for revealing more than he intended. His cheeks darkened and he muttered to himself, stomping back down into the hollow.

Maleneth nodded. 'I don't know anything about Hammerfists and Grudgebearers, but there's something in you that even the Dark Gods can't crush.' She looked down the coast, back the way they had come. 'Which is why I think we should head back to somewhere you can put it to use. Just because you had a disagreement with the Kharadron doesn't mean we have to banish ourselves to the wilderness. If we keep heading further away from the Spiral Crux, we'll end up turning into lumps of tin or melting into quicksilver. This place is an alchemist's furnace. What's so special about this stretch of coastline? What are you actually looking for?'

Maleneth did not expect Gotrek to confide in her. Ever since they had left Barak-Urbaz he had been working to an agenda that he refused to explain. But she seemed to have disarmed him. He nodded as he climbed back up to their cart. 'This is where I will start showing my kin how to live up to their history.' He climbed up into the wagon and waved for her to follow. 'Back in Barak-Urbaz, Solmund showed me his maps. And he gave me an idea of the problems that hold the duardin back.' Gotrek barked a command, driving the ironbacks into motion as Maleneth leapt up and sat next to him. The ironbacks were boar-like creatures with rusty metal hides and corroded tusks. They made grunting sounds as they clanged off across the rocks, heading away from the cliff back towards the road. 'There are people in these lands who could be making a difference. There are still armies in these wilds who could stand against the greenskins and necromancers and Chaos worshippers, but they're all bogged down in turf wars.'

It was rare for the Slayer to speak so openly and clearly, so Maleneth simply nodded, cherishing the chance to glean a little of what was going on in his boulder-like skull.

'Solmund has a sound head on his shoulders...' Gotrek frowned and lost his thread. Maleneth knew the Slayer regretted his feud with the Kharadron magnate. If it weren't for the potency of Kharadron ale, they would still be friends. Gotrek scowled and shook his head. 'In some matters at least. If he

had listened to me, we could have achieved something with all that power he's been hoarding in the clouds.'

'And this coast?' prompted Maleneth.

'Aye. This coast. A good example of why everything in your realms is bugged. There are dwarfs near here, or duardin as you'd say. Solmund told me about them. They call themselves Varrukh.' He tapped the rune in his chest. 'They're the same breed of savages who made this thing. Fyreslayers. But, by all accounts, they used to do a decent job of guarding the lands from this coast all the way up to those mountains. They're sellswords, like all Slayers seem to be nowadays. They charge people for their protection, but at least they gave people a chance to live in relative safety. Solmund said they live in a mountain hold near here.'

Maleneth stared at him. 'You're taking us to another Fyreslayer lodge? Do you remember what happened last time we entered one of their magmaholds? We both ended up in chains. Besides' – she gestured to the waves breaking in the bay, still visible from the road as it snaked up into the hills – 'you said they're keeping this place safe. It sounds like they're doing a good enough job without your help.'

'They *used* to keep it safe. A few months ago, everything changed. Solmund said they now spend their time cowering in their fortress while marauders and greenskins run riot. This used to be one of the few places in Ayadah where people could travel safely but now, thanks to the cowardice of these so-called Slayers, it's as bad as anywhere else.'

Maleneth shrugged. 'The whole realm's under the heel of Chaos. Just like all the other realms. I fail to see why this particular corner is of interest.'

'Because these Varrukh idiots are my kin.' Gotrek leant forwards in his seat, his muscles tensing. 'And they're bringing shame on my ancestors. I don't care if you back-stabbing aelves skulk in your hovels and kid yourself that Sigmar will sort everything out, but these Varrukh are dawī. I won't stand by while they hide under a mountain and leave everyone else to die. Where's the honour in that? They protected these lands before so they can sodding well protect them again. Even if I have to kill them to make it happen.'

'You're going to kill them so they can do their job again?'

'Yes. No. You know what I mean. I'll teach them how to live. And how to fight. And how to die properly.'

‘So you’re going to be a leader now, then? A great general.’ She threw up her arms in praise. ‘Gotrek, warrior king of the duardin! Lord of the Free Folk. Bringer of order and beer!’

He grimaced. ‘You people have enough leaders. That’s half the problem. They’re a plague. Every one of them vying with the other to look more impressive. No, that’s not Gotrek Gurnisson’s way. I know that much. But I can challenge evil where I find it.’

‘And you think that will make a difference? Against the endless legions of Chaos?’

‘That’s not the sodding point. You don’t do the right thing because it makes a difference. You do the right thing because it’s the right bloody thing.’

Maleneth laughed. ‘Ah, the gnostic profundities of Gotrek Gurnisson. You’re quite the philosopher. Someone should write a book about you.’

Gotrek muttered something, the fire fading from his eye as he looked away.

Maleneth shook her head. She was still struggling to follow his logic but at least she knew which direction they were headed now. ‘If the Slayers are conspicuous by their absence, it probably means they’re dead. Chaos warbands still own this continent, whatever Solmund might have told you. I imagine the Dark Gods finally noticed your duardin friends and sent their minions to scrub them out.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Solmund said not. He said they’re still mining under their mountain. His captains have seen them from their sky-ships. The Varrukh are still alive. They just don’t fight any more.’

‘Fyreslayers who don’t fight? Unlikely. It’s what they live for. That and making money. They’re not like you. They don’t have any burning desire to right wrongs and honour ancestors. They don’t have morals. They just like killing things and getting paid for it. They’re faithless mercenaries. Trust me, if they’re not fighting, it’s because they’re dead.’

Gotrek muttered as he steered the ironbacks round another bend and revealed the next stretch of coast. The sun was rising fast and they were high enough to see for several miles.

‘There you go,’ he said, pointing to a smudge on the horizon. ‘My point exactly. If Slayers watch over these lands that should not be happening.’

Maleneth peered through the early morning haze. There was a column of

smoke drifting from the remains of a coastal village, about five miles down the road. 'Could be the work of greenskins rather than Chaos,' she said.

'Who cares who did it? If there are Slayers out here they should keep these roads safe.' Gotrek drove on, the cart picking up speed as it rattled over the crumbling road. 'And if they can't do that they should be hunting down the culprits. Evil has to be rooted out as soon as it springs up. Grobi scum, trolls, Chaos savages or treacherous *elgi*, it's all the same. Act fast. Stamp it out. Let decent people get on with their lives.'

'We should be careful,' said Maleneth. 'This attack happened in the last few hours. There was no sign of fires when we stopped last night. There may still be fighting going on down there.'

Gotrek grinned, driving the ironbacks to even more speed.

Maleneth need not have worried. As they drove towards the village, they saw no signs of fighting. There were human corpses scattered across the nearby beach and around the village's wooden stockade, but no movement other than the smoke rising from a fishing hut and carrion birds that were picking at the dead.

Gotrek stopped the cart and tethered it to a tree stump, and then the two of them continued on foot, drawing their weapons as they approached the village. The gates were hanging drunkenly from their hinges and there were more bodies strewn across the little square beyond. As Gotrek stomped in and out of huts, examining bodies and cursing under his breath, Maleneth noticed something strange.

'Gotrek!' she called.

He leant out of a shattered doorway. 'What?'

'Look at this.' She waved her knife at a corpse. It was a young warrior, slumped over a scimitar and shield. 'Why's there no blood on him?'

Gotrek walked over, frowning at the body as Maleneth turned it over with her foot. 'What do you mean?'

'There are no wounds,' she said, dropping to one knee to examine the corpse more closely.

'Well there were plenty on the bodies outside. What difference does it make? He's still dead.'

'It's just odd. The people out on the beach carry wounds, but these ones look like they've been scared to death. Look at him, there's not a scratch on him other than where the birds have been picking at his face. His eye's gone

but I think a gull probably took that. I wonder if...’ Her words trailed off as she lifted the man’s face closer to hers. ‘Wait a minute. He’s still breathing.’ She put her ear to his chest. ‘He’s alive.’

Gotrek frowned. ‘He must have been knocked out during the fighting and been overlooked.’ He studied the damaged buildings. ‘Probably Chaos scum. Greenskins would have done more damage. And aelves would still be here, composing a poem about how sublime the battle was. Whoever did this just wanted to kill and leave.’

‘He’s not unconscious,’ said Maleneth, slapping the man’s face and trying to rouse him. ‘Look, his eye’s wide open. It’s like he’s mesmerised.’

Gotrek wandered over to another one of the bodies. ‘Odd,’ he said, crouching next to it. ‘This lad’s the same. His eyes are open but he’s poleaxed.’ Gotrek bent lower, until his mouth was near the warrior’s ear, and grabbed the man’s shoulders. ‘Wake! Up!’ he bellowed at the top of his voice. The warrior lay motionless in his grip and gave no sign he had heard. ‘That is strange,’ he muttered, dropping the warrior and crossing the square to another body. ‘This one’s the same.’ Gotrek placed his hand near the woman’s nostrils. ‘She’s breathing and her eyes are open but there’s no one at home.’

They explored all the huts and found the same thing several times – people who looked like corpses at first glance but turned out, on closer examination, to be alive. ‘And look at this,’ said Maleneth, calling Gotrek over to a hut that had been used as a storeroom. ‘Ropes, weapons, food, armour... Why has none of this been touched? If this is the work of brigands or marauders why haven’t they taken anything?’

Gotrek picked through the weapons. ‘Followers of the Dark Gods murder for pleasure. They wouldn’t care about looting the place.’

Maleneth shook her head. ‘I don’t agree. What kind of army ignores a source of free supplies? At the very least they should have taken the food.’ She kicked a spear. ‘And the weapons seem well made.’ She looked at one of the insensate survivors. ‘There’s something odd going on here.’

‘Look at this,’ said Gotrek, picking up a piece of armour and waving it at Maleneth. ‘I should have bloody guessed.’

She took it from his fingers and frowned at it. It was too elegant to have been made by humans or duardin. It was a rondel – a small, circular piece of metal that shimmered as she turned it in her fingers. It was iridescent,

like fish scales, and hammered to resemble a seashell.

‘That’s aelf work,’ spat Gotrek, looking around. ‘I should have known. Anything suspicious usually leads back to your kind.’

Maleneth shook her head as she examined the intricately worked armour. ‘It does look aelven but I’ve never seen a design quite like this.’

‘There’s more,’ said Gotrek, pointing his axe at another scrap of armour. ‘And tracks. Look. They lead to the other side of the village.’

Maleneth crouched down to examine the marks in the dirt. ‘Odd. See how they ripple and curve. Like the tracks a serpent would leave.’

‘Snake-riding aelves,’ sneered Gotrek. ‘Snakes on snakes.’

Maleneth ignored him and followed the tracks to the back of the village, where she found a section of the stockade that had been utterly destroyed.

‘So they came in this way,’ said Gotrek, approaching the piles of wooden stakes.

‘Perhaps,’ said Maleneth. ‘But everything is drenched.’ She picked a piece of seaweed from the wreckage. ‘It’s almost like a wave did this.’

‘Not likely.’ Gotrek waved through the gap at the rocky shore outside. ‘The sea’s half a mile from here.’

Maleneth headed out onto the beach. The stones that crunched under her feet were mostly precious metal – gold, silver and a myriad of alloys that shimmered as they moved beneath her boots. In another realm, people would have murdered for such riches but here, in the Realm of Metal, where gold rained from the sky or grew from corpses like mould, they had found other things to kill for. The sinuous tracks wound on towards the sea, and as Maleneth followed them, she found more scraps of armour and villagers – either dead from bloody wounds or dazed like the people they had found near the huts, breathing but otherwise lifeless, staring blankly at the clouds overhead. Since finding the scrap of aelven armour, Maleneth had noticed how precise and elegant the sword strikes were. Neither humans nor duardin would fight with such lethal grace.

Why would aelves bother themselves with people like this? Her mistress sounded incredulous. ***Miserable fisherfolk and tide scavengers. And it’s not even as if they took anything.***

Maleneth shook her head. ‘And these tracks are like nothing I’ve seen aelves leave before.’

Finally, with Gotrek trudging after her, she reached the sea. The liquid

hissed over the stones and she kept a few paces back from the spray. While some people said the Amethystine Ocean was a body of water and others claimed it was molten metal, everyone agreed it was toxic. The tracks trailed down the beach from dozens of different directions and joined at this point, churning up the stones before heading out into the waves. As Maleneth looked out at the sea she had the peculiar sense that it was looking back at her, studying her. 'Is that more bodies?' she said. 'Floating a little way out?'

'I don't see anything,' muttered Gotrek. 'And what's that chuffin' stink?'

Maleneth sniffed. There *was* something odd on the breeze, beneath the briny tang: something bestial, like the musk of a large animal. The sense that she was being watched increased and her instincts warned her that they were in danger. She felt a sudden urge to leave. 'What does it matter?' she said. 'A few dead villagers. We should go.'

Gotrek looked even more furious than usual as he rounded on her. 'This is exactly the bloody problem.' He jabbed a finger at the piles of bodies. 'No one in these stinking realms cares about those people. They're the forgotten and the abandoned.'

Maleneth sighed as she realised she had triggered one of Gotrek's rants.

'Sigmar or Khaine,' he growled, 'it makes no difference, don't you see? It doesn't matter who these people put their faith in. Gods only care about dominating other gods. And while they stride the heavens, hurling thunderbolts, this is what happens to everyone else. Crushed and bloody slaughtered, over and over. Ground into the earth. Food for crows. Nothing changes. No one wins. We just swap one tyrant for another.'

Whatever Maleneth thought of Gotrek, she still balked at being lectured by him. 'You have no idea what Khaine means. No idea what he can do. Besides, if not gods, who *should* we put our faith in?' She sneered. 'You?'

'Put your faith in yourself!' Gotrek's jaw was trembling with fury. 'That's what we did. The dawis didn't expect gods to save us. We listened to the wisdom of our ancestors. We took responsibility for our own futures.'

Maleneth laughed. 'And look where it got you! Your entire world was destroyed. And now you're here, a rootless exile who failed his people, trying to convince me that you know best.'

'Because I listened to a bloody god! Because I put my faith in Grimnir when I should have put my faith in mortals like these. Me and the manling

could have made a difference if I hadn't been deceived by—'

Something moved further down the beach. Maleneth was so furious with Gotrek that when she heard the noise, she turned on her heel to hurl a knife.

Gotrek's hand shot out with surprising speed, grabbing her wrist and causing the knife to fall uselessly to the ground.

She hissed as valuable toxins spilled from the blade and splashed across the shards of metal.

Gotrek glowered at her. 'Not everyone needs killing.' He nodded to the figure who had made the sound. It was a man, sprawling on the beach and clutching at his wounds.

'Debatable,' muttered Maleneth as she followed Gotrek towards the stranger, picking up her knife and pretending to hurl it at the Slayer.

CHAPTER THREE

The man was around thirty years old and he looked nothing like all the other villagers they had seen. He was clad in an elaborate metal suit that glinted and clanged as he tried to rise. He stared back at them as they approached, shaking his head and mouthing blood-flecked prayers. He was powerfully built and his arms, which were uncovered, were almost as muscular as Gotrek's. As she approached him, Maleneth realised that the man's metal suit was covered in moving parts: mainsprings and cogs that clicked and whirred as he moved, trying to rise. There was a leather bag near him that had spilled mechanical devices onto the beach.

'Still alive,' grunted Gotrek.

Maleneth nodded to the terrible wounds that covered him. 'Not for long.'

The Slayer glared at her. 'Help him.'

She gave him an incredulous look.

Fury burned in Gotrek's eye and he gripped his axe, leaning against her. '*Help* him.'

Maleneth sighed, reached into one of the pockets that covered her leathers and stuffed some powder into the man's mouth before he had a chance to object.

He coughed and stared at her in disbelief, but before he could say anything, she yanked an arrow from the plates of his metal suit and pushed powder into the wound.

He gasped and lay back, his eyes widening in delight. 'The pain's gone.'

Maleneth nodded. 'You'll be fine now.'

‘Gods be praised,’ he breathed, grasping her hand, tears of gratitude in his eyes. ‘You’re not them,’ he gasped. His limbs were shaking and his skin was an unpleasant shade of grey.

Maleneth snatched her hand back and wiped it on her leathers.

‘Who did this to you?’ demanded Gotrek.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t be tiresome,’ snapped Maleneth. ‘He means all this.’ She waved at the bodies on the beach and the damage to the fishing village. ‘Who attacked you? Were they aelves? Like me?’

The man looked confused, staring past her to the waves breaking on the shore. He shook his head, began to speak then frowned. ‘I can’t remember.’

‘You can’t remember who was trying to kill you?’ Gotrek tried to speak in a gentle tone but even that verged on a bellow. ‘What do you mean? How long ago did this happen?’

The man was still peering at the sea as if he had never seen it before. Then his eyes widened as something came back to him. ‘Leviathans,’ he whispered. He looked around at the bodies on the beach. ‘The sea was alive.’

Maleneth looked back at Gotrek, who raised an eyebrow. She waved at the bodies. ‘Those wounds are from aelven weapons.’

The man grimaced and shook his head again. ‘No. Not aelves. Sea creatures. Krakens. Ridden by nymphs and kelpies. Things from the deep.’

‘You lost a fight with mermaids?’ said Gotrek.

The man looked even more confused and shook his head. ‘I wasn’t fighting anyone. I was just passing through.’ He was still looking at the bodies. ‘I don’t belong here with these people. I’m from Vindicarum.’ He looked at Maleneth. ‘I’m Adorach.’

He said the name in a way that implied Maleneth should have heard of it. She shrugged and looked at Gotrek, who shook his head.

‘Are you something to do with all this?’ said Gotrek, waving his axe at the ruined village.

Adorach looked appalled. ‘Of course not. I just spent the night here. I’m trying to reach Barak-Urbaz. I was leaving early so I could be past the foothills before dark. And then...’ He frowned and massaged his brow. ‘And then I don’t know what.’ He patted down his mechanical suit. ‘Nothing broken,’ he muttered, turning keys and flicking levers, causing

parts of the suit to slide and click.

‘Are you an engineer?’ asked Gotrek, peering at his strange outfit.

‘I’m Adorach. Are you sure you’ve never heard of me?’ He looked around, reached into his bag and took something from it. He held it out to them with a theatrical flourish. It was a metal dragon that danced on the palm of his hand. The thing was only a few inches tall but it was incredibly detailed and it moved with the liquid grace of a real serpent, making a pleasing jingling sound as it coiled and uncoiled. ‘Adorach the puppeteer,’ said the man, looking at them expectantly.

Gotrek ignored the puppet and gestured inland, at the distant mountains. ‘What about the dwarfs?’

Adorach struggled to focus on Gotrek. ‘The what?’

‘Grungni’s beard. Did the aelves put something in your bloody ears? Duardin. Slayers. Fyreslayers. Whatever you want to call them. The warriors who are meant to protect this coast. The Varrukh. Where were they when the mermaids invaded? Where do we find them?’

‘The mercenaries?’ The man shook his head. ‘They haven’t been seen for months. They stay up in their fortress. Up on Slayer’s Cauldron.’

‘Slayer’s Cauldron?’

‘A volcano. The Fyreslayers have another name for it – Dreng-Gungron, I think.’ The man was staring at the ruined village and bodies. ‘Are they all...?’

Maleneth shook her head. ‘You don’t want to know.’

‘Dreng-Gungron,’ said Gotrek. ‘Those are dawí words. It means Slayer’s forge.’

‘Yes,’ said the man, still looking at the bodies. ‘Slayer’s Forge. I’ve heard it called that.’

‘Where is it?’

‘North-west of here. Half a day. You can’t go there, though.’

‘I go where I like, manling.’

‘No sane person climbs that volcano. It’s active, for one thing, but that’s not the main problem. The Varrukh are the only ones who know the safe routes across those rocks. There’s a concentration of aetheric currents up there. It’s on some kind of ley line. The elements are always in flux.’

Gotrek shrugged and waved his axe at the sea. It was shimmering with dozens of different colours and forming peculiar shapes with its viscous

waves. ‘That’s true of the whole realm. What’s so different about this volcano?’

‘It’s the fumes. They mesmerise people. It’s chymical smoke. Anyone who doesn’t know the correct routes ends up deranged. People see visions and nightmares, and they either fall into a crevasse or run screaming back down into the foothills. Even the followers of the Dark Gods have never taken that peak, though they’ve tried enough times.’

Gotrek snorted in disdain. ‘So the Slayers hide in the fog, is that what you’re telling me? Is that what my people have come to?’

Adorach was rummaging in his sack, checking his belongings were intact, but he looked up at Gotrek’s comment. ‘No, not until recently at least. They used to spend all their time down here on the coast, locking horns with anyone they could find. They’re a very warlike people. It’s only recently that they’ve been staying up in Karag-Varr, their fortress.’ He shrugged. ‘If they are even up there. No one actually knows where they’ve gone. It could be that their fortress has finally been taken. Or perhaps the volcano finally tired of her tenants and drowned them in lava?’

Gotrek looked around at the people lying on the beach, his beard bristling. ‘Well, if they are still alive they’ve got a lot to answer for. They broke faith with these people. They might be a pitiful excuse for *dawi* but they *are* *dawi*. And I’ll not have them bringing shame on us like this.’

‘Us?’ said Maleneth, surprised. ‘So you see yourself as one of them, now?’

He looked like he had tasted something bitter. ‘We’re kin. And I won’t stand by while dwarfs fail to uphold their oaths.’

Adorach narrowed his eyes. ‘You’re going to try and climb Dreng-Gungron?’

‘I don’t try, manling, I do. I’ll find this Karag-Varr and see what the Slayers are playing at.’

Adorach pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. He glanced at the mechanical devices in his sack. ‘I could come with you.’

Maleneth gave him a suspicious look. ‘You said you were headed for Barak-Urbaz. That’s the opposite direction.’

‘But there are ores in those foothills that are found nowhere else. I’m not fool enough to attempt the ascent, but even on the lower slopes there are treasures to be found. I may be able to find something that has long eluded me. The Fyreslayers do not welcome guests.’ He nodded at Gotrek. ‘But if I

was travelling with one of their kinsmen I should be safe to at least approach the volcano. And we're actually very close.' He proceeded to reel off a list of directions to the fortress.

'Good,' said the Slayer, when Adorach had finished explaining the route. 'That's helpful. I'll let you travel with us to the bottom of the mountain. Then you can clear off and play with your dolls while I knock some heads together.'

'And what about this mess?' laughed Maleneth, waving at the people who were still breathing, staring blankly out at the waves.

Gotrek frowned. 'Buggered if I know. They look bewitched to me. Maybe the cowardly Slayers know something about mermaids.'

'So you're just going to leave them like this, for the tide to take them?' She laughed again. 'You talk about honour and doing the right thing, but you still seem suspiciously similar to the savage killer I met in Aqshy.'

Gotrek tugged at his beard, pacing between the prone villagers. 'Shut up and let me think.' He looked from the shapes on the beach to the smoking ruins of the village. 'That fire won't spread. We can put the living ones back in their houses.'

Maleneth continued laughing. 'Put them back in their houses? To do what, exactly? Stare at each other? Shall we tuck them up in their beds? Or stack them in a pile?'

Gotrek levelled his axe at her. 'Get on with it, Ditchmaid, or you'll be staying here with them.'

'It's Witchblade,' she muttered, but she was too amused to be angry. She could think of nothing more ridiculous than the Slayer trying to adopt the role of helpful do-gooder.

'You too,' rumbled Gotrek, turning to Adorach. The man gave no reply. His head had dropped to the ground, his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Gotrek dropped to his side, shook him, then looked up at Maleneth with a furious expression. 'He's dead!'

'Of course he's dead.' Maleneth shook her head. 'Look at those wounds. I'm an assassin, not a damned healer. I eased his pain. What more do you expect of me?'

'You told him he would live.'

She laughed. 'How much information would we have got out of him if I hadn't? He would have been too busy screaming and sobbing. Thanks to

me, you now know where your Fyreslayer friends are.'

Maleneth's laughter stalled in her throat as she saw the psychotic gleam in Gotrek's eye. 'Ingrate,' she muttered, heading off to start dragging the bodies.

CHAPTER FOUR

When they had finished laying the villagers out in their huts, they made their way back up to the coastal road and climbed into the cart. Gotrek steered it into motion and they began clattering through the foothills. There were no more villages, and as the sun rose higher it revealed a land of jagged promontories and rocky coves. Gotrek still had some of the Kharadron equipment Solmund had given him and he used a blocky, ornate compass to plot their route, taking them off the road along a series of dirt tracks that headed away from the sea. To the north of them were the Grymmpeaks, a vast wall of mountains that punctured the clouds, their shoulders glittering with snow and metal.

Gotrek was in a feverish frame of mind that Maleneth found particularly irksome. He could go for weeks without speaking, but at times like this, when he was in the grips of an obsession, he rambled incessantly. As the hours rolled by, he talked about the hearth halls of his homeland, where history merged with the present, and the wisdom of elder times was relayed to eager young apprentices. As his voice rumbled on, it mingled with the grunts of the ironbacks and the crunch of the wheels across the rocks. Maleneth distracted herself by studying the slabs of sweaty muscle that covered the Slayer, trying to decide which would be the best place to jab a toxin-laced blade. An elaborate fantasy played out in her mind in which she killed the Slayer and earned the adoration of the gods. Khaine himself praised her for ridding the realms of such a tedious relic. Power and glory followed. She was just picturing the moment at which she ascended to

godhood, taking Sigmar's place at the head of the Pantheon, when she noticed something in the distance.

'What's that?' she said, leaning back over the cart.

'What?' grunted the Slayer, without turning.

It was nearly midday and the hills were drenched in sunshine, but back towards the coast, on the horizon, it looked as though someone had torn a strip out of the daylight. 'I think there's a storm coming in,' she said. Clouds were scudding towards them and her sharp, aelven eyesight made out lines of silvery rain banking back and forth across the cliffs.

Gotrek gave a non-committal grunt and continued listing reasons why the young should defer to the old. Maleneth tried not to listen but fragments of his talk bludgeoned their way into her thoughts. 'People have forgotten how to listen... Too young to understand their place... It comes down to respect. When I was a beardling I did what I was bloody told... This is where the rot sets in... I once spent a year hammering at the same anvil because that's what...'

The cart's wheels were rattling over loose scree and the ironbacks made a horrendous din with their rusting hooves, but as Maleneth listened hard, she heard the rumble of distant thunder.

'Remember,' she said, talking loud enough to lift her voice over Gotrek's lecture, 'we're in Ayadah. In Karick-azam, a storm probably just meant another excuse to put your feet up by a fire and plait your beards, but this is the Realm of Metal. Storms mean trouble.'

'Karaz-a-Karak,' corrected Gotrek, looking back towards the coast. 'That weather's an hour away. Maybe more. We'll reach the Slayers before you have to worry about getting your hair wet.' Despite his dismissive tone, he studied the thunderheads intently, then turned back to the ironbacks and yanked the reins. The beasts lowed mournfully but broke into a heavy trot, splitting rocks and trampling tree stumps as they headed down into another steep-sided gulley.

Moor and scrubland soon gave way to a barren expanse of gleaming, jumbled ore. Shafts of gold and lead punctuated a blanket of jagged, black basalt. The higher they climbed, the harder it became to see. Dust and ash filled the air, pouring down across the rocks, and even from her seat in the cart Maleneth could feel heat radiating up from the ground. Horses would have found it hard to climb such rugged terrain but the ironbacks made light

work of it. They were bred all along the Incendiary Coast and their claws were equipped with iron talons that hooked into the rocks as they climbed, kicking up sparks and rubble.

Maleneth muttered a curse as embers settled on her face, singeing her skin. 'Why exactly,' she said, brushing them away, 'have you pinned all your hopes on these duardin?'

Even now, as the smoke grew thicker and a sulphuric stench filled the air, Gotrek's excitement was growing rather than fading. His face was unusually animated and he was humming tunelessly to himself.

'Eh? The Fyreslayers? I'm pinning nothing on them, lass. They're a sorry excuse for dawis. But they could be the pebble that starts the landslide. I'm going to show you people the right way to sort out the mess Sigmar's handed you. There's good in these realms, as well as evil. I see that now. And I'm going to tip the balance in the right direction.'

'Good and evil!' Maleneth laughed. 'For someone so old, you sound remarkably like a child. Good and evil? Who uses those terms? They're just matters of perspective. Surely you know that. Nothing's ever black and white. Ask your mercenary friends when we reach them. Wars are about territory, wealth or power, or imposing an ideology. They're never about right and wrong.' She sneered. 'Good and evil. Really?'

Gotrek gave her a pitying look. 'You've handled too much poison. It's withered your soul. There's good and evil. And there's also right and wrong. There's courage and cowardice. There's success and failure. These things exist. You aelves try to muddy the truth with riddles but the truth is still there. Some things just *are*. It's good to help people like those villagers we just saw and it's evil to let them die.'

Pleased to see that she had punctured the Slayer's cheerful mood, Maleneth pressed harder. 'You don't even know who attacked those villagers. And you don't know why. What if the sea monsters that killed them lived along this coast before the coming of man? What if they are just fighting back to reclaim lands that were stolen from them in an earlier age? And what if the villagers don't know that? So the villagers fight for lands they consider rightfully theirs while the monsters do the same. Who's "good" in that scenario, Gotrek? And who is "evil"?''

Gotrek levelled a blocky finger at her. 'There you go! Wrong-headed gibberish. Typical aelf claptrap. People are being murdered by things that

crawl from the sea. That's bad. And it needs to be put right. Don't over-bloody-think everything. Sometimes it's clear what's right and wrong. And if there are dawis living on this mountain, they need to get off their arses and do something about it.'

He paused, and Maleneth saw that the pained, haunted look had come back into his eye. 'We forgot it before and we mustn't forget it again. It's why Karak Ungor fell, and Karak Eight Peaks, and all the other holds we lost. It's why we lost everything, in the end. We were dazzled by other things. Petty things. Things that blinded us to what matters. We're the Elder Race. Heirs of Grungni. Lords of the Karaz Ankor. We've got the grit to get things done. But we lost our way.' He studied the blasted mountainside, watching the ember-jewelled smoke, his gaze distant. 'And look where it led. We have to stand for truth. Or we don't stand for anything.'

Maleneth had no idea what he was talking about but she had done enough. He would now sink into a morose silence that she found infinitely preferable to lectures on deference and tradition. She leant back in her seat, toying with one of her knives, but her peace was short-lived. As the ironbacks hauled them higher up the rocks, the smoke became so thick it was hard to breathe. Maleneth coughed and spluttered, and even Gotrek muttered into his beard.

'What's that, up ahead?' Maleneth pointed her knife at something in the smoke. There was a patch of darkness even deeper than the rest. It was as if someone had opened a doorway. 'Wait here,' she said, dropping lightly down onto the rocks as Gotrek halted the cart. She approached the darkness with difficulty, slipping on the thick carpet of ash that covered everything. As she drew near to the object she saw that it was twitching and shivering, and she dropped into a crouch, holding her knife before her as she edged closer.

'What have you found?' boomed Gotrek, thudding down from the cart behind her.

Even as she approached the shape, Maleneth found it hard to answer, and Gotrek headed off in a different direction, muttering in a surprised tone as he spotted something else in the smoke. Maleneth took a few more steps and saw that someone was sitting on one of the rocks. At first she could only see a pair of long, lithe legs clad in leather boots, but then she laughed in disbelief as she saw that it was her dead mistress, as beautiful and cruel-

looking as ever, studying her with heavy-lidded eyes.

You look awful, she smirked, rising to greet Maleneth.

Maleneth snorted. 'I killed you with my own hands. I'm hardly going to believe you're walking about in Ayadah.'

If I'm dead, sneered the witch aelf, sauntering towards Maleneth, ***there's no need to defend yourself***. In a single, fluid movement, she snatched a pair of knives from her belt and lashed out at Maleneth.

Maleneth tried to sidestep then gasped as blood sprayed from her shoulder. When her mistress spoke, the words came not just from the figure in front of her but from the vial of blood that spoke to her mind. It was dizzying and confusing. But years of training in the Murder Temples meant she could defend herself from any attack, however unexpected. She flipped across the rocks, somersaulting through the smoke and then rushing back at her opponent with a lunge of her own.

You're even slower than I remember, laughed her mistress, hidden somewhere in the smoke. ***Is this what comes of spending your time with an oaf like Gotrek?***

Maleneth hissed as blood exploded across her back. She whirled around, knives raised, to see her mistress backing away, eyes full of triumph. 'You're in my mind,' spat Maleneth. 'The human warned us this would happen.'

Is that pain in your mind? Is this? The witch aelf lunged again.

Maleneth was faster this time. She parried and fought back with a high kick, landing her boot on her mistress' jaw and sending her toppling through the smoke. Maleneth rushed after her and drew her knives back for a killing blow.

'Now you decide to attack me?' boomed Gotrek, rising up from the fumes. He gripped his axe and dropped into a crouch, grinning at her.

Maleneth backed away, lowering her knives, confused. There was no sign of her mistress. 'You fool,' she whispered, shaking her head. 'I wasn't attacking you. It was her. She was here.'

Gotrek lowered his axe, looking disappointed. 'Her? Who are you talking about?'

'Nothing. No one.'

Tell him, sneered the voice in her head. ***Tell him what you do to your companions. Tell him what a mistake he's making keeping you by his***

side.

Are you here? thought Maleneth. *Are you on this volcano with me?*

I'll be with you until the end, Witchblade. Until I make you pay.

Gotrek glared at Maleneth. 'You've been at the bloody ale.' He looked around, trying to spot the cart. 'And I was just working up a thirst.'

'I'm not drunk, you oaf. It's the air, playing tricks on me, just as that human said it would.' She listened hard, trying to pick up the sound of her mistress' boots rushing over the rocks, but there was nothing.

'Don't breathe so much then,' grunted Gotrek, turning and climbing up the slope, waving for her to follow.

They had only been walking a few steps when Maleneth saw more shapes moving around her in the gloom. She whispered a prayer to Khaine, trying to ignore them. 'Can you see anything following us?' she said, giving Gotrek a sidelong look. The shapes had moved closer and she recognised their silhouettes. They were stooped, diseased wretches, robed in flies. Tusks jutted from their foreheads and they each had a single, bloated eye. Daemons. She had faced them in battle and knew all too well of the pox they carried. It oozed from their infected skin and dripped from their rusty blades. 'Do you see that?' she hissed, waving at the shapes.

Gotrek did not even spare the figures a glance. 'I see rocks, Witchblade. And I see smoke. Anything else is nonsense.' He looked back, his face inches from hers, his gaze iron hard. 'Nonsense.'

She nodded and, to her surprise, when she looked again at the daemons, she saw that they were fading back into smoke. Gotrek's conviction was so great, it had driven them from her thoughts.

Gotrek turned and marched on, whistling in a tuneless monotone as he picked his way through the rocks. He had only gone a few paces when a shadow rose up before him – a vast, gelatinous mound. It was as rotten as the shapes Maleneth had glimpsed earlier, but it was the size of a hill and its head was crowned with broken antlers. As it lumbered through the smoke, Maleneth felt a rush of panic. It radiated an aura of intense wrongness. It was not meant to exist on the physical plane. It was a horror spawned in the places between worlds.

'Rubbish,' muttered Gotrek as he stomped through the daemon. The disdain in his voice dispelled the illusion. The daemon rippled away into the fumes.

Maleneth stared at him in disbelief. ‘You *did* see that, didn’t you? You just ignored it.’

‘I spent an eternity in the Realm of Chaos, lass. Everything in there’s a lie.’ He pounded his axe handle on the ground. ‘That taught me to know what’s real.’ He strode on.

Other shapes lurched towards them as they climbed, but Maleneth kept her eyes locked on Gotrek’s tattooed shoulder blades, refusing to acknowledge the voices that called out through the smoke, lisping and snarling and demanding that she halt. Every now and then, one of the figures would lunge at Gotrek, but each time it happened he simply muttered the word ‘rubbish’ and thudded on up the rocks, dispersing phantoms with his unshakeable conviction. The tide of visions grew so vast that Maleneth felt like she might scream, or drop to the ground and cover her head, but whenever she felt she was on the verge of breaking, Gotrek would dismiss the apparitions in such a scornful, deadpan voice that it gave her the ballast to keep going.

As they climbed, the ground grew hotter. Steam began hissing up through cracks in the rocks to join the thickening acrid smoke. The heat was all too real, and Maleneth had to dodge scorching geysers as she followed the Slayer. Without the sun as a guide she soon struggled to keep track of time. Gotrek’s stamina was limitless, but as the going became more difficult, Maleneth began to feel weary. The slope was so steep in places that they had to haul themselves up over sheer faces and leap narrow crevasses. Heat and smoke combined to cloud Maleneth’s thoughts and, where she would usually be nimble and fast, she found herself stumbling and scraping the skin from her shins.

Maleneth hated to appear weak in front of the Slayer, but he was utterly tireless and her muscles were screaming. She was about to call out for a rest when she heard him laugh in surprise. He was a dozen feet or so higher than her, standing on a narrow ledge that jutted out over a drop.

‘What is it?’ she called, her voice echoing oddly through the smoke.

‘A liar,’ spat Gotrek.

‘I wish,’ muttered Maleneth, climbing up towards him, ‘that, just once, you could say something intelligible. You talk so much about how your people told great sagas and—’

The words faltered in her mouth as she reached the ledge and stood next to

Gotrek. 'Khaine,' she whispered. She now saw the reason for the awful heat that was singeing her face and making her eyes stream. They had reached the lip of the volcanic crater. The caldera spread out below them – a lake of magma so bright that Maleneth felt like she was staring into the sun. It was not the lava that caused her to stare in wonder, however. Rising from the flames was a god.

'Is that...?' gasped Maleneth.

'Aye,' snarled Gotrek. 'Grimnir. The lying worm.'

CHAPTER FIVE

At the centre of the caldera there was an enormous fortress – a Fyreslayer magmahold, larger than any Maleneth had seen before. It had been built in the shape of Grimnir’s upper body, so that the Slayer God seemed to be rising from the lava, bellowing a war cry. The whole structure was forged of polished gold and, as the lava boiled around it, spewing smoke and steam, the metal reflected the light so that the whole fortress appeared to be on fire. The hold was reached by two bridges that approached it from either side, straddling the lava and linking the fortress to the lip of the crater. The two bridges were Grimnir’s shoulders, and his beard snaked down from his face into the lava. Even from half a mile away, Maleneth could see glinting metal standards raised on the battlements and bowl-shaped braziers jutting from the walls, as big as carts and filled with flames. It looked like a massive funeral pyre.

‘Shoddy work,’ said Gotrek, but he did not speak with his usual conviction and Maleneth could guess why. Much as she hated to admit it, the Fyreslayers’ magmahold was a remarkable sight. Every part of it had been built on an absurdly large scale and the design was so cleverly wrought that it really did seem as though a deity were tearing up through the lava, howling into the inferno.

‘Shoddy?’ she said, still struggling to take in all the details. There were channels cut into the walls that spewed lava down Grimnir’s chest, giving the impression that he was wounded, and in one of his hands he was gripping the horns of a dragon or godbeast, forcing it below the surface of

the burning lake. As she peered through the smoke and embers, she made out sentries on the walls holding metal icons and, from the size of the duardin, she realised the structure was even larger than she had first thought. 'I'd say it looks impressive.'

Gotrek gave a dismissive grunt. 'From a distance. Half hidden by smoke. And look at all that gold. What a waste. These Slayers are as flashy as the sky dwarfs.'

Maleneth looked at him, noticing that his voice sounded oddly rigid, as though he were battling to suppress something. He was not looking at the battlements and walkways, or the cloud-scraping towers and stairways; his gaze was locked on Grimnir's face and his expression was even more intense than usual. He was gripping his fyresteel axe so tightly his knuckles were gleaming.

'You're a Slayer,' she said, shaking her head. 'And Grimnir is the god of Slayers. How can you hate him so much? What kind of betrayal would make you forsake your god?'

Gotrek did not speak for a moment and his expression grew even darker. Then he finally answered, still staring at the likeness of Grimnir. 'He called me his heir. He told me I would take up his mantle and hold back the tides of Chaos.' He closed his eye and let his head rock back on his massive shoulders. 'All of it lies. If I'd ignored him I could have stayed with the manling. I might have saved my world, saved my people, saved my friend. Or at least I could have tried.'

As ever, Maleneth found Gotrek's logic baffling. 'You told me that you want to pitch yourself against "servants of evil". And Grimnir gave you a chance to fight the daemons of Chaos. Surely that was exactly what you wanted – a chance to defeat the ultimate enemy?'

Gotrek rounded on her, his eye burning. 'I defeated nothing, aelf. Don't you understand? At Grimnir's word I missed the final battle of my people and what did it achieve?' He waved his axe back down the slope. 'While I was lost in their netherworlds, the Gods of Chaos claimed everywhere else. Call these realms what you like but they belong to the Ruinous Powers. My sacrifice meant nothing. Worse than nothing.' He stared back at the likeness of Grimnir. 'And now he's gone. I can never hold him to account. I can never–' He howled and reeled away from Maleneth, slamming his axe into a rock, splitting it with an explosion of embers.

Maleneth backed away. If Gotrek slipped into his berserk state he might cleave her in two without even realising. But his rage faded as quickly as it had come. 'No matter,' he said, looking for a way down to the nearest of the two bridges. 'It's better this way. I was a fool but I won't be fooled again. I'll honour my ancestors in the way I see fit and I will never listen to another god.' He spotted a path heading down to the crater and began climbing down to it. 'I'd advise you to do the same.'

Maleneth scrambled after him but she struggled to keep up. The heat was radiating through the soles of her boots and the air scorched her lungs. She had to bat embers away as she clambered down towards the heart of the volcano. It took nearly an hour to reach the bridge and by the time she stumbled onto the path, Maleneth could hide her exhaustion no longer. She collapsed onto the hot stone, gasping for breath and grabbing a flask of water from her belt. Gotrek noticed she was struggling and, to her surprise, paused to let her rest, sitting down near her on the low wall that lined the path. The entrance to the bridge was flanked by two colossal statues that looked, to Maleneth's eyes, like the wingless dragons Fyreslayer nobles rode into battle – magmadroths, they were called, and they made her uneasy as they reared over the bridge, forming an arch cast from the same metal as the fortress at the far end.

'No sentries,' said Gotrek, standing and walking past the statues onto the bridge. He was only a dozen feet from Maleneth but the heat was so fierce he rippled as he walked away from her, blurred by the infernal temperature. There was a constant wall of embers drifting up from the lake below and as Gotrek strode down the centre of the bridge, it looked like he was entering a tunnel of flames. The bridge was built on the same grand scale as everything else, broad enough that fifty Slayers could have marched down it side by side. 'Don't these people want to protect their god castle?'

Maleneth finished her drink, climbed wearily to her feet and followed him out onto the bridge. The metal was even hotter than the rocks, and was engraved with runes that glowed in the heat. She shrugged. 'Perhaps they have no need of sentries. Adorach said no one ever gets past those phantoms you just ignored. We're probably the first people to come up here for centuries.' She squinted through the smoke, trying to see the opposite end of the bridge. The air was liquid and mobile, but she realised that some of the movement was more than just heat haze. 'There *is* someone coming.'

she said, drawing her knives.

Gotrek slapped the head of his axe against his palm. 'Good. Time for some answers.' He marched off into the smoke. 'Keep up, manling.'

Gotrek had often called Maleneth manling when they had first travelled together, confusing her with a long-dead friend, but he had not done it for months. She caught up with him and studied him as he walked. At first she could not see anything untoward but then she frowned in surprise. 'Look at the master rune.'

Gotrek looked down at his chest and cursed. It was glimmering with inner fire. The rune was forged to resemble a face – the same face that adorned the fortress up ahead of him. 'What's going on?' said Gotrek, tapping the rune with his axe.

Maleneth stared at the metal. It usually only lit up when the Slayer was in one of his berserk rages. She nodded at the magmahold. 'It was forged in one of these Fyreslayer keeps.'

Gotrek gave the rune a suspicious look. When they had first come to Ayadah, Gotrek had been bent on taking the rune from his body but since then he had made an uneasy peace with it. He distrusted anything so closely linked to Grimmir and tried to avoid triggering its power, but he had come to admit that it was sometimes useful. 'If it starts trying to change me I'll douse the bloody thing in lava.'

Gotrek was about to start ranting but before he could start, a loud droning sound filled the air. 'Grungni's hammer.' He grimaced. 'Is something dying?'

'They're war-horns.' Maleneth nodded to the walls of the magmahold. 'Look on the battlements.' She could see figures up on the walls of the keep, carrying curved trumpets.

Gotrek nodded and picked up his pace, swinging his axe from side to side as he stormed down the bridge.

'Gotrek,' said Maleneth, hurrying after him, dizzy from the heat. 'You look like you're about to kick the doors down.'

'So?'

'Look at the size of this place. There must be thousands of warriors in there. Even you don't want to pick a fight with an army.'

Gotrek scowled, gripping his axe tighter as the shapes in the smoke came nearer.

CHAPTER SIX

The first thing to reach them was a monster: a magmadroth, almost as large as the statues at the start of the bridge and twice as fierce. Its scales burned as hot as the lava below and it was surrounded by a thick, brimstone stink that caught in Maleneth's throat and made her cough and hawk. The creature towered over Gotrek as it stomped towards him, causing the bridge to judder and groan.

Gotrek stood his ground, glaring up at the beast's rider – a Fyreslayer carrying a brazier-topped staff and wearing an ornate, dragon-crested helmet. Dozens more Fyreslayers were gathering around the creature's legs. To Maleneth, they looked very similar to Gotrek – a little smaller perhaps, but with the same squat, muscular build – and though they all wore ornate, rune-inscribed battle helms, they still sported tall, red crests of hair almost identical to Gotrek's. Most of them looked as deranged as him, too. The Fyreslayer on the magmadroth was motionless, looking down with a proud, stern expression, but others were swinging their axes, swaying from side to side and mouthing feverish prayers. They were one command away from launching themselves at Gotrek. Maleneth counted thirty of them in the shadow of the beast but there were more approaching through the smoke.

The Slayer on the magmadroth reined in his steed and leant forwards in his elaborate, tall-backed throne. He pointed his staff at Gotrek, spilling embers from the brazier at its top. 'Leave.' His voice boomed out through the fumes, laden with authority and something else – something unnatural that made Maleneth grip her knives a little tighter.

‘Be careful,’ she warned, glancing at Gotrek.

He turned to her, eyebrow raised, then looked back at the Fyreslayer on the magmadroth. ‘Who are you,’ he bellowed, ‘to give me orders?’

The Fyreslayer studied Gotrek. His face looked too severe to have ever been softened by a smile. His brow was like a mountain crag and his forked, black beard hung down to his boots. There were golden runes hammered into his muscles and they shimmered as he glared at Gotrek. He had black stripes under his eyes that looked like streaks of charcoal, and as Maleneth looked around at the other Fyreslayers, she saw that they were all wearing the same markings. She had met many Fyreslayers before, but she had never seen them paint their faces in such a way.

‘I’m Korgan Forkbeard,’ said the Fyreslayer, barely moving his lips, ‘son of Ogvald the Grim, High Priest of the Varrukh Forge Temple and Runemaster of Karag-Varr.’ He looked at Gotrek with cool dispassion. ‘And you must leave this place while you can.’ The other Fyreslayers grew even more restless, rolling their heads on their shoulders and barking oaths, inflamed by their leader’s words.

Maleneth expected Gotrek to be equally animated but he simply nodded. ‘You’re a disgrace,’ he said, speaking calmly, ‘to your ancestors and your creed. You should hang your head in shame. I do not take orders from an oathbreaker.’

Something dangerous flickered in Korgan’s eyes but he remained calm. ‘Who are you, stranger?’

‘Gotrek Gurnisson, son of the Everpeak and sworn enemy of the gods.’ He waved his axe at the colossal face on the magmahold. ‘Including yours.’

Korgan raised an eyebrow. ‘A lunatic, then.’ He lowered his staff. ‘Leave and I’ll overlook your hasty words.’

Gotrek’s brow bristled. Maleneth mouthed a curse as she saw he was on the verge of one of his rages. ‘Look how many there are!’ she whispered.

Gotrek did not seem to hear. ‘Before I came here,’ he cried, starting to pace and swing his axe, ‘I heard tales of your cowardice. Even the cloud-cowering Kharadron speak of it. And now, now that I meet you, I see with my own eyes what a disgrace you are. Not only do you hide up here, counting your gold, while people are being slaughtered all along the coast, but you have also forgotten how to welcome one of your own kin. What kind of *drengi* turn away a traveller seeking rest? You’re a disgrace.’

The mob of Slayers howled and spat, shaking their heads like hounds on a leash, desperate to attack. Maleneth was surprised to see that Korgan still remained calm. She had never seen a Fyreslayer show such self-control. In her experience, they were always on the verge of violence. Korgan stood slowly in his throne and levelled his staff at Gotrek, dripping flames from the brazier. ‘You all heard. I gave fair warning. No one but the Varrukh may enter Karag-Varr.’ The magmadroth bucked and stomped beneath him, runes smouldering in its scales. ‘This stranger would not leave by choice’ – he drew back his staff, as if he were about to hurl it – ‘so I will *make* him leave.’ The runemaster thrust his staff forwards and roared an oath.

Gotrek howled incoherently and charged.

‘What did I do to deserve him?’ hissed Maleneth, running after him.

They were still a dozen feet from the Varrukh lines when Maleneth realised what was happening. Korgan had summoned a storm of embers and formed them into a glittering mass that was hurtling at Gotrek. The maelstrom flashed, coiled and coalesced into a dragon made of flames, fifty feet tall and with a wingspan that spread out from the bridge, shimmering in the heat haze.

‘*Khazuk!*’ roared Gotrek, laughing as he leapt at the dragon, swinging his axe around his head.

The fire spirit crashed into Gotrek, and the other Slayers howled war cries, sprinting at Maleneth.

Gotrek’s axe flashed white as the blade bit deep into the dragon’s shoulder, throwing sparks across the figures below. The dragon reeled backwards but lashed out with a claw at the same time, smacking Gotrek so hard he somersaulted through the air and landed heavily on the bridge.

The Slayer lurched back to his feet and laughed, blood rushing from one side of his face. ‘I’ve slain beasts that make you look like a fledgling!’ he shouted, then ran down the bridge again, drawing back his axe for another attack. The same light that was burning in the fyresteel blade was also shining from his eye and from the rune in his chest.

‘Halt!’ cried Korgan, his thunderous voice dragging the Fyreslayers to a standstill.

Maleneth had been about to hurl a poisoned blade, but as the Fyreslayers backed away from her, she stayed her hand.

Korgan was watching Gotrek rush at the dragon. He lunged back and forth,

hacking at the fire spirit, and the rune in his chest sparked and blazed. Gotrek had learned to control the rune's power, to stop it possessing him, but it still burned when he was in one of his psychotic rages. As rune light flashed across his chest, it caused the brazier in his fyresteel axe to flash and spit, and even though the dragon had no true flesh, Gotrek's blows were having an impact, slicing through its dazzling scales and hacking gouts of flame from its claws. The beast reared up in anger and shock, spreading its wings.

Korgan cried out another oath and slammed his staff down on the base of his throne. The dragon vanished, leaving a cloud of cinders that whirled around Gotrek for a moment then drifted away down the bridge. Gotrek fell forwards, thrown by the sudden absence of an opponent, and slammed into the wall at the side of the bridge.

'Hold!' cried Korgan, gesturing for his warriors to back away from Maleneth.

Gotrek recovered and lurched away from the wall, trailing spit from his beard and shivering with fury. He looked around, confused, trying to find the dragon.

Korgan steered his magmadroth down the bridge towards Gotrek, staring at the rune in his chest. 'What are you?'

'Gotrek!' cried Maleneth, rushing over to him and gripping his arm.

The Slayer rounded on her, drawing back his axe, his eye flashing.

'It's me, damn you!' She backed away, warding him off with her knives. 'Witchblade.'

His grimace became even more ferocious, but then he managed to focus on her and steady his axe.

'They're not attacking,' she said, nodding at the Varrukh. 'So you don't need to butcher them.' She had no great love for the Fyreslayers, but if Gotrek took on a whole army, it could only end badly for her. 'Not yet at least.'

Korgan rode closer. For the first time, he seemed animated, leaning forwards in his saddle. He looked at Gotrek's rune and then turned to look at the huge fortress behind him. Both of them were likenesses of Grimnir's face and they were almost identical in design.

Gotrek nodded at Maleneth and lowered his axe. She breathed a sigh of relief. She had caught him in time.

‘Your axe,’ said Korgan, frowning. ‘It cut the vulcanus spirit.’

‘The what?’

‘The magmic salamander. A being that did not exist. You were able to injure it.’

Gotrek scowled at him. ‘What are you? Some kind of conjuror?’

‘Which lodge do you belong to? Who forged that rune?’

‘It was forged by Krag Blackhammer,’ said Maleneth, sensing a chance to avert disaster. ‘He’s a runesmith of the—’

‘I don’t come from any of your pitiful tribes.’ Gotrek clanged his axe against the rune. ‘This bauble was made by a Fyreslayer but I’m not one of you. And this thing didn’t used to look like your two-faced idiot god.’

‘You lodgeless *wanaz*,’ snarled another Fyreslayer, rushing forwards. He was dressed in a similar fashion to Korgan, with a dragon-crested helm, a loincloth and little else, but his appearance was different in every other respect. Where Korgan was lean and chiselled-looking, this duardin was so broad he was almost spherical. His bulk was muscle rather than fat, however, and as he stomped towards Gotrek, brandishing fyresteel axes, he reminded Maleneth of the ironbacks that hauled their cart. He snorted and twitched as he glared at Gotrek. His face was ruddy and freckled, and his beard was such a storm of ginger that his chin seemed to be on fire. His eyes were rolling in their sockets, reminding Maleneth of Gotrek in one of his most extreme rages. If anything, this duardin seemed even more psychotic. Like most of the Fyreslayers, every inch of his skin was networked by old scars and there was a line of stitches tattooed around his neck, giving the illusion that his head had been severed at some point and sewn back on. He slammed into Gotrek chest first and yelled in his face. ‘Show! Some! Bloody! Respect!’

‘Skromm!’ said Korgan, raising his voice. ‘Hold.’

Skromm and Gotrek scowled at each other, their faces contorted. Maleneth presumed Gotrek would behead the foolish Fyreslayer, but when Korgan repeated his command Skromm backed away, muttering into his fiery beard and breathing quickly, whispering frantic curses.

Gotrek still looked drunk on fury so Maleneth spoke up quickly. ‘It’s the master rune of Krag Blackhammer. It is *uniquely* powerful.’

Korgan’s face remained impassive. ‘What would an aelf know of Fyreslayer runes?’

Gotrek laughed. 'Or anything else for that matter.'

Korgan stroked the black, ropelike plaits of his beard, looking thoughtfully at Gotrek. 'You are an unusual person.'

Gotrek threw back his shoulders and raised his chin. 'I didn't come here to be ogled. I came here to find out why you people are hiding.'

Skromm made a low whining sound and his head jerked violently to one side. Sweat was pouring down his muscles and he was trembling, but Korgan held him in place with a warning glance.

Korgan looked back at Gotrek. 'We stay in Karag-Varr because Grimnir wills it.'

'Isn't Grimnir dead?' whispered Maleneth, giving Gotrek a sideways glance. She nodded at his rune. 'Unless he really is in that thing.'

Korgan caught her words. 'The Ancestor is not a fit subject for an aelf.'

'Grimnir wants you to hide yourselves up here?' said Gotrek, lowering his axe.

Korgan glanced back over his shoulder and Maleneth saw that more Fyreslayers were approaching, racing frantically down the bridge. They were more heavily armoured than the warriors with Korgan and they were carrying what looked like thick, metal pikes.

The runemaster seemed surprised to see them and sent one of his warriors to investigate. Then he looked back at Gotrek. 'I will not discuss these matters with a stranger. But I will allow you to enter Karag-Varr.'

'Is that what passes for a courteous invitation these days?'

Korgan tapped his staff. 'The salamander was only a glimpse of what I can throw at you, Gotrek Gurnisson. If you enter this hold, you do so on my terms.'

'And what terms are they?'

'You tell me your story.'

'Try stopping him,' muttered Maleneth.

Gotrek ignored her. 'I'll talk if you know how to listen.'

Korgan looked surprised by the answer. 'You have my word.'

'And your king?' said Gotrek. 'Do you have one? Do you speak on his behalf?'

Korgan's expression stiffened. 'Our runefather is Thurgyn-Grimnir.' Gotrek was about to speak when Korgan continued. 'But for now, I and the other lodge elders rule Karag-Varr.'

Even Maleneth knew that was odd. ‘You rule in your king’s stead?’

Korgan was about to say more when the other Fyreslayers reached him. The leader of the group looked suspiciously at Maleneth before rushing over to Korgan.

‘Runemaster!’ he gasped, short of breath from running down the bridge. ‘It’s back. Headed straight for the Cindergate. Even worse than last time.’

Korgan closed his eyes. His stoicism seemed to falter, but then he recovered his composure and nodded. He turned his lumbering steed and waved his warriors back down the bridge. ‘Back to the hold. And quickly. We may have time to reach the Harulk barracks.’

There was a chorus of oaths and curses as the Fyreslayers turned and began running towards their fortress.

Gotrek called out as Korgan started to ride away. ‘What are you running away from? Are you under attack?’

‘Not an attack,’ called Korgan over his shoulder. ‘A storm. Follow me back to the hold. We have to get inside before it hits.’

Gotrek laughed. ‘You’re running from bad weather?’

Korgan nodded. ‘You’ll see.’ With that, he picked up speed, riding his magmadroth past the other Fyreslayers and thundering down the bridge.

‘We’ll finish this later,’ snarled Skromm, glaring at Gotrek, before running after the other duardin.

Gotrek laughed in disbelief, then began jogging after him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maleneth could easily have sprinted after the runemaster, but she stayed at Gotrek's side as he puffed and muttered down the bridge.

'Bloody ridiculous,' he gasped. 'Running from a bit of weather. Who ever heard of such a thing?'

Soon the gates of the magmahold rose up ahead from the smoke. The bridge was formed from Grimnir's pauldron and the gates were built into the side of his helmet so as Maleneth ran towards them, she saw the god's fierce visage glaring out at the other mountains, as though debating whether to rise from the lava and smash their peaks.

'That soddin' smell,' coughed Gotrek, pounding along at her side. 'The one from the fishing village.'

Maleneth sniffed. He was right. Even the sulphuric stink of the volcano could not entirely mask that there was another smell flooding across the bridge – a sharp, briny tang that made her feel oddly cool, despite the fierce heat rising from beneath them. 'Smells like the sea,' she said, frowning.

Gotrek grimaced. 'More like fish guts.'

'It must be the storm I spotted when we were climbing up here. I thought it was headed this way.'

Gotrek waved his axe at the gates they were approaching. They were hundreds of feet tall and the metal doors were a dozen feet thick. 'Why do they bloody care? Look at this place. What kind of storm could touch it?'

Maleneth thought of the ruined huts they had seen by the beach and the bodies scattered across the rocks. 'If they're worried, we should be

worried.'

They reached the gates and ran through, joining a large crowd of Fyreslayers who had gathered in a grand square inside the walls of the hold. There was a great tumult as hundreds of duardin crowded round the magmadroth, calling out to the runemaster and all speaking at once, but Maleneth forgot about the approaching storm as she looked at the architecture. The square was lined with enormous statues. They were all Fyreslayers, with trailing beards, whirling axes and proud crests of hair, and all had been captured at the moment of attack, snarling as they lunged and hacked. Each of the Slayers was grappling with a daemon of some kind: putrid plaguebearers or flaming, goat-legged things with the heads of drooling hounds. Through some clever artifice of duardin engineering, magma from the lake had been channelled into the statues' axes so that they burned and smoked. This filled the square with lurching shadows, making it seem as if the colossal figures were moving. Maleneth stared up at them, feeling like she had wandered into a furious battle of the gods. The whole place radiated an intense feeling of violence. It was like a shrine to battle. The feeling of danger was so real, so palpable, that she had to resist the urge to draw out her knives and drop into a fighting stance.

'The Doomgron,' said Gotrek, looking up at the fierce-looking statues. His face was an angry puce colour and there was sweat dripping from his beard.

'Doomgron?'

'Aye. The final battle, according to these lava-chewing fanatics. Solmund told me about it back in the Kharadron cloud city. Fyreslayers think they'll fight alongside Grimnir one day, when he's reborn to save the realms.' Gotrek's words dripped with bile. 'There was a time when I might have thought they were right to put their faith in him.'

'Look there,' said Maleneth, pointing to the far side of the square. 'Some of the statues have fallen. Someone's been using siege engines against this place.'

Gotrek frowned. 'How would you lug siege engines up the side of a volcano?'

'Well something has hammered them. Look, there's rubble over there and half that hall has collapsed.'

Gotrek shrugged. 'Probably fell down. These modern Slayers take no pride in their work. They throw these places up in a hurry, without taking the time

to make them sturdy, and then they let them slide into disrepair. They have no respect for honest labour or the proud skills of the mason or the—'

'To the barracks!' cried Korgan, calling out to them as he rode across the square. The other Fyreslayers were following him, heading past the warring statues to the largest of the buildings surrounding the square – an impressive rectangular structure with broad steps and rows of anvil-topped columns.

'They're not going to make it,' said Maleneth, pointing her knife to the main street that led off the square. There was a wall of fog hurtling down it, rolling and churning like waves and filling the air with spray. It was going to overtake the Fyreslayers before they could enter the barracks.

Gotrek tried to answer Maleneth but his words were drowned out by a deafening thunderclap. Lightning flashed, deep in the fog, and for a brief second something was visible in the spray – something serpentine that appeared to be swimming through the air. The flash of light was too brief for Maleneth to understand what she had seen, only that it was vast and heading their way.

'Slayers don't run from rain clouds.' Gotrek strode towards the wall of mist with his chin raised. 'These people have hammered too much metal into themselves. They need to get some bloody—'

His words were cut off as the mist engulfed them. Maleneth had the claustrophobic sense that she was drowning, that the sea had risen from the coast in a great deluge, swamping the mountain. The fog hit with such force that she staggered backwards, struggling to stay on her feet and gasping for air. She quickly realised that she could still breathe, and was not really underwater, but the odd sensation persisted as she looked around into the rolling banks of spray. In an instant, the furnace-like heat of the magmahold had been replaced with a damp, piercing chill that ate into her bones, causing her to shiver as she looked around for Gotrek. He was nearby but the fog was so dense she could barely make him out. He looked as confused as her, stumbling around and looking up into the mist.

'Wait,' she said. Her voice was muffled and odd, as if she really were underwater, and Gotrek did not hear. 'Gotrek!' she cried, stepping closer to him. He turned, finally hearing, but then he frowned and stared at something behind her. 'What is it?' she asked, looking round. Then she gasped in surprise.

Drifting towards them, floating through the fog, was a jellyfish. She stared as it rippled through the mist, trailing long, seaweed-like limbs. There was something dreadfully wrong about seeing such a creature hanging in the air. As she watched it, Maleneth felt a crushing sense of despair.

Finally, after all she had seen, after all she had survived, her mind was folding in on itself; her sanity was fragmenting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘What kind of storm is this?’ roared Gotrek. She could tell he was shouting because of his expression, but the words were barely audible, even though he was right next to her. The smell of the sea was now overpowering and Maleneth was breathing in short, quick gasps, still struggling to convince herself she was on dry land.

Lightning flashed again. The boom of thunder was distant and faint, but the light was even brighter than before and Maleneth cried out in shock. She was surrounded by sea creatures. Before the light failed, she saw more jellyfish, shoals of silver fish and larger shapes, winding through the darkness. One of the bigger creatures resembled a centipede, but dozens of feet long and propelled by fins rather than legs. It was coiling and looping in the gloom, thrashing around as though attacking something she could not see. ‘This is what destroyed the fishing village,’ she gasped, though no one could hear her.

She saw Fyreslayers – still heading in the direction of the barracks but, rather than sprinting, they were now wading slowly through the gloom, leaning forwards as though forcing their limbs through thick tar. Their shoulders had dropped and their expressions were grim, as though they had endured a terrible defeat. As Maleneth tried to head their way, she felt the same resistance. It was the same sensation she had experienced in dreams, when struggling to escape an enemy summoned from the recesses of her mind.

‘Gotrek!’ she howled. Something about the penetrating cold filled her with

dread. The undersea phantoms were still flickering through the darkness, trailing tentacles and fins as they circled through the air. This could only be the work of a powerful sorcerer. Then she remembered Adorach's warning. 'This is just the mountain,' she cried. Somehow, the thought helped battle the misery that was threatening to overwhelm her. She managed to grab Gotrek's shoulder. She waved at a turtle that was swimming towards them. 'These things are just more hallucinations. It's the metal in the ground.'

Gotrek nodded, causing his beard to pool around his face. 'Mind tricks. We can ignore them, like all the others.' He looked around. 'Where's the dwarf with the wingless dragon?' He spotted the distant silhouette of the magmadroth and launched himself in that direction, moving with slow, stiff movements. 'Korgan!' he bellowed. 'None of this is real!'

Maleneth stumbled in Gotrek's wake, trying to ignore the visions as she had done when they were climbing the mountain. As she moved the air grew darker and more viscous. Huge shadows drifted overhead and she ducked, expecting an attack, but when she looked up she saw that it was fronds of kelp, as big as tree canopies. She had the odd sensation of travelling through an undersea forest. 'What's happening here?' she cried, reaching a wall of pale, tubular weeds that rippled as she battled through them. She drew deep, quick breaths, struggling to believe that she was still surrounded by air. The fiery golds and reds of the magmahold had vanished, replaced by a wash of shifting greens and greys, and when she looked down, she saw that the flagstones were hidden beneath waves of rippling seagrass.

She staggered out of the tube weeds and then halted as pain washed over the right-hand side of her body. She juddered as light pulsed from her arm and turned to see that a black, sinuous shape had wrapped itself around her bicep. It was a glossy, muscular eel and as its jaws locked around her wrist, the rest of its body sparked with electricity that jolted through her sinews and bones, burning her skin.

'Swords of Khaine!' she gasped, grabbing the thing with her other hand and trying to wrench it free. 'You're not real!' Pain blossomed across her other arm and stabbed up her throat, throwing her head back. She managed to stagger to a pillar and then proceeded to pound the eel against the fluted metal. Burning energy ripped through her muscles but, finally, the thing loosened its hold enough for her to hurl it into the shadows. She lurched

after Gotrek, locking her eyes on his back as she had before, determined to ignore the illusions.

She had almost caught up with the Slayer when he stumbled to a halt. As Maleneth forced her way through the fog she saw that Gotrek was grappling with something. It was only as she reached him that she saw it was a squid with membranous webbing linking its tentacles. As Gotrek struggled, the creature slid over his head, smothering him.

Gotrek howled and pounded, but Maleneth was too dazed to help. If the sea creatures were able to harm Gotrek, how could they be figments of her imagination? The sense of hopelessness returned and Maleneth groaned in horror. As she watched the Slayer punching the bulbous sac that was consuming him, she saw something snaking through the darkness towards her, moving at sickening speed. She caught a glimpse of scarred grey skin and featureless black eyes, and a tooth-crowded mouth that was bigger than she was – then a shark slammed into her, bucking and turning in the air as it tried to lock its jaws around her head.

Maleneth felt like she was fighting through tar but she managed to jam a knife up into the creature's gills. Blood pooled around her and the shark became even more frenzied, thrashing and slamming into her, sending her reeling backwards. She struggled to right herself as the shark turned over her head and plunged towards her, eyes rolling.

Maleneth rolled clear and lashed out with her knife, tearing the blade through the shark's leathery skin. It twisted away, trailing clouds of blood. Then it jolted towards the ground, its head flipping away from its body as Gotrek's axe sliced it in two.

The Slayer toppled forwards through a cloud of crimson. There was no sign of the squid but his face was covered in fresh scars where barbs had tried to gain purchase in his flesh.

'They're injuring you!' cried Maleneth as he hauled her onto her feet. 'How's that possible? They're hallucinations!'

He looked around at the shapes flitting past. 'Not these.' He held up one of his arms. It was covered in angry welts. 'These things have teeth.'

'Someone must have summoned them from the sea,' she said, lifting her knives and readying herself for another attack. 'This is not natural weather. A sorcerer must have conjured this fog.'

'Aye,' said Gotrek, wading off in the direction of the Fyreslayers. 'Classic

wizard work. Probably one of your sort. Remember the armour we found on the beach? Elgi.’ He grimaced as a fat, barbed pufferfish floated in front of his face, staring at him with featureless eyes.

Maleneth was no longer listening to him. Her mind was teetering on the point of collapse and she had to find a way to rationalise what was happening. She scoured her memory for anything concerning sea aelves. In the libraries and temples of Azyr, she had studied documents that described many of the races that inhabited the Mortal Realms. Much of the knowledge had slipped away from her over the years, but she had a vague memory of blind aelves who dwelt in the ocean. There was a disgrace hanging over them, a failing of some kind. She knew their name, she was sure of it, but it eluded her. A hail of tiny fish drummed into her face, causing her to stagger and cough.

‘Gotrek,’ she called, seeing that he had almost disappeared from view, his tattooed bulk merging with the banks of fish weaving through the fog.

When she caught up with him, she saw that he had joined the other Slayers. Hundreds of the duardin warriors had formed a protective circle around Korgan’s magmadroth, but the runemaster looked transformed. His proud, stoic manner had vanished. He slumped dejectedly in his throne, resting his brow against his staff as the brazier burned fitfully. He looked like he might drop from his steed at any moment. The other Fyreslayers looked like they were standing on a wind-lashed meadow. Purple seagrass was billowing all around them, the blades as tall as they were, and there were cold lights blinking through the mist, giving the scene a liquid, dreamlike quality. Behind them, where the barracks should have been, Maleneth saw the wreck of a ship, slumped on its side, its mast crumbling and trailing weeds.

‘What kind of storm is this?’ roared Gotrek as he reached the magmadroth and looked up at the runemaster.

Korgan stared past Gotrek, his face rigid. ‘This is what happened. Skromm, this must be what happened. When the storm hit us all those other times, these things must have been carried inside it. This must be why it does so much damage.’

The stout Fyreslayer called Skromm was near the magmadroth and he seemed dramatically changed too. The mania was gone from his eyes and he looked weary, as if he could barely muster the strength to grip his axes.

‘But did you remember any of this, runemaster? Until now, I mean.’

Korgan shook his head. ‘But now that I see it, I *do* remember it. This is what happened before. This is why our magmic defences can’t hold.’ He looked up at the drifting kelp, his face ashen. ‘This phantom tide is what took the runesons.’

‘The who?’ yelled Gotrek, looking from Korgan to Skromm. ‘Who are the runesons? What are you people talking about?’

‘There!’ cried Skromm, pointing into the rolling gloom. ‘Did you see that?’

‘See what?’ Korgan leant forwards in his throne, staring at the rolling shadows.

‘Ghost soldiers.’ Skromm looked furious again, rolling his head on his shoulders in a way Maleneth had seen Gotrek do. ‘Like last time. This *is* what happened.’

Gotrek marched out into the seagrass and looked around. ‘Ghost soldiers? What are you talking about?’

Maleneth followed, forcing her way through the mist. ‘Gotrek, I think I might know what’s happening. The armour we found *was* aelven, but it’s not like any design I’ve seen before, with all those corals and frills.’

‘Get to the point.’

She looked past him at the shoals of fish and the vast, half-glimpsed shapes circling behind them. ‘There are many different kinds of aelves in the realms, including some who hide in the deeps of the sea. Cursed aelves who can control the tides and summon storms.’

Gotrek grimaced as an eel looked him in the eye. ‘I could imagine your lot getting on well with fish. Cold, dead-eyed, no sense of—’

Silver shapes hurtled towards them. Everything else was caught in a dreamlike torpor so the sudden flash of silver was shocking. For a moment, Maleneth thought it was another shoal of fish, but then she saw that the shapes were rushing along the ground and they had limbs and weapons.

The Fyreslayers yelled war cries and Korgan raised his staff to wave them forwards, but they were painfully slow compared to the glittering phalanx that knifed towards them. Maleneth saw eyeless white faces and long, two-handed swords – then she was fighting for her life. A pale aelven warrior lunged at her, trailing mist and kelp, swinging at her face.

Maleneth brought her knives up in an X, barely managing to block the

blow. Rather than being encumbered by the sea mist, her attacker was empowered by it, dancing around her with fluid grace. Maleneth found most opponents too clumsy to be more than an amusing diversion, but this aelf left her reeling as she tried to follow his movements. There were smooth patches of skin where the aelf's eyes should have been, but he seemed to anticipate Maleneth's every move. She ducked, weaved and parried, but, to her outrage, Maleneth realised her opponent was toying with her. More of the fleet figures dashed by, slicing into the lines of Fyreslayers, and Maleneth howled in frustration, trying and failing to land a blow. 'God of Murder!' she spat, forcing her muscles to battle the sluggish air.

'Slow, Khainite,' whispered the aelf in her ear, smiling, before whirling away in the swell.

Maleneth turned on her heel and stumbled, losing one of her knives and reaching out, trying to break her fall.

The pale aelf laughed and launched himself at her, raising his sword for the killing blow.

CHAPTER NINE

Maleneth was ready. The fall had been a feint. She flicked one of the rings on her fingers, opening its lid, and as the aelf moved in for the kill, Maleneth blew hard, sending powder into her opponent's face. He tried to sidestep but it was too late. As he reached up to touch his face, his skin came away in his fingers, sliding from his bones like well-cooked meat. He gasped, trying to hold his features in place. Maleneth stepped forwards, snatched her knife back from the seagrass and plunged it into his chest. Blood plumed. Maleneth felt a surge of energy as Khaine's spirit responded to the kill, filling her body with vigour, stoking her hunger for violence. Despair fell away, replaced by murderous passion.

As the aelf crumpled into the mist, another raced towards Maleneth but the power of the Bloody-Handed God was growing fast, hammering in her veins. She whipped around, bringing her knives up to parry a sword strike. Then she blew more powder from the ring. The aelf convulsed, clutching at his face. Maleneth lashed out with her blades, releasing another cloud of crimson. She quickly grew drunk on her kills, tearing into the aelves, moving with increasing speed and skill, matching the elegance of their blows with a graceful ballet of cuts and kicks. She forgot about the fear that the mist had planted in her mind. She thought of nothing but the cycle of power that was rushing through her. With every kill, she sent life force to the Bloody-Handed God. And with every blood sacrifice she offered, Khaine repaid her, filling her muscles with wonderful strength. Her confusion fell away leaving her with pure, brutal clarity of purpose.

Through violence and blood, she worshipped her lord. Whatever she thought in calmer moments, she now remembered the truth. The Murder God would be her salvation. The High Oracle, Morathi, had prophesied Khaine's return and, as she killed the aelves, Maleneth felt the truth of it. She felt the power of her god. She whirled and turned, abandoning herself to the glory of the slaughter.

'Aelf!' bellowed Gotrek. It took a moment for Maleneth to steady her breathing and recall where she was. She kicked away the aelf she had just killed and backed away from the fighting, wiping blood from her face and looking around for the Slayer. The scene was chaotic. The Fyreslayers were surrounded by hundreds of the quick, sword-wielding aelves and they were making a poor job of defending themselves, attacking with clumsy lunges. The air was filled with drifting clouds of blood and shattered weapons. The runemaster, Korgan, was still riding his magmadroth and the creature was tearing into the aelves, slashing at them with its massive claws and locking its jaws around others. But Korgan was staring at his staff. The flames flickering in its brazier were fitful and weak, and Korgan looked perplexed.

'Where are you?' cried Maleneth, looking around for Gotrek but seeing no sign of him. More aelves were arriving all the time and the shimmering, fluid light made it hard to see anything with clarity. Some of the aelves were archers, launching volleys into the beleaguered Fyreslayers; some were sword-wielding infantry while others were mounted on huge eels that snaked above the battle, allowing their riders to hurl spears into the carnage. The eel riders wore intricately forged armour, as elegant as anything Maleneth had seen in Azyr and forged of a strange, pearlescent metal that shimmered like the inside of a conch. They were nobles, sitting proudly in their saddles as the eels whipped through the air and electricity flashed in the tips of their spears, charged by the motion of their steeds.

Maleneth fended off a blow, killed another swordsman and then leapt at one of the eel riders, knocking him from his steed and stealing his mount, hoping to gain a better vantage. She had assumed she would be able to ride it like a horse, but the moment she touched the creature she realised her mistake. Agony jolted through her as energy sparked from the eel's scales and blasted through her bones. Maleneth howled and the eel twisted, lunging at her, opening its jaws to reveal dagger-like teeth. Maleneth cursed and leapt into the air. Rather than slamming back down onto the ground, she

floated, with peculiar serenity, towards the field of seagrass. The eel twisted away into the darkness, trailing arcs of electricity, and as she dropped, Maleneth shivered and cursed, weakened by the shock.

In the distance, where the shipwreck had appeared, Maleneth saw a large shape approaching. At first, she thought it was another eel, but then she saw that the creature had powerful, clawed forelimbs and a head that was almost equine, with a long, spiral tusk jutting from its brow. The noble on its back looked even more magnificent than the eel riders. He carried a curved, shell-like shield that shimmered as it caught the light, and wore an ornate helmet with a wide, coral-coloured crest. He was holding his spear aloft as his steed carried him forwards with stately calm, and Maleneth guessed that this must be the aelves' king or ruler. Other, much larger shapes were swimming out of the darkness behind him, flanked by eel riders, and she realised that the Fyreslayers were only fighting the vanguard – the full weight of the aelven forces was yet to reach them.

That's where the moron will be, said Maleneth's mistress, her words dripping venom. ***He'll be headed for the biggest opponent he can find.***

'True,' said Maleneth, finally landing back on the ground. One of the aelven archers tried to take aim at her but she rolled sideways, leapt back to her feet and sent him tumbling backwards in a spray of scarlet. She raced on, heading for the approaching army, peering into the rolling shadows, trying to spot Gotrek. Arrows glided past, fletched with coral-coloured fins, and she dived for cover. It was only when she climbed back to her feet that she realised she was inside the shipwreck. Even by the standards of Chamon, there was something surreal about climbing through the ship's skeletal, mouldering hull. There was no time to examine it, however. Gotrek's unmistakable voice boomed through the pall, bellowing a duardin war cry she had heard him use before: '*Khazuk-ha!*'

Whatever you think of him, said her mistress, ***even he can't take on an entire Idoneth army. There must be a thousand of these namarti wretches. And that pompous ass on the sea drake must be the king. He will be well protected.***

Maleneth stumbled to a halt. *Idoneth? Namarti? What are those names? Do you know what these things are? Why in the name of the Murder God didn't you say anything?*

Oh, so now you want my help. So now you want me to share my learning

with you. I would have shared all my knowledge with you, Witchblade, if you had not betrayed me.

You were going to bathe in my blood.

And what greater sacrifice could you have made? What Daughter of Khaine would have defied her mistress in such a way? You should have given your life willingly. After all I did for you, you should have been honoured that—

There's no time for this now. What are these aelves? You called them Idoneth and namarti. What does that mean? Tell me what you know. I need to keep the Slayer alive.

There was no reply.

'Speak, damn you!' spat Maleneth, grabbing the amulet at her chest.

Gotrek's familiar battle cry boomed through the air. The noise was so loud that Maleneth almost failed to notice a movement on her left. She leapt back just in time to dodge a spear thrust as one of the eel-riding knights hurtled past.

She righted herself and clambered up a broken spar, looking out across the fighting. She easily spotted the unmistakable figure of Gotrek charging through the aelves, dealing out blows with his axe. He was surrounded by blood and fire as he vanished from sight, swamped by hordes of fast-moving warriors.

You've hung all your hopes on that idiot. If he dies, you will have no way to survive this battle. You need to do something.

Maleneth clung to the spar, thinking. Her mistress was right, but she would not achieve anything by simply standing at Gotrek's side. She leapt from the wreck, running away from Gotrek, back towards the beleaguered Fyreslayers, dodging spears and arrows as she headed towards the runemaster, Korgan. She vaulted aelves and duardin until she reached his rampaging magmadroth. The beast was like a slab of living magma, thrashing its tail and spitting lava into the oncoming aelves. Maleneth tried to approach it, but there was so much heat radiating from its scales that she could not get within more than a few feet of it.

'Korgan!' she cried.

The runemaster did not hear. He was still fixated on his staff, barking prayers at it but only managing to coax a few embers from its brazier.

'Runemaster Korgan!' howled Maleneth, climbing over dead Fyreslayers

to get closer.

Korgan finally looked up. He glared at her, drawing back his staff like an axe.

‘I’m not one of them!’ she cried. ‘I’m Gotrek’s...’ She hesitated, realising she had been about to say ‘friend’. ‘I’m Maleneth! Gotrek’s travelling companion. You have to help him.’

Korgan shook his head, looking dazed. ‘They’re part of the storm.’

‘Where are your bloody armies?’ boomed Gotrek, wading through the crush towards them. He had blood splattered across his face and there were flames trailing from his axe. The rune in his chest was burning furiously.

The sight of Gotrek had a noticeable impact on Korgan. He sat up straight and tried to shrug off his stupor. ‘The fyrds?’ His words were slurred, as though he were emerging from a deep sleep. ‘They’re inside, safe from the storm.’

Gotrek waved his axe at the fighting. ‘They’re not safe! This is an invasion. Muster your damned armies.’

Korgan looked around at the battle and nodded slowly, realisation dawning on his face. Of the few hundred Fyreslayers who had been standing with him, fewer than a hundred were still on their feet. Almost all of the bare-chested axe warriors had fallen. Most of the duardin left were the heavily armoured soldiers carrying magma-spewing guns.

‘Call out your troops!’ cried Maleneth. ‘Do as he says! Or lose your home.’

Korgan took a deep breath and nodded. ‘Skromm!’ he cried, standing up in his throne as the magmadroth bucked beneath him. ‘He’s right! Summon the fyrds! Muster the Varrukh! We’ve been tricked. We’re under attack!’

Skromm snatched a horn from his back and blew into it, producing a deafening howl. Immediately, dozens more horns rang out as other Fyreslayers responded.

Korgan steered his magmadroth back and forth, scattering warriors as he looked around at the flickering gloom, his eyes growing clearer. He raised his staff. ‘To me!’ The light in his brazier finally began to blaze and all the surviving Fyreslayers gathered around him as he jabbed it at the approaching aelves. Flashes of red and gold rushed from his staff. They looked like dragons made of flame and they rushed into the battle, engulfing the aelven soldiers.

The horns grew louder and other figures raced towards the battle. These were not fire spirits summoned by Korgan, but living Fyreslayers, brandishing axes and magmapikes as they poured from archways that had not been visible moments earlier. Korgan grew surer of himself by the minute, riding to the join the newcomers, bellowing commands as warriors flocked to his blazing staff.

‘Yes!’ roared Gotrek. ‘That’s the bloody way! Show them a *real* storm!’ Satisfied he had done enough, the Slayer raced back into the battle. Maleneth tried to follow but, to her outrage, the newly arrived Fyreslayers made no distinction between her and the Idoneth. Gouts of molten lava hissed past as the Varrukh took aim at her. She managed to dodge the shots but soon lost sight of Gotrek.

Maleneth resisted the urge to cut down the duardin and ran back towards the aelven lines. There were now two focal points to the fighting. There was a crush around Korgan as he drove his magmadroth forwards, mustering more Fyreslayers, but also a concentration of fighting near the aelven king. ‘Gotrek,’ muttered Maleneth, guessing the cause of the latter. She ran along one of the ship’s spars and leapt over the heads of the nearest aelves. The clinging gloom that had overtaken the magmahold was lifting. As Korgan conjured lava spirits and crowds of Fyreslayers poured from the surrounding buildings, the dream sea began to recede. The air grew warmer and the mist thinned. The aelves were shocked by the failure of their sorcery and the Fyreslayers pressed their advantage, firing barrages of lava and surging forwards with a wave of battle cries.

The weight fell from Maleneth’s limbs and she found she could sprint again, racing past the floundering aelves and heading towards their king. The Idoneth were trying to regroup but the Fyreslayers were tearing into them from every direction and Maleneth used their confusion to approach the Slayer.

Gotrek was separated from the Fyreslayers by hundreds of aelves. There were eel-riding knights circling him, penning him in with spears as he tried to reach the king. Every time Gotrek hacked one down, another jabbed at him, causing him to bellow and reel. Along with the eel-riding Idoneth, there were other creatures assailing Gotrek – fish, sharks and squid were boiling around him in a frenzy, latching on to his arms and savaging his legs. Blood was drifting around the Slayer and his yells sounded deranged,

but Maleneth noticed that the rune in his chest was only faintly lit. Gotrek claimed he was learning to harness the rune, to master it, but Maleneth knew better. If the rune started blazing, there was every chance Gotrek would lose control. And if that happened, there was no telling what might happen.

‘Fight me, you coward!’ roared Gotrek, trying repeatedly to reach the king, but the crush around him was too great.

They’re holding back, said her mistress. They’re not trying to kill him. They’re trapping him in that spot for some reason.

Maleneth changed her position, trying to get a better look at the Idoneth king. He was a fantastically pompous individual, surveying Gotrek with disdain while chatting casually to another aelf who was drifting in the shadows at his side. Maleneth changed her position again but still struggled to see the king’s companion clearly. He was floating above the ground and the air was whirling around him, obscuring his face. All the surrounding currents seemed to emanate from this one figure, as if he were the eye of the storm. He was holding a staff in one hand and something smaller in the other. A rune, forged from metal or perhaps carved from bone.

That’s the one who summoned this phantom sea. Stop him and you’ll stop all of this.

Maleneth could sense the truth in her mistress’ words. When she looked at the indistinct figure, she was filled with a feeling of crushing despair, but when she looked back towards Korgan and the Fyreslayers it vanished. ‘He’s the sorcerer.’

Obviously, you simpleton. But not like any sorcerer you’ve ever encountered before. The Idoneth are corrupt. Their souls are broken. Did you read nothing in Azyr?

Maleneth was about to reply when she saw the sorcerer point his rune at Gotrek.

Gotrek immediately stumbled, lowering his axe. He opened and closed his mouth, gaping like a landed fish and clutching at his throat, swinging weakly at the aelves.

As Gotrek struggled, his face growing dark, more of the Idoneth army swam into view. Flanked by the eel riders was a shark large enough to carry two Idoneth nobles. The one at the front was clutching the reins, steering the shark towards Gotrek. The other was manning a weapon that looked like

a harpoon launcher. The weapon was draped with nets.

You need to do something quick.

Gotrek fell to his knees, pawing at his throat, unaware of the shark swimming towards him. The eels and other creatures backed away, making a path for the shark, but Gotrek was oblivious, grasping at the air and shaking his head.

‘Khazuk! Khazuk! Khazuk-ha!’ roared Korgan, leading the Fyreslayers into battle. They crashed into the aelves like a landslide and Maleneth laughed as she saw how numerous they were. There must have been a thousand, perhaps more – and others were still flooding from the surrounding buildings. Their horns brayed as they fired magma into the Idoneth, blasting eels apart and sending the riders tumbling from their mounts. Korgan’s face was as livid as his brazier and he wrenched lava from the air, hurling it at the shark, sending the creature backwards in a shower of embers and burning meat.

As the Fyreslayers attacked, the phantom sea withdrew, snatching away the Idoneth’s gloomy veil and bathing them in the magmahold’s furnace glow. The sorcerer fell to the ground and staggered away from the king, dropping his rune. The last vestiges of sea mist rolled away, revealing the duardin’s statues in all their glory.

With his soldiers floundering, the Idoneth king rode at Gotrek, drawing back his sword to cut the Slayer down.

As the darkness faded, Gotrek drew a deep breath and looked around, coming to his senses just as the king’s serpent steed bore down on him. He laughed and snatched his axe from the ground, bringing it up through the creature’s neck and sending its head spinning through the air. The headless beast slammed down at his feet and Gotrek grinned at the king as he rolled clear, his armour clanging against the flagstones. ‘Finally, I see your lily-white face.’ He raised his axe over his head and roared. ‘Come to Gotrek!’

War drums pounded as Fyreslayer berserkers rushed past Gotrek, hurling axes and shields while the Slayer charged at the kneeling king.

‘Gotrek!’ cried Maleneth, as she saw the Idoneth sorcerer climb to his feet and point his staff at the Slayer.

Gotrek was oblivious. He strode forwards and slammed his axe into the king, splintering his armour and filling the air with blood.

The king reeled backwards then charged at Gotrek, ignoring his wounds

and swinging his sword at the Slayer's head.

The sorcerer howled an incantation and the storm returned, hitting with even more violence than before. Dark waves roared through the battle, hurling warriors into the air. Maleneth cried out as she was snatched from the ground and thrown backwards. She slammed into something and pain knifed through her skull. Then the darkness consumed her.

CHAPTER TEN

Eòrna paused at the threshold, relishing the soundless dark. Cold, black weight pressed down on her, clearing her mind and steadying her heart. Outside, beyond the chamber's ironshell walls, lay the spires and whorls of the city. Outside, there was noise and politicking and people playing mind games that crushed her spirit. She had carved a role for herself out there: saviour and hero, hunter of souls; but down here, in her private chambers, there was only the ocean. The Curaim was only an echo of the great darkness outside the city but it was still one of the largest rooms in her palace – large enough that she could see no roof or walls, large enough that she felt a rush of emotion every time she entered. In these coiling, chambered halls, she had recreated the abyssal night. In here, she could feel the boundless might of the sea. For a few moments, there was just her and the dark. She breathed it in, drinking the void. Then, slowly, a storm of blue embers began raining down towards her. It was the cold light of lanternfish, moving in brittle flurries, like snowflakes. They illuminated the ground as they reached her, picking out other shapes from the darkness. She smiled and raised her hands. Tubeworms enveloped her legs and eels shivered across the surface of her simple, namarti-style leathers. It looked like she was standing in a field of moonlit grass, but the shapes at her feet were actually the gangly, antennae-like limbs of brittle stars, heaped in their thousands across the floor of the chamber. They twitched and juddered all around her, sensing her presence. A shoal of glassfins turned slowly around her, clinking and flashing their luminous hearts. Not one of these creatures

was a bond beast. Eòrna had not blinded them or broken their will. She had not cowed them with Isharann spells. They were her and she was them. Their hunger was her own.

‘He has returned.’ Torven’s voice was unmistakable, resonant and deadpan, but it took Eòrna a moment to locate him. At first he was just a deepening of the darkness, gliding slowly towards her, but then he entered the circle of lanternfish and she saw him clearly: a pale spiral of shell, taller than she was and covered in intricate markings that resembled coral fronds. She had never seen another creature quite like Torven but he resembled the nautilus that floated in the upper reaches of the sea, only much larger and blessed with a deep, strange intelligence. Tentacles moved around his beak as he spoke, billowing like ribbons in a breeze. ‘Just a few hours before you.’

Torven had two eyes but only one was fully visible, an ink-black pool as large as her fist, protruding so far from its socket it looked barely attached. His second eye was much smaller and sunken beneath his pale skin. It was sometimes visible – a subcutaneous shadow, like a bruise, expanding and contracting in response to changes of light – but it was this second eye that had made Torven Eòrna’s most valued servant. Torven could see further and clearer than any of the king’s soulscryers. His deepsight was unparalleled. Everything Eòrna had achieved she owed to Torven.

She dropped the sack she was carrying and began to unfasten it. ‘Who has returned?’

‘King Dìolan, your highness.’

Torven’s tone was unwavering. There was never a hint of emotion in his voice. She was sure he felt emotions but they were buried too deep to colour his speech. In their long years of companionship, Eòrna had at least learned to sense when he was trying to stress the importance of something. There was a barely perceptible pause between the words ‘King Dìolan’ and ‘your highness’ that made her glance at him.

‘My brother has returned from where?’

‘King Dìolan led several battalions against Karag-Varr.’

Eòrna’s good mood slipped away from her. She felt a flash of annoyance at Torven. He knew she came here seeking respite, to escape the intrigues of court and thoughts of her brother. She tipped the contents of the sack onto the ground. A jumble of body parts slopped out, human and duardin,

severed heads and broken limbs brought back from her recent hunting expedition. The air around her exploded into life. Animals snaked and twisted through the air, falling on the meat in a flurry of tentacles and teeth. Blood pooled around the corpses and Eòrna backed away. She knew Torven would be as hungry as the others and human meat was a particular favourite of his, but he continued drifting at her side, fixing her with his huge, blank eye.

‘What of it?’ she said, unable to hide her irritation. ‘My brother is the king. He is perfectly entitled to lead his armies into battle. And he is only doing as I instructed him to do. The tighter we squeeze the Varrukh, the sooner we will draw out Gotrek. Crushing Karag-Varr is the lure. Dìolan is doing his best to follow the plan. I will go to court soon enough and let him boast of his triumph, but for now I really need to rest.’

Torven continued staring at her.

She sighed and tried to suppress her anger. She had spent weeks travelling the Myrway, she was tired and she would soon have to endure the company of her brother, but none of these things were Torven’s fault. ‘I can sense you wish to tell me something,’ she said. ‘Something about my brother’s latest battle. What is it? Please speak clearly and quickly, Torven, I need to sleep.’

Torven’s tentacles rippled around his beak, as they often did when he was agitated. ‘The phalanx was driven back. The king was injured.’

‘The idiot. How did he manage that? We’ve already broken the Fyreslayer king. He’s mad with grief and the duardin are ready to fall. We could have finished them off before now if we weren’t waiting for Gotrek to arrive.’

‘Gotrek is already there.’

Eòrna was watching the feeding frenzy and it took her a moment to register what Torven had said. ‘He’s already there? In Karag-Varr?’

‘Yes.’

Eòrna could hold back her rage no longer. She wrenched her helsabres from their scabbards and lunged at the darkness. ‘And my conniving brother didn’t tell me! The worm! He went without me! After I – after we – told him about Gotrek’s soul.’ She hacked at the air. ‘And now he’ll claim this whole thing was his idea. He acts so pious and then stabs me in the back. He calls me unfit to rule. Has me reduced to the rank of thrallmaster. And then he behaves like the most ill-bred namarti wretch. Where is his honour?’ She looked back at Torven, breathless with anger. ‘Did you say he

was injured? Badly, I hope. It's no more than he deserves for capturing Gotrek without me.'

'His injuries were serious but not life threatening. And he did not capture Gotrek.'

She halted and lowered her swords, her rage subsiding a little. Whatever she thought of her brother, she did not really like the idea that he had been badly hurt. 'He didn't catch the Fyreslayer?' she asked. 'Why?'

Torven floated in silence for a moment, then answered. 'I could not see. Something happened. Gotrek is not what we thought.'

'Not what we thought? What are you talking about? His soul is not as potent as we imagined? The shock waves he created in Skrappa Spill were immense.'

'His soul *is* potent. We were correct in that regard. But when your brother tried to seize him, he...'

'He what?'

'It is hard to explain. Gotrek resisted.'

'Resisted what? The Isharann spells?'

'And the might of the entire phalanx.'

'A single Fyreslayer resisted an army?'

'Something happened to my sight, your highness. I was blinded. Something that came from Gotrek. I cannot tell you exactly what happened, only that the king was unable to capture him, even with the weight of the phalanx behind him. And when the Fyreslayer resisted I felt another shock wave, similar to the one that came from Skrappa Spill when Gotrek fought the Moonclan tribes.'

Eòrna began pacing back and forth, swinging her sabres again. 'So my idiot brother tries to take the prize without me and makes a mess of it. All the better. This plays into my hands. Everyone knows I was the one who discovered Gotrek's power.' She placed her hand on Torven's cold shell. 'Thanks to your insight, old friend. And now they'll see that only I am capable of hunting the Fyreslayer down. I have no idea how Dìolan managed to make a mess of things, but next time he attacks Karag-Varr I'll be there to make sure he does things properly.' She gave Torven a sidelong glance. 'And to show people who should really be the ruler of Dhruim-Ùrlar.'

'The king will not be attacking for a good while. His injuries will take a

long time to heal. Days, perhaps weeks. The tru'heas are treating him but I can sense their concern. They are determined that the king must rest.'

'Rest?' Eòrna sneered. 'Not if I can help it. I'm going to the palace now.'

Torven did not reply. His silence was a pointed one.

'What?' asked Eòrna. 'Is there something else?'

'When Gotrek resisted your brother, I was unable to follow what was happening. But the Isharann priests saw something. And whatever they saw made them very excited.'

'Something about Gotrek?'

'Perhaps. Something to do with his soul. And the rune in his chest. It was something they were keen to share with the king once he was well enough to talk. Thallacrom seemed to know the most.'

Eòrna nodded at the mention of her brother's chief soulscrier. 'Thallacrom will talk to me. My brother can't have completely poisoned him against me.'

'Eòrna, I am troubled,' said Torven.

Eòrna and Torven had been friends for many years. He had remained loyal to her and chose to remain in her service, even in her darkest hour, when she thought her brother might have her killed to secure his place on the throne. They had endured much together, but this was the first time he had ever described himself as troubled.

She kept her voice calm, determined not to reveal how uneasy she felt. 'My brother wants to secure his place on the throne. He has always been fixed on that goal. But when he made me a thrallmaster he was giving me a chance to live. He knows I'm a threat but he didn't try to have me murdered. Whatever he's doing now will just be to further tighten his grip on Dhruim-Ùrlar. It can't be any worse than his previous games.'

'It is more than that, Eòrna. I saw something in his face. And in the face of Thallacrom and the other priests. There is something else happening. It is not just to do with holding on to his throne. I sense a betrayal.'

'A betrayal? Of whom?'

'All of us. I can only half see it, but I am sure it is there. Your brother means to betray the Dromlech.'

'No. I can believe many things of my brother, but not that. He is devoted to preserving Dhruim-Ùrlar. He never craved power for its own sake. He craved it because he doesn't trust anyone else to do the job. He's wrong, but

he's not a traitor.'

'Nevertheless, I sense a great betrayal is about to take place, unless we can stop it. Let me give you something.' Torven's tentacles rippled around his beak and a tiny shape floated from his shell.

Eòrna reached out to take it. At first, she thought it was a stone, or egg, but then, as she turned it in her fingers, she saw that it was a tiny likeness of Torven – a pale, smooth whorl of shell, no bigger than one of her knuckles. 'Why do I need this?'

'Thallacrom and the rest of the priests have ways of protecting their privacy. My deepsight does not penetrate their temples. But if you take this into their inner chambers, I will see as clearly as if I were there. Then we can find out what your brother is planning.'

Eòrna nodded. 'Very well. I do not believe he would betray us, but I do like the idea of finding out what he's up to.' She secreted the shell in a pouch at her belt. 'My brother may have robbed me of my title, but he cannot deny me access to the palace. Not unless he wants outright civil war on his hands. I'll secrete this near his priests.' She looked back at the food she had brought. The bones had been stripped clean and her children were circling again. 'I wish I could stay to feed you more. I desire nothing more than to be here, resting in the darkness, but I will not sleep after what you have told me. I must brave the palace.'

She headed back towards the lobe-shaped doors of the hall. 'I'll return as soon as I can,' she said, looking back towards Torven. He was still hanging in the shadows, motionless, his fathomless eye locked on her.

'Be careful,' he said.

She nodded and left.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Namarti flocked around Eòrna as she headed back into the upper levels of her palace. Servants fussed her, and proud warriors of the Akhelian Guard, mounted on fangmora eels, formed ranks and swam before her as she headed through the entrance halls and out into the city. The aelves of the Dromlech enclave referred to their home as a city but, in truth, Dhruim-Ùrlar was an ancient kelp forest. It sprawled for miles across the sea floor and reached hundreds of feet up into the darkness, but if a traveller were able to survive the crushing depths and swim overhead, they would see only a tangled canopy of dark green fronds. The kelps that grew in Dhruim-Ùrlar were knotted so tightly together that they hid the wonders beneath.

As Eòrna mounted her deepmare and glided down the steps of her palace, she passed through pools of turquoise light. Luminous branches spiralled around the city's buildings, and the architecture was so sinuous that, in many places, it was impossible to distinguish fortresses from flora. The ethersongs of the Chorralus spell-weavers had formed temples and townhouses from the kelp, creating a web of balconies and walkways that coiled around each other like fronds, merging seamlessly with the original forest. Some of the roads were broad and constant, but the lesser routes were unpredictable and not to be trusted. The forest had never entirely been tamed and even the oldest citizens avoided the darkways and bowers of the outer glades. Like all Idoneth cities, Dhruim-Ùrlar was not filled with water or air, but existed in a third element called the ethersea. Thanks to the powerful sorcery of the Isharann priesthood, lungs and gills worked equally

well in the halls of the Dromlech. As aelven thralls walked through the shifting lights, hauling carts and carrying enormous conches, plume sharks swam over their heads, trailing tendrils like pennants. Higher still swam bell jellies the size of whales, true monsters of the deep, pulsing between the spires of Isharann temples, swelling and flashing like storm clouds.

Eòrna did not pause to study the majesty of the forest city. Anger was still trilling through her veins as she thought of her brother's treachery. She was the one who had identified the importance of Gotrek Gurnisson. And she was the one who concocted the plan to lure him to Karag-Varr. There would be other prizes; Eòrna could hunt souls more efficiently than anyone else in the enclave. But the Fyreslayer's soul would transform the thralls of Dhruim-Ùrlar, prolonging their lives by many years. And she was damned if Dìolan was going to take the credit.

Eòrna's rage was so great that she had ridden through several groves before she realised there was something odd happening. She was travelling down the city's great east-west road, Dabbarloc-sór, a highway so wide it rarely looked busy. But today it was crowded. Her thralls were having to clear a path for her and even the side streets were packed with namarti slaves and finely dressed nobles. *What is this?* she wondered. She had been away from the city for weeks, hunting along the Incendiary Coast. Had she had forgotten a festival?

'You!' she called out to a nearby half-soul.

The slave turned his eyeless face towards her. Though they were blind, namarti could perceive the world around them with absolute clarity. 'Your highness,' gasped the slave, recognising her. All the nearby slaves that noticed the exchange were equally excited by her presence. Under normal circumstances, Eòrna would have relished the attention, but she did not have time for their adoration. 'Where's everyone going? What's the commotion? Are there envoys from another enclave visiting?'

The slave looked shocked. 'Didn't you know, your highness?'

'About what?'

'About the assemblage. The king has summoned a meeting of the high priests and royal families. But surely you were invited?'

Another snub. Eòrna wanted to howl but she simply shook her head. 'Of course I'm invited.' She tried to think of an excuse for her earlier question. 'What I mean is, where are all these slaves going? The Allmarach is huge,

but it's still just one palace. It can't house the entire enclave. Why are so many people headed to the assemblage?'

The half-soul beamed. 'The priests of the Chorralus are going to relay King Dìolan's words to the palace gardens. His highness wishes to address the entire enclave.'

As the slave called out to her, more namarti recognised Eòrna and began shoving their way across the road to try and see her more clearly. 'Move!' she snapped, steering her mount on through the crowds and waving for her thralls to do the same.

King Dìolan's palace, the Allmarach, was on the opposite side of the city to Eòrna's home and even on a deepmare, the journey could take an hour. Eòrna had no idea what time her brother had specified but she was determined not to find herself shut outside with the half-souls. As she raced through the city, she spotted a familiar face, seated in the howdah of a leviadon that had just swum onto the main thoroughfare. The huge, turtle-like creature was draped in the colours of House Deoch and the noble Eòrna had recognised was Princess Arainn Deoch. When Arainn caught sight of Eòrna, she ordered the leviadon's crew to steer it in her direction. The great beast pounded its hook-shaped fins, throwing the street into shadow as it approached.

Arainn was dressed as magnificently as ever, wearing indigo robes that billowed like clouds of ink and a crown of knotted coral. Her face was so heavily powdered that it resembled a bone mask and she was so slender she looked like she would buckle in a strong breeze. But she was the oldest and most powerful of all the nobles at court. She spawned a new fashion every time she wore a different robe and her approval was considered the greatest boon a courtier could aspire to. Before Dìolan had seized the throne, Arainn's father had been king and she was still a figurehead for the high-born who pined for the old regime. Many of her devoted followers were with her in the howdah: ancient, proud lords of Dhruim-Ùrlar, so aloof that their gazes were fixed, habitually, on a glorious horizon only they could see.

'Thrallmaster,' said Princess Arainn in a deep, musical voice. She smiled sympathetically as she said the word, emphasising Eòrna's diminished title. 'What a pleasure it is to see you.' She glanced at Eòrna's scruffy, worn leathers with an expression of mild despair, as though greeting an endearing but wayward child. 'Have you recently returned from one of your

voyages?’

Eòrna refused to show how irked she was and nodded her head graciously. ‘Princess. I was thinking of you just the other day. Thinking of how devoted you have been to my brother, offering him your help at every turn. You are a model subject.’ She lowered her voice as the leviadon came closer. ‘Whatever happens in the future, whatever becomes of our enclave, I shall always remember how loyal you were to the king.’

Princess Arainn’s mouth hardened into a line. She understood the hidden barb in Eòrna’s words. Dìolan was king but Arainn would have noticed how popular Eòrna had become. Perhaps even more popular than Arainn’s own entourage. The half-souls adored Eòrna for her success in hunting soul-matter, and there were many of the younger members of the nobility who treated her with the same reverence. The throne of Dhruim-Ùrlar was famously difficult to retain and Princess Arainn knew all too well how easily power could shift.

‘I only did what anyone else would do in my stead,’ said Arainn. She kept her tone cordial but the smile did not return to her mouth. ‘It is my duty to serve King Dìolan.’

The two nobles studied each other in silence for a moment, as the princess’ entourage affected disinterest, keeping their regal gazes on the horizon. Eòrna shrugged. She had no energy for the subtleties of court and these weighted, brittle conversations. She looked down at the crowds. ‘I’ve never seen a gathering like this. The entire city must be here.’

Arainn was not ready to let the matter go. ‘Making you a thrallmaster was not my suggestion. The court is poorer without you. And I told your brother as much. I said it would serve him better to keep you here in Dhruim-Ùrlar.’

‘Keep me here?’ Eòrna looked at Arainn’s beautiful, absurd robes. ‘Keep me at court when there is an ocean to explore and animus to hunt?’ She shook her head. ‘You would be doing me a cruelty.’

Arainn regained her imperious smile. ‘You always were much wilder than your brother.’ Her sycophants laughed gently and muttered in agreement.

Eòrna nodded at the crowds rushing to the palace. ‘What is this all about? Do you know what my brother considers important enough to drag the whole city to a halt?’

‘He has returned victorious from a battle in the uplands. That’s the thrust of it, I believe. He has obtained a great haul of soul-matter and he wishes to

share news of the victory. It is to be a glorious affair, followed by a grand ball.'

'Victory?' said Eòrna, recalling Torven's rather different version of events. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course, child. Why else would he summon us all? He would be unlikely to call an assemblage to boast of an unsuccessful raid.' She raised an eyebrow at her followers. 'And even I would not approve of balls being hosted to celebrate defeats.'

They sniffed and smirked in agreement.

Eòrna shrugged as she continued steering her deepmare above the crowds of thralls. 'I wouldn't put it past him. Since he found religion I can make no sense of his decisions. He's lost his grasp on sanity.'

'He pays tribute to the Great Illuminator. With the greatest of respect, Eòrna, there is nothing wrong with that.'

'Nothing wrong with it? I'm not so sure. He prays to a god who despises us. That's idiocy at best. If Teclis remembers us at all, he would laugh at my brother's devotion.'

Before they could say more they turned a bend in the road and saw the royal palace spread out before them. The Allmarach was the grandest structure in all of Dhruim-Ùrlar, a circle of spires that rose from the forest like a crown. Its gates were wide enough to admit hundreds of aelves at a time, but so many people were trying to crowd into the palace that a sea of thralls had gathered outside, jostling and trying to push their way forwards. The noise was immense. As well as the sound of the crowd, there was a rolling clatter of drumming coming from the palace walls and a howl of hunting horns that swelled and droned, as resonant as whale song.

Eòrna and the other nobles guided their steeds over the heads of the namarti, riding a menagerie of gaudily armoured sea creatures. Knights and princes called out to Eòrna and Arainn as they passed through the gates and through the king's coral gardens. Eòrna nodded with all the grace she could muster. She could not remember the last time she had slept and this was the last place she wanted to be, but these were the people who would one day help her to Diolan's throne. They believed in her and she would not let them down.

'Your highness!' cried one of the nobles, riding his fangmora eel back towards her.

‘Úrdach.’ She smiled as a young knight reached her, pleased to see someone who viewed her with less condescension than Arainn. He had a bright, open-looking face, but Eòrna was not deceived. In his own way, Úrdach was very dangerous. He was witty and charming, which meant he was very well connected at court. He was like a sunlit stream with hidden, unexpected deeps. Luckily for Eòrna, he was unfailingly loyal to her.

‘I did not see you at the battle,’ he said, struggling to make himself heard over the din of the crowd. ‘Were you there?’

‘No,’ she said, sitting proudly in her saddle, conscious that Arainn was still nearby and might overhear the exchange. ‘I knew nothing of the attack.’

He grimaced. ‘I thought as much. Well, you didn’t miss much. It was a farce.’

She leant closer to him as they rode towards the central keep, with Arainn and the other nobles keeping pace. ‘But how? The Fyreslayers are leaderless. And they have accepted the story of the curse. Even my brother should have been able to handle them.’ She noticed that the plates of Úrdach’s armour were damaged. ‘Are you injured?’

‘Only my pride. My battalion was one of the first to attack. I lost several good warriors. I’m glad you weren’t there to see what a mess I made of things.’

‘What went wrong?’

‘Nothing, at first. Things went exactly as planned during the first waves of the attack. The king took half the phalanx with him. The thralls cut through the uplanders with ease and the priests were gathering a great harvest of souls. But then, when we found Gotrek Gurnisson, everything fell apart. He’s immune to the ethersea. He saw through it. Even Thallacrom could do nothing to halt him. Gotrek marched through the waves and started cutting us down. Nothing touched him.’ He shook his head. ‘And he fights like a zephyr shark. Dìolan rode out to face him and even he could not touch him. Gotrek batted him away like he was the lowliest half-soul.’

Much as Eòrna would have liked to revel in her brother’s defeat, she had to admit that this was peculiar. For all his faults, Dìolan was a great warrior. He had seized the throne in a bloody coup and he was generally considered one of the greatest swordsmen the Dromlech enclave had ever produced. She was about to ask Úrdach for more details when speech became impossible. Their steeds had swum through a soaring arch into the Great

Hall of the Allmarach.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Arrayed across the walls, on conch-shaped balconies, were hundreds of flute and horn players, and the noise was deafening. The seats below were filled with colourfully dressed nobles and their servants, and there were more flooding in from the various archways around the perimeter. Eòrna guessed that there must be three or four thousand aelves crammed into the hall and all of them were clamouring for a view of the stage at the far end. Throngs of adoring followers swarmed around Arainn until she was obscured by a forest of gowns and gleaming armour, and more of Eòrna's friends spotted her and gathered at her side. She felt a rush of pride. There was a time when siding so visibly with her would have been considered a risk. But since becoming a thrallmaster she had led the Dromlech enclave to unprecedented seams of soul-matter – cities and coasts that were so ripe for the plucking they had prolonged the life of the Dromlech half-souls by many years. Thanks to her, their battalions had almost doubled in size. She was a hero to namarti and noble alike, and her brother would not dare lay a finger on her.

The music swelled and then died away as a group of Isharann sorcerers walked onto the stage, their gaunt faces haloed by ornate collars and their bodies swathed in ceremonial robes that billowed round them as they took their places. There was a roar of cheering and applause as King Dìolan limped onto the stage. He was surrounded by Isharann healers who were trying to help him walk, but he drove them off with angry shrugs as he stepped out from the shadows, straightening his back and lifting his chin.

He was dressed for war, wearing thick, scalloped plate armour. His intricately engraved helmet was topped with a transverse crest of honey-coloured coral and the nose guard was forged in the shape of a sea serpent's head. He reached the front of the stage and stood in silence for a moment, letting the applause wash over him, his face grim and resolute. Then he held his hand up for silence.

'Children of Dhruim-Ùrlar.' His tone was low but the words reverberated through the hall and echoed out into the streets beyond. Standing just to his left was his most senior priest: Thallacrom, the spirit-navigator who guided the king's battalions through the Myrway and singled out the most potent souls in enemy armies. Thallacrom was a potent mixture of soulscryer and tidecaster, and he was also the spiritual leader of the enclave. He was a gaunt, severe-looking noble who had served the Dromlech enclave for so many generations that some claimed he was older than Dhruim-Ùrlar itself. His long, angular face was inked with runes and his left eyebrow was arched in a habitual expression of disapproval. Fierce intelligence simmered in his eyes. There were many tales told about him, including rumours that he had once served with High King Voltornos, oldest of all the Idoneth rulers. Despite his age, however, he was considered to have the sharpest mind in Dhruim-Ùrlar. As King Dìolan spoke, Thallacrom was leaning on a staff made from the tip of a narwhal tusk, his eyes closed as he whispered urgently. It would be Thallacrom's ether-magic that was amplifying King Dìolan's voice, thought Eòrna, noticing the light that was shimmering between the priest's fingers.

'We have come to a crossroads,' continued the king, surveying the crowds with a look of triumph.

'He lost the battle,' whispered Eòrna, glancing at Úrdach. 'Isn't that what you said? And he looks like he could pass out at any moment. So why does he look so pleased with himself?'

Úrdach shook his head. 'He had to be dragged back to the Myrway. He lost a lot of blood.'

There was a moment of quiet in the Great Hall as the crowds wondered what their king meant.

'For all these long centuries, we have been slaves,' continued the king. 'From the high-born Akhelians to the lowliest half-souls, we are all the same.'

Most of the nobles in the hall looked unimpressed by this comment, glancing at each other and muttering in disapproval.

‘What *is* he doing?’ whispered Eòrna. If her brother continued in this vein, he would alienate every Akhelian pure-soul in the hall. He would do her job for her.

‘We are slaves to our past,’ continued Dìolan. His face was rigid with pain and he could not quite stand straight, but he still refused any help from his servants, glaring out at the crowd. ‘We are bound by the ancient curse, scavenging for the animus of lesser races when we should be masters of our own.’

A tentative cheer washed through the crowd as the nobles realised he was not really suggesting nobles were comparable with soul-withered slaves.

‘We are the firstborn!’ When Dìolan raised his voice, it roared through the hall, causing some of the nobles to flinch. ‘When the Great Illuminator brought our ancestors into the realms he had a noble purpose in mind. We were not made to cower in our halls. We were not made to live off scraps.’ He leant out from the stage, staring at the crowds, his eyes feverish. ‘We were made to rule!’

The cheers were now wholehearted and Eòrna shook her head. ‘What *is* he talking about?’

‘Daemons crawl where we should stand. Orruks ruin where we should build. The Mortal Realms are our birthright!’ He let the cheers crash over him, then gestured to one of his servants, looking pained and irritated. The servant rushed over with a conch of wine and Dìolan drank heavily. Then he stood in silence for a moment, eyes closed.

‘He’s going to faint,’ said Eòrna, incredulous. ‘In front of the entire enclave.’

The cheers died away as Dìolan remained still. Finally he nodded, threw the conch back to his slave and faced the hall again. ‘But for all these years we have been shackled by the Great Hunt. Shackled by this endless search for animus.’ He waved at a nearby slave. ‘Shamed by our crippled offspring. But *no more!*’ He glanced at the old Isharann priest, Thallacrom, who was nodding eagerly. ‘In the volcanic caverns of the lesser races, I have found the answer. I have found the key that will rid us of our chains. This is a day that will be remembered through the ages. Your descendants

will sing ballads about this moment. In Karag-Varr, I have discovered a soul that will finish what Teclis began all those long ages ago. A soul that carries within it a spark of divinity. The soul of a god! And with its power, finally, we will be truly born. Finally, we will be free. We will take up the mantle the Great Illuminator intended for us. Once we have harvested this soul, the Dromlech will be the first enclave in the history of all the Idoneth to escape the soul curse!’

There were several seconds of dazed silence as people looked at each other, trying to grasp what they were hearing. The king was known to be eccentric but no one had expected this.

‘They’ll behead him,’ whispered Eòrna. ‘There will be a revolution.’

But, to her amazement, some of the nobles began rising to their feet and cheering, raising weapons and howling battle cries. A roar of triumph crashed through the hall that was so loud even the king’s magically enhanced words were drowned out. It was half the audience at most, but that was enough to unnerve Eòrna.

‘He’s lost his mind,’ she said. ‘What’s he talking about, escaping the soul curse? It’s madness. We aren’t cursed, we’re blessed. The Great Hunt is what we live for. It’s who we are. Without that we wouldn’t be Idoneth.’

When the cheers died down again, the king continued talking, explaining that Gotrek was unique. That his soul was the prize Idoneth enclaves had been seeking since prehistory. But Eòrna was barely listening. All she could think of was the ruin her brother would wreak if she did not stop him. Before this moment she had been sure that she should rule in his stead, but now it was more than that. If she did not stop her brother’s madness he would destroy everything she cared about. Everything that mattered. When the king had finally finished his speech, the music began again and guards began ushering the crowds from the hall. Some of the nearby nobles were talking excitedly about the king’s grand idea, talking about how glorious it would be when the Dromlech could escape their exile in the sea and become masters of the realms. But many others gathered around Eòrna, troubled by what had been said and keen to hear her response.

‘He can’t just tear down our traditions,’ said Úrdach, looking at her. ‘He can’t drag us into the upper lands, to live in deserts and dust.’

‘Our home is here,’ agreed another noble. ‘We are of the sea. And what would we be without the Great Hunt?’

Eòrna nodded but she was too furious to speak until the palace guards approached and tried to usher her from the hall. ‘I will speak with my brother now,’ she said, glaring at them.

Despite her royal blood, the guards looked on the verge of arguing with her, gripping their tridents nervously and glancing at each other. But then the crowd of nobles around her demanded they let her pass, appalled that mere soldiers would attempt to defy a member of the royal family. It looked for a moment as though fighting might break out, but then the soldiers saw sense and backed down, allowing Eòrna to cross the hall unhindered. She rode her deepmare quickly through the departing crowds, nodding to the people who called out to her, both pure-souls and half-souls. When she reached the now empty stage, she dismounted. ‘Wait for me here,’ she said to Úrdach, who had followed her through the crowds. She handed her reins to a nearby slave and strode through a doorway.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The antechamber Eòrna had entered was crowded with scribes who were transcribing the king's speech onto shells. They looked up in surprise as she entered. Since the king had reduced her status to that of thrallmaster, most people were unsure how to address her, keen not to offend her but conscious that they could enrage Dìolan by using her old title of princess. One of the scribes opted for a neutral 'your highness' and the others followed suit. She ignored them and marched on into the next chamber. This room was a ballroom with a broad, vaulted dome that resembled the inside of a ribbed shell. The walls were lined with suits of armour and there was a huddle of figures at the centre of the room. Eòrna picked out Thallacrom and some of her brother's other close advisors, all clustered around the king, who had fallen to his knees. Princess Arainn was there too, with a few of her splendidly attired followers. The princess looked troubled and was whispering urgently to one of her friends. There was a pool of blood spreading around King Dìolan as he tried to shrug off the people who were trying to assist him. 'Leave me be!' he roared. 'I'm quite capable of walking.'

Dìolan lurched to his feet and began staggering on across the ballroom, trailing blood across the polished floor. Attendants and Isharann priests scurried after him holding cups and poultices, but he ignored them as he weaved drunkenly towards the door. Despite her anger, Eòrna felt a rush of pity for him. Since childhood, Dìolan had been obsessed with the idea that the Dromlech were the greatest of all the Idoneth enclaves. At times, his

obsession had seemed like a talisman, lending him strength and purpose when others lost their way, but at other times it was a kind of madness. He could not rest until the Dromlech rose from the ranks of their kin. He dreamed of a past that had probably never existed and a future that could never be. And now, as he lurched across the hall, blood rushing from his armour, he looked closer than ever to destroying himself. Then Eòrna remembered what he had just said in his speech and her pity evaporated. ‘You’ll destroy us,’ she spat.

He halted, without looking back. ‘Who admitted this thrallmaster?’

The king’s priests and advisors looked flustered, spouting apologies, but only one had the nerve to challenge her. Thallacrom walked slowly back across the ballroom towards her. This close, his great age was even more apparent. His skin was like silvered bark and the only colour in his face was the bruise-blue of his teeth, which he licked thoughtfully as he approached. He was so frail that he barely looked able to withstand the weight of his robes, but Eòrna knew better than to underestimate him. He was the most powerful sorcerer in any of the Isharann fanes. And his skills were not limited to a single discipline. Unlike most priests, he deployed any form of magic he chose. ‘There is no need for this, your highness,’ he said. His voice was firm but kind, as it had been when he had tutored her as a child.

‘I’ll tell you what could destroy us,’ said the king, ignoring Thallacrom and limping back towards Eòrna, fury sparking in his eyes. ‘Blinkered, backward traditions. People like you are so enamoured of the glorious hunt that you forget what it means. It’s just a leash, Eòrna. A leash that holds us in place while our enemy moves closer. And I will stand for it no longer.’

She had never seen him look so unhinged. She had come here to try and make him see sense, but now that she saw him, she wondered if she had made a mistake. He looked feral, as if he were in the midst of battle and about to strike a killing blow. ‘Our enemy?’ She shook her head. ‘Which particular enemy? The Mortal Realms are full of enemies.’

‘You know what I mean. The great wurm. The Serpent Who Thirsts. The Lord of Excess. Slaanesh.’ He staggered back towards her. ‘Do you think it is enough to hunt souls and eke a little more life into our thralls? Do you think it is enough to wait in the deeps as Chaos prepares to hunt us down? Do you think we can escape the fate that befell the uplands? Of course not. It is a matter of time. But we were not made to wait. We were made to

stand. To fight. To rule.’ He was spitting and twitching as he spoke, his powerful frame rocked by tremors. ‘And fools like you think we can remain as we have always been, lost in the hunt, scouring beaches for sparks of life. Living off morsels.’

‘Every soul I find makes us stronger,’ she snapped, refusing to be cowed by him. ‘Our thralls are more powerful now than at any time in our past. And it is down to me, you know it is. The half-souls in our battalions are better than—’

‘They are cursed!’ roared the king, looking like he might draw his sword and cut her down. ‘Nothing else matters. The rest of your words are meaningless. They are a shameful failure. They are the failure that caused the Great Illuminator to drive us from his light.’

‘You don’t know your damned history. The gods didn’t drive us from their light. Our ancestors fled. Teclis meant to destroy us. The gods despise us.’

‘Perhaps,’ hissed Dìolan. ‘But that will change when we rise from the deeps and reclaim the realms in their name. Then they will see that we are, and always were, their most perfect weapon.’

‘Rise from the deeps?’ said Princess Arainn. She was standing a few feet away, looking increasingly unnerved. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re raving, brother,’ said Eòrna, before Dìolan could reply. ‘The deeps are where we belong, not the dry, life-leeching heat of the uplands. We are the Dromlech and we are—’

‘We are the Dromlech!’ snapped Dìolan. ‘Exactly! And we are better. Better than the Nautilar or the Dhom-hain or the Ionrach or any other enclave. We are the chosen.’ He glared at Princess Arainn and then at Eòrna. ‘We can do *more* than hunt from the shadows. We are destined to strike back. We will not hide, we will advance, and we will crush the followers of Slaanesh with an entire phalanx of pure-souls – aelves who live, think and fight with all the perfection the gods intended.’

‘Because of this one soul?’ said Eòrna. ‘Because of this Fyreslayer? Can’t you hear how insane you sound?’

The king took a deep breath to steady himself and glanced at Thallacrom, his eyes full of triumph. ‘It is not madness.’ He placed a hand on her shoulder, speaking in softer tones. ‘I thank you for finding him, Eòrna, truly I do. But you had no idea. You thought it was the rune in his chest that triggered that etherstorm, but it was never that. It’s *him*. He is not what we

thought. He is not a normal being. His flesh is temporal but his soul is... His soul is something else. Isn't that right, Thallacrom?'

Thallacrom was watching her carefully. 'There is no need for this argument, Eòrna. You are angry because you see only fragments of the picture. When you know the full—'

'Do not lecture me!' Eòrna gripped the handles of her *helsabres*. 'I'm not a child any more, Thallacrom. I am—'

'You are a thrallmaster,' warned her brother. 'And you will leave me now. The healers tell me I need to rest before we can mount another attack.'

Eòrna was about to argue when she realised guards had been entering the hall while she spoke with her brother. There were now dozens of half-souls targeting her with longbows.

Her brother seemed calm and spoke to her in a kinder tone. 'You should leave, Eòrna. Events are moving fast now and they do not concern you. I do not say that out of spite. You do not believe in this cause and I will not let you hinder me. You should return to your hunts. There is a change coming and you must prepare yourself for a new way of life.'

She wanted to strike him. 'You're half-dead. And from what I hear, Gotrek has turned the *Fyreslayers* into something formidable. If you attack him again, you'll only make a fool of yourself.'

Her words had no effect on the king. His anger had gone. He shared another triumphant gaze with Thallacrom, nodded to Princess Arainn and then turned to leave.

'Go home, Eòrna,' said Thallacrom, giving her a kind smile. 'The matter is in hand. Wheels are in motion. And you need to rest.'

His gentle tone only made Eòrna more furious and she was about to follow him when the lines of archers interceded, stepping in front of her, bows raised and arrows nocked.

Thallacrom licked his teeth and smiled at her as he shuffled away. 'You need not worry about the king, thrallmaster. I will take care of him.'

Eòrna glared at the archers, on the verge of making a scene, then realised she would need to employ subtler methods if she wanted to uncover the details of her brother's plan. She turned and stormed from the ballroom, heading back towards the hall. When she strode back out onto the stage, Úrdach was waiting. She mounted her steed and waved for him to follow as she headed to the exit. Most of the crowd had already left, but Princess

Arainn and her train of nobles had followed her back out into the hall, and some of them were looking in her direction, so Eòrna rode out into the gardens and found a quiet arbour in which to talk.

‘He’s plotting something with Thallacrom,’ she said, after making sure they were alone.

Úrdach nodded. ‘They need a better way to defeat the Fyreslayers if they’re going to harvest Gotrek’s soul. Or they’ll risk another farcical defeat. I’m sure Thallacrom and his priests will have some ideas.’

‘This must *not* happen.’ Eòrna gripped Úrdach’s arm. ‘We have to find out what they’re planning and put a stop to it. I curse the day I told my brother about Gotrek Gurnisson.’ She shook her head. ‘I knew he was unusual but I had no idea it would lead to this. My brother is going to destroy us.’ She pulled him close. ‘Do you still have access to the inner temples of the Allmarach?’

He frowned. ‘They will have seen me talking to you today, and they know we are still friends. But I have never been denied admittance before. The king still trusts me, I think.’

Eòrna remembered the small crustacean Torven had given her and took it out. Its claws scuttled briefly across her palm as she studied it, as though it were eager to begin its errand. The sight of it reminded her of Torven and the memory calmed her. She took a deep breath and then handed it to Úrdach. ‘Get as close as you can to the priests’ chambers, then leave this creature in a hidden place. It is a spy. It will seek Dìolan out and show me what he’s plotting. The plan my brother has suggested would require a ritual unlike any the Isharann have performed before. How can he think he could use Gotrek’s soul to change the whole enclave? To rewrite our entire history? He must be planning something insane. Find out. Then we can make sure it fails.’

Úrdach hid the shell in his armour and kissed Eòrna’s hand. ‘I will not fail you, princess.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Úrdach knew better than to skulk. Nothing would look more suspicious than an Akhelian noble *creeping*. He strode, straight-backed and proud through the scallop-shaped halls of the Allmarach. Namarti slaves were bustling through the rooms, preparing for the victory ball, carrying trays laden with food and wine and tuning instruments made from cowrie shells so large it took teams of aelves to carry them. He had not found time to have his armour repaired but it was clean and polished and he had draped a sash over the worst dents, so he looked presentable as he nodded to various nobles. There was a charge in the air. Everyone he passed was talking in breathless tones about King Dìolan's speech. An intoxicating mixture of fear and excitement had taken hold of Dhruim-Ùrlar.

He reached the grand ballroom, where guests were already gathering, draped in their finery and eager to discuss the day's events, but he picked up his pace, heading for an opposite door, making it clear he was there on business rather than looking for dance partners. He had almost reached the door when an unctuous voice called out to him.

'Lord Úrdach,' said Arainn, gliding across the room to his side and gripping his arm. 'Isn't it wonderful?' she said, her tone neutral.

He gave her a stiff nod, trying to hide his annoyance at the delay. 'Isn't what wonderful, Lady Arainn?'

'King Dìolan's plan. His desire to lift us up from the deeps.'

As Úrdach studied her face, he realised, to his shock, that she was afraid. It was not hard for him to guess why. Her life had been built on certainties.

She knew her place at court was unassailable. But now the king was talking of changing everything and all Arainn's certainties were about to be stolen.

'It is quite incredible news,' he said, matching her flat tone.

She stared at him. 'Yes, because, if we can change the nature of the namarti...' She looked at some nearby slaves. 'If we can elevate them by shaking off their soul curse, there will be nothing that can stop us.'

Úrdach nodded.

'And then,' continued Arainn, 'we can become the aelves the Great Illuminator intended us to be. We can reclaim the *uplands*' – she grimaced at the word – 'and take our place as the pre-eminent enclave.'

'So it would seem. Now, if you would excuse me, I have business to attend to.'

Arainn did not loosen her grip on his arm. She looked at the door he had been heading towards. 'Business with King Diòlan?'

'Yes. I must take a message to his highness.'

'Perfect,' said Arainn, heading for the door. 'I need to speak with the king myself. I am keen to hear more detail concerning his wonderful idea.'

Úrdach mouthed a curse as she entered the corridor, trailed by billowing robes. The last thing he needed was someone at his side when he was trying to place Eòrna's shell.

'Arainn,' he said, hurrying after her. 'The ball will begin soon. You would be sorely missed. I imagine many people will have come here specifically to dance with you.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'I'm too old for your flattery, child. Besides, it will be an hour at least before everything is ready. And the ball will still be in full swing when the morning comes. Anyway, I will always make time for an audience with the king.'

They walked on in silence as Úrdach tried to think of a way to be rid of his unwelcome companion and Arainn waved graciously at passers-by. Then, as they crossed more chambers, they began to leave the noise of the ballroom behind and enter the regions of the palace devoted to Isharann temples. The walls were painted with images of the father of the Isharann faith, the fallen god known as Mathlann. Mathlann was shown with his mighty *fuathtar* spear held high, locked in battle with the ultimate enemy of the Idoneth, the Chaos God Slaanesh.

Úrdach had seen the murals many times but they never failed to humble

him. Mathlann was a symbol of everything the Idoneth aspired to: raw, magnificent pride, like the nobility of a crashing wave. Painting after painting showed Mathlann's final battle with Slaanesh, in which he tried to save his worshippers from the predations of Chaos. His lines were perfect, his countenance divine, all of which was contrasted by the dreadful nature of his foe. Slaanesh was a sinuous mess, a lurid swirl of un-life, caressing Mathlann with razor-edged fingers and barbed, glistening tails.

It was a battle between nobility and depravity, and even in the final panel, as Slaanesh finally consumed Mathlann, it was clear that the aelven god had snatched an unexpected triumph. As Mathlann perished, his expression was victorious, causing the Serpent of Pleasure to frown, confused. The artist who had painted the mural had captured the doubt in Slaanesh's mind as the Chaos God sensed that it had missed something. In the fanes of the Isharann priesthood, Úrdach had heard many times of Mathlann's secret triumph. The aelven god of the deeps would never truly die, as long as his memory lived on in the souls of his followers. His power had been scattered, rather than diminished. Slaanesh thought it was glutting itself on a glorious meal, but it was actually crunching on an empty shell. Some of the Dromlech saw the story as a metaphor, illustrating that by keeping Mathlann's memory alive, they could embody his greatness; but others saw the tale in a very literal way, believing that Mathlann sowed his divine essence into the souls of his worshippers, making each of them, even the lowliest namarti, a vessel for his glorious power.

Priests glanced up as Úrdach and Princess Arainn passed by the shrines and altars, as did the armed guards who waited at doorways, but none of them challenged the nobles, having seen them in conversation with Dìolan many times. The princess, in particular, was almost on an even footing with the king, so highly was she regarded. Soon, they started to approach the king's private chambers. Úrdach had no desire to actually speak with his regent, and he was sure he was close enough to let the shell go now, but he could do nothing with Arainn at his side and she would be expecting him to find the king. An idea occurred to him as he spotted a seat outside one of the antechambers that led off the corridor. 'Damn it,' he muttered, coming to a halt and holding his side with a grimace.

'Are you unwell?' asked Arainn.

'Wounded. At Karag-Varr.' He tried to sound pained. 'It is nothing. We

can continue.'

Frustration flickered in her eyes but she shook her head. 'No, you must rest. Look, here's a chair.' She took him by the arm and led him to the seat. 'Take time to catch your breath. I will wait.'

'No, carry on without me,' he said. 'I fear I may need to wait here for some time. And, if you do not find the king quickly he will be heading to the ball and you will miss your chance.'

'No,' she insisted, with a taut smile, 'I won't leave you.' But it was clear from the way she kept glancing down the corridor that she was desperate to carry on.

'Please,' he said. 'I will have many chances to speak with his majesty. I fight at his side in every campaign. But you may not have this opportunity again for a long while.'

She hummed tunelessly, something he had seen her do before when she was thinking. Then she nodded. 'If you're sure.' She looked around. 'I will call a slave to help you.'

'No,' he said, a little louder than he intended, then more softly, 'No, no need. I just forgot how tender my wound is. If I sit here for a while I will be fine, I assure you, and if I need a servant I can call for one.'

She nodded and made to leave, then hesitated. 'I may see you later, in the king's chambers. You know how he hates balls.' She gave him a stiff smile, then hurried on down the corridor. 'He will delay going for as long as he can.'

Úrdach remained on the seat for a while, listening to her soft footfalls fading into the distance. When he was sure she was not going to come back, he stood and peered into the antechamber behind him. It was a small room, empty apart from a statue of Mathlann in a niche, but there was a doorway on the opposite side, hung with heavy curtains.

The antechamber seemed the perfect place to leave the shell, but he wanted to see what was through the curtains first. He resisted the urge to creep and walked confidently across the room, snatching back the curtains and stepping through the doorway.

The next room was dark. Only a few veins of blue light pulsed through the walls and he struggled to see what kind of chamber it was. The sound of chanting wafted through a doorway he could not see and, as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he realised that robed priests had gathered in the

centre of the room, kneeling in prayer. A guard emerged from the shadows and approached with a stern expression. 'My lord. Forgive me. No one is to be admitted.'

Úrdach was so keen to make his presence seem beyond question that he spoke without thinking. 'I am Prince Úrdach,' he snapped. 'How dare you treat me like a common half-soul! I am here on the express orders of King Dìolan. Would you like me to tell him you attempted to bar my entry?'

The guard paled and looked to one of his comrades who had walked over at the sound of voices.

'Of course you may pass,' said the second guard quickly. 'Please forgive the mistake, prince. Lord Thallacrom has stressed at great length the importance of discretion in this matter. I'm sure you understand.'

'Of course I do,' replied Úrdach, not understanding in the slightest. 'I shall overlook your impertinence on this occasion.' Before the guards could ask him anything else, he strode on across the room. There was something odd going on. He had heard Isharann priests at prayer every day of his life, but the chant he could hear echoing through the chamber was peculiar and quite unlike anything he had encountered before. It sounded urgent and pleading, and as he walked into the next room, he had the odd sensation that the words were tugging at him, draining him of energy.

He dismissed another group of guards who tried to challenge him, speaking with even more confidence now, as he headed past another group of kneeling priests. This room was as gloomy as the previous one, but there were fragments of light blinking through the priests' fingers, as if they were holding lanternfish. They were all holding pieces of coral and their shapes were familiar in some way. Úrdach had only entered the first antechamber looking for a place to leave the shell, but he was now intrigued to know what was happening. All the guards seemed on edge, even though many of them knew him by sight, and as he passed through room after room, the chanting grew in fervour and volume.

He wandered for nearly an hour, crossing dozens of chambers, many of them filled with priests who were clutching pieces of coral, and he began to feel troubled. There was something significant about the coral but he could not place it. He reached a room so heavily guarded that he finally resorted to subterfuge, slipping down some steps and taking another door inside, creeping behind a row of statues and rushing through the entrance when the

guards were looking the other way.

The next room was dominated by a long, stone table heaped with pieces of coral. A line of priests was filing into the room from one direction and exiting in another, each taking a piece of coral as they passed the table. There were no guards in this room and Úrdach approached the table with a chill of realisation, staring at the coral. ‘They’re pieces of the chorrileum,’ he whispered, so shocked he had to reach out to the edge of the table to steady himself. The chorrileum was the resting place of the Dromlech. When they died, their souls were interred in the chorrileum by Isharann priests. Dromlech faith taught that any soul not bound to the chorrileum would be consumed by Slaanesh. It was the heart of Dhruim-Ûrlar – and here was a large section of it, dismantled and lying in pieces on a table in the Allmarach. Countless souls were being put at risk. King Dìolan must have sanctioned this, he realised, leaning heavily against the table. This must be how he intended to harness Gotrek’s soul. The idea was so horrific Úrdach could barely breathe. The chorrileum was the most sacred site in the whole of Dhruim-Ûrlar. It was the king’s holy duty to preserve it. ‘I have to tell Eòrna,’ he whispered, turning to leave.

‘Wait,’ said a voice from the other side of the room and a newcomer hurried through the darkness towards him.

A sudden premonition of danger jolted through Úrdach and, before the figure could reach him, he took Eòrna’s shell and placed it on the table with the piles of coral.

‘Prince!’ whispered Thallacrom as he limped from the shadows, baring his ink-stained teeth. In the pall of the chamber he looked even more cadaverous than usual, but he seemed delighted to see Úrdach. ‘You have come at an auspicious moment.’

Úrdach bowed. ‘I have?’

Thallacrom nodded, studying Úrdach closely and continuing to grin. ‘Let me show you.’ He waved his narwhal tusk at the door through which the priests were leaving.

Úrdach could not rid himself of the sense that he was in danger but he refused to look hesitant in front of the priest, so he marched across the room with his chin raised, wondering how best to explain his presence.

‘King Dìolan has tasked me with a great commission,’ said the priest as they headed into a long gallery. ‘Perhaps the greatest that has ever been

undertaken by an Isharann fane. I and my—'

Úrdach gasped as pain flooded across his back. He whirled around to see that Thallacrom had raised the tusk and was pointing it at him. The air between the two of them shimmered, like the surface of starlit water, and the disturbance was pouring from the point of the tusk. Where it washed over Úrdach, he felt a fierce agony. The pain was so intense that he stumbled and dropped to his knees, struggling to speak. As he fell, he reached for his sword, but his arm had been transfigured by the same disturbance that had altered the air. Where his armour should have been, there was a splash of silvery ripples.

'It is unfortunate that you decided to enter these particular chambers,' said Thallacrom, letting the smile drop from his face. He walked slowly towards Úrdach, keeping the narwhal tusk raised. 'We are not ready to share our methods.'

Úrdach tried to reply but the room became a wall of ripples, as though he were viewing it from behind a waterfall. He realised he could not drag any air into his lungs. In fact, he no longer had lungs. Then the world floated away from him and he was no more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maleneth gasped for breath, clawing at her throat, her lungs burning as the darkness crushed her. Memories of violence flickered through her mind, visions of every battle she had fought, every kill she had made, every blood sacrifice she had offered – and looming behind it all was the face of Khaine, the Bloody-Handed, Lord of Murder and master of her fate. Her heart raced to know he was watching her, then horror filled her as she saw that the Murder God was studying her with a disappointed expression. He moved closer, blood and fire washing over his perfect features. ‘Look at you,’ he said, his voice surprisingly coarse. ‘Lounging around like you’ve nothing better to do. Typical bloody aelf.’

As soon as Maleneth recognised Gotrek’s bludgeoning voice, the world fell into place around him. The Slayer was standing over her, leaning on his axe, a look of utter disdain on his face. His tattooed muscles were draped in seaweed and spattered with blood. Something was moving in his beard, fidgeting and twitching. Gotrek frowned and picked it out, peering at it. It was a small fish that flashed silver as it moved, flapping back and forth between his thumb and forefinger. Then it was gone, dissipating into a tiny cloud of mist that floated away through the flickering light. As she watched the mist disappear, Maleneth saw that the square looked almost as it had when she had first entered the Fyreslayer keep: lined with heroic statues of daemon-battling duardin and lit by hellish light. Things were not entirely as they had been, though. Some of the statues had been damaged and were now missing weapons or limbs, and there were piles of rubble scattered

across the flagstones. In some places the walls themselves had been knocked through, admitting clouds of smoke and embers from the volcano. Everywhere she looked, there were wounded Fyreslayers. Thanks to Gotrek, many hundreds had sallied forth from the buildings that bordered the square and lots of them were now dead or dying, crumpled in heaps along with the broken masonry. Other duardin were rushing between them, tending wounds and offering water. All of them bore the same dark marks across their cheeks and they carried themselves in a manner that seemed unusual for Fyreslayers. Rather than feverish and wild, they appeared sombre and grim.

‘What kind of storm can tear down walls like these?’ she said, looking around at the carnage in disbelief.

Gotrek had been about to walk away but her words stopped him. He frowned at her. ‘Storm? What are you talking about?’

As soon as he answered her, Maleneth felt an inexplicable sense of dread, as if she were losing hold of her sanity. ‘The storm that followed us from the coast.’ She waved at the wreckage in the square. ‘The weather that did all this.’

‘Weather? What is it with people blaming everything on the weather? It wasn’t mist that knocked the walls down, was it? It wasn’t the mist who stuck spears in these people. Don’t try and pass elgi treachery off as bad bloody weather.’ His lip curled in disgust. ‘If there’s one thing you can bank on, one thing that never sodding changes, it’s that aelves will let you down. All your talk of allegiance and forces of “Order” but look what happens when someone takes their eye off you for a moment – you ride in on fish horses and butcher the people you’re supposed to be siding with.’

Maleneth gripped her head, feeling even more disturbed. Gotrek talked nonsense a lot of the time and she had learned, long ago, to ignore most of what he said. But when he spoke of aelves riding fish, it triggered a memory – glimpses of aelves in pearlescent battleplate, with pale skin and coral-coloured banners. The memories were impossible to grasp, however. As soon as she tried to bring them into focus, they slipped away. ‘Were there aelves in the storm?’ she asked. She had the uncomfortable feeling that their roles had been reversed. Usually Gotrek was the one trying to rouse himself from a stupor as she reminded him what had happened the night before.

Gotrek stared at her, looking even more incredulous than usual. ‘Unbloody-believable.’ Then he stomped off across the flagstones. ‘Where’s Korgan?’ he bellowed, and someone directed him to a huge, vaulted portico on the opposite side of the square where Korgan’s magmadroth was just visible through the smoke.

‘Wait,’ groaned Maleneth, lurching to her feet. Pain knifed through her stomach and she doubled over, spitting a curse. It was an old wound, sustained when she and Gotrek had battled the Moonclan tribes. She had thought it healed but now, as she pressed a hand against her stomach, she could feel the muscles beneath her skin, twisted and ugly, still damaged. ‘Curse him,’ she muttered, blaming Gotrek for the injury as she stumbled after him. She must have landed heavily during the storm. It was not just her stomach that ached. All of her limbs were bruised and stiff, and she shook them as she walked, trying to get the blood flowing.

You’ll need to do more than that if you want Khaine to help you.

‘What do you suggest?’ whispered Maleneth. ‘Shall I start attacking these Fyreslayers? I’m somewhat outnumbered.’ She knew her mistress was right, though. The only way she could reinvigorate herself was by making blood offerings to the Murder God.

I shouldn’t worry, Gotrek has a skill for turning allies into enemies. You won’t have to wait long.

‘What would I do without you to point out the obvious at every turn?’ sneered Maleneth.

‘Aelves!’ roared Gotrek as Maleneth reached him. He was glowering at Korgan, who was still seated up on the magmadroth. ‘Salad-eating elgi!’ He waved at Maleneth. ‘Like this little milksop.’

Maleneth could see from Korgan’s expression that he was as confused as she was. ‘It was a storm,’ he said, but there was doubt in his voice as he looked around at the nearby Fyreslayers. ‘Did you see any aelves?’

The other Fyreslayers shook their heads but looked troubled and quickly found other things to do.

Gotrek’s face turned purple. ‘You’re all bloody cracked. There were aelves. Riding on eels and sharks. Hundreds of the sodding things. And they were attacking you. Less than ten minutes ago. Why do you keep talking about storms?’

The runemaster shook his head and looked steely again. He waved his staff

at the damaged walls, causing the brazier at its head to flare. ‘This is Grimnir’s judgement, stranger. And now that you have entered Karag-Varr, you may find that you are as damned as we are.’

Gotrek sneered. ‘Perhaps I was damned, once, but I’ve given it up. It’s just another bloody excuse for not getting things done. What do you mean Grimnir’s judgement? You’re his people, aren’t you? You do his bidding, whether he knows it or not. Why would he damn you?’

Near to the magmadroth there was a group of Fyreslayers dressed in similar finery to Korgan, with tall, plumed dragon helms and braziers on staves. Korgan glanced at them, as though unsure how much to say. They looked grim and said nothing. ‘No one can explain the reasoning of the gods,’ he said, looking defiantly at Gotrek. ‘Nor should we seek to try. All we know is that Grimnir has found us wanting and turned his wrath against us. The storm you saw was just a glimpse of what he is capable of.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Don’t you people believe Grimnir died at the dawn of these realms? Didn’t I hear that in one of those tuneless dirges you call songs?’

The runemaster was about to answer, but Gotrek held up his hand to stop him. ‘It doesn’t matter. Just tell me why you’re sitting up here darkening your eyes and sulking while the elgi are free to come and go as they please, murdering every innocent soul from here to the Spiral Crux. How did servants of the Slayer God become cowards?’

‘Cowards?’ Korgan gripped his staff in both hands and embers billowed from its head, flashing in his staring eyes. ‘You would insult the Varrukh in their own keep?’

‘If I hadn’t taken charge there wouldn’t be any bloody Varrukh left to insult. You’d all be eel food.’

The doubt returned to Korgan’s face. ‘Eels,’ he muttered, frowning and looking out over the piles of bodies.

Throne of Khaine, this could go on for ever. Can’t you talk some sense into them?

‘Is this why you’ve been hiding up here?’ asked Maleneth, dragging Korgan’s attention back from the dead. ‘These storms?’

Gotrek gave a grudging nod. ‘Exactly. Grimnir was liar and a cheat, in my experience, but he never shied away from a fight.’

‘In your experience?’ Korgan shook his head. ‘What do you mean, “in

your experience”?’

‘Ancient history, lad. Answer the aelf’s question. You’re hiding up here grizzling because you think Grimnir wants you to be cowards. Tell me why you think that and I’ll tell you why you’re being idiots. Then we can all get back to doing something useful with our time.’

Korgan looked from the aftermath of the battle to Gotrek. ‘You did something. You helped me.’

‘Aye, I told you to pull your head from your arse and get your fyrds out here. And then, what a surprise, the aelves didn’t find it so easy to kill you.’

Korgan shook his head. ‘You turned back the storm.’ He pointed his staff at the slab of metal in Gotrek’s chest. ‘It was something to do with your rune. It gave you the power to hold back Grimnir’s storm. And it was the same when I was going to attack you on the bridge.’ He tapped the magmadroth’s flank and the creature dropped to its knees, causing the ground to judder and allowing Korgan to dismount and approach Gotrek, still staring at the rune. ‘I think you were sent to us for some reason.’ He was now speaking confidently again. ‘I’ll discuss it with the lodge elders. Perhaps this is significant.’

Korgan gave orders to some of the other Fyreslayers, telling them to fetch more hands to deal with the wounded. Then, when he was satisfied, he strode off down the portico, gesturing for Gotrek and Maleneth to follow him.

‘Can you hear me talking?’ said Gotrek, glancing at Maleneth. ‘I feel like I’m talking to myself. Can *anybody* hear me?’

‘I can always hear you,’ replied Maleneth sadly.

Gotrek nodded. ‘Then why’s that strutting oaf still blathering on about storms from Grimnir?’ He looked closely at Maleneth as they walked down an avenue of metal columns, each cast to resemble a duardin with a flaming beard, holding up the portico’s roof. ‘You do really remember that fight, don’t you? You do remember all those sea aelves?’

Maleneth saw the fragmented memories again but they were already growing weaker. She saw little more than pale, aelven faces and the sinuous curl of a sea creature, shimmering through dark waters. ‘I see something,’ she said, ‘but it is so vague I can hardly remember it.’ She looked at the Slayer’s craggy face. For all Gotrek’s faults, he was not a liar. There was something very odd going on. ‘Tell me what you saw.’

‘Elgi, in their hundreds, wearing armour made from shells. And they were swimming through the air like it was water, riding on sharks and turtles. There was a battle in the square. A pretty decent scrap, too, once I forced the Fyreslayers to get off their arses. It was odd though. Fish floating in mist. Squid drifting overhead.’ He glared angrily at Maleneth, as though expecting her to mock him.

‘There are aelves who are linked to the sea,’ she said. ‘They’re called Idoneth. They’re mentioned by cultures in many realms, but usually only as folk tales and legends. When I was back in Azyr, I learned a little about them, but not much more than the name. They dwell in underwater cities and they’re secretive – beyond that, I know nothing. They’re cursed or exiled, or criminals of some kind. Whatever the reason, they keep to themselves.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Is everyone drunk? You’ve already told me this.’

She frowned. ‘Why would everyone forget what happened apart from you? I wonder if it’s something to do with the rune.’

Gotrek looked at the metal in his chest. ‘Fyreslayers are stuffed with these things. It doesn’t seem to have made any difference to them.’

‘Then perhaps it’s because you weren’t born in the realms? If it was the Idoneth, perhaps they use a kind of sorcery that you’re immune to.’

Gotrek was about to answer when they reached the end of the colonnade and approached a pair of vast doors that led into the volcano. The doors were cast in burnished metal and designed to resemble the roaring mouth of a salamander. The scale was as grand as everything else in the magmahold and they both paused to study the metalwork. ‘Shame,’ muttered Gotrek, as the doors swung inwards with a reverberating clang. He walked over to the door frame and patted the rune-inscribed metal. ‘There’s skill here. And ambition. But no discipline. They haven’t taken any pride in it. It’s all so hurried.’ He traced his finger over the metalwork. ‘Look at this. It’s not a bad idea. The concept is sound. But it’s half finished. It’s like everything here was built in a rush. If they’d spent a few more decades on these doors they could have been worth something.’

‘Decades? To build a door?’

‘If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly. The smiths who made this place clearly knew what a well-made door *should* look like, they just couldn’t be bothered to put the hours in.’

‘They’re Fyreslayers,’ said Maleneth, as they were led through the gates into a mountain hall. ‘They don’t like anything that gets in the way of fighting or making money. I’m amazed they bothered with doors at all. They clearly don’t worry about clothes.’

Some of the surrounding Fyreslayers caught her words and muttered into their beards. ‘They’re so like you,’ she laughed. ‘Egos like eggshells. A few hard words and I could have them frothing at the mouth.’

The group came to a halt just inside the hall as more Fyreslayer priests rushed over to Korgan and began talking urgently, looking repeatedly at Gotrek and Maleneth, clearly troubled by the presence of strangers inside the mountain. Dozens of other duardin were rushing in the opposite direction, towards the doors, carrying bandages and water, calling out for help as more Fyreslayers spilled into the hall from doorways and staircases. It was a chaotic scene, but Maleneth and Gotrek stepped aside into a relatively empty space to look around at the hall. It had been carved from a natural cave, with jagged, rough-hewn walls, but it was circled by the same giant statues they had seen in the square outside, and each one held a brazier, flooding the hall with smoke and embers. The heat was even greater inside the keep and Maleneth began to feel light-headed as the temperature soared.

After a few minutes of waiting impatiently, Gotrek muttered a curse and marched across the vast chamber, barging through the crowds of shouting Fyreslayers and heading for Korgan and the other priests. ‘Who’s actually in charge of this mess?’ he said, glaring at their surprised faces.

Korgan’s nostrils flared and he raised his chin. ‘It is rare for one of the Dispossessed, such as yourself, to be admitted into Karag-Varr. You may not wander at will.’ He nodded to some of the Fyreslayers with magmapikes. ‘The Hearthguard will escort you to the barracks, where you may rest. You are welcome to stay for as long as you need. Let it not be said that the Varrukh do not show charity to their kin.’ He glanced at the rune. ‘I will seek you out once I have spoken with the lodge elders.’

‘You’re going to have a council meeting?’ Gotrek laughed in disbelief. ‘Elgi have just trounced half your army and put holes in your walls. The only council you need is a council of war. Why are you heading back into your halls when you’re under attack?’

Skromm was at Korgan’s side and he looked like he was about to swing at

Gotrek, but the runemaster stopped him with a warning look. ‘The storm will not come again for weeks,’ said Korgan. ‘This has happened many times before.’

Gotrek pointed his axe at Korgan. ‘You know that was more than a squall. Those were aelves.’ He looked at Maleneth. ‘What did you call them? Idoneth?’

Maleneth nodded.

Korgan frowned. ‘Idoneth? The *Vongall-varr*?’ He looked at Skromm.

Skromm was still flushed and twitching with anger. He seemed to be in a state of perpetual mania. ‘That might explain what happened to the runesons,’ he snarled. ‘If the *Vongall-varr* were in the storms, perhaps they poisoned them.’

Korgan shook his head. ‘Now is not the time to discuss this, Skromm.’

‘Is *Vongall-varr* your name for the Idoneth?’ asked Maleneth.

Korgan looked suspiciously at her, then turned to Gotrek. ‘I have to talk to the other lodge elders.’ He softened his tone. ‘My memory is clouded, but I sense that you did me a great service out there, Gotrek son of Gurni. And I will not forget it.’

Not again, thought Maleneth, as she sensed Korgan was on the verge of joining the long line of Gotrek’s devotees. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Korgan placed a hand on Gotrek’s shoulder. ‘Though I do not understand exactly how, I feel I am in your debt. And your talk of the *Vongall-varr* may help us understand the curse that has overtaken us.’

‘My talk of the *Vongall-varr*,’ said Maleneth, but Korgan kept his eyes on Gotrek.

‘Go with Skromm,’ said Korgan. ‘Let him show you the hospitality of the *Varrukh*. I will find you this evening and we can talk more.’ He glanced at the rune in Gotrek’s chest. ‘It feels significant to me that you have arrived here now, when we are at our lowest ebb. I am interested to hear your tale.’

To Maleneth’s surprise, Gotrek nodded in an almost amiable manner. ‘Hospitality sounds like a good idea.’ He looked at Skromm. ‘I presume, in a hold of this size, you have things like breweries and ale stores?’

Skromm glared at Gotrek, his lips curling back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Skromm stomped off, leading them across the hall towards another pair of vast doors. The doors led out onto a walkway, lined with more statues, that reached across a sea of angry, hissing steam. As Maleneth stepped onto the metal structure she grimaced, feeling intense heat radiating up through the soles of her boots. ‘Don’t you people ever feel the heat?’ she said to Skromm. He shrugged and she noticed how red his skin was. It looked like he had been roasted alive. There were golden runes hammered into each of his biceps, like smaller cousins of the one in Gotrek’s chest, and they were so rounded and glossy they resembled globules of lava, boiling up through his angry flesh. ‘Aye, I feel it,’ he rumbled. ‘Feels good. Reminds me I’m not an aelf.’

Gotrek laughed approvingly.

The walkway looped in a lazy arc through the fumes and led deep into the sweltering depths of the hold, heading down a series of broad, sweeping stairs that had been cut from the inside of the volcano. There were brands in some chambers but much of the illumination came from streams of magma that ran down channels cut into the walls. By rights, the lava should have destroyed the rooms it passed through, but the Fyreslayers had used their obscure smithing skills to contain the volcano’s lifeblood. The deeper they climbed, the more Maleneth realised the scale of the place. In its own way, the keep was as impressive as the Kharadron sky-port she had left a few weeks earlier. She saw foundries and forges, where huge teams of Fyreslayers laboured over vast furnaces. There were also armouries crowded

with gleaming weapons and countless shrines to Grimnir, some no more than niches in the wall, cradling a flame, and others as large as palaces, built around huge statues of the duardin war god. Most of the chambers were in the process of being emptied, however, as people rushed past them, heading to the upper levels, their expressions grim as they learned of the attack.

Finally, to Gotrek's obvious delight, they passed through busy, steam-filled kitchens and pantries crowded with hanging cuts of meat, baking ovens and blocks of cheese. Maleneth had always found duardin food so stodgy and bland as to be almost inedible, but the smell of fresh bread and cured meat reminded her that she had not eaten for a day.

Skromm ushered them into a rectangular feasting hall. A single, rune-scored table ran down the length of the hall and it was heaving with food that had been abandoned by the people rushing up to the square. 'Where does all this come from?' asked Maleneth. 'You have no farms? No fields even?'

Skromm patted his prodigious gut and nodded. The mania faded from his eyes and he looked calm for a moment. 'We barter for whatever we want. We deal with traders from across the realm.'

Gotrek sat down heavily at the table and began eating, reaching across the plates for a jug of ale. As Maleneth sat next to him, she noticed that none of the food was fresh. Apart from the bread, everything was dried, salted or preserved in some way. 'And when did you last do any trading?' she asked.

Skromm's face turned an even angrier shade of red as he joined Gotrek at the table and grabbed a salver of cold meat. 'We haven't left the hold for weeks. It's forbidden.' He crammed a piece of thick, buttered bread into his mouth and continued talking, spraying Gotrek and Maleneth with crumbs.

'Why?' said Maleneth.

Skromm scowled and continued shovelling food into his mouth, refusing to say more on the subject. Gotrek gave Maleneth a look that she could not read as he slid the jug of ale towards Skromm. 'Is this the best brew you've got?'

Skromm took the jug, filled a cup and started drinking. The cup was very large and it took him a while to empty it, but he persevered; then, once he was done, he slammed the empty cup back down on the table. 'No.' He poured himself another cup and, again, drank it without pausing for breath.

‘This is Odger’s Finest.’ He wiped the froth from his beard and nodded. ‘Worst beer in Ayadah. Worse even than Odger’s other beers.’

He poured himself a third cup and was about to drink it when Gotrek said, ‘Where I come from we brewed ale that *didn’t* taste like goat’s piss. Bugman’s Special Brew. Durgrund’s Helfire. *Real* beer. None of you Fyreslayers are capable of making anything with flavour.’

Skromm’s face turned purple and for a moment he was unable to speak. He rocked back on the bench and made a peculiar whining sound, like an injured dog. Maleneth realised he was trying to stay calm. When he had finished howling, he leant closer to Gotrek and jabbed him with his finger. ‘A rootless wanderer like you could never comprehend the ways of the Varrukh.’

Gotrek raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m starting to get an idea.’

For a moment, Maleneth thought Gotrek was picking a fight because he was bored, something she had seen him do on many occasions, but then she noticed how cool his manner was. He was up to something. For all his oafish manners, the Slayer was capable of surprising subtlety.

‘I’ll show you what a *real* drink tastes like,’ said Skromm, rising and marching off down the hall, looking at the various jugs that had been placed on the table. ‘Here!’ he said, grabbing one and bringing it back over, slamming it down in front of Gotrek, spilling froth over the side. Before Gotrek could touch it, Skromm poured himself a cup and drank, closing his eyes and sighing with pleasure. ‘Try that!’ he said, glaring at Gotrek with beer glistening in his beard. He filled Gotrek’s cup and his own, and nodded for Gotrek to drink.

‘Better,’ said Gotrek when he was done, and as Maleneth ate, the two duardin drank several cups in quick succession. ‘I was after something darker though, really,’ said Gotrek, when they had finished the jug. ‘Something more substantial.’

The furious look was gradually fading from Skromm’s eye and he rocked back on the bench again, looking pensive and tugging at his wild hedge of a beard. ‘Darker, yes... Maybe Olfsson’s Reserve.’ He shifted his impressive girth out from the table and wandered off down the hall again. Not finding what he wanted to hand, he disappeared through a doorway, muttering to himself and calling out to see if there were any servants left in the hall.

‘What are you up to?’ whispered Maleneth, prodding her food and

grimacing.

Gotrek shrugged. 'There's only one way to learn anything about a dwarf.' He tapped the empty jug. He shrugged. 'I don't blame Korgan for wanting to keep secrets. We're strangers here. Why should he share private matters with us? He's not some witless bearding. But I have a feeling this big lad can be won over. I think he has the kind of tongue that is easily loosened.'

Skromm sounded almost cheerful as he came back into the hall carrying a tray laden with four large jugs of beer. 'It's an acquired taste,' he said, as he poured them both a thick, dark ale. His mood had lightened so much that he even offered the jug to Maleneth. She raised an eyebrow and he shrugged and lowered it again. 'Takes a few pints to really get the flavour,' he said, clanking his cup against Gotrek's.

Maleneth continued inspecting her food, happy that she understood Gotrek's plan. She had seen him employ it before. Even compared to other duardin he had an iron constitution, so when he wanted to unearth secrets, he simply drank people into a stupor. Skromm's bulky physique meant that Gotrek's ploy took a little longer than usual, however. They had been chugging ale for almost two hours before the Fyreslayer began to slur his words and drop his guard.

'If it wasn't for the bloody curse, I could have offered you some Fellmann's Neck Oil. Now there's a beer.' He looked fierce again, making his strange howling sound. 'But if we can't bloody leave Karag-Varr, we can't get any more orders to Fellmann.'

'Curse?' said Maleneth. She was lying further down the bench, trying to block out the tedious duardin talk, but that word caused her to sit up. They were the only people left in the hall and her voice echoed through the gloom.

Skromm ignored her comment but Gotrek had also noticed the word. 'You're not bloody cursed.' He clapped Skromm on the back. 'This ale has made me see you people in a better light. You're daw. That means you're blessed. Why would you think of yourselves as cursed?'

Skromm slammed his forehead against the table, hitting the wood with such force that the plates rattled. For a moment he stayed like that, face crushed against the table, and Maleneth wondered if he had knocked himself unconscious. Then he sat up again, wiping beer from his face with a loud sniff. 'I don't think we're cursed either. But Uzkal thinks we are. And

that's all that matters. Especially now he's got all the other lodge elders agreeing with him.'

Gotrek topped up Skromm's cup. 'Uzkal?'

'The auric flamekeeper!' boomed Skromm, giving Gotrek an incredulous look, as though it were absurd that Gotrek would not know who he meant. 'Uzkal said we're cursed until he can get his hands on the runesons' bodies.'

Maleneth sat up and moved closer down the bench, intrigued. 'Runesons? They're the heirs to your throne, is that right? They will rule when your runefather dies?'

'Obviously, yes,' said Skromm. 'Why do you keep stating the bleedin' obvious?' His tone turned bleak. 'Or at least, they would have been the runefather's heirs if they hadn't got themselves killed.'

Maleneth knew little of Fyreslayer religion or politics, but she knew that having no heirs would be a disaster for any ruler.

Skromm seemed too angry even to drink, glaring at his reflection in his beer, his head shaking. 'Thurgyn-Grimnir's sons are all dead. All killed in the storms. And now Uzkal has convinced everyone we're cursed.'

Gotrek gently steered Skromm's cup towards his mouth so that the Fyreslayer continued drinking. 'Why would anyone believe such an absurd notion? Kings have been losing their sons in battle since before even I was born.'

Skromm's voice was a confused mumble and his head rolled loosely on his shoulders. 'It's not because they're dead. That's not the problem. To die defending the magmahold is nothing to be ashamed of. Even Uzkal wouldn't claim that.'

'Then why do you think you're cursed?' growled Gotrek, losing his patience.

'Easier...' mumbled Skromm, trying to push his belly back from the table, 'to... show you.' He managed to get off the bench but would have fallen if Gotrek had not gripped his arm and kept him on his feet. 'This way!' barked Skromm, stumbling off with Gotrek helping him and Maleneth following. He gave them an exaggerated warning look. 'Throne room. Don't tell Korgan. He's very touchy... on the subject... of the thing.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The feast hall was empty, but as Skromm led them out into a corridor, they had to pause to let a group of pike-wielding Fyreslayers rush past. The warriors all nodded respectfully to Skromm as they went by, and Maleneth realised that, incredible as it might seem, he must be a person of some significance in the Varrukh lodge. Skromm waited until the soldiers were almost out of sight, pretended to enter a chamber on the opposite side of the corridor, then lurched off in the other direction to the soldiers, still gripping a cup of ale. He led them through a series of hallways and crossed a bridge that stretched over another smouldering chasm, then left the main routes and took them down a humbler-looking passageway. They entered it through a small, unimposing door, and the walls were far plainer than the rest of the keep. There were no runes cut into the stone and the floor was unpaved, covered in loose scree.

‘This is the way to the throne room?’ rumbled Gotrek, sipping at his beer and looking at the roughly carved walls.

‘Servants’ access,’ replied Skromm with a conspiratorial look. ‘All the ceremonial ways are guarded. Korgan and Uzkal don’t want anyone to see...’ His words trailed off and his face sagged. ‘Not far,’ he said, leading them down an even narrower passageway. There was no lava running through the walls and the only illumination came from braziers that hung to either side. The light was fitful and weak, but every now and then they would pass an opening in the wall and be bathed in a fiery glow from a furnace or a lava flow.

Maleneth found the atmosphere oppressive and wished she were back in the upper levels of the keep, but she could see that it was having the opposite effect on Gotrek. The deeper they went, the happier he seemed. The weight dropped from his shoulders and his habitual scowl started to soften.

‘You love it down here, don’t you?’ she said. ‘Deep under the earth in this sweaty furnace.’

He took a deep breath of the dank, sulphuric air and sighed. ‘Reminds me of home.’

‘Then why don’t you spend more time in places like this?’

His eye glazed over and he sounded grim again. ‘Reminds me of home.’

‘Hold your tongues,’ whispered Skromm, swaying slightly as he held up a warning finger. ‘Not far now.’ He led them round a few more bends and down a flight of narrow, chiselled steps. Then he extinguished the light of a brazier and plunged them into darkness.

Even Maleneth’s aelven senses struggled to cope with absolute darkness, and she had to trail her hands against the walls as she followed the heavy tread of duardin boots. The rock scorched her palms but it was not long before ruddy light filtered down the corridor towards them, reaching another bend up ahead.

Skromm gestured that they should creep carefully as he led them round the bend and into the light. They had reached a metal grille, embedded in the wall, about six feet square. As Maleneth crept up to the bars, she saw that the grille looked down on another statue-lined hall. It was a circular room, centred on a large, round dais that supported a group of six thrones. All of the thrones were cast in gold and designed to resemble the gaping maws of dragons. The statues had their arms raised and their palms pressed to the domed ceiling, as though holding it aloft. There were lines of magma running through their angular muscles and the light bounced off the thrones, filling the hall with movement and shadows. The shifting illumination seemed to move in time to a sound that filled the hall – a quick, urgent mumbling, like prayers, that echoed through the shadows, giving the place an eerie, dreamlike atmosphere.

There were a few guards dotted around the circumference of the hall – Maleneth counted ten – all wearing dragon helmets and gripping magmapikes, but it was the shapes on the dais that caught her eye. There

were five shrouded figures lying on the flagstones in front of the thrones and a sixth slumped in the largest of the thrones. ‘Corpses?’ she whispered. They were so high up that she doubted the guards would hear her, but the Fyreslayers’ halls had a habit of throwing one’s voice in unexpected ways. ‘Are they dead? Are they the dead sons?’

Skromm nodded and, incredibly, Maleneth saw tears glimmering in his eyes. She shook her head in disbelief. The duardin boasted, endlessly, about their capacity to drink cartloads of ale, but Skromm was so drunk he looked like he might start sobbing. ‘The five on the floor are the runesons,’ he said. ‘The one on the throne is Thurgyn-Grimnir, Runefather of Karag-Varr.’

‘Your king’s dead?’ Maleneth shook her head. ‘That’s not what Korgan said.’

‘He’s not dead,’ muttered Gotrek. ‘I see his beard moving.’

Maleneth peered closer at the figure on the throne. He was horribly emaciated and his dragon helm was slumped to one side as his head lolled onto his beard, but the strangest thing about him was his skin. There was barely an inch of him that was free of metal. Dozens of golden runes had been hammered into his muscles, far more than Maleneth had seen in even the most zealous Fyreslayer berserker. He almost looked like one of the metal statues that lined the hall. There were runes sunk into his chest, limbs and even his throat. It was as though he had been hammered to death by a runesmith. Gotrek was right though; as she studied him, she saw his chest rise and fall, almost imperceptibly.

‘How is he still alive?’ she whispered. ‘He looks like a skeleton. A skeleton that’s been smashed by golden trinkets.’

‘Trinkets?’ hissed Skromm, glaring at her and grabbing her by the arm. ‘Do you know what ur-gold is, aelf?’

‘Not really,’ she said, nodding to the knife she was holding at his throat.

Skromm’s eyes widened and he was about to shout, but then he seemed to change his mind and he loosed her arm, turning away and muttering into his beard. ‘The runefather still lives,’ he said eventually. ‘But the rune madness has left him unable to move or even speak.’

‘Rune madness?’ asked Gotrek.

‘Aye. Too many runes will do that to you. But no one could make him see sense. It started when his first son fell. Thurgyn came to Korgan and demanded that we fill his body with the most powerful runes. He was too

furious to heed any warnings so we did as he asked.’ He was speaking quickly now, utterly drunk. ‘Then he lost another son, and then another, each taken by the storms. The runefather demanded more power, more runes and he would not listen to reason.’ Skromm stared at the broken figure in the throne. ‘No one can endure such power and keep their mind intact. But with each lost son, a little more of the runefather’s mind slipped away.’ Skromm turned to face them, his jowly face lit up by the glow of the statues. There was such horror in his eyes that Maleneth looked over her shoulder, half expecting to see a daemon rushing towards them. ‘Then we all started to hear him. In the wreckage of the storms, as we tended to the wounded and tried to fix the walls, we heard his voice.’

‘Whose voice?’ asked Gotrek.

‘The Slayer. Grimnir. He said that the runefather had damned us all.’

‘Because he grieved for his sons?’ Gotrek looked at the bodies on the dais. ‘Even Grimnir wouldn’t begrudge him that.’

‘No, you don’t understand.’ Skromm nodded at the shrouded corpses. ‘He didn’t grieve in the proper way.’ The pain of the memory seemed to be sobering the Fyreslayer up. His words still tumbled into each other but he was no longer swaying as he talked. ‘When the storms come, people die, every time, but it’s more than that. We’re always left with warriors who are neither living nor dead, but somewhere in between. And that’s what happened with the runesons. Every time the storm died, another runeson was left in a waking sleep. Their eyes were open and they were breathing, but they could not move or talk.’ He tugged at his beard. ‘It was terrible to see. The king tried to keep his sons alive. He tried everything he could to wake them – demanded that Korgan use every form of rune charm he could think of, but nothing would work. Thurgyn tried to pour water down his sons’ throats but they would not swallow. The water just ran out of their mouths. There were many afflicted with the same terrible fate, but to see the runesons stricken like that was dreadful. When his sons finally died, the runefather refused to accept the truth. He said his sons were still under some kind of spell. Even when they began to...’ He grimaced. ‘Even when the bodies began to decay, he would not listen to reason. The Zhargrimm tried chanting the old sagas and telling the old legends but it all fell on deaf ears. Thurgyn banished everyone from the throne room and threatened to kill anyone who entered without his permission.’

Maleneth edged closer, trying to get a better view of the runefather. ‘So he just sits there? Every day? Doing nothing?’

‘He talks to his sons,’ said Skromm, his voice bleak.

Maleneth realised that the murmuring sound was coming from beneath the runefather’s matted beard. She shook her head and looked at Gotrek. ‘There’s nothing you can do for someone that spends his time talking to corpses. I’ve seen you do many things I didn’t expect but you are not the person to comfort a grieving parent.’

Gotrek frowned. ‘I still don’t see why you should consider yourselves cursed. A father grieves for his dead sons. There’s no great shame in that.’

‘It’s not grief that’s the problem,’ said Skromm. ‘It’s the breaking of tradition. The runefather never allowed his sons to be cremated. Their bodies were never taken to the pyre. Their eternal spark has not travelled to the halls of our ancestors.’ His voice was stiff with emotion. ‘They will never be judged. Never reborn. They will not join us at the final battle.’ He lowered his voice to whisper, staring at the shrouds. ‘From fire we are born, to fire we return.’ He looked at Gotrek. ‘Do you understand? The runefather robbed them of their place at the Doomgron. It would be a tragedy for any warrior, but for it to happen to our runesons is beyond anything.’

‘But you don’t believe you’re cursed,’ said Gotrek. ‘You said in the feast hall.’

‘No, I don’t. I can see that this is a tragedy. Our runefather’s mad. And he’s robbed his sons of their future. But when Uzkal says we have to hide ourselves away in shame, I cannot believe that’s right. I can’t believe Grimmir would want that of us.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Grimmir was a liar, but he wouldn’t want you to cower up here like this. This is nothing to do with him. The voice you heard after the storms, telling you that you’re cursed, that wasn’t Grimmir. Even I know enough of your crooked religion to see that doesn’t make sense. It’s the bloody aelves.’ He scowled at Maleneth. ‘If there’s treachery and deceit involved, it’s always the bloody elgi. They’ve got you cringing like whipped hounds and you don’t even remember them. Sorcery and lies, just like always.’ Gotrek pointed at the runefather. ‘And I’ll tell you the biggest lie of all – that he’s beyond saving. That’s grief. Nothing more, nothing less. His heart is broken. I’ve seen it a dozen times and there’s only one way to fix him. Did you really think a load of talking and singing was going to do

anything? You people have forgotten who you are. You're warriors.'

Skromm nodded eagerly. 'Aye, that makes sense to me.' Then he slumped back against the wall and looked despondent again. 'But there's nothing to be done. Uzkal said we're cursed and no one listens if I try to argue.'

'They'd listen to their king,' rumbled Gotrek.

'But look at him. Thurgyn is a ruin.'

'And what does this Uzkal suggest you do to escape your curse?' asked Gotrek.

'He says we must contain our shame up here at the top of Dreng-Gungron until the curse is lifted, or we might spread it to others. Korgan and the other elders all agree with him. So all of our outposts have been lost. We had three other keeps: Karag-Agril, Karag-Duril and Karag-Wyr, but they have all been overrun by greenskins since we stopped marching to their aid. It's a bitter blow. They were smaller than Karag-Varr but they were still proud citadels. Still worthy shrines to Grimnir.'

Gotrek looked furious. 'So, until recently those keeps were still in your hands?'

'It's a matter of weeks since we lost them. And before that they had been ours for centuries.'

Gotrek's lip curled. 'You need a king to lead you, not a faith-drunk priest.' He looked down at Thurgyn. 'He needs to remember who he is.'

Skromm shook his head. 'Nothing will rouse him.' He moved to drink from his cup of ale but Gotrek put a hand on his arm to stop him.

'I told you,' said Gotrek. 'I've seen this before. I can remind your king who he is.'

'Really?' Skromm's eyes widened and he put his cup down. 'You think you can bring him back?'

'I don't think. I know.' Gotrek turned to Maleneth and nodded to the pouches at her belt. 'Do you have anything that can knock someone out rather than cook their insides?'

Maleneth shrugged. 'I do. But what good will that do you? Sending the runefather to sleep won't make him any less deranged.'

Gotrek nodded and leant back against the wall of the passageway. 'Don't kill the guards.'

Maleneth shook her head. 'What are you talking about? Why would I? They're not—'

With his back still pressed against the opposite wall, Gotrek slammed his boots forward into the metal grille, sending it spinning into the throne room. Dust filled the air and Maleneth backed away, covering her face and coughing. Then, as she picked rubble from her face, she heard the grille clang onto the floor below as the guards cried out in alarm.

‘What in the name of Khaine did you do that for?’ gasped Maleneth, but as the air cleared she saw that Gotrek was no longer hunkering in the passageway. She was alone with Skromm. ‘Where is he?’ she demanded.

Skromm stared at the ragged hole with a dazed expression.

Maleneth shoved past him and saw that as the Fyreslayer guards raced towards the dais, raising their magma weapons, Gotrek was clambering down one of the statues, his axe slung over his back.

‘What are you doing?’ she yelled, stepping carefully through the hole Gotrek had made and leaning out over the throne room, gripping the wall as she looked down at the dizzying drop.

‘The guards!’ roared Gotrek, as he climbed quickly down the statue. ‘Deal with them!’

‘He’s insane,’ whispered Skromm, looking at Maleneth in horror.

She nodded. Then she spat a curse and leapt out into the air, landing lightly on the statue’s raised arm and hurrying down the polished metal.

‘Do *not* approach the throne!’ cried one of the Fyreslayer guards, raising his pike as he ran, targeting Gotrek.

Gotrek ignored him as he dropped to the floor and began stomping towards the dais at the room’s centre. ‘Deal with them, aelf!’

The guard triggered his weapon, hurling a dazzling arc of magma through the air.

Gotrek marched on oblivious.

‘Protect the runefather!’ cried the guard, and the other Fyreslayers opened fire, filling the hall with light and heat.

Maleneth paused halfway down the statue, took a handful of stones from a pouch at her belt and hurled them at the approaching guards. The stones flashed as they hit the flagstones. An acrid smell filled the throne room. The guards stumbled, crying out in surprise and lowering their pikes, reaching for their throats.

Maleneth continued climbing and by the time she reached the bottom, the guards were on their knees, their weapons dropped as they struggled to

breathe, their faces turning purple. 'Don't make a fuss,' she sneered, striding past them. 'You won't die.' She heard them thudding to the floor behind her as she reached the dais. 'I don't think.'

She climbed the steps and picked her way through the shrouded bodies. 'How do you think you're going to help him?' she laughed, heading after the Slayer. 'Kind words and a hug?'

Gotrek had nearly reached the throne and he paused a few feet away to unsling his axe and grip it purposefully in both hands. 'There's only one way to help him,' he said, preparing to swing the axe at the runefather's head.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘Wait!’ howled Skromm, looking down from the hole, high up in the throne room wall.

Gotrek ignored him and swung his axe at the runefather, who was slumping in his throne.

Maleneth cursed, realising Gotrek was about to earn the enmity of the entire Fyreslayer lodge, but at the last moment, the runefather jerked into motion, raising a large key-shaped axe from the side of his throne. Thurgyn moved like a revenant, awkward and stiff, but he was fast enough to parry Gotrek’s blow and the two axes clanged, scattering sparks around the dais. As the weapons collided, the runes in Thurgyn’s skin blazed, dazzling Maleneth so that she had to back away, raising her arm in front of her eyes.

When her vision cleared, Maleneth saw that Gotrek had stumbled back from the throne and seemed dazed, rolling his head on his massive shoulders as he righted himself and glared at Thurgyn.

The runefather looked equally confused, staring around at the empty throne room. He was taller than any Fyreslayer Maleneth had ever seen, almost as tall as she was, but he was so gaunt he looked like a cadaver. He was clearly very old, with a beard like frost-covered lead, but being so emaciated made him look even older, with deep creases across his brow and around his eyes. And there were so many runes embedded in his flesh that he barely seemed able to straighten his limbs. ‘Where is everyone?’ he said, his voice emerging as a croak. He frowned as he looked at the guards Maleneth had drugged, his face growing rigid with anger. Then his eyes fell

on the shrouded remains of his sons. His shoulders drooped and the head of his axe clattered on the flagstones. His eyes glazed over. 'Of course,' he muttered, staggering backwards, about to drop back into his throne.

'Stand and fight,' said Gotrek, speaking in a low growl as he rushed at the runefather, drawing back his fyresteel axe.

Anger flashed in Thurgyn's eyes and he steadied himself, bringing his massive axe round with surprising force. His runes lit up again, mirrored in his eyes as he pounded the axe into Gotrek's blade. There was another flash and, again, Gotrek was thrown back across the dais.

'Aye!' roared Gotrek, reeling and stumbling down a few of the circular steps. 'That's more like it, you dotard.'

'How dare you!' gasped Thurgyn, a little colour seeping into his hollow, grey cheeks. He lurched across the dais, gripping his latchkey axe in both hands and glaring at Gotrek.

'By all the hells of Shyish,' muttered Maleneth, backing away from the two duardin. 'What are you doing, Gotrek?'

Thurgyn hissed furiously and attacked, swinging his axe at Gotrek's chest.

Gotrek parried, scattering more sparks and causing Thurgyn to stumble backwards. Then he rushed across the dais and slammed his forehead into the runefather's nose. There was a crack of breaking bone and Thurgyn whirled away in a spray of crimson, dropping his axe and cursing. He would have fallen had he not managed to steady himself by gripping one of his sons' thrones.

Gotrek charged after him but Thurgyn turned with a howl, runes blazing as he wrenched the throne from the floor and smashed it into Gotrek.

The chair tore a piece of Gotrek's cheek away, spraying more blood as the Slayer fell backwards and tumbled down the steps.

Thurgyn grabbed his key-shaped axe and staggered after him, swinging at Gotrek again.

Do you think the entire duardin race is insane? asked Maleneth's mistress as Maleneth watched the fight from the top of the dais. ***Or are we particularly unlucky in meeting these idiots?***

'I've never met any others that were quite this moronic,' replied Maleneth as she watched Gotrek and Thurgyn reel around the throne room, swinging and parrying and demolishing pieces of furniture. Within a few minutes, they were both drenched in blood and howling incoherently. Gotrek was

utterly frenzied, and Maleneth could see he had slipped into the berserk state that meant it would be pointless trying to reason with him. But, if anything, Thurgyn was even more deranged. He seemed to be more metal than muscle and, as he punched and pounded Gotrek, his whole body was ablaze.

Do you think he might actually harm him?

Maleneth was about to laugh at the suggestion, but then she realised Thurgyn *did* seem to have the upper hand. It was as if weeks of pent-up anger were boiling up from his chest, igniting the metal in his skin.

‘How dare you?’ bellowed Thurgyn, repeating the question several times as he attacked Gotrek. As they fought, they overturned tables and sent braziers rattling across the flagstones, but neither seemed able to land a killing blow.

‘Perhaps I should lend a hand?’ wondered Maleneth, toying with one of the poison knives at her belt.

You’re as dim-witted as Gotrek. What do you think will happen if you kill their runefather? They’ll fry you in a lava pit. You need to stop Gotrek, not help him.

Maleneth was about to reply when a deafening braying sound filled the hall. Gotrek and Thurgyn were too enraged to notice but Maleneth cursed and whirled around, looking for the source. ‘Skromm!’ she hissed, spotting the Fyreslayer at the foot of a statue. He had managed to climb down and was blowing furiously into a horn that was so big he had had to climb inside its bends to reach the mouthpiece.

She sprinted from the dais, whipping her knives out as she ran.

Skromm backed away from the horn, scowling as she approached, swinging his axes. The amiable demeanour he had shown in the feast hall had vanished, replaced by the unhinged snarling she had seen when they had first met him on the bridge.

‘I did not bring you here to attack the runefather!’ he cried, stamping towards her.

‘Tedious,’ said Maleneth, dropping into a fighting stance and considering which poison would be the most effective way to drop such a large duardin.

A second noise filled the hall: this time it was the sound of grinding metal. Maleneth and Skromm turned to see one of the ceiling-high statues judder and jolt sideways. Either Gotrek or Thurgyn had struck its leg with such

force that it had buckled, knocking the structure out of true. As the statue moved, its splayed hands tore cracks in the distant ceiling, causing slabs of rock to fall. A storm of masonry and metal began raining down, forcing Maleneth and Skromm to bolt for cover, taking shelter in one of the alcoves that lined the throne room. Dust and noise filled the hall, and for several seconds Maleneth and Skromm could do nothing but crouch next to each other, their fight forgotten as they wondered if they were going to be buried alive.

‘Perhaps there is a curse,’ muttered Skromm, staring at the apocalyptic scene.

‘It’s called Gotrek,’ replied Maleneth.

When the dust cleared and the echoes faded, Maleneth could see no sign of Gotrek or the runefather. There were mounds of rubble scattered everywhere and small fragments of stone were still pattering down across the throne room like a hailstorm, bouncing off the flagstones and statues.

‘There,’ said Maleneth, when she spotted a glimmer of gold not far from the dais. ‘That’s one of them.’

‘Why did your friend do this?’ said Skromm as they began picking their way across the hall. He still showed no sign of remembering that he wanted to kill Maleneth. She toyed with the idea of killing him while he was distracted, but then decided to keep her options open. Perhaps there was still a way she could talk her way out of this.

‘I gave up trying to understand his motives a long time ago,’ she replied. ‘It only makes me angry.’

They reached the piece of gold and saw that it was one of the runefather’s runes. He was half buried under a pile of rocks but his runes were still shimmering. Thurgyn was staring up into the darkness, muttering curses.

Gotrek was a few feet away, equally buried, and as Skromm helped the runefather sit up, Maleneth did the same for Gotrek. Once the two old duardin were upright, they dusted themselves down and looked around at the rubble. Both of them looked dreadful. The dust had stuck to the blood that covered them, making them look like they had been dunked in flour. Thurgyn’s nose was broken at a revoltingly unnatural angle and half of Gotrek’s cheek was hanging from his face, revealing a flash of white bone. They sat there for a moment, looking around. Then, when they caught sight of each other, their faces twisted into savage smiles.

‘Wait a minute,’ said Maleneth, backing away. ‘Look at what you’ve already—’

Thurgyn moved fastest, bringing the haft of his axe up from the rocks into the underside of Gotrek’s jaw. The blow lifted Gotrek from his feet, sending him pinwheeling back through the clouds of dust.

Maleneth ran to stop the runefather as he stumbled after Gotrek, but the air exploded from her lungs as Skromm planted a punch in her stomach, doubling her over and leaving her gasping for breath. She turned her fall into a pirouette and landed a high kick on the side of Skromm’s head, sending him flying backwards.

Thurgyn stood and lurched towards Gotrek, swinging his axe again, but he was so dazed that he staggered, almost dropping the weapon.

Gotrek lunged from the rocks with a roar, slamming his forehead into the runefather’s bloody nose. There was another crunch of breaking bone and the two duardin fell, landing in a cursing, jumbled heap. They both tried to land another blow, then slumped against each other, unable to catch their breath.

Skromm clambered to his feet and reached for his axe, only to find Maleneth holding a knife to his throat and shaking her head in disapproval.

Too exhausted to move, the runefather lay on his side in the wreckage, glaring at Gotrek as rubble continued to fall on him. Slowly, his breathing eased and the mania faded from his eyes. He continued staring at Gotrek but the rage had been replaced by a profound agony. For several seconds he did not move or speak and when he did, his voice was a desolate growl. ‘My sons,’ he said.

Gotrek wiped some of the blood from his brow and stared at Thurgyn, his chest heaving, his face flushed. He looked surprised by the runefather’s words, but then he nodded, slowly. ‘I know.’

Skromm backed away from Maleneth and looked at Thurgyn with amazement. ‘Runefather,’ he whispered. ‘You can speak. Your mind is clear.’

‘It was my fault.’ Thurgyn kept looking at Gotrek. ‘How do I live?’

Gotrek stared at the runefather, and Maleneth was surprised by the depth of feeling in his eye. Thurgyn’s pain was mirrored in Gotrek’s face. The Slayer climbed wearily to his feet, brushing off more dust and rubble. Then he limped over to Thurgyn and held out a hand.

Thurgyn looked through Gotrek's hand. 'How do I live?'

Gotrek's hand was trembling but he continued to hold it out. He raised his voice, as though addressing an audience only he could see. 'We live because we have to. And because we're more than our failures.'

Thurgyn looked up, frowning.

'We're not just the things we did wrong,' said Gotrek. 'We can't let them be our epitaph.' His voice was strident and he was no longer looking at the runefather. 'No one can live in the past. We can learn from the past. And remember it. But we have to move on. It's the only honourable way.' He waved at the circle of thrones. 'While you sit here, grieving, your warriors have forgotten how to live. They have forgotten how to fight. Without you to lead them they're lost. They've let these lands be overrun. Your outposts have been taken.'

Thurgyn winced. Then he looked past Gotrek to the shrouded shapes on the dais, shaking his head. 'I robbed my children of their future.'

'You robbed them of nothing. They died with honour. And their spark is in you, in every sinew of your body. Live with pride. Fight with honour. And I promise you, you will see them again.'

Thurgyn studied Gotrek closely, as though seeing him properly for the first time. 'I'd cuff the ears of anyone else who made promises like that, but there's something about you...' The runefather shook his head. 'Who *are* you?'

'Gotrek, son of Gurni. Born beneath the mountains of a world that died. A world where good people hid in the past while evil ones claimed the present.' He fixed his gaze back on Thurgyn. 'I won't make the same mistake again.'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thurgyn continued looking at Gotrek with an incredulous expression as blood poured from his broken nose, staining his steel-grey beard. He was about to speak when the doors to the throne room crashed open, banging against the walls as dozens of Fyreslayers rushed into the hall gripping magmapikes and axes and howling war cries. They were led by Korgan and another Zhargrimm priest. The second priest was clearly a figure of great importance. He wore a long, scaly cloak that trailed across the floor and his battle helm was fronted by a fierce golden mask that hid his face. He held a brazier axe in one hand, but most striking of all was what he held in his other hand: a metal rune engulfed in flames. Heat haze shimmered around the metal, but the priest held it with no sign of discomfort.

‘Protect the runefather!’ cried Korgan, his face thunderous as he raced across the rubble.

Gotrek turned to the approaching mob, but Maleneth noticed how unsteady he was. Despite his wasted appearance, the runefather had been a match for Gotrek’s strength. The Slayer looked like he might fall at any moment. She looked around for an escape route. Seeing none, she spat a curse and dashed to protect Gotrek’s weaker side, raising her knives and whispering a prayer to Khaine.

‘Hold!’ cried Thurgyn, struggling to his feet and raising a hand.

The Fyreslayers looked like they had seen a ghost, staggering to a halt, the colour draining from their faces.

‘Runefather,’ breathed Korgan, shaking his head. ‘You’re...’ He was too

shocked to finish the sentence.

‘I’ve been talking to this foreigner,’ said Thurgyn, ‘and he tells me my lodge is a disgrace. That it has been neglecting its duties.’ Thurgyn gestured for Skromm to pick his latchkey axe from the rubble, and once he had it in his grip again, he used it as a crutch, hobbling through the wreckage, heading back towards his throne. ‘I have not been myself.’ He gave Korgan a fierce look. ‘But that’s no excuse for backsliding. Muster the fyrds, Runemaster Korgan. I want to see what state they’re in.’ He dropped heavily into his throne and spat on the floor, leaving a tooth on the flagstones. ‘And fetch me some bloody ale. My throat’s as dry as an aelf’s blade.’

Korgan stared in disbelief for a moment, then joy shone in his eyes. ‘Fetch the runefather a drink, by Grimnir,’ he snapped, glancing at one of the other Fyreslayers. ‘And some food.’ Then he waved at the rubble. ‘And see to this mess.’

Fyreslayers leapt into action, dashing from the hall or rushing to the piles of fallen rocks.

Thurgyn nodded in satisfaction. ‘And wipe those stupid black marks off your face. We’re not dead yet.’

Korgan took a deep breath. His face remained as stern as ever, but Maleneth could feel the relief radiating from him. As the hall filled with movement and noise, the two priests climbed up onto the dais, followed by Gotrek and Maleneth, and stood before the runefather. Gotrek was limping, but when Maleneth offered him her arm he glared at her and struggled on up the steps, leaning heavily on his axe.

The masked priest with the flame stared at Maleneth. ‘An aelf?’ His voice was a rough-edged rasp, as though he had spent his life yelling. ‘What is she doing in the throne room?’ He turned to Gotrek. ‘And who is this?’

Gotrek’s beard bristled and he was about to give an angry reply when Korgan spoke up. ‘He’s a friend, Uzkal. When the storm came, he helped me turn it back. He has saved many Varrukh lives today.’

Uzkal shook his head. ‘He arrived today. How can he claim to be a friend of the Varrukh? And I’ve just been up to the square. The walls are in tatters and there are scores of dead.’

‘It would have been much worse if this stranger had not aided me,’ said Korgan. ‘The entire hold would have fallen. He’s the reason we’re still

alive.'

Uzkal looked at Gotrek. 'Those storms come from Grimnir. It's his judgement. This is our curse.' He waved his flaming rune at the shrouded corpses, embers spilling from his fist. 'The runesons were never taken to the Ancestor Halls. They have never been granted the stone-sleep they deserve.' He was practically howling, leaning towards Korgan as though he were about to strike him. 'Their runes have never been reclaimed! They're still lying in that cold, lifeless flesh!'

'Uzkal!' The runefather spoke to the priest in an equally furious roar, slamming his axe on the flagstones. 'Hold your damned tongue! There are outsiders present!'

Do these people only have one volume? hissed Maleneth's mistress.

They're all deaf, thought Maleneth. *They've spent too much time hammering gold.*

'Why are you talking about curses?' continued Thurgyn, glaring at the masked priest. 'And why would Grimnir send a storm against us?'

Uzkal was uncowed. 'We have earned the wrath of the Slayer God! The lodge was robbed of the runesons' fire. They have lain here, mouldering, when they should have been returned to the Ancestor Halls and reclaimed by fire. We have broken faith with Grimnir. And these storms are his response.'

'How dare you speak to the runefather like that!' howled Korgan, his eyes flashing as he rounded on Uzkal.

Thurgyn lurched to his feet, angry red veins spidering across his ashen face. 'They weren't dead!'

To Maleneth's disbelief, it looked like the lodge elders were about to attack each other. 'Wait!' she cried.

The duardin turned and looked at her in shock. Even Gotrek seemed taken aback by the rage in her voice.

'The storms are nothing to do with your dead Slayer God. There's no mystery here.' She held out the fragment of armour she had taken from the beach. 'Your enemy isn't weather, it's sorcerers. They're called the Idoneth.'

She turned to Gotrek. 'Tell them! Tell them what you saw.'

Gotrek shrugged. 'Bloody great leviathans, swimming over your walls, along with packs of eel-riding knights who made mincemeat of your

warriors.'

Korgan nodded eagerly as Gotrek spoke, and though Uzkal seemed about to disagree, something about the Slayer's words must have triggered a memory. Gotrek told of mist-shrouded monsters and pale, eyeless aelves, and as he did, the masked priest seemed to deflate, shaking his head and backing away from the throne, staring at the rune in his fist.

'I see them,' muttered Uzkal. 'As you describe them, I see them in my mind – aelves mounted on serpents, armour like shells. How can I have forgotten it? Why did I not remember them until you spoke?'

'It's the nature of their sorcery,' said Korgan, looking at Maleneth. 'Isn't that right? Your people mesmerised us.'

'They're not *my* people.' Maleneth shrugged. 'They're aelves, I suppose, but they do not worship Khaine, or the Shadow Queen of Ulgu, or Sigmar of Azyr. They live beneath the sea and pray to gods of their own. And when they attack, they harness storms and waves to mask their attacks. It's not a true storm that has been battering your fortress. It's an Idoneth conjuration. And part of its power is that it leaves no mark on your memory.'

'Can it be true?' whispered Uzkal. 'Can I have been so wrong?'

'Think about it,' said Thurgyn. 'You claim these storms were a curse, sent from Grimnir. You say it's because I...' He gave a pained look at his sons' bodies. 'Because I neglected the old traditions. But how can that be? The storms began *before* my sons fell. My sons fell to these storms.'

The fury had vanished from Uzkal's voice. He sounded crushed. 'Then I am the problem. I am the one who has damned us.'

'No one's bloody damned,' snapped Gotrek. 'Too much god-bothering, that's the problem, as usual.' He waved at the runefather. 'Your king's back. A little the worse for wear but that's nothing that won't be fixed by some food, ale and rest. You still have scores of warriors and most of your hold is still intact. And it's not a bad keep. Your work's slapdash by true dawī standards, but still better than most of the hovels I've seen in these realms. And you're well prepared. I passed through your storerooms and armouries on the way down here, and you have enough weapons and equipment to fight all the hosts of the Three-Eyed King himself.' He shook his head. 'You just need to stop thinking like aelves. Stop making things complicated where they should be simple. Cremate your fallen princes. Heal your king. Then march to bloody war.' The light from Uzkal's rune flashed in his eye

and gave his face an even more hellish appearance. 'Take the fight to your foes. Reclaim your keeps. Heal yourself with war. Reforge yourself with combat. Cauterise your scars. You call yourself Slayers. It's time to slay.'

Korgan and Uzkal looked from Gotrek to their runefather, watching for his response. Thurgyn was staring intensely at Gotrek, his face battered and blood-smearred. He looked utterly psychotic. Even more so when a brutal grin spread across his face.

'Time to slay,' he said, all trace of confusion gone from his voice.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Korgan closed his eyes, whispering a prayer to Grimnir as the heat of the Forge Fire washed over him. It stoked the rage in his chest, causing the runes in his muscles to pulse and filling him with zeal.

He was deep in the Zharrgrim temple, the burning heart of the magmahold, where every breath scorched the lungs and even his runesmiters grimaced as they took their places, forming a circle at the centre of the vast chamber. It was an octagonal tower, open to the heavens, like a huge, ornately worked chimney stack. Embers drifted up through the distant opening to mingle with the stars, rising from a burning pit at the centre of the hall. The pit was hundreds of feet in circumference and had been designed to resemble the open jaws of an enormous, fire-breathing salamander: Vulcatrix, the Ur-Salamander, the great fire wyrm that had fought with Grimnir, merging its spirit with him as they both died.

It was the aftermath of that apocalyptic battle that had scattered ur-gold across the realms, a metal imbued with power that only the sons of Grimnir could understand. To most, it looked like simple gold, so that across the realms the Fyreslayers were seen as greedy mercenaries, obsessed with hoarding gleaming metal. But, in truth, they hungered for something greater than wealth. Every god-fuelled fragment brought the lodges closer to Grimnir, closer to the day that he would be reborn and lead them in the final war for the realms, a battle so glorious it would make the others look like brawls over spilled ale.

Korgan looked back over his shoulder to see Gotrek entering the inferno,

closely followed by the auric flamekeeper, Uzkal. The runefather had insisted that Gotrek be included in the funeral rites but Uzkal had been appalled by the idea. And, Korgan had to admit, it was strange to see a lodgeless wanderer at this most secret of rituals. Uzkal had not dared to defy Thurgyn but he was watching Gotrek closely as he joined the circle. Along with Gotrek and Uzkal, there were a hundred or so Fyreslayers present, mostly Zhargrimm priests, arrayed around the circumference of the firepit. The runefather was alone, standing on a platform made from Vulcatrrix's tongue. The whorl of metal was so hot that it bathed Thurgyn in heat haze. The air around him was so liquid and mobile that he looked like he was standing behind a waterfall. But Korgan could still see how grief-stricken he was. The Dron-Gungron rite was usually a stirring, proud affair, but Thurgyn was shaking his head as he looked down into the firepit. A dozen feet below him, on an intricately worked metal bier, were the bodies of his fallen sons, their hands closed around axes and forge keys. Korgan's runesmiters had removed the ur-gold runes from their bodies but they had been replaced with common gold. It should have been a moment to celebrate the runesons' death in battle, to celebrate their future at Grimnir's side, but the runesons had not died in battle; they had wasted away, their minds stolen by the magic of the Idoneth. Thurgyn moved towards the edge of the platform, leaning on his latchkey axe like a crutch, muttering to himself.

Korgan was filled with grief. Not for the fallen runesons, but for their father. He could not bear to see Thurgyn so tormented.

'He looks bloody awful,' grunted Gotrek, reaching Korgan's side. 'Is this going to take long? He'll fall in if he has to stand up there too long.'

Korgan looked at Gotrek in shock. Other than the formal words of the funerary rites, speech was not allowed during Dron-Gungron.

Uzkal glared at Gotrek and approached the edge of the pit, holding out his ceremonial flame. He looked around at the gathering and called out into the clouds of smoke and embers, his voice ringing through the metal of his mask. 'We have marked our foes well. We have readied our weapons and steeled our hearts. We have tested our strength. And when we enter that final battle we will burn as bright as the First Fire. We will strike as one. Our strength will be Grimnir's strength. Our fury will be Grimnir's fury. Our vengeance will be Grimnir's vengeance. And then, on the day of final

judgement, when Grimnir separates the gold from the clinker, the weak from the strong, our spirits will shine. The unworthy will be left in the ashes of his wrath but we, the true-hearted Varrukh, we will stand free, marching at Grimnir's side in his hour of triumph.'

Gotrek glanced at Korgan, his eyebrow raised, and Korgan felt a rush of anger. He, more than anyone present, believed Gotrek had been sent to aid them, but he would not stand by if Gotrek tried to ruin the sanctity of the ritual.

'From fire we are born!' cried Uzkal, holding his flame aloft.

All around the hall, hidden in shadows and smoke, runesmiters began drumming, pounding hammers against anvils and making a clanging, pulse-like beat.

'To fire we return!' cried Korgan, along with all the other Fyreslayers in the hall.

'From fire we are born!' repeated Uzkal, kneeling and taking a key from beneath the magmadroth scales of his robes. It was as large as his forearm and scored with runes.

'To fire we return!' yelled the other priests, drawing out identical keys and dropping to their knees.

The hammering grew more savage and erratic, scattering embers and pounding against Korgan's eardrums. The heat and the noise were intoxicating. Kill fever surged through him. He had to battle the urge to attack the warriors nearby. His muscles tensed and his pulse hammered as he did as all the other priests had done, dropping to his knees with his forge key in his hand.

Uzkal repeated his cry, and as Korgan roared in answer, he and the other priests slammed their keys into holes in the floor of the chamber, locking them into place with a chorus of oaths.

'He's off,' muttered Gotrek.

Korgan was so caught up in the ritual that he barely registered Gotrek's words, even though he was standing at his side. No one else noticed as Gotrek pointed at the runefather. 'Is he meant to be doing that?'

With an incredible effort, Korgan drew his gaze from the fire and saw what Gotrek meant. Thurgyn was stumbling back down the platform, away from the firepit, shaking his head. 'No,' gasped Korgan, horrified. 'If he doesn't turn his key the rite will fail. The runesons will never know peace. *We* will

never know peace.’

Gotrek glared at Korgan, then looked at the grief-stricken runefather. ‘Sod that. I’m not having you lot moping again.’ He stomped off through the smoke, heading in the direction of Thurgyn.

‘No!’ gasped Korgan, but the rite was now almost complete. If he moved from his position he would disrupt the ceremony.

‘From fire we are born!’ howled Uzkal, his eyes closed as fervour consumed him. He was oblivious to the fact that Thurgyn and Gotrek had both left their allocated positions.

‘To fire we return!’ came the booming reply as Korgan and all the other priests turned their keys. It was only then that Uzkal realised something was wrong. With all the keys turned, the rite should have reached its climax, but nothing happened. Uzkal opened his eyes and looked around, confused, just in time to see Gotrek reach Thurgyn and put his hand out to stop the runefather leaving the temple.

All around the hall, Zhargrimm priests looked up from their keys and saw Gotrek grip Thurgyn’s shoulder. Everyone, even Uzkal, was too shocked to speak, watching the exchange in mute horror. Korgan could not believe what he was seeing. Dron-Gungron had never been disturbed like this.

The Fyreslayers at the anvils were obviously too far gone to notice what was happening. They continued hammering out their wild, clanking rhythm, filling the hall with noise and making it impossible to hear what Gotrek and Thurgyn were saying to each other.

Thurgyn yelled something at Gotrek, pointing his axe at the corpses on the bier and shaking his head. Gotrek stood in silence as the runefather raged, his runes blinking and his head shaking with passion. Then, when Thurgyn finally paused, gasping for breath, Gotrek gripped his shoulder and spoke urgently into his ear.

‘What’s this?’ demanded Uzkal, looking at Korgan. ‘What is he telling him?’

Korgan shook his head. Whatever Gotrek was saying seemed to enrage Thurgyn even more. His eyes flashed and, as Gotrek spoke, he backed away, breaking free of the Slayer’s grip and shaking his head. But Gotrek persevered, following the runefather and continuing to talk. Finally, something shifted in Thurgyn’s demeanour. His furious expression softened. He looked appalled by whatever Gotrek was saying. Pity filled his eyes and

his anger faded away. Gotrek nodded, saying one last thing and slapping the flat of his axe against his chest.

The drummers continued pounding their anvils but everyone else watched in astonished silence as Thurgyn and Gotrek embraced. They stayed like that for a while, embers whirling around them. Then Thurgyn nodded and looked at his dead sons, his expression resolute. With Gotrek at his side, the runefather climbed wearily back up onto the platform. He hesitated briefly, then slammed his key-shaped axe into a hole at his feet and looked over at Uzkal, nodding for him to continue.

Uzkal stared back in shock, then nodded and knelt, gripping his key and looking around at all the other priests, indicating that they should do the same. When everyone was back in position, gripping their keys, he cried out one last time. 'From fire we are born!'

'To fire we return!' cried everyone in the hall as the drumming became deranged. As one, all the priests turned their keys. This time, Thurgyn did the same, and at that moment a column of lava roared up from the pit. It blasted from Vulcatrix's mouth, burning through the dead runesons and obliterating their remains before spewing up through the opening in the roof and out into the night.

Korgan, like everyone else present, struggled to hold his position as the heat doubled in ferocity. Even his hardened Fyreslayer skin blistered and tears streamed from his eyes. The eruption only lasted a few seconds but it took every ounce of Korgan's will to keep hold of his key. Then the drumming ceased and the lava tumbled back out of sight. The after-image left Korgan temporarily blind as he removed the key and staggered to his feet, swaying like a drunk. The sudden silence felt as deafening as the drumming had been. He backed away, wiping sweat and ash from his face and praying to Grimnir. All around him, people were doing the same, blinking and trying to catch their breath.

Now that the ritual was over, and his battle lust was fading, Korgan remembered what had happened when Thurgyn tried to leave the hall. As his vision returned, he spotted Gotrek heading towards the exit, marching through the thick smoke. Korgan hurried over to him, catching up with him as he stepped out into an antechamber.

'What did you say?' Korgan's voice was ragged and he coughed up a cloud of embers.

Gotrek did not halt but he glanced back. 'Eh?'

'When you spoke to the runefather. What did you say? How did you convince him to carry on?'

Gotrek laughed bitterly. 'I told him what happens to people who live in the past.' His expression darkened. 'I told him how it feels to be me.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It took Maleneth a while to understand what had happened to Gotrek. She stared at him as he rode at the head of the Varrukh fyrds. He was travelling next to Runefather Thurgyn and the other lodge elders, standing precariously on a gilded throne, high on the back of a smouldering magmadroth, and as Maleneth studied his face, an incredible truth hit her. *He's happy.* She had seen him in various states: driven, morose, obsessed, deranged, drunk and furious, but never like this.

The Fyreslayers were advancing through rusting, dusty foothills, the dawn at their backs, sunlight flashing on their dragon helmets and smoke trailing from their magmadroths. It was a magnificent sight. Nearly two thousand Fyreslayers had spilled from Karag-Varr, filled with bloodlust and pride at the return of their king. Drummers pounded, horns brayed and the Zhargrimm priests roared tributes to Grimnir, causing the warriors' runes to flash. But it was the change in Gotrek that Maleneth found most incredible. She could barely recognise him. His face was still disfigured by scars but there was a new vitality shining from him. He seemed almost youthful. He had slicked his flame-coloured hair with a fresh coat of animal fat so that the crest stood tall and proud, he had polished his axe and his lion-shaped pauldron, and Maleneth had a suspicion he had even bathed. His muscles were so scratched, weather-beaten and sunburned that she could not be entirely sure, but he definitely smelled less like an outhouse.

Maleneth was on foot, marching next to Skromm. She had not been deemed worthy of a magmadroth steed, or even a place in the command

group with the lodge elders. It was only thanks to Gotrek that she had been allowed to join the fyrds at all. And she had a suspicion he had only demanded she accompany them because he thought she would find the whole expedition a chore.

After the revelations in the throne room, Maleneth had been forced to endure several days of Skromm's company. Gotrek and the lodge elders had spent long hours in the innermost halls of the keep, performing secret funerary rites for the dead runesons. Uzkal was still appalled by Maleneth's presence in Karag-Varr and had refused to admit her to the ceremonies, so she had spent her time watching an endless succession of feasts, shouting contests and training fights as the Fyreslayers celebrated the end of their 'curse' and the return of their runefather.

'What's the name of this outpost again?' asked Maleneth, peering through the rust clouds and trying to make out the shape on the far side of the next valley.

'Karag-Wyr!' cried Skromm. The Fyreslayer had not drunk any ale since the night before but he seemed even more intoxicated than at the celebration feast. As they jogged across crumbling iron he twitched and lunged constantly, lashing out at imaginary foes and spitting war cries. He seemed barely aware of his surroundings, lost in an imaginary battle. He ducked and weaved like a pit fighter, barking curses and laughing as he mimed death blows. He had lost the ability to talk and could only shout, even though Maleneth was right next to him. 'We'll see it soon!'

'I see it now,' she replied, squinting as she studied the shape that rose from the distant hills. There was so much smoke drifting from it that even she struggled to make out the details, but the outpost appeared to be built in similar style to Karag-Varr. It was smaller and, rather than Grimnir, resembled the head of a salamander, bursting from a rocky hilltop, but much of it was constructed from golden, polished metal. The smoke trailing up from behind its walls was full of garish colours – pinks and purples that made it look like the building was draped in a gaudy sash.

'You can see it from this distance?' Skromm stopped lunging to stare at her.

'Of course. I don't have your feeble duardin eyesight. You people can't see anything unless it's half a mile underground.'

'Is it ruined?' he yelled, spitting at the ground. 'Have the greenskins torn it

down?’

‘No. As far as I can make out, it looks intact. There’s some colourful smoke but no other sign of damage. It doesn’t look like the work of greenskins to me.’

‘Perhaps the scouts were mistaken then? Perhaps it’s still in our hands?’

Maleneth grimaced as she saw the standards that had been mounted on the walls, crudely daubed onto wooden boards. ‘Only if your sigil is a serpent turning into a flame.’

‘Chaos!’ spat Skromm, returning to his mimed battle, hacking at the dust and snarling. ‘We kept those *thagi* worms from these hills for decades. It’s typical of them to crawl back in on their bellies while the runefather is looking the other way. I have to tell Runemaster Korgan. This could change our plan of attack.’

Maleneth looked at the frenzied multitude surrounding her. ‘You make plans?’

Skromm halted and glared at her. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, waving his axes and shaking with anger, on the verge of attacking her. Then he decided against it and sprinted off towards the magmadroths at the head of the army.

Maleneth reluctantly followed. ‘You’ll need me,’ she said. ‘I’m the only one here who can see further than my belly.’

‘Runefather!’ bellowed Skromm as they neared the command group. ‘It’s not greenskins who have the keep! It’s a Chaos warband.’

Runefather Thurgyn and the others looked down at Maleneth and Skromm, breaking away from a conversation.

‘Did *she* tell you that?’ demanded Uzkal, staring at Maleneth through the eyeholes of his mask.

‘The aelf has good eyes,’ said Gotrek. ‘Whatever other faults she may have.’ He leant out of his throne to get a better look at her. ‘What did you see, Witchblade?’

Gotrek rarely called Maleneth by her true name and she had the odd sense that he felt protective of her. She quickly crushed the idea and decided his unusually good humour must have made him forget to insult her.

‘Their sigils definitely looked Chaos in nature. A serpent turning into a flame.’

‘Aye,’ snarled Runefather Thurgyn. ‘That one’s used by many of the local

warbands. They would never have dared attack Karag-Wyr under normal conditions. They know we rule these hills.’ He glanced at Runemaster Korgan. ‘But Korgan tells me Karag-Wyr was levelled by the thing we thought was storms. The aelves.’

‘They’re called Idoneth,’ said Maleneth, irritated that the Fyreslayers seemed unable to grasp the idea that aelves were not a single, unified people. ‘And they would not march under the banner of Chaos.’

‘No one’s suggesting they do,’ said Runemaster Korgan, studying her with his habitually imperious expression. ‘Karag-Wyr stood undefeated until your aelf kin bewitched it. But these Idoneth do not seem interested in keeping what they seize, so it looks like a warband has taken advantage of the situation.’ His lip curled in distaste. ‘It suits them. They’re carrion crows. Living off scraps.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘Chaos cults are like a disease. They spread. If this rabble gets a foothold in these hills they’ll send the call out to all their daemon-loving friends. Before you know it, this place will be a hellish netherworld.’ He looked around at the corroded hills and shrugged. ‘A *different* hellish netherworld.’

Runefather Thurgyn nodded. He was strapped into his throne and his face was still corpse grey, but his eyes gleamed as he looked at the horizon. ‘They won’t last long against the fyrds. I only wish we had a worthier foe. Look at the ill-bred wretches. Cowering behind the walls of Karag-Wyr won’t save them.’

Gotrek grinned and raised his axe.

The runefather smiled back, lifting his axe in response.

Maleneth clenched her teeth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Thurgyn waved his latchkey axe and the fyrds rumbled on, charging across the hills, throwing up rust clouds as they pounded drums and brayed on horns. Before long the Fyreslayers could spy the keep up ahead, and as the details became clearer to her, Maleneth saw what the runefather meant. There were Chaos warriors dashing from the surrounding fields, alarmed by the sight of the approaching Fyreslayers, and they looked scrawny and badly equipped. Most of them wore no more than leathers, similar to her own, and their weapons were a jumble of stolen swords and spears. The closest they came to a uniform was a swirl of yellow painted on the front of their jerkins and shields, presumably meant to be a flame, and they all had the sallow-skinned, sunken-eyed look of consumptives.

‘A few hundred,’ sneered Runefather Thurgyn. ‘Five hundred at most. Hardly worth interrupting the feast for.’

‘That’s your fortress they’re smearing sigils over,’ said Gotrek.

‘I was joking,’ said Thurgyn. He patted his axe. ‘It’s been a long time since I used this in anger and I was hoping for something bigger to hit.’

They came to a halt at the top of a shallow incline that led down to the walls of the fortress. ‘What are they doing?’ asked Gotrek, leaning forwards in his throne. The cultists were gathering outside the hold and making no attempt to close the gates or man the walls. They had formed a line in front of the keep and were readying their weapons. ‘They should look more scared than that,’ he muttered.

‘We’ll soon give them something to be scared of,’ said Thurgyn, looking

down his lines of Fyreslayers. ‘Grimnir’s fire is in you!’ he bellowed, straining forwards in his war throne.

His words ignited the fyrds. If they had been frenzied before, they were unhinged now, whirling in the dust and swinging their axes so furiously Maleneth was surprised they didn’t butcher each other. They howled and punched their chests, shaking their fiery crests of hair and roaring at the clouds.

‘Battlesmiths!’ cried Thurgyn. ‘Advance!’

Four figures broke away from the Fyreslayer lines, marching purposefully across the ruptured metal. Each of them carried a metal standard, forged to resemble Grimnir’s face. The sight of these raised icons sent the other Fyreslayers into even greater ecstasies of battle lust, and even Maleneth felt a wave of bloodlust wash through her. The Fyreslayers’ war cries were like the roar of an ocean and it lit a hunger in her chest. She gripped her knives, battling the urge to sprint forwards.

Control yourself, warned her former mistress. ***This is not your fight. Don’t be drawn into their madness.***

‘A kill’s a kill.’ Maleneth was shivering with barely constrained violence. ‘Khaine won’t care whose fight it is.’

Look at the graceless oafs. They fight like Gotrek. They’re deranged. You don’t want to end up like that.

‘Can you feel it?’ howled Thurgyn as runes lit up across his body, shining like irons in a furnace. Maleneth could see smoke trailing from his skin. He pointed his axe at the figures gathering before the keep, his eyes blazing as brightly as the runes. ‘Let! It! Burn!’

‘Let it burn!’ shouted the Fyreslayers, finally exploding into movement, hurling themselves down the slope after the standard bearers. The lodge elders followed the charge, their steeds thundering down the hillside as Thurgyn continued howling his battle cry. ‘Let! It! Burn!’

Maleneth could no longer resist. She joined her voice to the chorus, wailing an ululating battle cry as she sprinted after them, forgetting about Fyreslayers and Gotrek as bloodlust formed a crimson tunnel in her vision, blocking out everything but the Chaos warriors. Despite her mistress’ warning she abandoned herself to the battle frenzy, screaming prayers as she raced past most of the stocky Fyreslayers and sprinted out into the front lines.

The warband watched calmly as the fyrds thundered towards them. Maleneth's blood was pounding in her ears and she could think of nothing but the impending slaughter, yet even through such intense passion there was a part of her that sensed something was wrong. The warband looked too nonchalant, their weapons held loosely and their poses relaxed. Her doubts were washed away by a tide of bloodlust as Maleneth reached the enemy lines and dived at the first warrior she reached, somersaulting through the smoke and hammering knives into his chest.

The warrior tumbled backwards, blood spraying from the wounds. He crashed to the ground and Maleneth crouched over him, wrenched her blades free and flipped clear, looking around for another target.

Then she realised something was wrong. It was not blood spraying from the warrior, but liquid metal. It flashed in the morning light as it bubbled from his jerkin, then solidified, as if cooling, and vanished, leaving smooth skin where the man's chest should have been torn open. The warrior rose calmly to his feet, grabbed his greatsword from the ground and thrust it at Maleneth.

She was so surprised that she barely parried, just managing to bring up her knives in time to block the blow, and lost her footing, stumbling backwards as the warrior lunged after her.

You're fighting like a Fyreslayer. Show some skill. Remember who you are.

Maleneth did not need a lecture. She was furious at herself for moving in such a clumsy fashion. She took a step back to steady herself and prepare a more considered attack. The Fyreslayers had caught up with her and were crashing into the enemy lines, but as their flaming axes rose and fell, she saw that they were as ineffectual as her knives. The blades cut the Chaos warriors down, but rather than blood, lines of quicksilver gushed from the wounds and then the liquid metal meshed torn flesh back together, flowing like solder.

The warrior in front of Maleneth sauntered towards her, drawing back his sword for another swipe. As she studied his face properly for the first time, Maleneth saw that his eyes were featureless silver orbs, formed of the same liquid that had bled from his wounds. She saw her furious face reflected in the silver discs as he locked them on her and swung the sword.

She sidestepped, whirled behind him and slammed her knives in his back,

landing the blows with such force that he thudded to the ground for a second time. Again, it was quicksilver rather than blood that rushed from the wounds and the man laughed as he rolled over to face her, metal bubbling between his teeth. 'Keep trying,' he grinned, sprawling happily on the ground. 'You'll soon grow tired.' He leered at her. 'And then I'll make you do a different dance.'

She cursed and hurled a flurry of knife strikes at him, slashing and hacking so hard that her prey vanished in a fountain of quicksilver. Even when she knew he must be dead, she kept on, knives blurring through the air. When she finally reeled back from him, his body had been torn apart and scattered across the ground. As she stood over him, panting and drenched in quicksilver, the metal pouring from his body collected in pools and began to coagulate, merging until he had re-formed entirely. She had never seen anything like it. She had fought undead creatures that were oblivious to their injuries, but she had never seen bodies that repaired themselves at will.

'What are you?' she gasped as the man lurched to his feet and faced her again.

'We are the Covenant of Fire.' His eyes were glinting as he spoke. 'We are the change that has come. We are the new beginning. We are—'

'Boring,' said Maleneth, beheading the man with a cross-handed slash. As his head fell away she kicked it as hard as she could, sending it spinning over the heads of the battling Fyreslayers.

'There's a change for you,' she said as the headless man dropped to his knees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Maleneth was about to rush back into the main crush of the battle when she saw something infuriating. There was quicksilver bubbling from her dead opponent's neck and it was solidifying, forming into a shape. 'Blades of Khaine,' she hissed as the shape became a head made of liquid metal with blurred, half-formed features.

Maleneth kicked the man back into the crowds of Fyreslayers and then gave up on him, marching through the fighting and looking for the Slayer. 'Gotrek!' she cried, dodging sword strikes and lashing out with her knives, opening wounds that were already healing as she moved on. 'Where are you?'

Her bloodlust was fading and the charge of the Fyreslayers had whipped up rust clouds, making it hard to see more than a few feet in any direction. The enemy were massively outnumbered so Maleneth was mostly surrounded by throngs of Fyreslayers who were lashing out wildly with their axes, irrespective of whether they could actually find a foe to attack. There was no sign of Gotrek but, a hundred paces or so from where she was standing, she could see the hulking, fortress-like silhouette of one of the magmadroths. She sprinted towards it.

'They're heading for the standard!' cried Thurgyn as Maleneth reached his magmadroth. The runefather looked magnificent, like a burning idol, flames rippling down his muscles as he dealt out brutal, frenzied axe blows. Maleneth had never seen a Fyreslayer so consumed by rune-power. It was like watching Gotrek at his most incensed. The Varrukh near Thurgyn were

equally wild, inspired by his wrath, hacking at the humans with their axes and firing volleys of magma, but it was all pointless: each time a Chaos warrior fell, he simply rose again, his body re-forming with a ripple of quicksilver.

‘Protect the banner!’ cried Runemaster Korgan, riding to Thurgyn’s side and waving the Fyreslayers towards one of the standard bearers.

‘Where’s Gotrek?’ she called out.

Korgan shook his head and continued directing Fyreslayers to the standard, but someone else answered Maleneth from the heart of the fighting. ‘Near the gates,’ cried Skromm, bludgeoning his way through the crush, a wild grin on his face.

Maleneth felt another surge of bloodlust. Skromm was revelling in the slaughter, heedless of anything except the joy of battle. His opponents rose as quickly as he cut them down but he did not mind. In fact, he seemed to delight in the idea of a foe he could kill more than once. All around Skromm there were crowds of Fyreslayers who were behaving the same way. Their eyes were rolling like feeding sharks and their war cries were hoarse and wild. Maleneth wrenched her gaze from the bloodshed and ran towards the gates. Chaos warriors sauntered past her as she ran, dealing out lazy sword strikes and laughing. Some were fighting even while they were still re-forming, their limbs and features bubbling back into place as they lunged and stabbed.

Maleneth weaved between combatants, dealing out knife strikes as she ran, then spotted Gotrek near the wall of the keep. He had picked up a warrior and was using him as a club, swinging him into his comrades, causing his head to explode and re-form. The garish smoke Maleneth had spotted from the hillside was still pouring from the fortress and it was pooling around Gotrek as he fought. ‘Die when I kill you!’ roared Gotrek, smashing the man into another warrior, creating a shower of quicksilver. He still had his fyresteel axe, but had clearly decided the warrior was a better weapon. ‘Does nobody know how to do anything properly in these bloody realms?’

‘This is a bad joke,’ spat Maleneth, reaching the Slayer’s side with a flurry of knife strikes. ‘They must be daemons.’

Gotrek paused to stare at her, the man juddering and re-forming in his grip. ‘These mewling things aren’t daemons. They’re manlings.’

Maleneth dodged a sword strike and kicked her attacker back into the

crowd. 'Men don't bleed metal. And they don't get up when you kill them.'

'We're not killing them.' Gotrek hurled his groaning weapon into the mob and backed away from the fighting for a moment, wiping sweat from his face. 'They're not undead. They're lackeys of the Chaos Gods. Servants of Tzeentch. Look at that flame symbol. They're devious, book-reading types. This is wizardry.' He looked around at the battle. 'And where there's wizardry, there's a wizard.' He nodded at the gates to the keep. They were open, but there was a mob of Chaos cultists blocking the way into the courtyard beyond. 'Somewhere in there, but I can't get through those smirking idiots.' He slammed his forehead into the face of a man who was trying to rise from the ground, creating another fountain of quicksilver. 'I need to draw them out.' He looked out across the carnage, to the smoke-shrouded silhouettes of the magmadroths. Thurgyn was visible even from this distance, blazing and hacking through the crush.

Gotrek grinned. 'He's a true son of Karak Ankor, that one. Look at him. He's got real dawid blood in him.' Then he frowned. 'What are they mucking about over there for? Why aren't they attacking the gates like we discussed?'

'They're defending a standard. The cultists keep targeting them.'

Gotrek frowned. 'The standards? Why?'

Maleneth shrugged. 'Fyreslayers are obsessed with them. I think they react with the runes in their bodies.' Maleneth parried another sword slash and kicked her opponent in the face, not even bothering to use her knives any more. She shrugged. 'And if I know that, I suppose these cultists might. Maybe they think they can defeat the Fyreslayers by destroying their standards?'

'Not a bad tactic,' grunted Gotrek. 'If they trash all the standards, the Fyreslayers will probably start whingeing about curses again.' He punched a cultist, snapping the man's neck at a revolting angle and sending him reeling back into the crowd.

'We could do this all day and not get anywhere,' said Maleneth.

Gotrek nodded. 'We need to stop farting about with monkeys and find the organ grinder.'

Maleneth stared at him. 'I know all of those words but I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'We need to get through that gate,' he said, looking at the cultists blocking

his way. 'Got it,' he muttered, spotting something in the crowds of Fyreslayers. Without any more explanation, he stomped off through the battle, landing punches and headbutts as he went.

Maleneth ran after him, but the colourful smoke was getting thicker by the minute and it lined her throat, greasy and tacky, causing her to cough as she battled through the scrum. 'Where are you going?' she called out, her voice a rough croak. 'You said attack the gates but you're heading away from them.'

Gotrek did not reply, heading for the thick of the fighting and shoving his way through the Fyreslayers. Maleneth felt a rush of alarm when she realised he was making directly for one of the metal standards they had just been discussing.

He's going to do something stupid, said the voice from Maleneth's amulet.

'Helpful, as always,' muttered Maleneth, picking up her pace. Struggling figures blocked her way and, try as she might, she could not catch up with Gotrek before he reached the Fyreslayer standard.

Even in their frenzied state, the Fyreslayers recognised Gotrek, cheering as he approached and forming a path for him. He nodded back at them, stomped towards the battlesmith holding the banner and punched him, hard, in the face.

'Gotrek!' cried Maleneth as the battlesmith tumbled to the ground.

Gotrek caught the banner as it slipped from the duardin's grip and then marched off with it, making for a patch of raised ground.

All the nearby Fyreslayers howled in alarm but they were too confused to try to stop Gotrek, calling out to him furiously and staggering back from their opponents.

Gotrek reached the top of the incline and held the likeness of Grimnir's face above his head. 'Come and get it!' he roared, waving the standard back and forth so that it blinked in the smoke.

The figures at the gate surged forwards, running towards Gotrek, their blank eyes fixed on the banner. Gotrek waited until they were only thirty paces from where he stood, then turned and threw the banner into the rust field, away from the keep. As cultists and Fyreslayers bolted after it, Gotrek walked calmly back down the slope, heading in the opposite direction towards the now unguarded gates. He grinned as he marched past Maleneth,

unslinging his axe from his back as he headed towards the keep. 'Simple plans. Always best.' There were a couple of cultists still waiting by the gates but Gotrek floored them with a single swipe and headed into the keep with Maleneth close behind him.

Inside, the smoke was even thicker and it reeked. Maleneth struggled not to gag as she followed Gotrek through the fumes. The colours were more violent too, an eye-watering clash of pink and blue that boiled around her as she tried to make out the scene. Her eyes were streaming and that, combined with the smoke, made it almost impossible to see what was happening.

Gotrek seemed to have less difficulty, marching on into the courtyard. Maleneth tensed as towering figures loomed into view, but then she realised they were Fyreslayer statues, similar to the ones in Karag-Varr. 'Keep up!' boomed Gotrek's voice from somewhere up ahead.

As they approached the centre of the courtyard Maleneth saw another large shadow, but she could tell immediately that it was not a statue. It looked more like a hill, right at the heart of the keep, and it was the source of the dreadful stench. There was also an intense heat radiating from it that washed over her face and snatched her breath.

'On my oath,' said Gotrek. 'That's ripe.'

They both grimaced as they reached the mound and saw what it was. It was a pyre of Fyreslayers, all of them burning, drenched in pink-and-blue fire, their remains so charred they would have been unrecognisable if not for their crested dragon helmets and golden runes.

'This must be the whole garrison,' said Maleneth. There were hundreds of Fyreslayer corpses in the mound, thrown unceremoniously on top of each other.

Gotrek muttered a curse as he stared at the blackened remains. 'Grungni,' he whispered. Over the time she had spent in his company, Maleneth had come to understand the Slayer a little. He liked to masquerade as an anvil-browed brute, as a cold-hearted killer, but she knew the truth. Sights like this caused him pain. 'So many...' he muttered, shaking his head.

'Look,' said Maleneth, pointing one of her knives to the top of the pyre. A metal scaffold had been erected over the fire, suspending a cauldron as big as an outhouse. The burning bodies were heating the cauldron, causing it to bubble and spit, and, hunched over it with its back to them, standing on a

platform, was a slender figure. It was holding a book in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Gotrek scowled and spat on the ground.

Maleneth waved some of the fumes away, trying to see the figure more clearly. It was a woman, but there was something odd about her head. It took her a moment to realise that the woman was looking back at them, even though her body was facing in the opposite direction. The sorceress had rotated her head one hundred and eighty degrees. She had large, lemon-yellow eyes that stared out from a feathered, blue face. As she locked her hideous gaze on Gotrek, she let out a screech like scraping blades.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Maleneth staggered backwards as the sound lashed against her, and even Gotrek grimaced, shaking his head. As the sorceress screamed, the cauldron's fumes danced in time to her voice, forming slender tendrils that looped and coiled in the air before hurtling towards the ground. When the smoke touched the flagstones it transformed, becoming columns of quicksilver, identical to the liquid that had spilled from the cultists' wounds.

'Watch yourself, aelf,' growled Gotrek. '*This is the organ grinder.*'

'The what?' Maleneth was about to demand an explanation when she realised that the silver columns were taking on humanoid shapes. The quicksilver rippled and flowed, forming arms and legs and smooth, featureless faces. The metal figures were large – seven or eight feet tall and powerfully muscled. They swayed for a moment, as though unused to standing, then sprinted at Gotrek and Maleneth. As they ran, their arms reflowed, changing shape again, becoming long, curved blades.

Gotrek roared as the first of the automata reached him, bringing his fyresteel axe round in a low swipe that cleaved the creature in two. It collapsed, becoming liquid again, splashing quicksilver across the ground. Then another one of the metal figures reached the Slayer, swinging its bladed arms down towards his head. Gotrek parried the blow then cursed as he saw that the first automaton was already re-forming, pooling back together and solidifying, rising from the ground like a metal sapling.

Maleneth raced to Gotrek's side as a third automaton reached him, thrusting its bladed arms at his neck. She parried and kicked the creature in

the chest, sending it stumbling back the way it had come.

The sorceress was still producing a birdlike shriek and more automata were springing up from the flagstones as prismatic smoke rushed from the cauldron. There was a clamour of voices outside the gates as Fyreslayers tried to enter the keep but were blocked by cultists who had returned to the entrance.

Gotrek and Maleneth fought desperately as a crowd of the metal figures formed around them, attacking in silence, their muscles shimmering in the firelight. Gotrek barrelled into them, trying to approach the pyre, but it was no use. However savagely he fought, he remained mired in a tangle of gleaming limbs. ‘Damn it, aelf!’ he roared, his face flushing a furious purple. ‘Can’t you do something? I need to get up on that platform.’

Maleneth looked at the pouches fixed to her belt. She carried poisons that could stop hearts and scorch flesh, but how could she kill an enemy made of metal? ‘They’re not alive!’ she yelled back, fending off more blows. ‘How can I kill walking statues?’

Every moment you spend with that lout drains you of intelligence, said her former mistress. You were never bright but now you’re as dim as he is. What would you do if you needed to force a blade through thick armour?

Maleneth frowned as she parried another attack, barely preventing one of the automata from beheading Gotrek. *I’d coat the blade in narúna oil.*

Well done, idiot girl. And why would you do that?

Because it corrodes metal. Maleneth was irritated that she had not thought of it herself. Narúna oil was incredibly corrosive but she had never thought of it as a weapon in its own right. ‘Wait,’ she said to Gotrek, sidestepping another blow and grasping a pouch from her belt. ‘There is something. But I’m not sure if it will work.’

‘Do it quickly,’ grunted Gotrek, staggering back towards her as more of the silver figures crashed into him, lunging and stabbing.

Maleneth smeared the oil across her knives and leapt past Gotrek, cutting and hacking at the automata. Steam hissed from the metal figures and a black patina washed over their burnished skin. The oil burned like acid and Maleneth grinned as she clambered on through a crowd of toppling, crumbling bodies.

There were still more figures rising from the ground but Maleneth had managed to cut an opening for Gotrek and he crashed forwards with a howl,

charging towards the pyre. There was no ladder up to the platform and the Slayer hesitated for a moment, staring at the burning bodies. Then he roared a curse and leapt into the fire, clambering through the garish flames.

The sorceress' scream rose in pitch and Gotrek halted, halfway up the pyre, bellowing in pain and leaning backwards. It looked, for a moment, as if he were going to fall, but then he lurched forwards and hurled his axe. The weapon trailed embers and landed neatly between the sorceress' eyes.

The scream ended as the sorceress dropped into her own cauldron. Then there was a boom as the cauldron exploded, hurling smoke, fire and corpses through the air. Gotrek landed heavily near Maleneth in a shower of embers and ash. There was a series of splashes as the metal golems melted to the ground, turning to gleaming pools, and Maleneth found herself alone with Gotrek in the smoke. She remained in a fighting pose for a moment, expecting an attack, but when none came she rushed over to the Slayer and turned him over. She hissed and snatched her hand back as his skin burned her palm. He was badly blistered and, suddenly, she realised he might be dead. A dreadful chill rushed through her. She slapped his face. 'Gotrek!'

He grinned savagely, crumbling the layer of ash that covered his face. 'Nicely done,' he croaked, struggling for breath. He slapped her shoulder so hard she stumbled. 'Knew you'd come in useful eventually.'

There was another crashing sound as the cauldron's scaffolding gave way, dropping it onto the pyre and hurling more flames. 'Come on,' said Maleneth, giving Gotrek her hand and helping him to his feet. Together, they limped away from the wreckage, heading for the wall. As they leant against each other, dusting themselves down and gasping for breath, Maleneth considered how many times she had done this. She had escaped disaster so often with Gotrek that it was beginning to feel like all she had ever done. Annoying as he was, he was starting to eclipse the life she had led before she met him. It was not a pleasant realisation. Suddenly, she felt a presentiment of danger – not from the enemies that constantly assailed Gotrek, but from something worse: her reliance on him. She was starting to *depend* on him. Without ever intending to, she was investing everything in him. Since her youth in the Murder Temples she had relied on faith and her ability to wield a knife. But now, for the first time in her life, she felt as if she needed someone else.

You're going down a dangerous path, said her former mistress, reading

her thoughts and sounding even bitterer than usual. ***Take it from me, you can't trust anyone else.***

Maleneth reached the wall of the keep and slumped against the metal, looking at Gotrek with a growing sense of claustrophobia. He was a few paces away from her, doubled over, coughing sooty phlegm down his beard. She recalled the emotion she had felt when she had thought he was dead. It had been suspiciously close to panic. Panic! When had Maleneth Witchblade ever panicked? *I'm losing myself*, she thought. *Losing myself in him. And it's making me weak.* Perhaps it was the heady fumes that were still hanging in the air, clogging her lungs and muddying her thoughts, but she suddenly felt as though she had to do something drastic. She had to change the direction she was headed in.

Gotrek seemed to sense she was staring at him. 'Are you hurt?' he said, looking up at her and wiping muck from his face. His features were as savage as ever but she saw genuine concern in his face.

She could not bring herself to reply, her sense of claustrophobia growing worse. *What is this? Are we friends now? Do we care about each other?* The idea appalled her. She had never cared about *anyone*. Other than herself, of course. She felt as though she had abandoned a piece of essential armour.

There was a clamour of anguished voices as the Fyreslayers flooded into the courtyard. The axe-wielding berserkers ran through the smoke, heading for the toppling pyre, followed by the pike-wielding guards and then the hulking, ground-shaking bulk of the magmadroths, who had to stoop to fit through the gateway into the keep. There was no sign of any cultists. Gotrek must have been right, decided Maleneth. With the sorceress dead, the Chaos worshippers had become as feeble as they looked.

As the crowds of Fyreslayers continued pouring into the keep, the sound of their pain and outrage grew. It went beyond simple grief. When they reached the charred remains, they picked runes from the ashes, staring at the inert metal as though they cared about it as much as their dead kin.

'They're just pieces of gold,' said Gotrek, following the direction of her gaze. He shook his head sadly. 'It's the curse of my people. Look at them. Howling over lumps of metal in a land where it springs from every mountainside.'

Again, Gotrek was speaking to her as a confidant, as a friend, and again it

gave her a chilling sense of foreboding. She could not explain exactly how, but she felt that she had made an unforgivable error. She wondered if, even now, she could escape the Slayer's pull, but she knew she could not. The fight for the realms hinged on him, she was sure of it. The fight against Chaos, next to which all other concerns were insignificant, was bound up in Gotrek Gurnisson. She shivered and backed away from him, but before she had gone very far, she saw that the Fyreslayer elders were approaching. Thurgyn, Korgan and Uzkal were riding their magmadroths through the grieving mob, heading straight towards Gotrek. Maleneth prepared herself for another nauseating wave of gratitude and hero worship, but then she saw the Fyreslayers' expressions. They looked furious. Uzkal's face was hidden but she could see from his pose that he was rigid with anger, and Thurgyn looked livid.

'You can trust the Slayer to clear up your messes,' said Gotrek cheerfully, oblivious to the glares being directed at him.

'How dare you,' snarled Thurgyn when he was close enough to address Gotrek.

Gotrek laughed when he saw how angry they were. 'What are you talking about? How dare I what?'

The runefather gestured for one of his warriors to approach. The Fyreslayer was carrying a mangled lump of metal and, after a moment's confusion, Maleneth realised it was the icon of Grimnir that Gotrek had used to draw the cultists away from the gate. It had buckled where it had hit the ground, and the cultists had obviously managed to attack it before the sorceress died. It was distorted and cleaved in several places, rent out of shape by sword strikes. The Fyreslayer carrying it looked even more furious than his king, and Maleneth struggled not to laugh.

'I don't think they liked you pushing their flag-waver over,' she whispered, leaning over to him.

'You struck a battlesmith of the Varrukh lodge!' bellowed Thurgyn, veins snaking around his sunken eye sockets. 'And you attacked a likeness of the Slayer God.' He pointed his latchkey axe at the standard. 'You defiled Grimnir's memory!'

Gotrek seemed too shocked to reply. Then he shook his head and pointed at the pile of burned corpses. 'They did this to your people and you're whingeing about dents in your little sign. Is this some kind of bloody joke?'

Thurgyn studied the toppled pyre and then looked back at Gotrek, his words taut. 'You have aided us, again, Gotrek Gurnisson, but I will not stand for this. You will not treat our holy icons like scrap metal. This standard is a record of every battle and—'

'It's a lump of metal.' Gotrek's voice was dangerously quiet.

'Gotrek,' whispered Maleneth. 'They were on your side a minute ago. Apologise for hitting their damned banner.'

'Apologise?' He stared at her as though she were speaking a different language.

'It's a thing people do,' she said.

Gotrek ignored her and locked his glare back on Thurgyn. 'This is exactly where you people go wrong. Honour the past, by all means, but don't get bloody stuck in it.' He nodded at the icon. 'If that thing helps, all well and good, but if it doesn't, use it another way.'

'Blasphemy,' snarled Thurgyn, looking even more outraged.

'You people tie yourself in knots,' cried Gotrek. He waved at the runes in Thurgyn's body and the sigils on his throne. 'What do you think all this stuff is for?' Thurgyn started to reply but Gotrek shouted over him. 'They're tools. They're ways to win. Means to an end. Do you see? And it's the winning that matters, not the bloody tools. You need to think about the victory, not the trinkets that get you the victory.' He looked around at the crowd. 'Am I talking another language? Does anybody here understand me? If Grimmir's ghost really is up there somewhere, watching over you, what do you think he wants you to do?' Thurgyn tried again to speak but Gotrek boomed on. 'He wants you to slay! He wants you to drive out the bloody idiots. He wants you to put an end to people who are so dim they think it's clever to bargain with daemons.' He pointed his axe at the icon, spit flying through his crooked teeth as he addressed the whole Fyreslayer army. 'You brought that thing here to help you win. And what did it do? It helped you bloody win!'

Thurgyn looked even angrier, as did Korgan and every other Fyreslayer that Maleneth could see. There was a stunned silence as the normally frenetic duardin all stared at Gotrek in disbelief. Then, one by one, they all gripped their weapons and began stomping across the smoke-filled courtyard.

'Every time...' muttered Maleneth. She drew her knives and prepared to

fight. 'Only you could make enemies of an army you just saved.'

'Wait,' said a voice. Maleneth thought, at first, that it had come from the runefather, but as Thurgyn looked back at Uzkal she realised it was the masked priest. 'Runefather,' said Uzkal. 'I'm starting to see what is happening here. I think I have been wrong about this stranger.'

'Finally!' cried Gotrek. 'Someone who understands what I'm saying.'

The Fyreslayers all turned to their priest. 'We've been labouring under a delusion,' said Uzkal, riding his magmadroth out in front of the army. 'For all these weeks we believed that Grimnir had abandoned us. That he had cursed us. We endured hardships beyond count.' He glanced at Runefather Thurgyn. 'And the loss of our runesons. But we endured our trials with stoicism and faith. We held fast to the old ways. And now, now that we have finally returned the runesons to the Sacred Fire, look at what has happened.' He raised the burning rune he was gripping in his fist, waving it at the keep. 'We have driven out our enemies. We have reclaimed what is ours.' He stood in his throne and the fire burned brighter in his fist. 'This is a sign! As sure as any I have seen. Grimnir has judged us! And he has deemed us worthy!'

An awed murmur rippled through the crowd and the Fyreslayers nodded at each other, exhilarated by Uzkal's words. 'And this stranger,' said the priest, waving the flame at Gotrek, 'was the messenger who brought us Grimnir's word.' His voice grew even more impassioned. 'He is a prophet of the Slayer God!'

All across the courtyard, the Fyreslayers turned to stare in wonder at Gotrek. Even Thurgyn's eyes strained with revelation. Then he howled and gripped his axe in both hands, lifting it over his head. 'Let it burn!' he roared, shaking his head from side to side.

'Let it burn!' howled the fyrds, shaking their weapons and spilling embers from their axes.

As the cheering grew in volume, Maleneth turned to look at Gotrek. He was shaking his head, an incredulous expression on his face as he muttered something. She did not need to hear the word to know what it was.

'Morons.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Eòrna ran through fields of brittle stars. She ignored the ink-dark beauty of the Curaim, dashing through the chamber so fast that lanternfish scattered before her, flashing and blinking as they rolled up into the blackness. She felt none of the calm her inner sanctum usually granted her. Her brother's speech at the Allmarach had horrified her. And with every moment that passed, her fears grew. Her brother was insane and he was the king. That was a potent combination. He was not some remote corner of the nobility; he was regent of Dhruim-Ùrlar and he had the backing of the Isharann fanes. He might actually be able to realise his lunatic ambitions. She had to find Torven quickly. He would know what to do.

She passed through seemingly boundless chambers, knowing the hidden paths and where she would find Torven. The Galdach Hall was at the very centre of the Curaim and, unlike most of the city, it radiated a fierce heat. Eòrna entered it at a sprint, leaving the brittle stars behind and bounding up slopes of jagged, volcanic rock. It was brighter in this chamber and the light radiated from the walls of a vast, crooked tower that rose from the rocks. It was a natural chimney, a spiralling vent formed from cooled magma that roared constantly, filling the chamber with noise and spewing columns of hot water that would have dwarfed most mountains. The water boiled and flashed as it rose, reaching so high its top was not visible. Somewhere, many hundreds of feet above Eòrna's head, it emerged from the roofs of Dhruim-Ùrlar and spilled out into the abyssal plain. The chimney appeared to be molten but the movement was an illusion created by thousands of

crabs that crawled constantly over its pitted surface. The crabs scattered as Eòrna pounded up the rocks, heading for Torven's cave. Her priests had bound the chamber with complex Isharann spells, making it safe for her to enter, but she still winced at the heat, so alien to the deeps of Dhruim-Ùrlar.

Torven was waiting at the cave entrance and he glided back into the shadows as she climbed up towards him, heading back into his lair. She climbed in after him and followed his spiral-shaped shell as it floated down a tunnel, past several openings and grottos, into a central, roughly circular cave. The cave was filled with undulating light that spilled from an opening in the far wall. The opening was oval and as tall as Eòrna, and it looked onto the jet of heated water that was howling up the thermal vent.

'You were right!' she cried, rushing over to him. 'It is a betrayal! He means to end the Great Hunt! He wants us to live like uplanders.' She reeled around the cave, scattering fish as she waved her hands. 'He wants us to abandon Dhruim-Ùrlar and live in dust and sunlight like humans. And he thinks that will make us masters of the realms. It's madness.' She shook her head, remembering her childhood. 'He was always obsessed with this idea of appeasing Teclis. Where's the sense in it? How can we live our lives trying to please a god who always despised us? Betrayal is exactly what this is, betrayal of our entire way of life.'

'It's more than that,' replied Torven, his tone as neutral as ever. 'There is a greater treachery.'

Eòrna stared into Torven's lightless eye. 'What could be a greater treachery than stealing our way of life?' She gripped her *helsabres*. 'And what will happen to the *namarti*? If they are freed from the curse, that would make them our equals. They could challenge our right to rule.' She laughed bitterly. 'Dìolan thinks they will adore him for this, but they will probably put his head on a spike and take the throne for themselves. He's going to tear down everything that holds society together. Life needs order and structure. He's going to replace it with anarchy.'

'All true,' said Torven, 'but this is not the betrayal I sensed. What did you do with the shell I gave you?'

'I gave it to Úrdach and he swore to take it to Dìolan's chambers. He should have no difficulties. Everyone's drunk on Dìolan's madness.' She laughed incredulously. 'They're preparing a celebratory ball.'

'Good. I thought you might have been forced to bring it back here.' Torven

rotated slowly until his eye was facing the light-filled window. ‘Let us see what it uncovers.’

The window flashed brighter, forcing Eòrna to shield her eyes. Then the light died, plunging the cave into darkness. The only illumination was a weak glow from the lanternfish outside. Torven became a cool shadow at Eòrna’s side, but she could tell he was staring at the window. She had seen him use his deepsight many times but it never failed to impress her. It was quite unlike the etherstorms of the Isharann priests. The priests conjured power from the elemental fury of the sea, but Torven’s power emanated from somewhere in the chambers of his shell. She heard the familiar sound of his thoughts: dull, echoing clangs that reverberated through the shell’s spirals, as though its structure were being reconfigured.

Then a new light poured in through the window – a cool, silvery blue that rippled across the opening, fragmenting the darkness like moonlight on a pool. Eòrna forgot her rage for a moment, spellbound. The shapes eddied and churned as clunking sounds continued to reverberate through Torven’s shell. Then an image started to form in the opening.

‘Dìolan’s apartments,’ said Eòrna, recognising the grand, gilded stateroom, lined with columns.

‘Yes,’ replied Torven. ‘Úrdach was successful.’

‘Who’s that at the far end?’ Eòrna leant closer to the window. ‘Is it my brother?’

The image in the window drifted down the long chamber, heading towards a group of figures who had gathered around a table. Eòrna quickly recognised Dìolan and Thallacrom and several of her brother’s close advisors. ‘I can’t hear what they’re saying.’

‘Thallacrom has warded your brother’s apartments with sorcery. Even with a physical presence in the room I am struggling to see clearly.’

Eòrna could see how tenuous his glimpse on the scene was. Her brother and the others looked like they were beneath the surface of a river, their features rolling and tumbling as she tried to focus on them. ‘Then this is useless. How will we know what they’re discussing?’

Torven’s emissary glided closer to Dìolan, and Eòrna saw that her brother was holding something. It looked like a piece of shell, or coral. As the scene shifted again, she realised that the table was covered with a great heap of similar objects. They all burned with an inner fire that flashed on the faces

of her brother's counsellors and generals.

'No,' she breathed, as she recognised the shapes. 'It can't be. Has he cut those from the chorrileum?' Nausea washed through her as she realised she was right. To see pieces of the chorrileum butchered and broken was worse than seeing the corpses of her fellow nobles. Each piece contained the soul of one of her kin. 'What in the name of the gods is he doing?'

'*This* is the treachery,' said Torven. 'This is the great betrayal I felt. It makes sense now. You heard his speech – he means to harness Gotrek's soul and use it to break the curse. And this is how he will do it.'

'By sundering the souls of our ancestors?'

'There is only one reason he would do such a thing,' replied Torven. 'The king means to summon an Eidolon of unusual power. A great spirit of the Fallen God. And he has harvested the souls of his own people to do it.'

'But why?' cried Eòrna. The Isharann had summoned Eidolons before. They were divine manifestations, formed in the likeness of the god Mathlann and fuelled by the souls in the chorrileum. Such beings had been conjured many times in Dhruim-Ùrlar's history, but it had never required anything as horrific as this.

'He does not mean to summon any ordinary Eidolon. Gotrek carries the spark of divinity in him. Only the power of a god can crush the power of a god. Your brother means to create something greater than the Eidolons you have summoned before. Something so significant he is prepared to sacrifice all those souls.'

'But he's damning them all! They will go to the Dark Prince. They will go to Slaanesh.'

Torven drifted away from the window as more of the dull hammering sounds chimed through his shell. 'I have heard of such a thing. Your kin in the Faobhar enclave attempted it during the Palladium Wars. There was a manifestation they called the Apogaion Eidolon. Your own libraries contain references to it. It is said it was so great it could level mountains and crush entire armies. Your brother seems to have found a way to subdue Gotrek Gurnisson.'

'But he must have begun planning this before his disastrous battle. He can't have begun something on this scale in the last few hours.'

Torven thought for a moment. 'Then this must always have been his plan. When you told him that we had found a potent soul, one capable of

strengthening the namarti, he was lying to you. He had already hatched a plan to use Gotrek's soul in another, more profound way – as a way to break the curse.'

'It's not a curse!' hissed Eòrna. 'And I'm not the only one who thinks that.' She paced around the cave. 'We have to tell people what he's doing. There will be riots. Even his most ardent supporters will be appalled.' Suddenly, she realised what an opportunity this was. 'He's gone too far. Everyone will agree. It's all very well to speak of curing the half-souls and rising from the sea to conquer the realms, but what will people say when they realise he's sundering the souls of their parents to do it? They'll bay for his blood.' She turned and began rushing from the cave. 'I have to tell people.'

'And what will your brother say?' Torven's tone was still deadpan. 'Will he admit his crime and reveal the pieces of broken coral?'

Eòrna stopped and glared at him. 'No, of course not, but I will—'

'You will what? Fight your way into the king's apartments, slay all of his soldiers and take the evidence? Or will you stand at the palace gates, telling anyone who will listen that their beloved king is damning their ancestors to an eternity of torment? Railing like a lunatic. Do you think people will listen to the embittered, exiled sister, or the triumphant king who is about to make them lords of the realms?'

Eòrna drew one of her sabres and slashed at the darkness. 'They have to know.'

'And once your accusations have fallen on deaf ears, do you think your brother will continue to tolerate your presence in Dhruim-Ùrlar? Or do you think he will be forced to finally deal with his most credible challenger?'

Eòrna sighed and slid her sword back in its scabbard. She shook her head and walked back over to the window, watching her brother with a mixture of horror and grudging respect. 'There's nothing he will not do. His faith in himself is so absolute. Dìolan is no monster. I know what it would mean to him, breaking those souls from their sanctuary. But he won't let it stop him.' She turned to Torven. 'Very well, you've made your point. I'm impulsive. I know I am. It would be a mistake to let my brother know we have learned his plans. So let me suggest an alternative. He is desperate to launch another attack on Karag-Varr. He means to drag half the enclave to the uplands. It will be a glorious host and he will no doubt seize his prize.'

But while he's up there, hurling battalions at Gotrek, his palace will be empty and barely guarded. His friends and allies will be up on that volcano with him, desperate to earn a place in his new order. What if I bide my time, wait until the palace has emptied, then steal into my brother's chambers and take some of the chorrileum that he has stolen?'

Torven thought for a moment, his shell clanging and hissing. 'That *would* be the right time to act. But taking the pieces of coral would only give your brother an easy excuse to kill you. He would pass the blame on to you and say *you* were responsible for stealing the souls while he was leading his battalions into battle. No, it would be better to take some nobles into the palace with you. Even if King Dìolan fields a huge army, there will be many nobles left behind – people who are too old, or simply unskilled in the art of war. And among them will be many prominent political figures. If you led those nobles into the palace under some pretext, you could act surprised when you stumble across the king's treachery. You could even play the part of a caring sister who tries to find an innocent explanation for Dìolan's crime. You will seal his fate at the same time as appearing to be his most loyal supporter.'

Eòrna laughed. 'Gods, that's devious. I pray I never have your intellect working against me.' She patted his shell as she watched Dìolan and Thallacrom sorting through the pieces of coral. 'I almost feel sorry for him.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

King Dìolan woke in the darkness with a start. When the Isharann priests had summoned Dhruim-Ùrlar into being, they had granted it a cycle of light and dark, recreating a semblance of night and day, driven by ancestral instincts they could barely explain. The corals that formed the city's spires grew less luminous as the evenings wore on, becoming completely lightless at night.

When Dìolan lurched from his bed, his window looked out on almost pitch darkness. Only the faint glimmer of a lanternfish illuminated the ornamental gardens that surrounded his palace. He leant heavily on the sill, pain knifing through his innards and his mind filled with the echoes of his dream.

It had been Gotrek, again, who dragged him from his rest. The tru'heas healers had told him, repeatedly, that only rest would heal his wounds, but every time he tried to sleep he saw the Fyreslayer striding towards him, hacking through the ethertide, rune light blazing from his chest. It was a memory that should have filled him with elation. This was the great prize he had sought all his life. The fulcrum he would use to set the Dromlech on their true path. But the thought of Gotrek was troubling rather than pleasing. It pained him far more than his wounds, all the more so because he could not explain why. The Fyreslayer's ugly, battered face haunted him, bringing with it inexplicable doubts and making him feel that his mind was no longer his own.

'Your highness,' said Thallacrom. The priest was sitting in a tall chair on the far side of the king's bedchamber. He had not left Dìolan's side since

they had returned from Karag-Varr and he slept in the same chair every night, ready to fetch water or medicine. He stood slowly, massaging his skeletal face and yawning as he crossed the room, pulling his robes tight against the chill. ‘Do you need something? Is the pain bothering you? I can call the servants. What do you need?’

‘Just this,’ muttered Dìolan, taking a cup of wine from a table and drinking. The wine was heavy and strong and it eased the pain almost instantly. Wine was the only thing that stopped him feeling that he was losing his mind. He sat at the table and Thallacrom sat opposite, pouring himself a cup of wine. The two nobles had known each other so long that Thallacrom felt able to forgo formalities. They drank without speaking for a while, Thallacrom studying the king as the faint light of the lanternfish washed over his face.

‘It was more than the pain that woke you,’ said Thallacrom, when he finally broke the silence.

Dìolan nodded.

‘You seemed troubled at the ball.’

‘I despise those things.’

‘It was more than that.’ Thallacrom leant across the table. ‘We always knew this would be hard. But we are so close now.’

Dìolan drank more wine, still trying to rid himself of Gotrek’s face.

‘What are you thinking?’ asked Thallacrom.

‘What if there was another way?’ replied Dìolan. ‘Another way to harness Gotrek’s soul. A way that did not require...’ He thought of the broken pieces of the chorrileum, the sundered souls of his ancestors, lying on the table in the rooms below where he was now sitting. ‘A way that did not require such sacrifice.’

‘Do you regret what we have done?’ Thallacrom’s expression was neutral. Dìolan had the annoying sense that his childhood tutor was testing him.

‘Regret?’ he replied, hearing the anger in his own voice. ‘I regret every day we remain in Dhruim-Ùrlar while the slaves of Chaos rule the uplands. I regret that our entire race is content to cower under the sea. I regret that even High King Voltornos, supposedly the greatest of us, must hunt in the shadows while others rule the realms.’ He put his cup down on the table with a clank of coral against stone. ‘I have many regrets, Thallacrom. They weigh heavily on me.’

Thallacrom gave a slight nod. ‘But you wish we had not removed souls from the chorrileum.’

‘The Dromlech enclave have summoned Eidolons before and this has never been required. It is an abomination, Thallacrom, and you know it. We are damning our ancestors.’ He shook his head. ‘If any of the other priests had suggested this, I would have had them locked away.’

‘The idea to free us of the soul curse was yours, your highness. I only pointed out that Gotrek was a way to do it. And there is no other way to perform the ritual. Gotrek’s spirit is unlike anything we have hunted before. It is unique. Even I cannot say exactly why, but there is something in him that is not of the Mortal Realms. An echo of the divine. When your sister drew our attention to him—’

‘Do not remind me of Eòrna,’ muttered Dìolan.

Thallacrom held up his hands. ‘She’s only a problem because you refuse to deal with her. Labelling her thrallmaster and sending her on errands does not stop her being a threat. The half-souls adore her. They think she is their champion.’

Dìolan shook his head and poured more wine. ‘I’m the one who is about to heal their souls and it’s my damned sister they flock to.’

‘So let me *deal* with her.’ Thallacrom’s eyes were gleaming. ‘Your place on the throne will never be secure while she roams free, poisoning people against you with every word she utters. It is not just the half-souls who adore her – many of your courtiers would prefer to see her on the throne of Dhruim-Ùrlar. And while we work so hard to free the Dromlech, she consorts with that bizarre menagerie in her palace, giving credence to peculiar, alien notions. It is not right for someone in her position. It would be a simple matter for me to—’

‘No,’ snapped Dìolan. Whenever his advisors spoke to him like this, presuming to tell him how foolish he was for letting his sister live, he felt the same flush of outrage. They were not fit to decide the fate of people like Eòrna. If his sister were on the throne, they would no doubt be insisting she have him killed. ‘We need to strike soon,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘I can’t stay in this room forever. It makes me question things I know are right. I believe in this more than you can imagine, Thallacrom. I have seen this coming since I was knee-high. The Mortal Realms cannot be left to the likes of humans and duardin. They have failed. And they will always fail. It

was their ancestors who let the realms fall into the hands of the Ruinous Powers. And nothing they have done since has ever changed the situation.

‘I hear people talk of Sigmar’s Stormcast Eternals, sent from the Celestial Heavens to redeem us all. As if we are going to be saved by the bumbling of the lesser races. And look at what a pathetic mess they make. They butcher a few Chaos warlords, throw up an ugly building or two and say they have reclaimed the realms. And then, as soon as the Great Enemy notices them, they’re wiped from the map. And so it goes on, over and over. Sigmar sends his clumsy hordes, they make a hash of things and then they’re driven out. It’s like a terrible joke.’

He rose from his seat and began pacing around the bedchamber. ‘While we, the elder race who actually have the skill and wisdom to drive Chaos from the realms, do nothing.’ He glanced at a small shrine in the corner of his room. It contained a statue of the aelven god Teclis and he had treasured it since childhood. ‘Is it any wonder the Great Illuminator despaired of us? We, who were born to lead, have spent all these long ages hiding in the shadows, obscuring ourselves with mists and deceits.’ He jabbed a finger at the window. ‘My sister thinks we’re destined to be hunters and nothing more, but that’s not what Teclis intended. He didn’t mean us to pick at carrion, he meant us to rule. To drive out the corruption of Chaos.’

He knew Thallacrom had heard this speech from him many times, but it felt good to say the words. It drove out the doubts that had robbed him of sleep. ‘It can be done. And it will be done. But not by those plodding brutes from Azyr, with their clumsy hammers and ramshackle cities. It will be done by us. The true children of Teclis. The firstborn. We are the light bringers. We are the *only* ones who can drive away the darkness.’

He grabbed a history book from his shelves and waved it at Thallacrom, about to continue his impassioned speech, when an agonising cough rattled through his chest. It was so violent and unexpected that he dropped the book and fell against the wall, struggling to breathe. ‘Damn it,’ he wheezed, seeing crimson spots on the front of his tunic. ‘Can none of you priests do anything? Can none of you rid me of this weakness?’

Thallacrom rushed over and tried to take his arm, but Dìolan grabbed him by the shoulders and spoke urgently into his face. ‘We have to move soon. We have to begin. I cannot stay here, waiting like this. Waiting to die. We must take Gotrek’s soul and use it. We must begin the ritual. Or I will...’

He shook his head. All his life he had been filled with a furious belief in the pre-eminence of his people. The politics of court meant nothing to him. But he knew that the Dromlech were the only ones who could truly save the Mortal Realms. And now, on the very cusp of beginning his great revolution, he was powerless to act, hindered by the fragility of his mortal flesh.

Thallacrom studied him. ‘There must be another way. A way to accelerate your healing.’ He looked out into the darkness, frowning. ‘Perhaps there is something.’

‘What?’ demanded Dìolan.

‘There are more ways than one to heal someone. The tru’heas are skilled, but their arts are slow to take effect. So perhaps we should try using the fruit of our labours. Perhaps it is time for you to see what all this sacrifice has achieved.’

‘The Eidolon?’ Dìolan shook his head. ‘Has it already risen? I thought we were a long way from that.’

‘The Eidolon is little more than a beginning. A fraction of the great storm it will become. But even now, half-born, it is suffused with power. By sundering souls in the way we have, we are creating something unlike any Eidolon we have ever summoned before.’ He studied his narwhal tusk, as if he were reading something in the grain. ‘I wonder... If we brought you to the Eidolon now, I could attempt a smaller version of the rite that will rid us of the soul curse. I could pass some of its power into you.’

‘And it would heal me?’ Dìolan gripped one of the bedposts, leaning eagerly towards the old priest.

‘It would certainly grant you strength, and perhaps that strength would act as a cure. And, at the same time, it would allow me to see if our plan is going to work – if harvesting souls in this way really has made the Eidolon especially powerful. I have been wondering how to be sure. We need to gauge its strength. Otherwise, there’s no way of knowing if we can really use Gotrek’s soul in the way I claimed. There’s no use killing Gotrek if we are unable to do anything with his spirit afterwards.’

Thallacrom continued talking, explaining how he would use the Eidolon to extract Gotrek’s soul from his body and feed it to the chorrileum, but Dìolan was not really listening. He was just excited by the idea that he could finally act, that he could finally do something. ‘Take me to it,’ he

demanded, managing to stand, despite the pain in his chest.

‘Can you walk?’

‘Of course,’ snapped Dìolan, rising from the bed and grabbing some clothes. ‘I was sleepy, that was all.’ As he said the words, he realised it was true. Now that he was properly awake he found his strength returning. He stifled a cough, threw a cloak around himself and headed for the door, snatching a sword as he went. ‘Quickly. I cannot wait any longer. Heal me tonight and tomorrow we will begin. Karag-Varr must fall.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The streets of Dhruim-Ùrlar flowed and danced, moving around Dìolan as he rode through the half-light. His steed was white, a regal-looking deepmare he had ridden into battle many times. The reptilian creature seemed to sense his every wish, responding to such slight movements that he felt as though it were an extension of his body, gliding effortlessly past the spired temples and sprawling manses that bordered his estates.

At this hour, most of the Dromlech were asleep, or at least indoors, and the streets were empty and quiet. Thallacrom was riding at his side and there was a small group of guards following in their wake on fangmora eels. No army had ever invaded Dhruim-Ùrlar, or, for that matter, even learned of its existence, but there were still dangers to be found. Occasionally, schools of barb-sharks emerged from the kelp forests, hungry and venomous. On rare occasions, medusa squid had even been known to loom over the city, colossal, ink-dark leviathans that could tear down buildings and devour hundreds of aelves before being driven back onto the abyssal plain. Besides which, an Idoneth regent could never be complacent when crossing his kingdom. The crown of Dhruim-Ùrlar was won rather than inherited, and there was always someone eager to vie for such a valuable prize.

‘How far?’ asked Dìolan. Since leaving the Allmarach he had been feeling awful. He was sitting erect in his saddle, refusing to display weakness, but he was not sure how long he could maintain the act.

‘Only an hour’s ride, highness,’ replied Thallacrom. The priest was hunching forwards in his saddle, gripping his stave, robes billowing around

him as they glided through clouds of silt. ‘The Eidolon is being born very close to the chorrileum.’

Kelp fronds brushed against Dìolan’s armour as they left the city’s main streets, riding into a winding maze of dappled leaves and darting fish. A stranger to the city would quickly have become lost. The paths through the kelp forest were in constant motion, seemingly impossible to follow, but each had a name and a personality that was known to the deepmares. However much the routes shifted and writhed, the creatures could follow, swimming confidently round convoluted bends and through dark, lonely glades.

After what seemed to Dìolan a very long time, lights began glimmering up ahead, blinking through the boughs like stars that had fallen to the sea floor. Dìolan felt a rush of emotion. The light came from the chorrileum: the resting place of fallen Dromlech aelves, a sacred haven where souls were warded from the predations of Chaos. Since times forgotten, the Dromlech had trusted their spirits to these lights, confident they were safe. And now, at Dìolan’s command, souls were being cut away, used like kindling on a fire. The emotion Dìolan felt was not guilt, or doubt, but a burning determination. This great sacrifice, ordered by him, had to be made worthwhile. Such an appalling act of brutality could only be forgivable if it achieved the great transformation he had always dreamed of – the ascension of the Dromlech and the end of the Idoneth curse. No more would they battle to keep their half-souls alive with life force stolen from lesser beings. Soon, they would live free.

His pulse quickened as he pictured a mighty host of Idoneth, led by Dromlech nobles as they crossed the uplands in broad daylight, making no attempt at subterfuge as they scoured Chaos from the realms, showing Teclis once and for all that in the Idoneth he had achieved perfection. Dìolan knew what his fellow Akhelian nobles thought of him. They assumed he wanted power for power’s sake, as all his predecessors had done. But they were wrong. Dìolan no longer cared for the throne or all the other badges of office. None of this was for personal gain or glory. He did not even care if his name was recorded as the architect of this great plan. He just cared that there was now hope for the forces of Order and sanity, a chance to drive back the madness of the Chaos Gods. The Dromlech were the realms’ last chance. And he had sworn to unshackle them.

They reached a high path, looking down over the hollow that contained the chorrileum. Dìolan paused to survey the glorious sight. It looked like a coral reef, several miles wide, translucent and pale and lit from within by cool, pulsing light. There was no sign of the stolen souls. Thallacrom's adepts had been careful not to damage any of the places that were visible to passers-by

'Not far now,' said Thallacrom, steering his deepmare away from the chorrileum and heading back into the kelp groves. They had not ridden far when another light flashed through the gloom, slicing through the fronds that lined the path.

Dìolan urged his steed forwards, his strength waning. He prayed, silently, to Teclis, that this healing would work. He barely had enough strength left to stay in his saddle, never mind lead an attack on Karag-Varr.

They reached the slopes above another sunken clearing. This hollow was smaller than the chorrileum but still hundreds of feet wide. It was a tiered amphitheatre with arches of coral woven around it, forming a vast, cage-like dome of yellow polyps that were all entwined, like thousands of interlocking fingers. Every finger of coral radiated light, and the space beneath the amphitheatre was even brighter than the chorrileum. There were warriors of the Akhelian Guard dotted around the perimeter, standing proudly to attention and facing out at the surrounding kelp forest. The nearest one saluted as Dìolan and the others glided down a colonnaded slope that led into the amphitheatre. At the centre of the space, drifting above a dais, was a shell, similar in shape to a conch but the size of a small house. It was made of the same colourful, translucent material as the surrounding coral and there was a light at its heart, flashing with an arterial pulse.

Dìolan dismounted and walked up some steps onto the circular dais, Thallacrom following a few paces behind.

'Is that him?' he said, looking up at the imposing shape, feeling the need to speak in hushed tones, as if he had entered a shrine. At the centre of the shell, silhouetted by its light, there was a figure. It was no larger than a child and hard to see in detail, but Dìolan thought he could discern glimpses of scalloped armour and flowing hair. It was standing still, head bowed, hands clasped in front of its chest, as though in prayer.

Thallacrom rarely displayed emotions but his voice was rigid with pride. ‘He is like no Eidolon we have summoned before. Like nothing we have even dreamt of.’

Dìolan circled the shell, looking at the figure inside. He had seen Eidolons before, in the heat of battle, but never had a chance to study one so closely. He could feel waves of energy buffeting him as he stepped closer. ‘What do I do?’ he asked, bathing himself in the sacred light.

‘The Eidolon’s cocoon is charged with etheric power,’ said Thallacrom in hushed tones. ‘It is the spiritual force of every soul we have severed. Under normal circumstances, some power would pass from the souls in the chorrileum to the Eidolon. But with this ritual, we have freed all the power of the souls. They are unshackled. Their purpose is to give birth to the Eidolon but, at the moment, I can see no harm in you tapping into it.’

‘Tapping into it?’ Dìolan hesitated, glancing back at the ancient priest. ‘The severed souls will pass into me, rather than the Eidolon?’

‘No. Not exactly. A part of their essence will pass *through* you, as lightning passes through the boughs of a tree.’

Dìolan frowned. ‘When lightning strikes a tree, things rarely end well for the tree.’

‘Do you trust me?’

‘Of course.’ It was true. Dìolan had never doubted Thallacrom. In truth, after the defeat at Karag-Varr, the priest could not have been blamed if he had sided with Eòrna. Dìolan had been so weak from his injuries it had seemed like he might die. And if Thallacrom had turned against him, the other Isharann priests would have followed suit. But Thallacrom had stayed loyal.

‘It’s a simple rite,’ said Thallacrom, taking a string of shells from his belt. They were inscribed with tiny runes and clicked musically against each other as he shuffled them along the thread, looking for something specific. He stepped closer, peering at the tiny shell held between his bony fingers, light washing over the intricate tattoos that covered his face. The light made him look even more skeletal, highlighting the angular bones and sunken eye sockets. ‘You must simply hold your hand against the surface of the cocoon,’ he said, still squinting at the runes scored into the shell. ‘I will recite a short incantation. You must keep your hand in place until I say you can remove it.’

‘And will that be difficult? Holding my hand in place, I mean.’ Dìolan was not afraid, he simply wanted to be prepared.

Thallacrom licked his lips, revealing a flash of blue teeth. ‘There will be no physical pain. But when your mind comes into contact with the souls we have removed from the chorrileum, you may feel an urge to withdraw from them. You must resist the urge. If you break contact before I complete the rite...’

‘What?’

‘If I do not complete the incantation, there may be unexpected results. I cannot say what, exactly, but the rite would fail and there would be no healing.’

‘Has anyone tried this before?’

There was a slight pause before Thallacrom replied. ‘Not that I know of.’

Dìolan nodded, looking back up at the cocoon and the figure standing inside it. ‘Tell me when.’

Thallacrom held the tiny shell to his eye. ‘When I begin speaking, press your hand to the cocoon. It should not take more than a minute or so.’ He paused to clear his throat, then proceeded, speaking in the ancient language of the Isharann priesthood.

Dìolan immediately pressed his hand against the cocoon – or, at least, he tried to. His palm passed straight through the surface and he realised it was not solid. It felt more like thick smoke. He glanced at Thallacrom to see if he was doing the right thing, but the priest was too engrossed to notice, so Dìolan held his hand where it was, feeling the strange, viscous light moving across his skin. The sensation was odd, but not unpleasant, and Dìolan could not see why it should be hard for him to keep his hand in place. Thallacrom’s words droned on and, after just a few moments, Dìolan felt a pleasing warmth passing through his hand and through his veins, pouring into his body and making his head feel light. It was similar to the sensation one felt after drinking wine but it quickly grew in force. Dìolan did not feel any pain or doubt. There was something very natural about the sensation, even though he had never experienced it before. It felt so normal that it took him a moment to realise that his feet were hovering a few inches from the ground.

What have you done?

At first, Dìolan thought Thallacrom had spoken, but then he realised the

priest was still absorbed in his incantation. The voice had come from somewhere else.

What have you done to us? The voice was hoarse with grief and terror, and Dìolan realised it was coming from in front of him, inside the cocoon.

He has cut us! cried another voice, female and bordering on a scream.

He has betrayed us! howled another.

The voices were passing into Dìolan with the waves of light that had seemed so pleasing only a moment earlier. One voice summoned another, and then another, until there was a whole chorus of tormented voices crying out, denouncing Dìolan as a traitor. There was such pain in their words that he wanted to clamp his hands over his ears. But he knew that would not help. The words were in his head. He could only silence them by withdrawing his hand. And, although the voices tortured him, he could feel that Thallacrom's rite was working: his body was filling with a strength and vigour that surpassed anything he had felt before. He felt invincible, as though he could tear down a palace wall.

We are not safe! screeched a voice even louder than the others. *You have damned us! Murderer! The Dark Prince will take us! Fix what you have broken!*

Yes! replied a clamour of panicked voices. *Quickly! Return what you have taken! It is not too late! You can save us! Dìolan! Return our souls to the chorrileum! It is not too late!*

It was agonising to hear their cries. As the screams grew louder and more desperate, Dìolan's resolve started to falter. He could remove his hand and grab Thallacrom. He could order him to abandon the idea of summoning the Eidolon. It *wasn't* too late.

The light pulsed brighter and he felt a hand lock around his, holding it firmly in place. Dìolan tried to pull away, assuming that one of his accusers had managed to take hold of him, given purchase in the physical realm by their hatred. But as he stared into the light, he realised his mistake. The person gripping his arm was not one of his ancestors. It had the face of a god. A magnificence that no mortal being could hope to match. The Eidolon's eyes burned into him, fierce and tempestuous, and the waves of energy flooding through Dìolan suddenly became too powerful to endure.

Dìolan howled, trying to snatch back his hand, but rather than letting go the Eidolon gripped harder and opened its mouth to speak. No words

emerged, but the roar of a storm jolted through Dìolan, causing him to shake and clamp his eyes shut. The sound swelled, growing so loud he thought his skull would crack. And then it was over. The Eidolon loosened its grip, the sounds ceased, and Dìolan tumbled backwards from the cocoon, kicking up a cloud of silt as he landed heavily on the ground.

Thallacrom hobbled over as fast as he could, gripping his staff as he knelt down beside Dìolan, looking troubled. 'I had not finished,' he said. 'You should not have let go.'

'I was thrown back,' said Dìolan, his voice cracking. 'I did not let go.'

'Thrown?'

'The Eidolon.' Dìolan stood, then smiled as he realised he was full of strength. He backed away from Thallacrom and drew his sword, trying a few lunges and finding that his weakness was gone, replaced by such fierce vitality that he laughed out loud. 'You did it,' he cried, pacing around the clearing, swiping and slashing. He leapt onto a rock and stretched his limbs, arching his back as though emerging from a long sleep. 'It worked.'

The priest was still watching him with the same troubled expression. Then he looked back up at the cocoon. The light had faded a little but the silhouette of the Eidolon was still visible. It was watching Dìolan. 'The rite was not complete,' he said, speaking quietly. 'I did not sever the link between you and the Eidolon.'

'What does it matter? I am healed. More than healed. I haven't felt this strong for years.' Dìolan dropped down from the rock and grabbed Thallacrom by the shoulder. 'Be pleased. It worked.'

Thallacrom shook his head. 'I have no idea what this means.'

Dìolan laughed. 'It means we are ready for war. It means I can crush those savages in Karag-Varr and we can drag Gotrek Gurnisson back here.' He waved his sword at the cocoon. 'So that the Idoneth can be born again. Born as we should have been.'

Thallacrom shrugged and seemed mollified. He peered at Dìolan. 'I suppose, if there were any ill effects, you would not seem so hale.'

'Exactly!' Dìolan was about to say more, when he noticed how faint Thallacrom seemed. The darkness behind the old priest deepened and erupted into motion, making Thallacrom look oddly insubstantial, as though he were not truly there. It took Dìolan a moment to realise that he was looking at the surface of the sea. It was impossible, of course, all these

fathoms down, but he could see waves, breaking and crashing against the hull of a ship. The ship was of a peculiar design that he did not recognise. It bore symbols of the Sigmarite faith, but it was not like any ship he had seen before. As he looked at the ship, he felt an inexplicable surge of rage. The waves swelled, seeming to grow in response to his anger, lashing against the ship.

‘What is it?’ asked Thallacrom. As soon as the priest spoke, he regained his solidity and the scene behind him vanished, revealing the dome of coral and the drifting fronds of the kelp forest beyond. ‘What are you looking at?’

The doubt was back in Thallacrom’s eyes and Dìolan could imagine what the priest would say if he learned Dìolan was hallucinating. The attack on Karag-Varr would be delayed again. ‘Nothing,’ he said. He massaged his face, rubbing his palms into his eye sockets. ‘I’m just dazed from being so close to the Eidolon.’ He smiled again and left the dais, climbing back up onto his deepmare. ‘Thallacrom. We have waited long enough. Let us begin.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gotrek patted the orruk chieftain on the head, causing its bestial features to quiver. 'I knew we'd see eye to eye eventually,' he said. The orruk did not reply.

Gotrek's words were met with a roar of approval. Cheers and laughter reverberated around the cavernous feast hall of Karag-Varr. Gotrek had insisted on bringing the orruk's head to the victory feast and he had propped it up on top of a serving bowl so that its sagging, blood-spattered face was level with his. The Slayer bared his teeth in a lopsided grin that Maleneth was horribly familiar with. It was the smile that meant he had finally consumed enough ale to become drunk.

After the battle at Karag-Wyr, the Fyreslayers had marched on the other two keeps they had lost. Karag-Agril and Karag-Duril had both proved less of a challenge, however. Rather than cultists and sorcery, the Fyreslayers had found greenskin tribes, and the subsequent battles had seemed more like a glorious celebration than war. The greenskins had numbered in the thousands but that had not mattered. The Fyreslayers delighted in their favourite pastime: killing orruks. And, after adopting Gotrek as a revered prophet, the Varrukh revelled in every one of his facile pronouncements.

The illness that had plagued Thurgyn fell away as he fought at Gotrek's side, and despite Gotrek's oft-stated hatred of Fyreslayers, it seemed to Maleneth that he had finally found a people who were just like him. Their delight in combat and carnage was identical and, as the battles raged on, Maleneth had found it harder to distinguish Gotrek from Korgan, Skromm

or any of the other duardin. The fighting had been messy and undignified. After the first few encounters she had withdrawn, unable to revel in the kills – such a crude, leering fight was beneath the Lord of Murder and she watched the final parts of the battle from a distance, muttering curses as the Fyreslayers rallied around Gotrek, following his every move and attempting to imitate his archaic manner of speech.

What am I doing here? she thought, as drunks milled around her, belching and roaring drinking songs or spewing smoke from tobacco pipes. The feast had been going on for so many hours Maleneth felt like she had never been anywhere else, other than this reeking, noisy hall. Platters of meat, bread and cheese were carried constantly to the table but, by this point, the Fyreslayers were so drunk that the food was being used mostly as ammunition, hurled through the air as the duardin re-enacted key moments of the battles with legs of meat or teetering, beer-drenched pies. Skromm was sitting to her left but he had not moved for the last hour. He had slumped forwards and his face was lying in his plate of food. Only the occasional snort gave any indication that he had not drowned in meat broth.

Gotrek had been seated in a place of honour, at Thurgyn's side. The two had been inseparable since the runesons' funeral. The runefather had shrugged off his illness and grief, and clearly held Gotrek responsible. Gotrek, meanwhile, had been so impressed by Thurgyn's rune-fuelled violence that he had adopted the runefather as a worthy battle-brother. In the fights with the greenskins, they had fought side by side, Thurgyn's runes blazing as he matched Gotrek blow for blow, his strength growing with every fight. Now Thurgyn had his arm slung over Gotrek's massive shoulders and they were plotting like old friends, jabbing at a beer-sodden map of the Spiral Crux. They had spent the last hour discussing an ancient duardin kingdom called the Khazalid Empire. One of the Fyreslayer bards had mentioned it in a booming, interminable ballad and Gotrek had demanded to hear more. When Thurgyn revealed that the ruined capital, Karaz-a-Zaruk, lay to the north of Karag-Varr, Gotrek looked like a miser who had discovered a lost coin. Maleneth forced herself to try and follow the tedious conversation. The Khazalid Empire was one of Gotrek's obsessions and she had a suspicion she would be hearing more about Karaz-a-Zaruk. The ancient, abandoned capital of a duardin empire was exactly the kind of thing to entice him into another fool's errand. For a while, the

two old warriors were engrossed in the map, but as they grew drunker, it went forgotten, buried under plates of food as their conversation devolved into bawdy jokes and slurred singing.

‘Entering the keep through the sewers was a genius idea!’ laughed Thurgyn, slapping Gotrek on the back. ‘I’ll never forget the look on their faces when we charged from those drains.’

‘Aye,’ slurred Gotrek. ‘It reminded me of the time I worked as a sewerjack under Nuln, hunting ratmen with Felix.’ He laughed incredulously. ‘Turned out they were in cahoots with the bloody secret police.’

Maleneth was sure that no one in the hall had the faintest idea what Gotrek was talking about, but they all paused to listen as he began relaying another one of his rambling, fantastical anecdotes, punctuating the story with wild lunges of his axe and rattling burps. Maleneth had heard the tale countless times and knew how Gotrek would spit and curse when he came to the part concerning a skaven called Thanquol.

The sounds of merriment died away as the Varrukh listened to Gotrek, staring in wonder as he warmed to his theme, climbing up onto the table and trampling through their feast as he acted out his story. As Maleneth studied their rapt faces, she felt the same chill she had felt in Karag-Wyr. The same crushing sense of being dragged in Gotrek’s wake. *I will not become like them, she thought. I will not worship him. I will not be subsumed by him. I’m not going to become a footnote in his story.*

What choice do you have? Her former mistress was clearly amused by Maleneth’s predicament. ***You murdered a damned witch hunter. The order will already know about it. They’ll be devising especially creative ways to execute you. The Slayer is your only chance of staying alive. If you’re not Gotrek’s footnote, you’re just another dead aelf.***

There was a cheer as Gotrek illustrated part of his story by kicking the orruk chieftain’s head down the length of the table.

No, thought Maleneth. That’s not true. I still have options. How would the order know it was me who killed Drymuss? He was travelling alone through the Spiral Crux. Chamon is as dangerous as any other realm. There’s nothing to say I’m the one who killed him.

Apart from the fact that he came looking for you, a renowned poisoner, and was then poisoned.

He was killed by a tincture he was carrying on his person. Any band of

wandering brigands could have done that to him.

The order aren't stupid. Of course they'll know it was you. Besides, even if they didn't, it makes no difference. If you leave the Slayer, you leave the rune. And if you abandon the rune, you're dead anyway. Do you think the order will tolerate failure? Do you think they will be sympathetic to your change of heart? Your commission was to get Blackhammer's Master Rune to Azyr. Or failing that, get Gotrek to Azyr. Fail to do one of those things and they will want you dead.

Khaine will preserve me. Think of the kills I have made in his name. Think of the tributes I have offered him. I do not need to stay with this drunken boor, acting like another doe-eyed lackey, pretending to be like his beloved Felix.

He's important, you said. He's the one who can make a difference. Her mistress sounded as scornful as ever, but Maleneth sensed that she, too, was unsure of the right path.

He is important, she thought. But look at him. He has this entire Fyreslayer lodge in the palm of his hand. They've known him a matter of days and they'd fight to the death for him. If Gotrek really is destined to achieve some great victory against Chaos, he doesn't need my help to get there.

Then what will you do? You can't return to Azyr without that rune. That was your only chance. Your crimes will not have been forgotten.

'I will pray to Khaine,' she whispered, suddenly full of conviction. She gripped the knives at her belt, realising that everything was far simpler than she had imagined. The Slayer was such a garish distraction that he had blinded her to the obvious truth. *I will pray with steel and blood, just as I've always done. And I will lead my own life.*

She paused, waiting to hear her mistress' reply, but none came. She stood and pushed her huge, heavy chair back from the table.

Gotrek was still staggering through the plates of food, relaying his ridiculous story of rat-filled sewers and a treacherous human called von Haldstadt. 'The manling,' he said, over and over, ending almost every sentence with a mention of the human who had accompanied him before Maleneth. The human who died because of his devotion to Gotrek.

'No,' whispered Maleneth, growing angrier and more determined by the moment. She left the table and shoved her way through the crush of drunk,

stumbling Fyreslayers.

The entire Varrukh lodge seemed to have crowded into the hall and it took her several unpleasant minutes to shove her way through the singing, beer-slick mob until she could reach the anvil-shaped doors. She paused at the threshold and looked back. To her surprise, Gotrek paused his anecdote and stumbled to a halt, looking directly at her through the fug of pipe smoke. His expression darkened. For a moment she thought he had guessed her intentions and was about to call out to her. But then he let out a deep, rattling belch and resumed staggering around the table, continuing his ratmen story.

She watched him for a moment then shook her head in despair and headed through the door. It led out into a series of vast, pillared corridors, cut deep in the walls of the volcano and veined with so much magma that her skin burned as she strode through the darkness, crossing hallways and sprinting up long, winding stairs. Gotrek's infuriating, boastful tale was echoing round her head as she climbed up through the gloom.

The keep looked like it was abandoned, with only the distant, echoing cheers from the feast revealing the truth. It felt odd to pass through such grand halls with no sign of guards or servants. Maleneth paused to look at a shrine to Grimnir, built around a colossal, golden statue of the Slayer God. It looked like a shrine to Gotrek. In fact, the whole place could have been a shrine to Gotrek.

Maleneth spat a curse and hurried on, heading up a final flight of steps and emerging from the tunnels into the slightly less oppressive atmosphere of the square. It was evening. She guessed there would probably be stars somewhere overhead but a shroud of smoke made it impossible to know either way. There were a few sentries up on the walls, looking sullen and aggrieved, no doubt because they were missing out on the celebrations below, but otherwise Maleneth was alone. She considered calling out and asking someone to let her out of the magmahold, but she held her tongue. She did not like the idea of asking for permission to leave, and the guards might well refuse in any case. The Fyreslayers had treated her with suspicion since she had arrived and rarely did anything she asked unless Gotrek was there to glare at them. Besides, she was an assassin. A lethal daughter of the Murder Temples. She did not need anyone's permission to leave a place.

Maleneth kept to the shadows around the edge of the square as she headed towards the entrance gates through which she and Gotrek had originally entered the keep. When she desired, she could move with a silence that heavy-footed Fyreslayers could barely comprehend. She padded through the gloom, pulling her hood down low as she reached a doorway just off to the side of the gates. She had spent several days in the magmahold, bored, when the Fyreslayers were performing funerary rites for their fallen runesons, and she had used the time wisely, leaving Skromm behind whenever she could to explore the fortress and learn some of its secrets. She slipped through the small, easy-to-miss doorway and ran silently up a spiral staircase that led to the walls above the gate. When she reached the top she hesitated, peering out onto the battlements. The nearest sentry was a hundred paces from her and looking in the opposite direction, leaning heavily on a magmapike.

Are you sure? Her mistress did not even attempt to sound sardonic this time. ***If Gotrek is significant, shouldn't we stay with him?***

No, admitted Maleneth, *I'm not sure*. But now that she had acted she was determined to keep going. Determined to break free. She had a dreadful feeling that it was now or never. *I will not become his prop. I will not become a name in his drunken anecdotes. I have a fate of my own*. She slipped from the shadows and crossed the wall, reaching the opposite side of the battlements. As she looked out over the edge, she was dazzled by the light of the lava-filled caldera. She was at the top of one of the fortress' enormous shoulders, clinging to a piece of Grimnir's ornate, mountain-sized armour. Her eyes streamed as she looked down to the bridge that spanned the lava. She was looking for a piece of guttering that she had identified when she was exploring the fortress. It was only a slender tube of metal, not strong enough to hold the weight of a duardin or a full-grown man, but she was light enough to crawl down on it and make a leap to a ledge further below. From there she would be able to drop down onto the bridge. The only problem was, she could not seem to find the piece of guttering. 'Where is it?' she muttered, wiping away more tears and squinting into the glare.

The harder she looked, the more blurred her vision became. She could not explain it. Then, as she rubbed furiously at her eyes, she noticed something else: the heat was dropping. At first, she thought it was just the breeze,

snatching away some of the volcanic heat, but then she realised there was also an odd smell – a damp, briny stink that was horribly familiar.

‘Idoneth,’ whispered Maleneth, backing away from the edge. She still had no clear memory of the last attack on Karag-Varr, but she knew it had been preceded by this smell. And this mist. Sure enough, as she backed away from the battlements, she saw tendrils of fog snaking over the metalwork, stretching towards her and pooling at her feet.

She clawed at her memory, trying to remember any details of what had happened before, but there was nothing – just Gotrek’s vague talk of sea monsters and snake-riding archers. ‘Blood of Khaine,’ she whispered, remembering that most of the Varrukh lodge were currently inebriated, down in their feast hall. ‘This is going to be a massacre. Even Gotrek’s drunk. I need to warn them. They need to lock the gates to the keep.’

I thought you were abandoning Gotrek to his fate? I thought you were done with him?

Maleneth laughed bitterly and waved at the fog pouring over the walls. ‘What would you have me do? Rush out there and take on the Idoneth all by myself? I’m skilled but I’m not fighting an entire army.’ She rushed along the wall, looking for one of the sentries as the mist overtook her, covering the battlements and streaming down into the square.

‘You!’ she cried, as a figure loomed out of the mist up ahead. ‘Sound the alarm!’ It was only as she came closer that she realised the dark shape could not be one of the Varrukh. It was drifting in the air, at about head height, coiling and uncoiling like a snake. She snatched her knives from her belt, approaching cautiously. The mist parted to reveal a long, slender shark, its brutal, arrow-shaped head covered in old scars. The creature was seven feet long and it rolled in the air as it saw her, fixing her with glossy black eyes. There was crimson mist around its mouth and one of the Varrukh sentries was lying on the ground beneath it, grasping feebly at a ragged mess that used to be his throat.

The shark studied Maleneth with cool indifference, then darted forwards, slicing through the blood.

Maleneth tried to sidestep the shark but the mist clung to her limbs, weighing her down as if she were moving through water. The shark hit her like a toppling wall. She staggered back, turning side-on and trying to raise her knives as pain exploded across her shoulder. Another cloud of red filled

the air as the shark rolled and savaged her arm.

She gasped, hammering a knife into the shark's eye. The shark bucked and rolled away, but she did not give it time to recover. She lunged after it, forcing her body through the heavy air, taking a stiletto from her belt and jamming it into the shark's other eye. The poisoned blade took immediate effect and the shark's face shrivelled and blackened, as though held against flames. The creature looped and then bolted away from her, vanishing into the blood-tinged mist.

Maleneth dropped down next to the wounded Fyreslayer and grabbed him by the shoulders, yelling into his slack-jawed face. 'I need to sound the alarm! How do I alert everyone?'

The sentry lolled weakly in her grip, his face horribly pale as blood billowed around him. 'The war-horn,' he managed to groan. 'Further down the wall.'

She dropped him to the flagstones and ran on through the mist, heading in the direction he had suggested. She had a peculiar sensation of *déjà vu* as she struggled to run. There was something dreamlike about fighting through such sluggish air. As she fought her way down the wall, her honed senses warned her that she was being followed. There were several shadows in the mist, keeping pace with her, and they were up high in the air, gliding silently in packs. 'More sharks,' she spat, infuriated by the absurdity of the situation. As the sharks swam closer, she began to make out their sleek silhouettes in more detail. They were at least as large as the one she had just blinded, perhaps larger, and she could already make out six heading towards her.

She halted, seeing a shape up ahead on the wall, then realised it was a group of Fyreslayer sentries. They were huddling together, back to back with their magmapikes raised. They tensed as they saw her approaching, then relaxed as they recognised her.

'This is no ordinary storm,' said the karl in charge as she reached them. 'This is aelf magic.'

'I know,' snorted Maleneth. 'I'm the one who explained that to your elders. We have to warn everyone. They're all drunk. They need to bar the doors to your buildings and stay down in the holds.'

The karl was about to reply when a silver-flighted arrow cut through the mist, landing neatly between his eyes. He fell in silence, his magmapike

clattering to the ground.

The Fyreslayers howled battle cries as aelven archers sprinted towards them. Arrows filled the air and the Varrukh fired their pikes, spewing lava at their foes. Some of the archers fell from their saddles, torn apart by the magma, but more were riding into view, loosing arrows with a speed that even Maleneth found impressive. She left the sentries and ran on along the wall. The din of fighting grew louder as more of the Varrukh rushed to join their comrades, spitting molten death at their fleet, shimmering attackers.

There it is, said Maleneth's dead mistress as a sentry tower loomed up ahead with a curved battle horn fixed to its roof.

Maleneth had already seen the spur of metal and ran along the wall towards it. There was another mauled Fyreslayer corpse by the door. The body was floating, drifting a few feet up from the floor, turning slowly in a cloud of blood. Maleneth leapt over it and ran through an open doorway into the tower. It consisted of a single, empty chamber and a spiral staircase that led up to the roof. As she ran into the room, Maleneth came face to face with the dead guard's killer. It was an aelf with bone-white skin. The warrior's top half was naked but his legs were encased in scalloped, shimmering armour. He was gripping a two-handed sword, curved and serrated like a shark's tooth. The aelf had smooth hollows where his eyes should have been, but his blindness did not hinder him. He swiped at Maleneth with the sword, aiming for her throat.

She parried with her knives, but the effort sent another stab of pain through her shoulder and she staggered back out onto the wall.

The aelf followed her into the mist, thrusting his blade at her stomach.

Maleneth arched her back and the sword sliced through empty air. Then she turned on her heel and brought her knives down towards the aelf's extended arm. The air robbed her of speed. The warrior dodged her attack, pirouetting and landing in a crouch facing her, looking infuriatingly confident.

Maleneth backed away and swapped one of her knives for a smaller blade clasped at her belt. The aelf watched her with calm disinterest as he stood erect and prepared to swing his sword, the blade of which was as long as Maleneth was tall. She hurled the knife at his face.

The aelf sneered, swinging his sword and easily knocking the blade away. Rather than clattering to the floor, Maleneth's knife exploded. The blade

was made of glass and the air rippled as it broke, releasing the toxins that had been trapped inside.

The aelf did not register the gas until he strode towards Maleneth, passing straight through it. Then he stumbled, a shocked expression on his face as his skin began to melt. He reached out for Maleneth but his legs collapsed beneath him, the bones bubbling beneath melting muscles.

Maleneth did not pause to watch him die. There was a time to savour her offerings to Khaine, but this was not it. She ran past the dissolving aelf, back into the tower and up the steps. She stepped out onto the roof with care, crouching low and looking around for Idoneth. There was no one there. The true attack had yet to begin. Her opponent must have been a scout. She could see the Varrukh sentries down on the wall, still firing magma into the mist. They were making a good show of it. Another one of them had fallen but they were surrounded by the charred remains of aelves and sea creatures. There were more Idoneth gliding over the battlements, arriving in larger numbers and riding the mist like surf, but they were all fixated on the group of duardin. No one was looking her way.

She rushed over to the brass horn. The thing was the size of a small building, covered in loops and curves and scored with intricate runes. There was almost certainly a correct way to play it but Maleneth simply found the mouthpiece and blew as hard as she could. The sound it emitted was disappointing. The fog muffled the note so that it sounded like a distant echo. It was so faint that Maleneth was sure it would not have travelled more than a few feet. She tried again, blowing hard enough to make her head spin, but it made no difference – all that emerged was a muted drone.

Maleneth cursed, slapping her palm against the mass of metal tubing. She thought again of the drunken mob in the feast hall. ‘This is a disaster. They’ll be butchered and they’ll be too drunk to even notice.’ She imagined the Slayer’s disdain if he could see her struggling to use the horn. *Feeble bloody aelf*, he’d say, before shoving her aside and showing her how to use the thing properly. Anger rushed through her, tearing from her throat as an outraged howl. The howl reverberated through the horn and produced a long, proud note. Maleneth laughed and backed away, staring at the convoluted instrument in disbelief. ‘How typical of Fyreslayers, making an instrument you have to yell at.’

She looked down into the mist that was filling the square. *But they’re all*

drunk, she thought. And they're singing. Will they have heard that?

Another droning sound cut through the fog. At first, Maleneth thought it might be the call of a leviathan, summoned by the Idoneth. But then an identical note pealed out from another direction and she realised it was another war-horn, answering hers. Sentries all around the walls of the magmahold were signalling the alarm. Unlike Maleneth, they held their notes, creating a proud, thundering chorus.

That should be loud enough even for Gotrek's thick skull.

'Perhaps,' muttered Maleneth. 'But I'd better make sure.' She ran back out of the tower, headed away from the embattled sentries and ran in the opposite direction along the wall, heading for a ladder that led back down into the square. As she descended, she sensed movement all around her as shapes knifed through the mist. She paused and looked around. The magmahold looked like a sinking ship, with ocean waves pouring over its gunwales. The mist crashed down over metal and stone, filling the air with spray and spume. But it was not the scale of the storm that surprised Maleneth, it was the size of the army that was riding it. Along with a myriad of sea creatures there was a host of aelves. Most were riding armoured, oversized eels, but others sat atop larger monsters. She saw turtles the size of siege engines, with harpoons and howdahs fixed to their backs. And there were sharks too, with whorls of armour fixed to their flanks and crowds of warriors riding them. In the distance was a much larger shape that she could not make out yet. 'So many,' she breathed as the vanguard flooded into the square.

This isn't an army, said her mistress. It's a nation.

Maleneth had to agree. She had accompanied Gotrek through countless warzones as they had crossed the Mortal Realms, but she could not recall seeing an invasion on this scale. She climbed quickly down the rest of the ladder and leapt the last dozen feet, rolling as she landed on the flagstones and running back towards the doors she had emerged from when she was planning on fleeing the magmahold.

The horns rose in pitch and more sentries emerged from guardhouses, hurling axes and firing magma. She ran past them towards the gates that led down into the lower levels of the keep. To her relief, she saw that a group of guards had already begun heaving them shut. The cloying air was slowing them down, but they were gradually swinging the slabs of metal towards

each other. She rushed to help, slapping her hands against the doors and throwing her weight against them. Some of the Fyreslayers gave her suspicious looks but none of them refused her aid, and with a rumble of cogs and hinges, the doors began to close.

Don't get yourself trapped out here! Make sure you're on the other side when these doors shut.

Maleneth nodded. The Fyreslayers, to their credit, were clearly not concerned with their own safety. They were going to trap themselves outside to preserve the sanctity of the magmahold. Maleneth had no such intention. She had not come all this way to die for a Fyreslayer castle, however grand it was. The doors were only a few feet from slamming shut and she readied herself to slip through the gap.

'Let the Slayer at 'em!' slurred a familiar voice as the doors suddenly jolted back towards her, pushed from the other side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Maleneth and the Fyreslayers were hurled back into the square as the doors flew open, and a crowd rushed out into the mist. Gotrek weaved into view, swinging his axe wildly, his face flushed with drink and his eye rolling. Korgan was at his side, along with Skromm and a mob of howling, red-faced Fyreslayers. Behind them, rushing up from the depths of the magmahold, came hundreds more of the Varrukh, all baying for blood as they followed Gotrek out into the square. They were all hopelessly drunk, bumping into each other and blinking as they struggled to focus. Behind them, she could see the runefather and his pike-wielding honour guard, jeering and bellowing and tripping over each other as they raced down a hallway.

‘Khaine preserve us,’ whispered Maleneth as the Fyreslayers spilled into the square. The crowds from the feast hall had been joined by the rest of the Varrukh. The whole lodge was abandoning the safety of their vaults, rushing from the tunnels with a roar of oaths and battle cries.

The horns rose to an even higher pitch as the musicians saw the rabble stumbling out to meet the aelven host. Maleneth had to roll clear to avoid being trampled as the Fyreslayers ran past her. The stink of alcohol was even stronger than the smell of the sea.

‘Gotrek!’ she howled, jumping to her feet and running over to him.

He had paused to survey the approaching host and turned to face her. It took him a moment to bring her into focus, but when he realised who she was, he grinned. ‘The aelf!’ He threw his arms around her and crushed her

in a fierce, breath-stealing embrace. 'I take back everything I just said about you.' He let go of her, gripped his axe and pointed it at the lines of aelves hurtling towards him. 'For Karaz-a-Karak!' he howled.

Behind him, hundreds of ragged voices echoed his cry. 'Karaz-a-Karak!' they roared, creating such a din that the very air seemed to shake. Maleneth stared at the Fyreslayers in amazement. They were rallying behind the Slayer like he was their runefather, calling out words they did not understand, and they were preparing to fight an army while so drunk they could barely stand. Never, in all her years of travelling with Gotrek, had she been so sure that she was in the wrong place, with people she could never understand.

'Khazuk!' grinned Gotrek, sprinting forwards into the lines of approaching aelves.

'Khazuk-ha!' roared the Fyreslayers, thundering after him.

Maleneth was jostled and shoved and carried forwards by the mob. All around her, the Varrukh were howling and twitching, waving axes and pikes as they raced after Gotrek. They were more like incensed pit fighters than an army and none of them could charge in a straight line, weaving and staggering as they spilled from the gates. Despite her revulsion, Maleneth's blood surged. It was madness. The ale-stewed Varrukh were lunging towards thousands of elegantly armoured aelves, riding shockingly fast steeds and cloaked in powerful sorcery. It was going to be a massacre. And still, Maleneth felt vigour flooding her muscles. Massacres were what she lived for. 'For the Bloody-Handed God!' she howled, leaping after Gotrek with Khaine's fury crashing in her pulse.

Gotrek was the first to meet the enemy. A noble had ridden ahead of the aelven lines, riding a fast-moving eel. He was wearing pearlescent battleplate, with a scalloped shield on his arm and a serrated falchion in his other hand. His face was hidden inside a crested helm, but his posture screamed arrogance and disdain. As he reached Gotrek, he stooped from his saddle, slashing his sword at Gotrek's face with such elegance and speed that even Maleneth would have struggled to dodge it.

Gotrek was horribly drunk. As he reached the aelf, he tripped, struggling not to drop his axe. Maleneth could barely bring herself to watch. But then, something incredible happened. Gotrek's gait was so erratic that the aelven noble missed his mark, slicing through the air as Gotrek staggered

sideways. Then with the grace of the hopelessly drunk, Gotrek righted himself and, with a fluid lurch, brought his axe up through the eel's neck. The blow was more accidental than skilful, but it neatly severed the eel's head.

The noble fell from his saddle as his steed dropped from the air. Then he vanished from view as the Varrukh lines crashed over him, howling and baying.

Across the square, sleek, silver-clad elegance collided with beer-stained, tattooed savagery. The battle cries ceased, replaced with the brutal crunch of weapons cutting bones and armour. Maleneth grinned as she hacked through the fighting, but a part of her mind remained calm enough to observe something incredible. As the Fyreslayers reeled and lurched, clumsy with drink, it actually seemed to help them. The elegant precision of the aelves was thrown by the unpredictable nature of their foe. The Fyreslayers could barely see straight, but that only made them more brutal. They fought like lunatics, convulsing and spitting, fighting with their heads and teeth as much as their weapons. Maleneth had never seen anything so brutal. Even greenskins had a style of combat that could be measured and countered, but the drunk Fyreslayers fought without reason, never making the same move twice.

The aelves tried to form battle lines and phalanxes, tried to give the fight some semblance of order, but it was like trying to corral a landslide. Everywhere Maleneth looked, crests of fiery hair were smashing through the Idoneth ranks. It was a slaughter, as she had predicted, but not a one-sided one. The Idoneth were being dragged from their steeds and hacked to pieces by Fyreslayers too deranged to realise they were mortally wounded. She saw a howling berserker, arrows embedded in his neck and chest, clamber up the fins of a turtle, flinging aelves from its howdah and staggering so clumsily away that no one could land a blow on him. By the time the Fyreslayer dropped to his knees, overcome by blood loss, the turtle was riderless and out of control, crashing through the lines of eel-riding nobles that surrounded it.

'Karaz-a-Karak!' thundered Gotrek, and Maleneth realised he was somewhere nearby. She lashed out with her knives, cutting down another aelf, then stepped back from the violence, trying to catch her breath and locate Gotrek. The Slayer had climbed up onto the shell of the giant turtle

Maleneth had seen earlier. The monster was now dead and lying at the heart of the square, crowds of combatants crashing against it as the fighting ebbed and flowed. Gotrek was staggering, looking drunker by the moment, waving his flaming axe as aelves sprinted up the sides of the shell, trying to land sword strikes on him. She fought through the crowd and clambered up onto the turtle's back, joining Gotrek with a storm of knife strikes.

'This is it!' roared Gotrek, staring wildly at her, his face drenched in blood. 'This is how to celebrate victory! Bloodshed and wrath! And another victory!'

Maleneth howled another prayer to Khaine and took her usual place at Gotrek's weaker side. She could see the runefather and the other lodge elders close by. Their magmadroths were stomping through the aelves, vomiting lava, adding clouds of black smoke to the sea mist. Thurgyn looked reborn. He was swaying in his saddle, laughing and singing as he fought, as drunk as all the other Fyreslayers and delighting in the mayhem. There was no trace of the illness and grief that had weighed on him for so long. Every now and then he looked over at Gotrek, dealing out death from the back of the turtle, and with every glance at the Slayer, Thurgyn seemed to grow in stature and wrath, smashing his latchkey axe back and forth and flinging butchered aelves through the air.

Wave after wave of Idoneth attacked, banking and diving on their monstrous steeds. But their clever tactics were useless. They were killing dozens of Fyreslayers but it gained them nothing and they were falling in equal numbers. It was a brutal mess. Smoke, blood and mist whirled around the square as warriors rose and fell, howling as they died. In the distance, she saw the large shape she had seen at the start of the battle. It was a truly enormous leviathan, as big as one of the statues that lined the square. There were dozens of Idoneth on its back as it coiled through the mist, tearing whole sections of the magmahold apart, hurling rubble onto the crowds below. Maleneth breathed deep, savouring the iron tang of blood. No one could survive this, but she found she was at peace with the idea. Khaine's hunger screamed through her muscles. She leapt into the scrum, laughing and howling.

CHAPTER THIRTY

‘A strange choice of meeting place,’ said Princess Arainn as she approached Eòrna. The princess was accompanied by her usual throng of self-absorbed nobles and they nodded in agreement, looking around at the towering walls of kelp that lined the road.

Eòrna studied the princess and her acolytes as they walked towards her, fascinated by them. For her whole life, Eòrna had been a restless wanderer, using the ancient routes of the Myrway to cross oceans and continents, always seeking stranger, more potent souls to claim. Her brother had made her a thrallmaster as a way to remove her from court but, in truth, it was the perfect role for her. Searching out new shores and races was what she lived for. And it was only now, after travelling for so long, and so far, that she could see how peculiar the Dromlech nobles truly were. Arainn and the other aristocrats were consumed by their petty games. They fell in and out of favour constantly and that ebb and flow of power was all they could think about. Arainn and her followers had not left the city for so long that they wore the most outlandish, impractical outfits. With no need to dress for war, they had turned themselves into walking ornaments, as luminous and contorted as the coral reefs that surrounded Dhruim-Ùrlar. Eòrna craved the isolation of the deeps as much as any of the Dromlech but, as she nodded her head in greeting, it occurred to her that there was a kind of madness to these people: they had forgotten that there was a world above the sea.

‘You must forgive me my eccentricities,’ she replied, smiling at the princess. ‘There is something I wish you to see.’ Eòrna knew that her

eccentricities would need no forgiving. There was nothing Princess Arainn and her coterie liked more than royal intrigue. They could sniff scandal like sharks on the trail of blood.

Arainn looked around at the narrow avenue. Since Dìolan had set off for Karag-Varr even the city's largest thoroughfares had emptied, but this winding, narrow route was particularly lonely. If it had not been for Torven's deepsight, Eòrna would never have found it and even now, as she studied the kelp fronds that surrounded it, she could tell it was moving, shifting into another position. In a day or two it would lead to a completely different destination and would be no use to her.

'Where does this path lead?' asked the princess. 'It is unfamiliar to me.'

Eòrna smiled, doing her best to play the part of an elegant courtier. 'Let me keep you in suspense a little longer. Another ten minutes' walk and you will recognise where you are.'

Arainn studied her with half-lidded eyes. For a worrying moment, Eòrna thought the princess might refuse to follow. For all her pride and affectation, Arainn was fiercely clever. As a child, Eòrna had been terrified of her. There was every chance that she might guess Eòrna was luring her into something dangerous. Curiosity got the better of the princess, however, and she smiled back. 'Then lead on, thrallmaster. With the Allmarach left empty, there is very little to entertain us at the moment. Until your brother returns with that duardin's head, things shall be very tedious.'

Eòrna gestured for her thralls to lead the way and the group walked on down the path, with Princess Arainn taking Eòrna's arm.

'Have you thought any more about what my brother said in his speech?' asked Eòrna.

There was a pause as the princess considered the question. 'I tried to speak with him about it, before he left.' Her tone was neutral. 'But he was too busy planning his attack on the Fyreslayers. He did not even appear at the ball, which I consider a poor show as it was a ball *he* was hosting.'

The princess had answered without answering, something she was expert at. Eòrna could understand her reasons. To speak openly against the king of Dhruim-Ùrlar was dangerous, even for a scion of the old regime. But Eòrna needed to push her. Whatever she thought of these peculiar old relics, they were her only chance of stopping her brother. Arainn, in particular, was the fulcrum on which Dromlech society pivoted. If she failed to win the

princess over to her cause, there would be no way to make a stand against Dìolan. Eòrna glanced back at the other nobles. They were so drenched in robes that they looked like waves of silt, fluttering down the path. ‘And how do you feel about a life in the uplands, marching to war with our Idoneth kin, prising the realms from Chaos?’

Arainn gave her a warning glance. ‘You have known me a long time, child. Did you really call me out here in the hope I would start denouncing your brother? The king’s plan is bold and surprising, and I am intrigued to see how it progresses. But for now, I have little else to say on the subject. When he returns to the city I shall insist he makes time to speak with me, and perhaps after that, when I know more, we can have the heated debate you so clearly desire.’

Eòrna battled her frustration and simply smiled. They had almost reached the end of the path and the princess would soon have something else to consider. The path widened as it turned a corner and led up to a pair of tall, beautifully wrought gates. They were built in the shape of a vast kraken, with the creature’s boiling, writhing limbs making up the bars of the gate. It was ancient and crumbling, but when new it must have been startlingly lifelike. There was blue light drifting through it from the other side and recognition flickered in Princess Arainn’s eyes.

‘The chorrileum?’ She approached the serpentine gates, shaking her head, and then gasped, staring at the kraken in shock. ‘The Briondal Gate.’ She stroked the dusty, pitted coral. ‘I have not seen this place since... since my father was alive.’ For a moment, her regal facade slipped. Naked emotion flashed across her face, transforming her. ‘So long ago. So much has changed.’ Her face grew rigid again but her voice was husky with grief. ‘It is a peculiar thing to have outlived one’s generation. Wonderful and tragic at the same time. So many people have left me since I last stood here.’

Eòrna’s pulse quickened. Perhaps her years playing politics at court had not been entirely wasted. Things were proceeding exactly as she had hoped. This was just how she had predicted the princess would react.

‘Our kin never leave us,’ said Eòrna. She nodded through the gates to the rippling lights beyond. ‘Not while we preserve the chorrileum. While it endures, our past will always be with us.’

The princess nodded and whispered a prayer. Eòrna had never seen such a visible display of emotion from her. ‘What made you think to show me

this?’ She sounded genuinely moved. ‘I appreciate it more than you can imagine, but I’m afraid it will not change my position on your politics.’ She leant close to Eòrna and whispered in her ear. ‘Do you understand why I have lived so long, child? Do you know why I have retained my place at court, even after my father was killed, when so many others were exiled or executed? Because I keep my opinions to myself. I side with everyone and no one. I am above the debate. It’s not that I don’t sympathise with you, Eòrna. But only a fool reveals their hand in Dhruim-Ùrlar. The people I knew and loved, the people who used to pass through these gates with me – they died because they lent their voice to a cause, because they chose a side.’

Eòrna nodded.

Arainn seemed on the verge of saying more, then shook her head and decided against it. She took a long, lingering look at the gates, then turned to leave.

‘There is one more thing to see,’ said Eòrna. ‘Inside the chorrileum.’

Arainn stroked the gate with a wistful look on her face. ‘I fail to see how you could surpass this. The Briondal Gate is famously reclusive. Lead on, child. I am intrigued.’

Eòrna’s thralls opened the gates and the group of nobles swept through, heading into the resting place of their ancestors. During her years of travelling, Eòrna had heard tales of the chorrileums maintained by other enclaves. They were all unique, no two taking the same shape. She had heard that some were underwater lakes – silvery pools that existed in deeps of the ocean, with shores and tides, even though they were surrounded by water. Others were no more than a gemstone in the hilt of a falchion or a crumbling statue of Mathlann, the Fallen God. But, whatever shape they took, Eòrna could not believe any of the other chorrileums were as beautiful as the one in Dhruim-Ùrlar. The souls of the Dromlech dead resided in a drifting forest: clouds of barbed, transparent spheres, each the size of an aelven skull and formed of glittering gossamer. The spheres floated in clusters or swayed in vast, interlinked chains and they were all luminous, flashing brighter when disturbed by currents or passers-by. Passers-by were rare in the chorrileum, however. It was the most sacred of all the holy places in Dhruim-Ùrlar. A priceless treasure, containing not just the souls of the Dromlech ancestors but also the souls of lesser races that had been

captured and would eventually be used to prolong the life of namarti half-souls such as Eòrna's thralls. Entry to this sacred glade was only permitted to the soul wardens of the Isharann and nobles who had been granted permission to visit the ghosts of their fallen kin.

Eòrna, Arainn and the rest of the nobles advanced slowly, taking in the grandeur of the scene. Eòrna always felt a peculiar mixture of emotions when she saw the chorrileum. To see the numberless dead was humbling and, in some ways, terrible; but it was also inspiring to see so much wisdom and experience, preserved for the good of the enclave. As the barbed spheres glided above them, spilling their light and throwing shadows, voices drifted through the air. The chorrileum was filled with a gentle chorus: whispered prayers and hymns that ebbed and flowed with the swaying of the spheres. It was the music of the dead; they were singing in praise of their haven and sending prayers of strength and hope to the living. Eòrna could easily have been overwhelmed by the beauty of it, but she kept her purpose in mind, conscious she might not have long.

Under normal circumstances, guards would have challenged them the moment they entered, but the path was deserted. Once again, Torven had proved himself to be invaluable. It was he who had told Eòrna that the Briondal Gate still existed, even though most people thought it long gone. Torven had pointed out that the forgotten gate rarely approached the chorrileum and was unlikely to be guarded. As soon as he mentioned it, Eòrna had grasped at the idea, remembering that the princess had often mentioned the gate, citing it as a treasured memory from her youth. The path would not be deserted for long, however – they would be discovered eventually – so Eòrna nodded to her thralls, giving them a subtle signal. They vanished from view, disappearing beneath the drifting lights.

Arainn and the members of her entourage were too absorbed in admiring the chorrileum to notice the thralls leaving. Eòrna gave them a while to enjoy the sanctity and peace, and then gently took Arainn's arm. 'Come, this is not what I wanted you to see. There is something else. Something further inside.'

Arainn nodded and allowed Eòrna to lead the group at a quicker pace, following the tortuous loops of the path. They continued in silence for another ten minutes and Eòrna resisted the urge to cry out when she saw her destination up ahead. They had almost made it. She turned left at a fork in

the path and led the nobles up a gentle incline.

‘This is familiar, too,’ said Princess Arainn, frowning and looking around at the lights. ‘I have been here before. I remember—’

‘Halt!’ cried a stern voice as a group of guards rushed into view. They were clad in the ceremonial armour worn by all guardians of the chorrileum and were armed with *helsabres* identical to Eòrna’s. She counted twelve of them as they ran down the path, drawing their swords.

‘Put your weapons away,’ said Arainn in an outraged tone, glaring at the soldiers in disbelief. ‘How dare you? You know perfectly well who I am.’

‘Your highness,’ said the leader, looking deeply uncomfortable. ‘Of course I know you. I... Well... Under any normal circumstances I would be honoured to escort you through the chorrileum, but I must insist that you leave immediately.’ He glanced at Eòrna. ‘All of you.’

Veins of colour spidered across Arainn’s bone-white cheeks. ‘I have *never* been spoken to like this. I shall see you put in—’

Her words were cut off by a flight of arrows that whistled from beneath the floating spheres. While the princess was talking, Eòrna had given another signal to her hidden thralls, and their carefully aimed arrows sank neatly through the eye slits of the guards’ helmets. The guards clattered to the ground, every one of them dead.

Arainn stared at the corpses in shock. Then the princess noticed that Eòrna did not look surprised and her eyes widened. ‘What have you done?’ Her voice was trembling with rage.

‘I have saved us,’ said Eòrna, as her archers emerged from their hiding places and gathered on the path.

Arainn’s companions were all wide-eyed with horror, mouthing silent curses and shaking their heads, but the princess strode towards Eòrna, her expression thunderous. ‘You have damned yourself.’ She paced back and forth, shaking her head. ‘But you will not take me down with you. I will not join you in this madness. Whatever you’re planning, I am *not* part of it.’

‘You already are,’ said Eòrna, ‘whether you like it or not. You were seen coming here, with me and my thralls. You know we are not permitted to enter the chorrileum without the permission of the soul wardens.’ She gestured at the corpses on the path. ‘And who will believe that you weren’t part of this?’

‘Why?’ gasped the princess, aghast. ‘Why would you do this to me? You

know I would never be involved in any kind of...’ She grimaced, as though tasting something bitter. ‘In any kind of insurrection.’

‘Do you know why this place is familiar?’ asked Eòrna.

‘What?’ Arainn spat the word. She was transformed. Eòrna had never seen her like this. All her elegance and pride had fallen away. She looked like a cornered animal, ready to lash out. She looked up the path. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your ancestors,’ said Eòrna. ‘Your friends. Your lovers. They are all here. Or, at least they were.’

Arainn looked like she might scream. ‘What in the name of the gods are you talking about?’

‘Take a look.’

Arainn looked at the other nobles. Her face was contorting and twitching. Eòrna could guess what she was thinking. Should she order the other nobles to attack? That might give some credence to her claim that she was not working with Eòrna. Or should she simply flee and deny she was ever here? But the princess’ eyes kept returning to the path ahead, and the place where she used to visit her ancestors. Eòrna could see the recognition in her eyes. She had sowed enough doubt that the princess could not leave without taking a few steps more.

‘You will pay for this,’ hissed the princess as she strode up the path. The moment she reached the brow of the hill she stopped. She stepped backwards, shaking her head and staring at what lay on the other side of the slope. Then she collapsed in silence, folding to the ground.

Her companions cried out in dismay and ran towards her. When they reached the top of the slope they gasped and some of them fell to their knees as others gathered around the fallen princess, helping her to sit.

Eòrna followed slowly. She had already seen what her brother had inflicted on the chorrileum, but only dimly, in Torven’s cave. She braced herself, but even so, when she reached the brow of the hill, she struggled not to do as the princess had done and topple to the ground. Screened from the larger paths, a broad swathe of the chorrileum had been butchered. The luminous spheres had been cut from their tendrils and were now lying on the ground, grey and lifeless, like heaps of flayed skin. Eòrna shook her head and tears sprang to her eyes. The vision in Torven’s cave had not revealed the extent of the destruction, nor conveyed the horror of it.

Thousands of souls had been cut from their place of rest. Nausea rushed through Eòrna as she forced herself to take in the magnitude of her brother's treachery.

She realised that Princess Arainn was looking up at her, dazed. 'You... you are shocked by this... Why did you bring me here if you did not know about it?'

'I knew.' Eòrna sat down next to Arainn on the ground. 'But I had not seen it with my own eyes. I did not know how many he had taken.'

The princess' voice was hollow. 'Did he really do this? Your brother? Did Dìolan do this to his own people?'

Eòrna nodded. Even now, after everything she had learned, it pained her to admit that this was his doing. 'This is how he will harness Gotrek Gurnisson's soul. Thallacrom is going to use the souls as fuel for a rite. He has summoned an Eidolon of unusual power, and when he feeds Gotrek's soul to it, it will change everything about us. It will transform us beyond recognition. But to create the Eidolon, Thallacrom had to commit this appalling crime. And this is not all of it.' She gestured to the lights bobbing in the distance. 'There are many parts of the chorrileum that look like this now.'

'Fuel?' Arainn shook her head. 'There is no way to repair this. No way to retrieve what he has taken. It is inconceivable. He has robbed us of our past. He has betrayed our families.'

For a long time they sat there, unable to speak. Then Arainn took Eòrna's hand, and squeezed it, her eyes still glistening with tears. 'I am with you, child,' she said, her voice hoarse. 'Tell me what you need.'

Eòrna nodded. This was what she had hoped for. It should have felt like a triumph, but surrounded by such desecration, the most she could feel was relief.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

‘It’s like clutching at smoke!’ King Dìolan’s deepmare bucked and struggled beneath him as he tried to advance. His battalions were doing exactly as he had ordered: the Akhelian Guard were diving in from the east and west, their eels cutting into the Fyreslayer flanks as the namarti half-souls met them head-on, charging at the Varrukh in fast-moving lines. But his carefully planned tactics were useless. The Fyreslayers were a shambles. They moved in such nonsensical, unpredictable surges that the namarti kept floundering, unsure which way to advance, and the Akhelian Guard found themselves attacking flanks that no longer existed, faltering and slowing as they charged into empty spaces. The Fyreslayers were too outnumbered to drive the aelves back, but the battle was deadlocked. Neither side could gain any ground. And the resultant slaughter was dreadful to see.

‘Why don’t they care?’ said Thallacrom, reining in his steed at the king’s side. The priest was looking at the massacre in disbelief. ‘Look how many warriors they’re losing. Why are they all laughing?’

‘They’re drunk,’ said Dìolan.

‘Drunk?’ Thallacrom stared in disbelief.

Dìolan sat stiffly in his saddle as aelven warriors surged past him. Cold hate burned in his chest. ‘After all I’ve done. All we’ve sacrificed. I am faced with this... this *mess*.’ He thought of the chorrileum. Of the spirits he had severed. The great crime he had committed. In the light of everything he had done, the senseless behaviour of the Fyreslayers seemed like a personal insult.

He maintained his composure and turned to one of his guards. ‘Release the kharibdyss. Let these fools see the power we have at our disposal.’

Orders were yelled and Dìolan smiled as he heard the distant sounds of the kharibdyss thrashing against its restraints. It was a true monster that had grown far beyond the natural size of its kind, feeding on other monsters in the deepest, most hidden trenches of the ocean. Dìolan turned to Thallacrom. ‘Tidecaster. Show them the fury of the storm.’

Thallacrom nodded in approval, gripping his stave. ‘Highness.’ He steered his fangmora eel on, across the advancing lines of namarti until he had almost reached the bewildering chaos of the front lines. Then he held the staff aloft and called into the whirling banks of mist, beginning an incantation. The miasma turned around him like the hub of a great wheel, and a tempest whipped up from the ground.

Dìolan’s rage eased as he watched the display. Thallacrom’s might as a tidecaster was unsurpassed. The ethertide roared over the walls of Karag-Varr, ripping metal and stone from the battlements and shaking statues from pedestals. The currents drove the namarti infantry onwards and they started to regroup, regaining some semblance of order. But when the waves hit the Fyreslayers, it had the opposite effect, driving them back, hitting them like a physical sea. Dìolan rode forwards and raised his sword. ‘Show the drunken scum who we are.’

He had not ridden far when the battle was snatched away from him, replaced by a vision of a raging sea. It was not the furious etherstorm summoned by Thallacrom, but a real sea that had nothing to do with the battle for Karag-Varr. As Dìolan watched the waves, they smashed the strange ship he had seen days earlier, when he was still in Dhruim-Ûrlar. As the vessel collapsed, its Sigmarite banners snatched up into the tornado, he felt a rush of dizzying power and triumph.

WE ARE ONE.

The voice hit Dìolan like a wave.

Then the sea vanished and Dìolan was back in Karag-Varr, watching Thallacrom destroy the Fyreslayer lines. Dìolan shook his head and rode towards Thallacrom, trying to rid himself of the peculiar vision. He had been plagued by them since his encounter with the Eidolon but he had told no one. He would accept no more delays.

As Dìolan approached Thallacrom, a Fyreslayer cleaved his way through

the lines of namarti, making straight for him. He was carrying a flaming axe in both hands and there were runes blazing in his biceps. Unlike most of the Fyreslayers, who were squat but lean, this warrior had a sagging gut and was as broad as a barrel. He also had a circle of stitches tattooed around his neck, as though daring someone to try and behead him. The namarti tried to stop him reaching their king, but the Fyreslayer was running in such an unstable manner that they could not land a blow on him. Swords and arrows swiped past him as he stumbled, hacking as he ran.

Dìolan was transfixed, unable to comprehend a society that could produce such an appalling person. The Fyreslayer's beard was an explosion of greasy, wiry hair, matted with blood and pieces of food. His crest had been slicked with beer and animal fat, and half his teeth were missing. His nose had been broken so many times it looked like the angular rune on his helmet. But it was his demeanour that truly sickened Dìolan. War was a sacred endeavour, to be revered and respected. But the fat Fyreslayer was laughing and singing as he fought. He beheaded a namarti thrall, punched a second in the groin, then swaggered forwards. The ranks of namarti swordsmen formed a line to meet him but the Fyreslayer was not as inebriated as he looked. At the last moment, he changed direction, rolled into an open space and leapt at Dìolan, howling as he swung his axes.

Dìolan parried but the Fyreslayer's weight threw him from his saddle and they both crashed into the mounds of dead. The Fyreslayer's filthy beard engulfed his features, and a reek of stale beer filled Dìolan's nostrils as his attacker roared incoherently into his face.

Then the Fyreslayer vanished, replaced by a savage storm and the prow of a ship, looming over him. Wonderful strength rushed through Dìolan and he rose to his feet, gripping the howling Fyreslayer by the neck as he stood, tightening his grip.

There was a dry crunching sound as Dìolan crushed his attacker's throat. The battle rushed back into view and he saw the Fyreslayer's face, just an inch from his, grinning maniacally. It took Dìolan a moment to realise the Fyreslayer was dead, his feet hanging above the ground and his head lolling at an unnatural angle. Dìolan hurled the corpse away and looked around, sword raised, expecting another attack. There were only namarti thralls nearby. They had formed a circle around him and were holding back the mobs of Fyreslayers. He had no time to try and understand what was

happening to him. He had formed a bond with the Eidolon but it was aiding him rather than hindering him so he did not question it any further. He looked around for his steed and saw that the deepmare was a few feet away, tearing into a group of Fyreslayers, gouging them with the horn that jutted from its brow. He rushed to aid the creature, felling the last of the Fyreslayers, then leapt into her saddle and looked out across the battlefield.

Dìolan had expected to see a scene of victory. When he had last looked, Thallacrom had been in the process of summoning a storm to crush their enemies. But the storm had vanished. Thallacrom was still in the same spot, surrounded by eel-riding nobles, but the old priest was now bathed in flames. It was no ordinary fire. As Dìolan rode closer, he saw that the flames had limbs, tails and talons, and they were savaging Thallacrom. They looked like wingless dragons and were wrapping themselves around Thallacrom as he howled and waved his stave, trying to fend them off.

‘No,’ whispered Dìolan. ‘This will not happen.’ If Thallacrom were to die, all of this would have been for nothing. The sorcery that was giving the Eidolon life came from Thallacrom. If he died, the Eidolon would be extinguished.

Dìolan followed the lines of fire to their source: a Fyreslayer who was wearing a scaled cloak and an ornate triple-crested helmet with a mask that completely covered his face. In one hand he was gripping a brazier axe, but the flames came from a rune he was clutching in his other hand. Dìolan rode with all the speed and fury he could muster, whispering curses as he soared over the battlefield. As he rode, he saw the storm-lashed sea again, but this time it was overlaid on top of the battle for Karag-Varr, merging into a seamless torrent of waves and surging battle lines.

I AM WITH YOU.

The voice of the Eidolon gave Dìolan such a surge of strength that he stood in his saddle, holding his sword aloft as the deepmare hurtled towards the masked Fyreslayer. As he raised the sword, the waves from his vision became waves in Karag-Varr. The sorcery that Thallacrom wielded was now pouring from Dìolan and, using nothing more than his will, he directed it at the Fyreslayer.

There was a thunderclap as the etherstorm collided with the masked Fyreslayer. A column of water rose from the battle and a tremor rippled across the square, causing aelves and Fyreslayers alike to stumble and fall.

The glare was so bright that, for a few seconds, Dìolan rode blind, trusting to the instincts of the deepmare. When his vision cleared, he allowed himself a small smile. The masked Fyreslayer was dead, cast onto the ground by the force of the blast, his body broken and his rune knocked from his grip, lying inert a few feet away. The surrounding Fyreslayers were already leaping back to their feet, too drunk to register the loss of their priest, smashing back into the lines of aelves, but Dìolan sensed that the battle was now turning in his favour. The power of the Eidolon was inside him. He carried the spirits of the Dromlech. He could wield his fallen ancestors like a weapon. The memory of the chorrileum reminded him of Thallacrom and he turned his steed away from the enemy lines, searching for the priest. Thallacrom was not visible but then Dìolan saw other Isharann priests congregating at the feet of a statue, near the fortress wall, and he guessed that was where he would find him.

‘What did you do?’ gasped Thallacrom, trying to sit as he saw his king riding towards him. ‘You are not Isharann. How was that possible? How did you harness the ethersea?’

Dìolan dropped from his steed and rushed to Thallacrom, helping him stand. ‘The Eidolon is in me, Thallacrom. It is speaking to me. It acted through me.’

Thallacrom stared at him in disbelief. ‘Yes,’ he murmured. ‘I feel it. You are bonded somehow.’ He gripped Dìolan’s shoulders. ‘This is incredible. You can use the force of the Eidolon against them. Their antics won’t save them from that.’

Dìolan shook his head. ‘I don’t know how. I’m not Isharann like you. I’m not a tidecaster. I don’t know how to control such power.’

Thallacrom thought for a moment, as the fighting raged around them. ‘Perhaps you don’t need to.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Perhaps we’re going about this all wrong. We are spending so many lives trying to take this fortress. I’m sure we will succeed eventually, but what will be left of us when we do? Half the citizens of Dhruim-Ûrlar will have died. How can we conquer the uplands if we sacrifice our whole army trying to capture Gotrek Gurnisson?’

‘But we need Gotrek. Sacrificing him and taking his soul is the only way to escape the curse. Isn’t that right?’

‘True. But do we need to conquer the whole Fyreslayer army to do that?’ He leant close to Dìolan, struggling to be heard over the din of the battle. ‘The power of the Eidolon is in you. And I can harness it. If we can get you close to Gotrek, I can use the might of the Eidolon to snatch Gotrek away and anchor him in Dhruim-Ûrlar. We wouldn’t need to conquer the whole keep. We could simply use the Eidolon’s power to take the Fyreslayer. Then, once we have sacrificed him, and we have an army of pure-soul nobles’ – his eyes flashed – ‘we will be unstoppable.’

‘But the Eidolon is not yet fully born. Is it safe to drain its power like that?’

‘It might set us back a few days, maybe more. But if we fail to capture Gotrek Gurnisson then the Eidolon is no use anyway.’

Dìolan could still see glimpses of the phantom sea, superimposed over the battle. Everything was liquid and mobile. Even Thallacrom’s face was hard to make out clearly. But he could hear the conviction in the priest’s voice. He did not profess to understand all of what Thallacrom said, but he trusted him completely. He looked around, trying to focus on his surroundings. They were encircled by a battalion of his finest guards fighting with silent grace, holding back the Fyreslayer berserkers who were trying to reach Dìolan and Thallacrom. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘If we take these guards we can cut a path to Gotrek. My plan was to turn them on the Fyreslayer king, to behead their army, but we can use them to reach Gotrek instead. The duardin are so deranged I doubt they’ll even notice us moving towards a specific target. And, from what I have seen of Gotrek, even if he *does* notice, he would relish a chance to get near us.’ He looked at Thallacrom’s pained expression. ‘You must stay here though. We can’t risk losing you. Without you, the whole thing will have been for nothing.’

Thallacrom shook his head. ‘I need to be with you when you reach Gotrek. I must be nearby to perform the rite.’

Dìolan leapt back into his saddle and reached down for Thallacrom, hauling him up onto the deepmare. ‘Akhelians!’ he cried, causing the Idoneth nobles to regroup and gather round him, their steeds writhing and sparking. ‘The fate of the Dromlech is in our hands! And the fate of the very realms. I have to cross this battlefield. And whatever the Fyreslayers throw at us, I must not be stopped.’

‘For Dhruim-Ûrlar!’ cried the warriors, raising their volt-spears and

casting shards of electricity through the mist.

‘For Dhruim-Ùrlar!’ roared Dìolan. Then he kicked the deepmare into motion, sending it hurtling back into the fray.

The guards formed a spearhead around him, not caring who they cast aside. One of them raised a conch and let out a long note of triumph, and Dìolan’s blood surged in response. He lashed out with his falchion as he rode, but he refused to be overwhelmed by the fervour that was consuming him. He was determined that, in every strike and thrust, he would illustrate the difference between the Dromlech and the savagery of the lesser races.

He spotted Gotrek fighting near the gates that led out of the square, but even then he remained calm, ordering his guards in that direction with a cool, clear command. Gotrek was halfway up some steps that led to the battlements, roaring like an animal as he kicked and chopped at namarti thralls. There was a mound of aelven bodies around him and a crowd of Fyreslayers was rushing to join him, howling battle cries in their crude, duardin tongue.

Reaching Gotrek meant charging into the thickest crush of bodies, and as they reached the centre of the square, Dìolan’s guards became mired in a thicket of axes and swords. There were now so many corpses that the combatants were stumbling over their fallen comrades and even the Varrukh berserkers were starting to show signs of exhaustion.

As Dìolan struggled to fight through the impasse, he saw mounds of fallen aelves, their armour ruptured and limbs shattered, blood pouring from their wounds, dark and shocking against their pale skin. In all the Dromlech campaigns he had never heard of such appalling carnage. And many of the dead were pure-souls. Those precious, noble individuals who were gifted so rarely to Idoneth mothers. ‘This has to work,’ he whispered.

‘It will,’ gasped Thallacrom in his ear. He sounded like he was struggling to breathe but there was no trace of doubt in his voice. ‘Just get to Gotrek. As soon as we drag him back to Dhruim-Ùrlar this can all cease. I will summon the ethertide. I will carry our battalions home. Just reach Gotrek.’

Dìolan stared at the piles of dead, resolve tightening in his stomach. He yanked the reins and left his guards behind, gliding away from the crush and racing towards the wall where Gotrek was butchering thralls.

The deepmare rolled to the left, almost throwing its riders from the saddle. Heat washed over Dìolan’s face as magma tore through the air, missing him

by inches thanks to the instincts of the creature. He raised his shield just in time to deflect a second barrage. The deepmare screamed in pain, struggling to right itself. Then it thrashed its tails and turned to face a row of Fyreslayers. They looked as drunk as the berserkers but, rather than axes, they were gripping pikes that were trailing smoke.

‘Your people had their chance!’ cried Dìolan, pointing his falchion at them. ‘And you failed the realms!’

The Fyreslayers showed no sign they could understand him and prepared to fire again.

Thallacrom wheezed an incantation and jabbed his narwhal tusk at them. A column of spume rose from the mounds of dead, lifting the Fyreslayers off their feet and hurling them backwards. They fired as they fell, but the magma spewed uselessly up into the clouds of smoke.

Dìolan rode at them with a curse, and as they thudded back onto the corpses, he sent the Fyreslayers to their ancestors, removing their heads in a flurry of perfectly placed cuts. Then he yanked the reins again and turned back to face Gotrek, pressing on through the battle.

Fyreslayers staggered towards him as he rode on, shouting and hurling axes at him. Gotrek was only moments away but Dìolan’s steed was badly wounded. The Fyreslayers had burned holes through her flank and she was gulping and listing as she swam on, struggling to move with any speed.

‘You have to reach him!’ said Thallacrom, but the more Dìolan yanked the reins, the more his deepmare struggled.

A deafening boom shook the square, like a seismic tremor, and pieces of wall whistled down, smashing into buildings and warriors. The air was so thick with mist that it took a moment for Dìolan to locate the source of the explosion. The kharibdyss was tearing across the square – an enormous, five-headed serpent that lashed through the battle, devouring aelves and Fyreslayers in a frenzy, gouging a path into the crowd. ‘Thallacrom!’ cried Dìolan. ‘It’s attacking our own troops. What’s happening?’

Thallacrom stared at the frenzied monster. ‘It’s because my strength is fading, highness. And if I use the little I have left to subdue the kharibdyss, I’ll be too weak to seize Gotrek Gurnisson.’

Dìolan scowled as he watched the leviathan wreaking havoc. ‘There’ll be nothing left of us if that creature isn’t called to heel.’

‘Then move quickly. Reach Gotrek and I can end this. All we need is him.’

The Slayer was still adding to his pile of dead aelves, creating almost as many corpses as the kharibdyss.

Dìolan tried to ride on, dealing out more sword strikes as he steered through the battle, but the deepmare gave a last, tormented howl and crashed to the ground, hurling Dìolan and Thallacrom from the saddle.

Fyreslayers rushed to attack but Dìolan drove them back with a storm of sword strikes, crying out in frustration as he saw that he was surrounded. He called out for support but none of his soldiers were anywhere near him.

Thallacrom fought at his side, using the tusk like a spear, still trying to save the vestiges of his power, but he looked worried. 'We can't cut through the whole army on foot.'

A cold horror threatened to overwhelm Dìolan but he drove it down. 'I will not fail,' he gasped, lunging and hacking at the Fyreslayers. 'I cannot fail!' He led Thallacrom up onto the corpse of the deepmare so they could look over the heads of the Fyreslayers. There were dozens of duardin between them and Gotrek and there was no way he could fight through all of them, but then he spotted Thurgyn, much closer by, and had an idea. The runefather was wounded and on foot, and there were very few Fyreslayers near him. 'Gotrek roused the runefather from his grief, is that right?'

Thallacrom smiled, seeing Thurgyn and guessing Dìolan's plan. 'They have become close friends.'

There was another thunderous boom as the kharibdyss crashed past them, writhing and hurling warriors through the air.

When the monster had passed, Dìolan nodded at Thallacrom. 'Let's see if we can get Gotrek's attention.'

Maleneth leapt clear as a section of wall crashed down towards her, sending metal and rock clattering across the ground. 'What in the name of Khaine is that thing?' she gasped, staggering clear of the rubble.

Gotrek was above her, balancing on a flight of steps as they tore loose from the wall. He swayed precariously for a moment then, as the steps gave way, dived into the battle, roaring and laughing. Bodies flew in every direction as Gotrek laid about himself, hacking and punching towards Maleneth. When he reached her, he paused for breath, grinning at the aelves who were scattered around him, limping and bleeding and grabbing weapons from the ground. 'We've got them on the run, lass,' he growled,

juggling his axe from one hand to the other, as happy as she had ever seen him.

Maleneth looked around at the battle. There were mounds of dead in every direction, both aelf and Fyreslayer. 'This doesn't look like victory to me,' she said.

'Rubbish!' Gotrek headbutted a nearby aelf and slammed his axe into another. 'We're slaughtering them.'

'Slaughtering aelves.' Maleneth shook her head, despatching another warrior with her knife. Her bloodlust began to fade. 'Slaughtering warriors we could have fought alongside, against the armies of Chaos.'

Gotrek frowned at her. Then he noticed something and shoved past her, climbing up on the rubble. 'No you bloody don't,' he muttered, his face turning pale.

'What is it?' demanded Maleneth, leaping up by his side. Not far from where they were standing, there was a clearing in the battle, a path of corpses produced by the passing of the kharibdyss. Standing alone, fighting for his life, was Thurgyn. The runefather had become separated from his Hearthguard and the king of the Idoneth was raining sword blows down on him. Thurgyn was clutching a wound in his side and struggling to wield his latchkey axe with one hand. He was cursing the aelven king as he fought, bellowing at him, but his strength was fading, his blows becoming weaker with every strike.

The aelven king paused and looked directly at Gotrek, giving him a cold smile. Then he sliced his sword through Thurgyn's neck. The runefather's head whirled through the air, leaving his headless corpse to topple.

'No!' howled Gotrek, leaping from the pile of rubble and careering through the battle, making straight for the Idoneth king. Maleneth struggled to keep up as he ploughed forwards, roaring at Thurgyn's killer. 'You will pay for that!' he cried, his voice cracking. 'By the Everpeak, I swear it!'

Maleneth had no doubt that Gotrek was right. The Slayer was now more like an animal than a duardin, ripping and clubbing his way through the aelves. Then she noticed something troubling. As Gotrek raced towards the Idoneth king, the aelf was waiting quite calmly for him. Rather than preparing to defend himself, he was leaning nonchalantly on his sword hilt, watching Gotrek with amused disdain as Thurgyn's blood pooled around his feet. Then Maleneth noticed the frail, stooped figure at his side. The

sorcerer was pointing a rune at Gotrek and speaking quickly. And as he spoke, the storm was swelling, turning overhead and snatching corpses from the ground as it rushed towards the Slayer.

‘Wait!’ she cried, but there was no way to make Gotrek hear. He continued barrelling through the crowd and had almost reached the Idoneth king.

Maleneth howled at him, filled with dread as the storm grew wilder, plunging the battle into darkness and sending warriors slamming into each other.

‘Gotrek!’ she cried again as the Slayer reached the king, but at that moment the storm grew so furious she was lifted from her feet, caught in a huge wave. She rolled and flailed and came face to face with a leviathan. The giant sea serpent was rushing towards her, its five cavernous maws opening wide.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Maleneth lay in the darkness, swaying gently back and forth. She had not been bred to enjoy idleness or to appreciate luxury but she was exhausted, and her body was so battered that she sank gratefully into the cushions and stretched her tired limbs, whispering a prayer to Khaine, thanking him for this unusual moment of respite. But as she lay there, savouring the peace, a sense of foreboding washed over her. Why was the floor moving? She shrugged off the feeling of calm. It was a lie. It had to be. She opened her eyes but it made no difference. She was in complete darkness. She could not remember her cell in Karag-Varr ever being so dark before. There was always an infernal glow, leaking through the walls and under the door. Veins of lava ran through the entire magmahold. The thought of lava made her realise something else: rather than furnace-like, the air was cool and damp. She thought back over the day, trying to remember what she had done before retiring to her room. She remembered the victory feast and her decision to desert Gotrek... And then everything came back: the Idoneth invasion and the subsequent carnage, and then, with a gasp, she remembered trying to save Gotrek, sprinting after him as he attacked the Idoneth king.

‘Not dead then,’ rumbled the Slayer.

The dark was too profound for her to make out his bulky frame, but his words came from close by. There was an odd rattle to his voice and she realised that he had been injured too.

‘Not dead,’ she agreed, wincing as she sat up. ‘And, for some reason, I can

remember the Idoneth this time. I can remember the battle. I wonder why?’ As she moved, she realised she was not lying on cushions but a mesh of shiny black strands. The whole floor was made up of segmented worms. They were cool and coated in a tacky substance, and some of them were attached to her skin, making sucking sounds. ‘Leeches!’ she hissed, picking them off. Fresh blood rushed from her skin where the worms had been attached.

‘Where are we?’ she asked, though, in truth, she was not sure she wanted to know. There was a dreadful smell in the room and it was different to the stench that usually surrounded Gotrek. It smelled like burned hair.

Gotrek shifted position, shuffling through the leeches towards her. There was a faint glow coming from the rune in his chest and she began to make out his face. He looked furious and Maleneth instantly recognised the stony look in his eye. He was in one of his black moods. Long, plump leeches were dangling from his chest and arms, feeding eagerly, but he did not seem to care.

‘Where are we?’ she repeated, looking around in horror. There were so many writhing worms that it looked like she was in a vat of bubbling oil.

Gotrek replied in a flat tone. ‘Eaten.’

‘Eaten?’ She looked at the leeches. ‘What are you talking about?’

He ignored her, muttering something unintelligible to the dark.

‘Gotrek!’ she snapped. ‘What in the name of the gods do you mean, *eaten?*’

He shrugged. ‘Last thing I saw was a big sea snake with too many heads. Big as a townhouse. I was about to crack one of its skulls when everything went dark.’ He nodded at the undulating floor. ‘This must be its guts. It must have eaten the leeches too.’

Maleneth had travelled through every imaginable kind of hell with the Slayer, she had seen things she would not have thought possible outside of nightmares, but to hear him blithely announce that they had been eaten was enough to make her want to scream. She resisted the urge and tried to match his unruffled tone. ‘So now you’re just sitting here, waiting to be digested, is that it?’

He said nothing for a moment. Then his lips curled back in a dreadful snarl. ‘I’ll tear him apart,’ he muttered. ‘On my oath, I’ll make him pay.’

Maleneth could easily guess who he was talking about. She had seen the

Idoneth noble who cut Thurgyn down. And she had seen the look in Gotrek's eye when it happened. 'And how exactly do you plan to avenge the runefather,' she demanded, 'if you're digested?'

There was a long silence.

'Damn you!' she spat, picking worms from her boots. 'You said you escaped the Realm of Chaos and the destruction of an entire world – surely you can cut your way out of a fish?'

'You try.'

She patted her belt and found, to her horror, that her knives were gone. Then she realised Gotrek's axe was also missing. 'Damn it,' she muttered. Then she shrugged. 'No matter. I'll get us out of here. It won't be the first time I've got us out of a mess.' She stood up. It was only when she was on her feet that she realised how many injuries she had sustained trying to reach Gotrek. She was nauseatingly light-headed and every inch of her seemed to be bruised or bleeding. She refused to let Gotrek know she was struggling, though, and walked carefully past him, looking for a wall. She felt the ground curve upwards and realised they were in a spherical chamber, around thirty paces wide. She raised her foot, about to stamp on the floor.

'Wait,' sighed Gotrek. 'Don't.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't crush them. I've already tried.' He shifted position and light flickered in his chest, illuminating the side of his face. He looked awful – as much of a monster as anything the Idoneth could summon. He had been cut and burned so many times it looked like he had been chiselled from rotten wood. Lots of the wounds were old but there were fresh burns across his cheek and blood bubbling from his nostrils. The muscles in his jaw were twitching and his face was an unhealthy grey. He looked like he might struggle to stand. He fixed her with his one good eye. 'If you try hitting those leeches you'll get a shock.'

'There's not much that surprises me any more.'

'No, an actual shock. I tried. The blast threw me ten feet. When I came to, my teeth were clattering and I smelled like a burned hog.'

'Oh, it's *you* that stinks of burned hair. Makes a change from the stale beer.' She knelt down and peered at the mass of coiling worms. 'What are they?'

‘Just don’t bloody hit them.’

She glared at him in disbelief. ‘So that’s it then? Gotrek, son of Gurni, Thane of the Evertop Mountain and slayer of sewer rats, finally accepts defeat, overcome by worms and digested by a fish. I’m honoured to witness the “worthy doom” you talked about so much. If you’d told me you aspired to be fish food I could have helped you long ago.’

‘I’m thinking,’ growled Gotrek. ‘Or, at least I was until you woke up and started prattling.’

Maleneth’s anger was growing by the moment. She was furious with herself more than Gotrek. She’d had a chance to get away from him and she had missed it. And now she was trapped with him, again, as he sank into another interminable sulk. ‘Thinking isn’t really your strong point, though, is it? If you think I’m going to sit here listening to stories about your glory days in Nulndorf you’re wrong.’ She swung her fist back. ‘I’m getting out of here.’

‘No!’ roared Gotrek, lurching towards her, but it was too late. There was a flash of blue light as Maleneth hit the leech-covered wall, then jarring pain, rattling through her arms and chest, kicking her backwards across the room.

When she came to a moment later, the room was dark again, even though her whole body seemed to be burning. It felt like her skin had been dipped in acid and her heart was doing something deeply troubling: racing and stalling with such violence that she felt like it would break her ribs. The smell of burning was now almost unbearable and she could feel more worms sliding onto her arms and latching on to her skin.

‘*Still* not dead,’ said Gotrek, sounding grudgingly impressed.

‘Still not dead,’ she replied, but her voice now had the same wheezing rattle as his. *Getting closer though*, she thought, picking off more worms. She expected Gotrek to jeer at her for ignoring his warning but he said something she did not expect, speaking in a tone she could not place.

‘Where would you have gone?’

She lifted herself up onto her elbows, gasping at the pain. ‘If I’d managed to get out of here?’

‘No, when you left the victory feast in Karag-Varr – when you decided to leave me.’

She sat there in the darkness, unable to see him. Was he angry at her? Did he care that she was going to abandon him? ‘I didn’t think you realised. You

seemed engrossed in your rat story.’

‘Skaven.’

‘Skaven.’ She sat up and immediately regretted it. Her heartbeat became even more erratic and a fierce pain knifed between her temples. ‘Damn it,’ she muttered. She was about to die. The idea appalled her: not because she was afraid of death, but because she hated the idea of being killed by something Gotrek had survived. She tried not to let her pain show as she wracked her brain for a way to heal herself. There were various vials and pouches attached to her leathers, but none of them contained medicine – only poisons, toxins and hallucinogens. Her heart drummed wildly, stopped, then fluttered weakly. The pain in her head became even more intense and she struggled to stay focused on the moment; she felt like she was slipping back into a dream.

‘Maleneth?’ said Gotrek, but she could barely hear him.

Do something, you idiot, hissed her former mistress, jolting Maleneth back from the brink of unconsciousness. ***I will not have this stomach as my eternal resting place.***

‘Corr’s Bane,’ groaned Maleneth, grabbing a bottle from her belt. It contained a poison, intended to gradually stop a victim’s heart, but she had a vague memory that, diluted, it could be used to simply steady a heart. She was not sure if she was remembering correctly but with death only moments away, the risk seemed worth taking. She took a flask of water, poured a drop of the poison into it, then drank. Nothing happened. Her heart continued skipping and the pain in her head increased. ‘I will not die!’ she cried, staggering to her feet and punching her breastbone. She could not say whether it was the punch or the poison, but her heart skipped one last time and then regained a steady beat. The pain eased and the sleepiness left her.

Rather than relief, Maleneth felt another surge of anger. ‘I don’t know where I would have gone,’ she yelled, speaking to where she thought Gotrek was. ‘Other than I had to get away from you.’

‘What stopped you?’

‘The damned Idoneth. I got as far as the walls before they attacked.’ She carefully moved some of the leeches and sat next to the Slayer, gasping for breath. She thought about his question. In truth, she had not really considered where she would go if she escaped from Karag-Varr. ‘I suppose I would have sought out some of my own kind.’

‘Sigmar worshippers?’

‘No. The Order of Azyr are probably after my blood. Thanks to you. Because you refused to come to Azyr and hand that rune over, I will be considered tainted goods.’

Because you killed that witch hunter, you mean, said her former mistress, but Maleneth ignored her.

‘It would not be wise for me to show my face in a Sigmarite citadel or one of the Free Cities,’ she continued. ‘No, by my own kind I meant Khainites – aelves sworn to serve the Murder God. Covenite sisters. I could join a war coven.’ She shrugged. ‘Or perhaps it’s time for me to make my pilgrimage to the First Temple, to Hagg-Nar, where the High Oracle, Morathi, founded the sisterhood.’

‘And what would you do then?’

‘I would take my place in the temple, serving Khaine. I would offer him blood tributes and serve the temple. I would perform–’

‘You would perform,’ interrupted Gotrek. ‘Sounds about right. A performing monkey, prancing for the organ grinder, like those twits in Karag-Wyr.’

‘I would serve my god,’ hissed Maleneth. ‘With all the skill and strength I could muster.’ She tried to recall the mantras she had learned as a youth, in the Azyrite Murder Temples. ‘In mine hand is the power and the might,’ she said, surprised at how hard it was to remember the words. ‘None may withstand me. By the will of Khaine I will bathe in the blood of my enemies.’

‘You will serve your god,’ said Gotrek. ‘And then, when the killing is done, you will die.’

Maleneth could hear the bitterness in his voice. ‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘When the time comes, I will die. And when I do, I’ll know I served Khaine well. And that will be enough.’ As she said the words, she heard the lie. She thought of how she had felt just a few moments earlier, when her heart was about to fail. To her annoyance, she realised that she did not believe what she was saying. When death was about to take her she had not felt peace, nor pride, just rage.

‘You don’t sound very convinced,’ said Gotrek.

‘Well, who relishes death? Do you?’

He paused, considering her question. ‘I did. I sought it for so long it was

all I could think of. I thought it was the only way to atone. After what I did to those...' His words trailed off. 'But I was wrong. A worthy death is not enough. A worthy *life* is what matters. I've been wrong so many times. I've fallen for the same lies as you. But it's not too late. I don't know if it's fate or luck, but I've got another chance. A chance to do something worthwhile.' His voice had sunk even lower. 'I have the rights of it now. I'm an old fool, but I've learned one thing: I can't tell myself that someone else will sort everything out. It's people like us who will fix things. Not a glorious deity in the clouds, not some thunder-cracked savage in Azyr – it's us. You can spill guts for Khaine all you like, Maleneth, but I promise you this, when you die, the realms will be in the same mess they were when you were born. Unless we do something about it.'

'Your arrogance is staggering,' she laughed. 'Do you really believe that you can bring order to the realms when the gods can't? It's insane. I admit, you have a power, a force I don't understand, but you're not divine. You're not so different from any other mortal. You still need to understand your place. The only thing that matters is faith and devotion. Paying tribute to the higher powers.'

'No. That's *not* what matters. Not even bloody close. What matters is not giving up. What matters is finding truth in madness and holding to it, fighting for it even when there's no chance of winning. Determination, courage, honour, loyalty and friendship.' He turned to face her, embers flashing in his eye. 'Yes, bloody friendship. It matters. It counts.'

Maleneth realised that, incredibly, he *was* angry with her for deserting him. She felt such a confusing mixture of contempt and pride that it made her even more furious. 'Survival,' she hissed. 'That's all that counts in the end.'

'*No one* survives. That's the whole bloody point. In the end we die. Every one of us. We're here for a moment and then we're gone.' Gotrek spread his fingers and looked at his palms. 'But in that moment we have power. Not the gods, you and me. We can change things. And anyone who claims otherwise is a coward.'

Maleneth was shaking with anger. 'I am no coward, Gotrek Gurnisson. I just know what matters – what's important.'

'*You* are important.' Gotrek gave her a look of withering scorn. 'And you don't even know it. You think you're an adjunct to a god. A bloody

appendage. But you don't have to be what priests tell you to be. You're not just a piece of Khaine. Don't you see? You have your own thoughts. Your own strength. Your own mind. Your own past. You don't have to be a slave for whichever god lays claim to you.'

'Belief is not slavery!' Her palms itched for her knives. 'You're just too primitive to understand anything beyond beer, food and battle. And if you want me to give you a lesson in—'

A grinding sound interrupted her, like plates of metal being dragged against each other. Then they both cursed as light washed over them. After so long in darkness, the light was painful and they backed away, shielding their faces.

'The fish is opening its mouth,' said Gotrek. He stood slowly, wincing and muttering as leeches dropped from his muscles. 'This is our chance.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

‘Ready yourself,’ said Gotrek as the light grew brighter. ‘We can charge up the fish’s gullet and get back to Karag-Varr. Then I can find that murderous elgi king and split his—’

‘You are in Dhruim-Ûrlar,’ said a heavily accented voice.

As Maleneth’s vision adjusted to the glare, she saw a row of slender figures standing on the far side of the room, behind what looked like a wall of blades.

‘What devilry is this?’ snarled Gotrek, grimacing and stumbling through the worms.

‘This is King Dìolan of Dhruim-Ûrlar,’ said the voice. ‘Monarch of the Dromlech enclave and Sovereign Warden of the Falloch Trench.’

Maleneth could now see clearly. There were a dozen aelves standing on the other side of the blades. The one who had addressed them was a severe-looking priest who, unusually for an aelf, looked old. Aelves of any kind were long-lived, their lives often spanning centuries, but the priest looked like a living fossil. The skin on his face was stretched so tightly it revealed every contour of his skull and the hands resting on his stave were as pale and gnarled as driftwood. Maleneth recognised him from the battle. He was the sorcerer who had summoned the magical tides into Karag-Varr. He radiated power and authority, and studied Gotrek like he was something unpleasant he had found in a meal. ‘I do not know where you think you are,’ he continued, ‘but you are in the dungeon halls of the Wrach Cavern, beneath the streets of the Dromlech capital, Dhruim-Ûrlar.’

Gotrek balled his hands into fists. He was not paying any attention to the priest, his furious gaze locked on the tall, powerfully built aelf next to him. 'King, eh?' He sneered at Dìolan's heavy plate armour and beautifully engraved helmet. 'Is that why you thought you had the right to kill Thurgyn?'

Dìolan studied Gotrek down the length of his nose but gave no reply.

'He was their runefather,' growled Gotrek. 'And my friend. I swore an oath to avenge him, so it's convenient of you to show up here dressed in all those pretty shells. Saves me the effort of hunting you down.' He walked carefully towards the wall of blades and leant back, preparing to punch it.

'You might want to reconsider,' said Thallacrom, glancing at the twisting shapes on floor. 'Tomrall leeches may be small, but they carry an impressive charge. Lethal, when they are agitated.' He gestured to the row of blades that separated the aelves from their captives. 'And their collective power is currently being channelled through this coral.' He looked at Gotrek with a peculiar eagerness. 'You are a unique specimen. A unique soul. It is possible that you would be strong enough to break a few of these spines, but you would release a huge current. There is no way you could survive it.' He glanced at Maleneth. 'Either of you.'

Gotrek tensed, muscles rippling across his massive back and his beard bristling. Maleneth knew how much Gotrek hated being ordered not to do something. It was usually the best way to guarantee he would try anyway. 'Gotrek,' she said. 'That last explosion. I... My heart...'

He did not turn to look at her but he nodded. 'Aye. Me too.' Maleneth noticed how awkwardly he was holding himself. His breathing was coming in hitched gasps. She had never seen him like this. He was clearly in pain and muscle spasms kept rippling across his face. He looked like he might keel over.

Rather than falling, Gotrek edged closer to the blades, until his face was inches from the aelves on the other side. 'Let me out now,' he said calmly, glaring up at Thallacrom, 'and I'll only kill your king. Make me wait, and I'll butcher all of you.'

Thallacrom and Dìolan glanced at each other with amused expressions. 'How did you come to be like this?' asked Thallacrom. 'Your strength, I mean. It is not natural, however potent that rune may be. Which realm do you come from? What is your story?'

Gotrek sneered. 'I'll tell you my story, aelf – once I've done killing your king I'm going to kill you. Then I'm going to start the real work that you people have left undone. I'm going to hunt down every murderer, necromancer and daemon that ever crawled from under a rock. I'm going to put things right or I'm going to die trying.'

Thallacrom looked amused again, but King Dìolan nodded, looking serious. 'That is true, after a fashion, Gotrek Gurnisson. Your soul is unique. And when we take it from you in a few days it will be the catalyst that births a miracle. Your death is going to be the spark that lights a great fire. A fire that will sweep across this realm and the realms that lie beyond it. A fire that will drive back the forces you profess to despise. I believe we were destined to meet, Gotrek. Providence brought us together. You will play a key part in the final victory of Order and reason.'

The sound of Dìolan's voice caused Gotrek to twitch but he managed to control himself. 'You're going to take my soul?' He laughed. 'I'd like to see you bloody try.'

Thallacrom shook his head. 'You will see very little of the rite. The soul-rending will require your death. You may still be breathing when we take you apart, I suppose. I have seen that happen with tough specimens such as yourself. But the rite will not truly begin until your heart stops.'

Gotrek looked on the verge of throwing a punch, but Maleneth gripped his arm.

'They're probably lying,' he growled, but he looked down at the shapes writhing under his feet and Maleneth could see he was not convinced.

'And how do you plan to get us out of here,' said Gotrek, 'without me tearing your head off?'

'We are not taking you anywhere yet,' said Thallacrom. 'His highness merely wanted to see you and be sure you are intact. The rite will not begin for several days. Our preparations are not yet complete.'

'What kind of preparations?' demanded Maleneth.

'Nothing you would understand, Khainite. We have summoned an Eidolon of Mathlann but it is not yet fully formed.'

Maleneth had no idea what the priest meant but she knew of Mathlann. It was an obscure deity, but she had heard it mentioned in Azyr, in relation to storms and the sea.

'By the time we return for you, I doubt you will be able to stand,' said

Thallacrom, glancing at the floor. ‘The iomrall are always hungry. And as they feed they release toxins that keeps their meals docile.’

Maleneth looked at the shapes with distaste. So that was why she felt so exhausted. The aelves were turning to go, so she called out. ‘Wait. You don’t understand what you’re doing. I’m an agent of the Holy Order of Azyr. You must release me immediately or risk the wrath of Sigmar’s armies.’

Most of the aelves continued walking away, including the king, but Thallacrom paused and looked back at her in surprise. ‘Sigmar? That name carries no weight here. Does it where you come from? Here, it is a byword for failure and defeat. Sigmar is a spent force. But *you* on the other hand are an interesting specimen. I did not intend to bring you to Dhruim-Ûrlar. It was an accident. You must have been touching Gotrek when I ensnared him. But I prevented the guards from killing you. Your soul is almost as unusual as his.’ He peered at her. ‘It is almost as though you are two souls in one. Quite unlike anything I have encountered before.’

He means me, laughed Maleneth’s former mistress. ***So I have saved your life. Oh, the irony. I have saved the life of my murderer.***

‘So we have decided to harness your spirit along with Gotrek’s,’ continued Thallacrom. ‘By removing your soul at the same time as his, we will have an even greater chance of success.’

Perhaps not entirely saved, then.

‘Success at what?’ she demanded. ‘What good is our life force to you?’

‘We have hunted too long,’ said Thallacrom, looking off into the distance. ‘It is time to rule. So we lured Gotrek to Karag-Varr.’

‘You lured me?’ Gotrek shook his head. ‘What are you talking about?’

Thallacrom smiled, his face full of arrogance and pride. ‘We tormented the Fyreslayer king until his mind was broken. We made the Varrukh believe they were cursed. They are quite the zealots so it was easy enough to do.’

‘But how was that a lure for me?’

‘We have been studying you since your battle with the Moonclan tribes. We knew you would be troubled by the plight of your fellow Fyreslayers and would want to lend them aid. Then, once we had you where we wanted you, it was an easy matter to bring you down here.’

Gotrek’s lip curled. ‘You did all of that to ensnare *me*?’ He glared at the row of blades again, fists clenched.

‘You won’t hit them,’ said Thallacrom. ‘You’re not the fool you pretend to be. I can see through your disguise. You play the part of a savage but there is wisdom in you. If things had been different, I would have enjoyed talking with you, Gotrek Gurnisson.’ He shrugged. ‘But fate has decreed otherwise.’ He was on the verge of saying more, but then he shrugged and headed off after the other aelves. A moment later, the light failed and they were plunged back into darkness again, with only the faint glow from Gotrek’s chest to reveal the movement of the leeches, tumbling and sliding towards the two prisoners.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Maleneth coughed, waving away a cloud of smoke. She had spent the last few hours experimenting with poisons, trying to find something that would kill the leeches without causing an explosion. Finally, she had found a way to burn them. She dug out a tiny, thick vial of liquid and, by pouring small amounts of it across the floor of the cell, she managed to scorch a path clear of the creatures. She only had a small amount of the liquid but it was incredibly potent. Most of the creatures wriggled away, sensing the danger, and those that didn't died harmlessly, melting rather than exploding. Over many painstaking hours, she had almost cleared a route to a sunken area she had noticed in one of the walls. Gotrek had been no help whatsoever, hunkering in the far corner of the room, covered in leeches and muttering to himself. Since Thallacrom had told him he was the reason for the attacks on Karag-Varr, the Slayer's mood had grown even darker.

'It's madness,' said Maleneth, pouring another drop of liquid from the vial and creating more smoke. 'If we try to hunt down the king, we'll just be putting ourselves in more danger. Think how heavily guarded he'll be. He's most likely in a fortress or a palace. He's probably got half his army around him. Do you remember how many Idoneth warriors attacked Karag-Varr? There were thousands of them.'

'Doesn't matter,' muttered Gotrek. 'I swore an oath. I know that means nothing to an aelf, but it means everything to me. I said I'd avenge Thurgyn and I will, however many elgi get in my way.' He clenched and unclenched his fists. 'And now it turns out they only killed Thurgyn to get their hands

on me.'

Maleneth stopped clearing the path and turned to face him. 'You're deluded. Even more than usual. It doesn't matter why they killed him. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. Look at yourself. You're wounded. And not just a little. I've never seen you look like this. I don't care what you think, there's no way you could take on the entire Idoneth army.'

'There's nothing wrong with me,' grunted Gotrek, standing up and throwing punches at the air. He turned an even more troubling shade of grey and stumbled before managing to steady himself. None of his wounds were healing. There was still blood running from his nostrils and several deep-looking cuts in his chest and arms. He swallowed hard, grimacing, and Maleneth thought he might vomit. 'I keep my word, aelf.' He slapped the likeness of Grimnir that was glaring out of his chest. 'Or I'd be no better than the damned gods.'

She shook her head, returning to her work. 'You talk about making a difference in the realms and then you tie yourself up in these petty vendettas. You talk big and act small.'

'Petty vendettas?' Gotrek stumbled towards her, as unsteady as if he were still drunk. 'It's a matter of honour, you thagi witch. Thurgyn was their runefather. And he faced down a grief that would have crushed anyone else. He was going to lead those Fyreslayers back to war. They were going to reclaim that whole stretch of coast. And more besides, I'd wager. And now, thanks to these fish aelves, that's all in tatters. I won't stand by and let that happen.'

She laughed. 'Thurgyn only died because you're stomping around the realms making a name for yourself. You just said so yourself. Can't you see what a mess you're making?'

'I didn't make the bloody mess. It was elgi, as always, with their poison and treachery, twisting things until they're broken and full of spite. If people like Thurgyn can be murdered without anyone caring then your realms really are doomed. It's not a petty vendetta, it's making a stand. It's knowing the difference between what's right and what's wrong.'

Gotrek looked like he might attack her, so Maleneth quickly changed the subject. 'Look at this,' she said, gesturing at the shape she had revealed on the wall. 'I think it might be an old door.'

Gotrek continued glaring at her for a while, then looked at the smouldering

path she had made on the floor, noticing what she was doing for the first time. ‘What witchcraft is this?’ he rumbled, crouching to look at the burned remains of the leeches.

‘Not witchcraft,’ she replied. ‘Common sense. When we were fighting in Karag-Varr, I noticed something. When those magmadroth creatures bleed, the blood melts whatever it lands on. It’s like a mixture of blood and lava.’ She tapped the vial. ‘So I kept a few drops. I thought it might come in handy.’ She stoppered it, very carefully even though it was now empty, and placed it back in a pouch at her belt. ‘While you’ve been boasting about your oaths and your honour, I’ve been finding us a way out of here.’ She nodded at the depression in the wall. It was covered in cold, wet lichen and looked like it had not been opened for centuries, but now she was close to it, Maleneth was sure it was a door.

Gotrek was about to say something dismissive, but then looked at the wall and frowned. ‘Does look a bit like a door, I suppose.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Think big. Think about getting out of this place. That’s my advice.’ She turned back to the door and tried to prise it open with her fingertips. She felt a rush of excitement when it shifted slightly, but then it would go no further, however hard she tried.

‘Let the Slayer at it, lass,’ said Gotrek, shoving past her and gripping the door. He locked his blocky fingers around the edges and pulled. His muscles swelled and his veins bulged but the door did not move much further than when Maleneth had tried.

‘We don’t have long,’ said Maleneth, looking behind them. The lava blood was cooling and the leeches were sliding back into place. ‘They’ll be all around the door again soon and we won’t be able to open it without triggering another blast.’

‘Give me a minute,’ he muttered. ‘I was just getting the feel of it.’ He put one of his legs back, bracing himself for another attempt.

‘Careful,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t fling it open so hard it hits some of the grubs.’

He looked back at her over his shoulder, giving her a withering glare, then pulled at the door again. This time he made a low growling sound and the rune in his chest pulsed brighter. Maleneth knew how much he hated tapping into the rune’s power, but despite his offhand manner, he obviously realised how urgent it was that they escape from the cell. The leeches were

slowly killing them.

This time, the door made a deep, groaning sound as its hinges started to work. Gotrek made an almost identical noise as he leant back, his muscles straining and his body pouring with sweat despite the chill. Then, with a sudden lurch, the door flew open.

Maleneth felt a rush of elation as she saw darkness through the opening.

Her happiness was short-lived as she realised the darkness was a wall of leeches. The door led into some kind of cupboard or storeroom that was heaped ceiling-high with the creatures. 'Don't let them fall,' she gasped as the leeches started to tumble slowly into the cell. 'They'll explode.'

Gotrek and Maleneth grimaced as they stepped forwards, arms outstretched, and embraced the glistening tide of black shapes. There were thousands of the things, and as Maleneth tried to ease their descent, they slowly engulfed her, rolling over her face and head, sliding under her leathers and wriggling in her ears. She wanted to howl, but even that might be enough to disturb them, so she moaned in disgust as they rolled over her, filling the cell.

'You bloody—' began Gotrek but his words were muffled as the leeches filled his mouth.

As the Slayer vanished from view, submerged beneath the worms, the light from his rune was extinguished and Maleneth was plunged back into darkness. There were so many of them pouring down on her that their weight shoved her backwards. She was already so surrounded by the creatures that she did not fall, but instead tilted slowly, face to the ceiling, held up by the thick, writhing mass. She felt them starting to feed all over her body, fixing their mouths to her skin and draining her blood.

You'll suffocate, said her former mistress, sounding panicked. ***Crawl back the way you came. There might not be as many there. You need to get your head above them.***

She was right. The pile of grubs was so tightly packed that Maleneth could hardly breathe. She was keeping her mouth tightly shut but leeches were already wriggling around her nostrils, trying to find their way in. Very carefully, she began to twist her torso, trying to face away from the door. It was no use. She could only move a few inches and, as she did so, leeches tumbled into the space she had made and locked her in place.

She wanted to call out to Gotrek, but the moment she opened her mouth,

the leeches would rush in. She had felt dazed since she first woke up in the cell but now her head was swimming in a revolting fashion, as if it were floating away from her neck. She prayed furiously to Khaine. *Do not abandon me. I have offered you so much. And I will offer you so much more!*

There was no response. And she could not even say what kind of response she would have expected. The cold, wet leeches tightened around her, squirming and fidgeting in her hair and across her face. She moaned as one attached itself to her eyeball.

Then the whole mass of them began to move, sliding away from the wall and carrying her with them. Her feet were off the ground and it felt like she was floating in a living pool. The movement was slow and stately, and as her oxygen-starved brain grew more confused, Maleneth felt as though she were disembodied: a spirit, carried though the darkness towards another state of being.

To her surprise, the darkness began to fade, replaced by blue-green light that filtered down from somewhere overhead. 'Be careful,' said a voice. 'No sudden movements.'

The light flashed brighter and Maleneth found herself surrounded by a baying mob. They were covenite sisters like her, gathered around an arena. She was back in the Murder Temple, back in Azyr. Her knives were back in her hands and she was preparing to lunge at her opponent, an aelf with cruel, exquisite features who was leaning closer, her face just inches from Maleneth's. 'Remove them one by one,' said the aelf. 'Do not rush.'

As the aelf spoke, Maleneth felt leeches being removed delicately from her skin – and as soon as she remembered the leeches, the memory of the arena fell away and she saw where she really was. She was lying outside the cell, beyond where the row of blades had been. The blades had vanished and there was a group of Idoneth around her, kneeling at her side as they carefully picked off the leeches. The creatures had filled the cell with a glistening mass, but with the bars of the cage removed they had begun sliding out of the cavern, freeing Maleneth. The Slayer was also out, lying a few feet away, grimacing as he endured the attention of the aelves who were stooping over him. She could see by the murderous look in his eye how much he wanted to lash out, and the effort of restraining himself was causing him to growl and mutter.

‘You’ve had a lucky escape,’ said the aelf Maleneth had seen first. She was clearly a noble, her features cold and magisterial, but she was not dressed in the heavy, ornate armour Maleneth had seen on the other Idoneth high-born. She wore scarred, battered leathers, similar to Maleneth’s own clothes. There was a pair of falchions at her belt and Maleneth’s first thought was how easy it would be to snatch them and behead their owner, once the leeches were all removed. The aelf noticed the direction of Maleneth’s gaze and smiled. ‘This one is not dead, at least. How is the Fyreslayer?’

‘Fyreslayer?’ snorted Gotrek. ‘I’m a true Slayer, lass.’

‘Lass?’ The aelf frowned. ‘My name is Eòrna. I am a thrallmaster of the Dromlech enclave. I have no doubt that you are both considering how best to kill me, but you should know this: I came here to rescue you. And I am your only chance of escape.’

Gotrek glared at her, flexing and closing his hands.

Eòrna nodded. ‘And if that is not enough to convince you, you should also be aware that my thralls are all archers of unsurpassed skill.’ She leant back from Maleneth and nodded to the passageway that led away from the cell. It was crowded with pale, aelven archers who all had arrows nocked to their bows. Maleneth felt a rush of indignation as she saw that they were all targeting Gotrek. ‘I understand you are very hardy,’ continued Eòrna, looking at Gotrek. ‘But would you survive with a dozen arrows lodged in your neck?’

Gotrek bared his teeth but said nothing.

‘You’re one of the Idoneth,’ said Maleneth, wishing she had her knives. ‘Why would you help us escape?’

Eòrna nodded. ‘We do not have long, so I will have to keep my answer brief. I am sister to King Dìolan, the ruler of the Dromlech and of Dhruim-Ùrlar. My brother—’

‘Dhruim-Ùrlar?’ grunted Gotrek.

‘This city,’ replied Eòrna, clearly frustrated by the delay. ‘As I was saying—’

‘City?’ Gotrek frowned and peered down the passageway, then looked back at the cell. The mound of leeches was still tumbling slowly out of the room. ‘We’re not in a stomach?’

Eòrna stared at Gotrek. For a moment she seemed thrown by his question. She frowned and looked at Maleneth. ‘Is he...?’

Maleneth shook her head. ‘Don’t ask.’ She turned to Gotrek and waved at the shapes carved into the walls, reliefs showing aelven figures riding sea creatures and surrounded by vast waves. ‘Does this look like the inside of a fish? We’re in a city. An aelven city. She just told you. We haven’t been eaten, Gotrek, we’ve been captured.’

Gotrek looked around at the passageway, seeming unconvinced, but he remained quiet as Eòrna continued. ‘My brother means to use your souls in a great work of sorcery. If he succeeds in killing you and harnessing your spirits, he will fundamentally change the Dromlech. He is misguided and dangerous, and I mean to stop him – by sending you back to Karag-Varr, robbing him of the chance to kill you.’

‘How?’ asked Maleneth. ‘How will you send us back to the magmahold?’ She looked around. ‘Where is this city?’

‘We’re beneath the Amethystine Ocean. Under normal circumstances, I could have used the Myrway to take you home, but you’re bound to this place by Isharann magic. The only way to send you home is to extinguish the power that summoned you here. It’s called an Eidolon. I’m going to take you to it right now so that you can destroy it.’ Desperation flashed in her eyes. ‘But we must be quick. The Eidolon is still relatively weak and I believe Gotrek will be able to destroy it. But once it has fully emerged, it will have the power of a god.’

Maleneth was still feeling dazed and weak. She leant against the wall and carefully picked a leech from her boot. ‘Why not just kill this “Eidolon” yourself? Why bother freeing us?’

‘It’s incredibly powerful,’ replied Eòrna. ‘Even with all of my soldiers, I doubt I could vanquish it, but...’ She looked at Gotrek. ‘But I believe you would be able to do it. You have a divine power in you that is equal even to the Eidolon. I believe you can drive it back into the aether. And the moment you do, you will return to Karag-Varr.’

Gotrek shook his head. ‘I’m not going anywhere. Not until I find your brother and avenge Thurgyn.’

Eòrna’s face went rigid and Maleneth had the impression that she was thinking fast. ‘That works perfectly,’ said the thrallmaster. ‘My brother is visiting the Eidolon in a few hours. Your best chance of finding him, in such a vast city as this, is to come with me to the Eidolon.’

Gotrek studied her, his expression grim, then he nodded. ‘Good. Lead me

to him and I'll consider letting you live.'

Eòrna clenched her jaw, biting back a comment, then nodded and turned to her archers. 'The Briondal Gate, quickly.'

The archers turned and ran back down the passageway. Eòrna was still flanked by a dozen or so pale-skinned aelves who were carrying swords, but Maleneth was confident that, with the archers running in the opposite direction, it would be an easy matter for her and the Slayer to overcome the Idoneth. Even unarmed, Gotrek was lethal, and she still had a wealth of poisons secreted in her leathers and at her belt. Eòrna was watching Maleneth and guessed her thoughts. 'I am your only chance of getting home,' she said. Gotrek was about to say something but Eòrna spoke first. 'And of reaching my brother. Dhruim-Ùrlar is no ordinary city. It is not only vast, but also in constant flux. Streets change course unexpectedly and routes that were safe the day before can quickly become impassable. Without me, you would be lost almost instantly.'

Gotrek and Maleneth glanced at each other. 'How can we trust you?' said Maleneth.

'You can't, of course,' laughed Eòrna, as though the idea were absurd. 'But I have just rescued you. Why would I do that if I wished you dead? A few minutes ago you were buried under bloodsucking leeches. If you hadn't suffocated, the leeches would have eventually drained the life from you. If I wished you ill I could easily have left you to die.'

Gotrek looked at Maleneth. 'You're an aelf. What do you think?'

Maleneth could not remember Gotrek ever deferring to her opinion before. Or anyone's opinion, for that matter. She was too shocked to answer for a moment. Then she shrugged. 'It's true. She didn't need to come here if she wanted us to die.'

Eòrna nodded. 'I want you out of Dhruim-Ùrlar. Killing you would be too much of a risk. My brother might find a way to use your departing souls. I need you to survive. And to leave.' She nodded to her guards and turned to run after the disappearing archers. 'So we have to move now.'

Eòrna did not look back to check if they were with her, and Gotrek and Maleneth paused to look at each other before they followed. They were both covered in blood, soot and filth and they were gasping for breath. Maleneth's head was still spinning from blood loss and she could tell from the way Gotrek was swaying that he felt as bad. He still had a leech

dangling from his ear, like a grotesque piece of jewellery. They both looked like they had fallen from the back of a corpse cart. A faint smile played around Gotrek's mouth as he studied Maleneth's tattered leathers and blood-matted hair. To Maleneth's surprise, his smile made her laugh.

'I hate you,' she said.

'It's mutual,' he growled. Then he limped off down the passageway. 'There's always so much bloody running,' he muttered as Maleneth rushed after him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Maleneth had no idea what an Idoneth city usually looked like, but she was surprised at how deserted Dhruim-Ùrlar was. When they emerged from the building, they were on what looked, to Maleneth, like a broad forest path. Hundreds of feet above her head there was a dense canopy of leaves that drifted and rippled as though suspended in water. Maleneth looked around and saw that everything seemed to be swaying and billowing, as though caught in a current. She took a deep breath, half expecting her lungs to fill with brine, but the air was normal, if a little damp, and she had no problem breathing. It was a peculiar sensation and Maleneth decided that whatever she was breathing, it was not normal air.

Eòrna and her soldiers were already sprinting off down the road, keeping to the shadows, but Maleneth and Gotrek took a moment to look around, taking in the peculiar scene. Maleneth had never seen a city like it. It was almost impossible to distinguish plant life from architecture. As she studied the shapes lining the road, Maleneth began to make out balconies, windows and spires, all wrought in an intricate and distinctly aelven style, but seemingly grown rather than built. She saw balustrades and buttresses but they were made of coral and shell and knotted kelp. There was a profusion of pale colours everywhere she looked and the whole place shone with a light that pulsed, blood-like, through the boughs of the city. It threw rippling shadows, hiding as much as it illuminated, but Maleneth saw fish and other creatures, banking in shoals through the gloom.

‘This is weird,’ said Gotrek, ‘even for aelves.’

Maleneth could not disagree. There was something dreamlike about everything and the cold air ate into her bones, as though it had never been warmed by sunlight. 'We need to keep moving,' she said, nodding at the quickly disappearing aelves and staggering after them. 'She was right. This place looks like a labyrinth. We could wander here for decades if we get lost.'

'Especially as there's not a soul about,' said Gotrek, peering down a tunnel-like alleyway as they ran past it. 'Are aelven cities usually empty?'

Maleneth shook her head. She remembered Eòrna's expression when Gotrek had told her he intended to hunt down the king. She had clearly been keeping something from them. Maleneth had no desire to help Gotrek with his king-hunting so she kept her thoughts to herself, but she had a suspicion that whatever Eòrna was hiding might explain the empty streets.

After a while, Eòrna noticed how slowly Gotrek and Maleneth were moving and paused to wait for them, signalling for her soldiers to do the same. The archers scattered into the shadows, crouching in doorways and clumps of seaweed, arrows nocked as they watched the street. 'We have to move faster,' said Eòrna as they caught up with her. 'We have to reach the Eidolon before your escape is discovered.'

'Discovered by who?' said Gotrek, waving at the empty streets and the lightless windows looking down at them.

Eòrna did not acknowledge his question. 'The Briondal Gate is not far from here. Can you run any faster?'

'Course I can bloody run faster,' snapped Gotrek. 'You're the one who stopped to talk.'

Eòrna looked at Gotrek with a murderous light in her eyes, but she nodded and waved them on, her soldiers falling into step around her. They reached the end of the wide street and ran into a broad, circular plaza. It was surrounded by tortuous, meandering architecture, and Maleneth had the impression that it had only recently been deserted. There were objects scattered across the ground and unattended market stalls with their wares still on display.

'This way,' whispered Eòrna, pointing at one of the streets that led off the plaza and running in that direction. The group hurried after her, but before they had reached the far side of the plaza, one of the archers gasped and tumbled to the ground, clutching at his neck as blood fanned through his

fingers. As he came to a halt, Maleneth saw an arrow jutting from his neck. He tried to rise, coughing up blood, but two more arrows thudded into him, landing in his chest and knocking him off his feet. He hit the ground heavily and lay still.

Maleneth dived for cover behind one of the market stalls and Gotrek followed, hunkering down next to her. Eòrna and the other aelves moved so fast they seemed to vanish, slipping quickly into the shadows. There was a moment of tense silence. From where Maleneth was crouching, she could see the dead aelf. The arrows that had felled him were the same as the ones in his quiver. 'More Idoneth,' she whispered.

There was a sound behind them and they both whirled around to find Eòrna had joined them. She and a pair of her soldiers were crouching low behind the stall. Eòrna nodded to one of the other aelves and he put a large bag on the ground. As he unfastened it Maleneth saw a flash of gold, and warmth washed over her, as if the bag contained a campfire.

Gotrek grinned as he drew his axe, Zangrom-Thaz, from the sack. The brazier at its head was fuming and spitting embers in a way that seemed utterly out of place in the dank air of the Idoneth city. 'You're giving this back to me?'

Eòrna looked unnerved and Maleneth could understand why. Gotrek in possession of an axe was not a comforting sight. 'My intention was to keep it from you until the last minute,' said Eòrna, 'but it seems that we will be forced to fight our way to the Eidolon.'

Gotrek seemed to grow as he gripped the axe, testing it with a few experimental slashes. 'It's better than I remember,' he snarled, glaring into the embers.

Maleneth looked in the bag and found, to her delight, that her knives were there too. She snatched her weapons with as much relish as Gotrek, spinning them in her hands and slicing at the air. They were undamaged and looked even sharper than the last time she had seen them.

'Proceed with care,' said Eòrna. 'There are archers at the foot of that building opposite. Only five or six but they could easily—'

Gotrek let out a bone-rattling howl and lifted the market stall from the ground, spilling bottles and jugs as he tore it free, creating a horrendous din. He had slung his axe at his back and he proceeded to charge across the plaza, bellowing as he ran, gripping the collapsing stall in both hands,

holding it before him like a massive shield.

Eòrna and the other Idoneth stared in disbelief as arrows whistled towards the Slayer, thudding harmlessly into the stall. Gotrek reached the opposite side of the plaza and hurled the whole structure at the archers, who tried to flee at his approach. Then he took his axe from his back and launched himself at them, trailing sparks and curses as he began to kill.

Maleneth had seen Gotrek in action too many times to be surprised by his deranged attack. She ignored the screams and sounds of splitting bones, and rounded on Eòrna. 'Tell me the truth.'

Eòrna was staring at the carnage with an astonished expression, too dazed to register Maleneth's words. Then, as Gotrek picked the stall back up and smashed it into the aelves, she turned to Maleneth. 'What? What do you mean?'

'You were lying when you told him this was the best way to hunt down your brother, I saw it in your eyes.'

Eòrna's face was rigid and Maleneth saw, again, the fury she was struggling to hide, the desperation.

'Tell me.' Maleneth nodded at Gotrek, who was now swinging the stall around his head and howling, even though the aelves were dead. 'Or I'll tell him he's being lied to.'

Eòrna's mouth turned into a hard line. She clearly was not used to being given orders. Maleneth could respect that. In truth, there was something about Eòrna's furious determination that had impressed her.

'Look,' said Maleneth, softening her tone. 'I have no desire to follow Gotrek on a suicide mission to hunt down your king. I want to get out of here. And I'd prefer to do it while I'm still alive.' She leant closer to Eòrna, keeping her voice low. 'Gotrek is not as stupid as he looks. And if he realises you're tricking him, it will end very badly for you. But if you tell me what you're trying to do, I can help. I know how to handle him.'

On the other side of the plaza, Gotrek was slowly coming to his senses, dropping the remains of the stall and looking around at the mess he had made. Any minute now, he was going to head back over to Eòrna and Maleneth. 'I'll tell him this is a lie,' said Maleneth, 'unless you let me in on your plan.'

Eòrna studied Maleneth for a moment. Then she nodded. 'It's true. We're not heading towards King Dìolan. He won't be on his way to the Eidolon.'

He'll be at his palace, the Allmarach, over a mile from here.'

'How can you be so sure of that?'

Pride flashed in Eòrna's eyes. 'Because, at this very moment, my ally Princess Arainn is launching an attack on the Allmarach and Dìolan is fighting for his life. The time for change has come and the oldest families of Dhruim-Ùrlar are—'

Maleneth held up a hand. 'You're murdering your brother to take the throne. It makes perfect sense.' Eòrna shook her head and was about to argue, but Maleneth spoke over her. 'Spare me the details of your local politics. I'm sure you have perfectly good reasons and, to be honest, I don't care. Gotrek's heading back over. Tell me what I need to do to get us out of here.'

Eòrna tensed as she saw that Maleneth was right – Gotrek was stomping back over towards them, picking pieces of the market stall from his plaited beard. 'Gotrek has to destroy the Eidolon. It's the anchor that's tying you to Dhruim-Ùrlar. Once it's destroyed, the ether-magic that brought you here will be dispelled. You will return to Karag-Varr.'

Maleneth shook her head. 'Gotrek won't do it. He won't do anything that could send him home before he's killed your king. He's sworn one of his damned oaths.'

Eòrna nodded quickly, glancing at the approaching figure of the Slayer and speaking in an urgent whisper. 'The Eidolon is a violent spirit – an avatar of the etherstorm, formed from the souls of our ancestors. At the moment it is unborn, in a dormant state. If I can get you close to it, I can release it. I can bring it to life. At which point it will launch itself at anyone who is not one of the Dromlech.'

Maleneth nodded, understanding. 'You're going to make it attack Gotrek.'

'Exactly.'

'And how do you know he can defeat it?'

'I can't know that for sure. But from what I have learned about him, Gotrek is uniquely powerful. The Eidolon is a fragment of the divine, the spirit of a god, drawn from Idoneth souls. For most people it would be impossible to defeat, but your companion also has a spark of the divine in him. I believe he might be able to defeat it.' She shrugged. 'Besides, it's that or he dies.' She looked around at the city. 'And everything I cherish will be lost.'

‘It’s a kind of god?’ Maleneth laughed. ‘And you want Gotrek to fight it? I think this could work.’

Maleneth nodded at Eòrna then hurried across the plaza to the Slayer. ‘The king is on his way to the Eidolon. He’ll be there any minute. We have to be quick or you’ll miss your chance,’ she said.

Gotrek scowled and slapped his axe against his palm. ‘Elgi have betrayed dawi more times than I can count.’

Maleneth continued across the plaza and Gotrek followed, glaring back at Eòrna as he went. ‘But this one will pay for what he has done. Thurgyn *will* be avenged.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Eòrna and the other aelves raced ahead of Maleneth, turning down so many twisted streets that Maleneth gave up trying to understand which direction they were heading in. Gotrek was lumbering after her, slowed by his wounds but still full of bile and determination.

‘Not far now,’ called Eòrna over her shoulder as she led them through a set of ancient-looking gates built in the shape of a kraken.

Maleneth found the architecture of Dhruim-Ùrlar baffling. There was much in it that was familiar, echoes of shapes she had seen in other aelven structures, but it was all so knotted with coral that she could not discern the purpose of the buildings. After passing through the gate, however, she sensed that she had entered a region of spiritual significance. The light shone brighter and she felt a charge in the air, as though many eyes were watching her. She saw shrines to various deities and decided that this must be a place of remembrance.

Eòrna rushed on through the maze of streets, leaving the shrines behind and hurrying down a broad path towards a dome of yellow coral. ‘The Eidolon is in the amphitheatre,’ she said, pausing to wait for Gotrek to catch them up. When they had all grouped together again, she nodded and continued at a slower pace, jogging towards an opening in the side of the dome.

Gotrek managed to keep up, and the group entered the dome together before pausing to look around. The amphitheatre was circled with tiered seating, and beyond the glow of the lemon-coloured dome was a dark forest

of kelp, drifting and rustling against the cage. As Maleneth's eyes adjusted to the glare she saw a shape drifting at the centre of the amphitheatre – a shell, floating above a dais. Again, she felt a rush of spiritual power, as though her mind had brushed against something ineffable. She whispered a prayer to Khaine as she followed Eòrna and the others towards the shell. It was burning with the same inner glow as the dome, and the light silhouetted a figure at its heart. It was aelven in shape, but larger and even more elegantly proportioned. The figure was so striking that it took Maleneth a moment to realise that the amphitheatre was filled with noise. She heard waves crashing and rain pouring from thunderheads as lightning crackled overhead. Maleneth looked around, half expecting to see actual waves hurtling towards her, but there was no water beneath the dome; the sounds were emanating from the motionless shell above the dais.

'Quickly,' said Eòrna, waving them towards the dais, but as they approached it Maleneth slowed down, unnerved by the sounds coming from the shell. It was a furious din and she held her knives ready as she reached the steps of the dais.

'It's just bloody noise,' said Gotrek, marching past her, but even he seemed hesitant, holding his axe tight as he looked up at the figure in the shell.

Eòrna followed, drawing her swords.

The sound of the storm swelled and Maleneth was reminded of what had happened at Karag-Varr. She wondered why she had put so much trust in Eòrna.

'Many of you did not believe me,' cried an unfamiliar voice, coming from behind them. 'But here is the proof. Now you see Eòrna's treachery for yourself.'

Maleneth and the others whirled around to see a group of Idoneth gathering behind them on the path into the amphitheatre. King Dìolan was there, on his three-tailed steed, and the person who had spoken was the old sorcerer, Thallacrom, but there were countless other nobles who were unfamiliar to her. Some were as ancient-looking as Thallacrom and draped in fine robes and convoluted crowns. Arrayed around them was an army of blind, pale-skinned warriors. They were emerging from the kelp forest in their hundreds, arriving from every direction.

'Arainn,' gasped Eòrna, staring in horror at one of the nobles riding near

the king, seated in a howdah on the back of a huge turtle. ‘She betrayed me.’ Arainn stared defiantly back at Eòrna with an almost imperceptible shake of her head. ‘How could she, after what I showed her?’ whispered Eòrna.

‘Let me guess,’ sneered Maleneth, as the lines of grim-faced warriors continued to swell. ‘These people are all your close friends and they’ve come to wish us well.’

Eòrna was still staring at Arainn. ‘Eòrna!’ snapped Maleneth, grabbing her by the arm. ‘What do we do?’ Eòrna licked her lips, looking around at the vast army that was still spilling into the amphitheatre. Her guards numbered no more than a few dozen. For a moment, Eòrna looked panicked, but then her eyes hardened. She nodded. ‘We do as we planned.’ She looked at the ranks of warriors gathering around them. ‘There is no chance for us now. We have been betrayed. But we will still stop my brother. We will still send Gotrek home.’

‘Send us *both* home, you mean?’ said Maleneth as the army advanced towards them.

Eòrna glanced at her. ‘Make sure you hold on to Gotrek when the Eidolon dies. If you don’t, you will remain here.’ There were tears glinting in Eòrna’s eyes but she spoke calmly as she turned to her guards. ‘Charge the front lines. Move fast. Fight like you have never fought before. I can rouse the Eidolon but you will have to buy me time.’ She looked at each of them in turn, her voice shaking. ‘Our lives mean nothing now. We fight for something greater. Everything hinges on this moment.’ The guards looked shocked but they raised their swords in salute, pressing the hilts to the runes on their brows. ‘If we fail,’ continued Eòrna, ‘we fail every one of our ancestors. If Dìolan keeps Gotrek Gurnisson here he will use him to destroy everything that we are.’ The guards mouthed prayers then turned to face the army, adjusting their weapons and armour.

Maleneth looked around for Gotrek and cursed. He was already limping towards the Idoneth army, scything his axe through the air, his eye locked on Dìolan. There was blood rushing from his various wounds and he seemed unable to walk in a straight line. ‘What in the name of the gods are you doing?’ she called out to him.

‘Fulfilling my oath,’ he snarled, carrying on across the plaza. ‘While I still bloody can.’ He levelled his axe at Dìolan. ‘That aelf dies today.’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ she yelled. ‘It’s an army, Gotrek. And you can barely walk.’

He ignored her and continued forward as Eòrna’s guards sprinted past him, raising their swords in silence as they ran to their deaths.

‘Is everyone insane?’ muttered Maleneth as the clatter of fighting rang out through the noise of the storm. Eòrna’s guards had formed into a spearhead. They were fighting with speed and determination, slicing into the army, breaking up the well-ordered ranks, but they would be dead within minutes.

Maleneth shook her head in disbelief as Gotrek followed in their wake, dealing out a flurry of axe blows and crashing into the aelves. ‘For the rune-father!’ he cried. ‘And Karag-Varr!’

For once, Maleneth was unsure how to act. ‘I can’t leave here if I’m not *touching* him?’ She watched in dismay as Gotrek bellowed and smashed his way towards Dìolan, sinking deep into the Idoneth lines. ‘How in the name of Khaine am I supposed to do that?’

The sound of the storm swelled in volume, becoming so loud that everyone in the amphitheatre hesitated. Even Gotrek paused to look around for the source of the noise.

Maleneth stumbled and clamped her hands over her ears. It was only then that she realised Eòrna was not at her side. She whirled around and saw that the aelf had climbed to the top of the dais and swung her sword at the shell. A crack had snaked across its surface and the light inside was blazing brighter.

‘Stop her!’ cried Dìolan, his voice barely audible over the howling of the storm. Dozens of his soldiers continued fighting Gotrek and Eòrna’s guards, but those in other parts of the amphitheatre charged towards the dais.

‘What are you—’ began Maleneth, rushing up to Eòrna, but before she could finish, the shell detonated. Waves crashed into Maleneth, hurling her back down the steps. She rolled painfully to a halt just as a crowd of sword-wielding Idoneth raced towards her. Before they could reach her, spectral waves pounded into them, scattering them across the ground and sending their swords spinning through the air. The waves boiled and turned around the dais, forming a whirlpool hundreds of feet wide. It rolled through Dìolan’s army, hurling warriors around like leaves in a breeze. A chorus of howls merged with the noise of the waves as aelves crashed into each other. The scene quickly descended into chaos. There was no way for anyone to

fight as the amphitheatre became a lightning-charged tempest. Dìolan's steed bucked and snaked beneath him, and the king howled orders that no one could hear.

Maleneth managed to cling to one of the railings that led up to the dais as warriors and weapons whirled around her. Gotrek was nowhere to be seen but Eòrna was nearby, hanging on to the same railing as Maleneth.

'How exactly does this help?' cried Maleneth, dragging herself closer to Eòrna.

Eòrna was watching the carnage unfold, her face rigid with horror. Then she focused on Maleneth. 'Gotrek has to kill the Eidolon!' she cried, waving at the broken shell. As the storm grew even more violent, the figure at its heart was moving, climbing from the shell, wreathed in banks of mist and rain.

Maleneth felt a rush of dread as the thing loomed over the dais. 'Gotrek's not interested in killing that,' she managed to say.

Eòrna dragged herself closer to Maleneth as she replied. 'But the Eidolon will be interested in him. He's not an aelf. It will not tolerate his presence.'

Maleneth was about to ask how the Eidolon would feel about her, when it became impossible to speak. The storm howled as the Eidolon glided out across the dais, carried on banks of rain and crashing waves. It looked like an aelven noble clad in beautiful armour, but as it moved it broke apart and re-formed, like the waves that surrounded it, rising and falling and merging with the storm. To Maleneth's shame, she felt a rush of fear. For the first time in her life, she understood the contempt that the sea felt for the races who dwelt on dry land. She felt a hatred older than the realms themselves: an ancient, bitter loathing that made her gasp in panic. The Eidolon held a spear aloft as it rushed towards her, howling words, singing the vengeful song of the sea.

Eòrna huddled next to Maleneth, shaking her head and gasping prayers, but to Maleneth's relief the Eidolon moved past them, crashing down the steps in a cloud of spume and mist. Some of the Idoneth tried to kneel and humble themselves before the Eidolon but they were simply washed away, howling and tumbling across the amphitheatre as the god spirit crashed over them. It was moving with a clear purpose and Maleneth saw that Eòrna was right: it was heading for Gotrek. As the aelves were washed away by the deluge, Gotrek was left in an open space, bracing himself against the storm

and gripping his axe as he glared up at the Eidolon. He howled as he saw that Dìolan was now beyond his reach, retreating with hundreds of soldiers around him. 'You will not rob me of vengeance!' he roared, pointing his axe at the approaching spirit.

The Eidolon answered with a howl like the end of the world. The noise was so loud that Maleneth felt as though her skull were about to shatter.

Gotrek charged into the tempest and the Eidolon rushed to meet him. In one of its hands it was gripping a hook, and as it reached Gotrek it slammed the weapon into his chest, through the centre of Blackhammer's Master Rune.

The din vanished. Silence filled the amphitheatre. Maleneth watched in amazement as the world froze around her. Gotrek was staring in shock at the hook that had punctured the rune, while all around him Idoneth were hanging in the air or lying motionless on the ground, trapped in a fragment of time, their hands outstretched or held over wounds.

Maleneth tried to speak but she was as statue-like as everyone else. Even the Eidolon was motionless, looming over Gotrek, shrouded in the unmoving majesty of the storm, its spear held aloft. Then, at the point where the hook was embedded in Gotrek's rune, flames began to sprout, rippling across the metal and washing over Gotrek's chest. The fire was unnaturally bright, bringing tears to Maleneth's eyes as it spilled over Gotrek's muscles, engulfing him like armour. The flames kindled in Gotrek's crest of hair, turning it into a blade of fire that rose from his skull, spitting and flashing. The Slayer grew larger as the flames engulfed him, pouring down the haft of his axe and igniting the blade.

Time began again with a thunderclap. Sounds erupted from every direction as people jolted back into motion. The storm exploded into life, hurling aelves and ripping coral from the walls. Gotrek and the Eidolon had become a single point of light, rising up from the ground, dazzling turquoise spirals meshed with a column of ruddy flame. Gotrek was visible in the maelstrom but Maleneth could barely recognise him. He was transformed. It was more than just his crest of flames. His face was altered. His features were less haggard and brutalised. He looked both younger and older. With the hook still embedded in his chest and his feet hanging dozens of feet above the ground, he swung his axe, carving the air with fire and hurling its magma-like blade at the Eidolon's neck.

The Eidolon parried, blocking the blow with its spear, and Maleneth felt a surge of confusing emotions as they fought. The Eidolon was terrifying but it was also beautiful. She felt like kneeling in adoration. It was a beguiling mixture of nobility and savagery. Its face was proud and magisterial, and its limbs were wreathed in the wildness of the sea. As it cast Gotrek down to the ground, Maleneth had to battle the urge to cheer. This was the power of divinity and the might of the ocean, all bound into a single, glorious vision.

Gotrek tumbled across the ground, trailing fire and embers and struggling to rise, but Maleneth was powerless to help him. The Eidolon surged forwards, engulfing the Slayer in waves of mist and spume. For a moment, it looked like Gotrek would be crushed. Then, just as the waves broke over him, he whirled around and leapt at the Eidolon, his face locked in a snarl, his axe a plume of flames as it slammed into the Eidolon's neck.

The storm gave another deafening howl, then collapsed, splashing across the ground. As the waves toppled, so did the Eidolon. It fell, headless, into the storm, exploding into millions of eddying waves.

Gotrek dropped to the ground with a crunch of breaking bones that was audible even from where Maleneth was hunkering on the dais. As the Eidolon vanished, so did the Slayer's fire, and as he landed, he was Gotrek once more. If anything, he looked even older and more disfigured as he struggled to his feet, one of his arms hanging limply at his side and blood pouring from a fresh cut on his brow. As the noise of the storm faded, everyone in the amphitheatre stared at Gotrek. He swayed, punch-drunk and muttering, then raised his axe with his one good arm, pointing it at the distant figure of Dìolan. He cried out, trying to say something, but his mouth was so swollen and bloody that his speech was mangled. Then he began hobbling towards the aelves, spitting blood and teeth.

Maleneth grabbed Eòrna. 'The Eidolon is dead.' She looked back at the shell. It was dark and lifeless. 'He vanquished it. Will we leave now?' She glared at the thrallmaster. 'If you lied to me I will—'

'I didn't lie,' said Eòrna. Like everyone else, she was looking at Gotrek with an expression of disbelief. 'Thallacrom dragged Gotrek here with the power of the Eidolon. You need to reach your friend if you don't want to remain here.'

Maleneth nodded and climbed to her feet, feeling as though she had just survived a shipwreck. Her head was still filled with echoes of the storm and

her leathers were sodden. She paused, halfway down the steps. 'Your king will kill you for this. Is that right?'

Eòrna made no effort to stand. She looked exhausted but there was a gleam of triumph in her eyes. 'Yes. I will be executed.'

Maleneth was conscious that she needed to reach Gotrek before he vanished, but something about Eòrna's fatalism bothered her. 'Don't you care?'

'I have saved us,' said Eòrna. 'We can remain as we were. Hidden from the likes of you. Our traditions preserved. We will not be dragged into your wars.'

As Eòrna spoke, Maleneth realised that this was the counterpoint to Gotrek's creed. This was the antithesis of everything the Slayer believed. Rather than trying to save the realms, Eòrna simply wanted to save her way of life. She wanted to avoid the muddled wars of the lesser races. Maleneth might once have understood but now, as she studied Eòrna, she felt revulsion. This was just another form of cowardice.

Eòrna frowned, still looking over at Gotrek. 'He should already be changing. He should be fading.'

Maleneth felt a rush of panic as she saw how far away Gotrek was. He was dozens of feet from her, surrounded by Dìolan's dazed-looking soldiers. 'I need to get over there.'

'No.' Eòrna stood and grabbed her arm. 'Wait. Something's wrong.' They both looked over at Gotrek. He had reached the first lines of Idoneth soldiers; as they scrambled to their feet, grabbing weapons, he knocked them aside, swinging his axe with one hand as he limped towards Dìolan. 'He's not changing,' said Eòrna. 'I don't understand. It was the Eidolon that was anchoring him here. When Thallacrom dragged you both down...' Her words trailed off and she looked around at the crowds. 'It's him,' she breathed, pointing out the sorcerer who was standing not far from the dais, surrounded by guards and pointing his narwhal tusk at Gotrek. 'He's holding Gotrek here somehow.'

There was a clatter of weapons from the other side of the amphitheatre. Dìolan's soldiers had recovered from their shock and were massing around Gotrek, surrounding him in gleaming lines. The Slayer was batting them aside, cursing and shouting, but even from here Maleneth could see that the rune in his chest was dark and lustreless. The Eidolon's hook had changed

it. Gotrek stumbled on, shouldering through the aelves, but his wounds were starting to tell. He was slowing. And the slower he went, the fewer swords he managed to parry. Cuts were opening across every inch of him and his shouts were growing hoarse. ‘They’re killing him,’ whispered Maleneth. Rather than grief or pity, the idea summoned a feeling of horror in her.

‘Why doesn’t he use the power of the rune?’ demanded Eòrna.

Maleneth shook her head. ‘It’s lifeless. And even if it weren’t he could never have taken on a whole army.’ She rounded on Eòrna, waving a knife in her face. ‘You told me he just needed to defeat the Eidolon. Why is he still here?’

Eòrna pointed her sword at Thallacrom, who was reciting an incantation. ‘It’s the priest,’ she said again. ‘He’s holding him here. We have to kill Thallacrom.’

Maleneth nodded. ‘Killing is my particular area of expertise.’ She thought for a moment. ‘He’s a damned sorcerer though.’

There was another bellow from the other side of the amphitheatre as waves of soldiers swarmed around Gotrek and he staggered to a halt, still a dozen feet away from King Dìolan. Dìolan looked vaguely amused as his soldiers rained blows down on the Slayer, filling the air with his blood.

‘Damn it,’ gasped Maleneth. ‘He’s not meant to die.’ Some of the nearby soldiers had noticed her and were running in her direction. Time was running out. She grabbed Eòrna by the shoulder. ‘If I can get within twenty feet of Thallacrom I can kill him. Can you make sure he doesn’t notice me coming?’

Eòrna nodded.

The two aelves grasped each other’s hands. Then Eòrna sprinted towards Thallacrom while Maleneth ran in a wide loop, approaching the sorcerer from behind. As Maleneth drew closer, she saw that Eòrna was not quite right. From her new vantage point she could see a vague shimmer of power lancing out of the narwhal tusk. Rather than targeting Gotrek, though, Thallacrom was dragging energy from Dìolan, hauling power from the king and casting it at Gotrek. The details were irrelevant, however. Thallacrom had to die. Gotrek was now on his knees, furious and savage as ever, but clearly on the verge of death. Hundreds of warriors were pressing to get close to him and there were arrows jutting from his muscles. He sounded

deranged, pausing between blows to level his axe at Dìolan, but unable to get any closer.

Deftly, Maleneth took a pouch from her belt. There was a small leaf inside it. Very carefully, keeping the leaf contained, she dragged it along the blade of her knife, smearing sap along the metal before dropping the pouch.

To her left, a few dozen feet away, Eòrna leapt at Thallacrom's guards. Maleneth nodded in appreciation as she saw how Eòrna sliced through them, whirling and diving in an impressive display of acrobatics. *She would have done well in the Murder Temples*, she thought.

Better than you, at least, sneered her mistress.

As the guards struggled to slow Eòrna's advance, Thallacrom looked furious. 'Stop her, you idiots!' he snarled, keeping his attention fixed on Gotrek. 'What are you doing?'

Eòrna grinned as she ran on, and Maleneth sensed that she was revelling in the chance to attack the priest.

Maleneth was almost close enough to hurl her knife when she remembered what Eòrna had said. 'I have to be holding him when he leaves,' she gasped, looking at the distant figure of Gotrek. 'I'll never reach him.'

Her dead mistress struggled to hide her panic. ***Then let him die. Flee. Live to fight again, you fool.***

Maleneth stumbled to a halt, still watching Gotrek. He was surrounded by piles of aelven dead but he was dying. She could barely comprehend it. He was so weak he could barely swing his axe. He was on the verge of falling backwards, and when he did it would all be over. 'He has to live,' she whispered, filled with horror as she turned back to Thallacrom. 'He matters. He means something. I can't let him die.'

You hate him!

I hate him, agreed Maleneth, feeling numb. Then she threw the knife.

Thallacrom staggered forwards with a bark of surprise. He looked around, confused, to see who had shoved him. Then he noticed the knife tip jutting out of his chest. His eyes widened in disbelief, then he collapsed, his flesh sliding from his bones and slopping to the ground. Within seconds, there was nothing left of him but a smouldering puddle.

Eòrna was still fighting with his guards but she paused to howl in triumph. Maleneth rushed to her side, and between them they cut down the remaining guards. Then they both looked back over at Gotrek.

For a horrible moment, Maleneth thought the Eidolon had returned. The air around Gotrek was turning and sparking, forming a tornado. Soldiers were thrown clear as he rose from the ground, limp and blood-sodden, but still hurling curses and pointing his axe at Dìolan. As he rose, the Slayer began to fade, just as Eòrna had promised, his flesh becoming as translucent as the storm.

Idoneth soldiers began rushing at Maleneth. Robbed of Gotrek, Dìolan's army turned its attention to her. Hundreds of warriors surged in her direction, their faces full of wrath.

Eòrna leant against Maleneth, gasping for breath. She looked almost as bad as Gotrek, covered in cuts and gripping her arm to her side. She grabbed Maleneth's shoulder. 'Thank you.'

Maleneth could not speak, still dazed by what she had done. The entire Idoneth army was racing towards her. She was completely surrounded. She was going to die. She was going to die for Gotrek.

You absurd child! screamed her mistress. ***You've killed us both!***

Ridiculous as it was, Maleneth and Eòrna dropped into battle stances, back to back and preparing to fight, whispering prayers to their respective gods.

Just before the Idoneth reached her, Maleneth looked up and saw Gotrek. The storm had almost taken him. He was breaking apart, his body fragmenting in the wind, but she could still see how furious he was. He was pointing at her, howling and cursing. He was outraged that she had robbed him of his chance to reach Dìolan, but there was also another emotion in his face. Behind the rage there was something even more powerful, a terrible sorrow. She realised that, rather than trying to reach Dìolan, he was now trying to reach her, trying to save her.

Then he was gone. The storm vanished, leaving no trace of the Slayer.

Maleneth turned to face the army, baring her teeth in a brutal smile, her pulse quickening in anticipation of the coming bloodshed. Arrows thudded into her, puncturing muscles and shattering bones, but her bloodlust was so great she barely noticed. As the front lines reached her she leapt forwards to meet them, stabbing and lunging, howling Gotrek's name as Idoneth blades sliced into her body, spilling her blood into the cold, unnatural air.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

‘There he is,’ muttered Korgan, filled with relief when he saw Gotrek’s unmistakable silhouette. It was dusk and the Slayer was sitting at the edge of an outcrop, looking out at the ocean. Korgan climbed down from his magmadroth and ordered his Hearthguard to remain with her as he headed off along the edge of the promontory, picking his way between slabs of rusting iron.

‘You are not well enough to be out here, Gotrek,’ he said as he approached the Slayer. He said the words mainly so as not to surprise Gotrek. The Slayer’s axe was lying not far away and Korgan knew perfectly well what would happen if Gotrek mistook him for an enemy.

Gotrek did not acknowledge him, continuing to watch the colourful waves as they boomed against the cliff wall. Despite the Slayer’s silence, Korgan felt safe to approach and sit next to him on the cliff’s edge. Gotrek still looked terrible. It was nearly a week since he had reappeared in Karag-Varr, tumbling into the square from the storm clouds that had been hammering the mountain since Thurgyn died. And in that week every healer in the magmahold had done their best to treat Gotrek’s wounds, but he still looked like he had been mauled by something, or several somethings. His left arm was broken, there was a deep gash across his forehead, and his one good eye was so bruised he was almost blind. Even the rune in his chest seemed altered – dark and inert where it had previously gleamed. Since he had returned, Gotrek had been uncharacteristically calm, accepting the attentions of the healers and eating the food he was served, but he had not

spoken a single word. So Korgan was surprised when, after a few minutes, the Slayer addressed him in gravelly tones. 'I should have listened to you.'

Korgan was so taken aback at hearing Gotrek speak that it took him a moment to answer. 'You should have listened to me when?'

Gotrek continued looking out at the starlit sea. It was cold, this far from the mountains, but he showed no sign of feeling the wind that was whistling through the rocks. 'You were the first one I met. On the bridge into your hold. You told me I should leave while I still could.'

'Ah.' They sat in silence for a while, listening to the waves. Then Korgan said, 'Can you tell me what happened? After you left us. After the storm killed the runefather.'

Gotrek scowled. 'Don't start that storm rubbish again. Thurgyn was killed by aelves. There was a battle.'

'I understand...' Korgan hesitated, guessing that he was probably about to enrage Gotrek even further. 'But none of us can remember it. We remember your words and those of your Khainite companion. We remember your talk of aelves who rode the storm. But we don't actually remember them.' He shook his head. 'I've tried, repeatedly, to summon a memory of it, but I can't.'

Gotrek glowered, but then he shook his head and the heat faded from his eye. 'What does it matter?' He looked back out at the sea. 'It makes no difference. I don't think they'll attack you again. It was me they were after and I'm leaving. All these trials you've faced, all these losses you suffered, it was all because they wanted me. For all my fine talk of fixing the realms, I've made things bloody worse. That's why I'm going. I need to get away from you people.' He nodded to a redoubt, further down the coast. Even at this late hour, there were signs of building work as Fyreslayers and humans worked to repair the walls and create new defences. 'You're back on your feet now. You've reclaimed your outposts and watchtowers. You're rebuilding.' He frowned. 'Do you have a new runefather yet?'

Korgan struggled to hide his pride. 'The lodge elders chose me.'

Gotrek nodded. 'You have good dawī steel in your spine. I saw it the first day I met you. You'll do well, lad.'

If anyone else had called Korgan 'lad' he would have been outraged, but from a relic like Gotrek, it seemed reasonable. 'The healers tell me you are not fit to go anywhere, yet. Those wounds are more serious than you

realise.'

Gotrek muttered. 'A few scratches never stopped me before. Especially scratches I got from aelves dressed in seashells.'

'But where will you go?'

Gotrek shrugged. 'Away. I think the sodding aelf was right. I'm more trouble than I'm worth.'

Korgan shook his head and nodded at the lights in the distance where the redoubt was being rebuilt. 'None of this would be happening if you hadn't come to us. We used to defend coastal villages from greenskins. Sometimes we'd even strike at the Great Enemy if we saw a chance, ambushing Chaos caravans or outposts. But all we were really doing was surviving, getting by. Now we're doing more than that. We're extending our reach. Karag-Wyr and the other holds are just the beginning. You showed us what we're capable of. And it's all because you saved Thurgyn-Grimnir.' He looked Gotrek in the eye. 'You lit a spark in him. And in the rest of us. You showed us that we can do *more* than survive. We can fight back.'

Gotrek nodded. 'You're dawi. Of course you'll fight back. It's what you were built for.'

'But you didn't answer my question,' said Korgan. 'What happened to you after Thurgyn was killed?'

'I tried to avenge him.' Gotrek spat on the ground. 'I *would* have avenged him. But that thagi witch Maleneth stopped me.' The Slayer clenched his fists. 'She stopped me' – he held up his finger and thumb – 'when I was *this* close.'

'So Maleneth was working with the other aelves?'

'No! Of course she wasn't working with them. She was trying to save me.' He lurched to his feet, glaring at the sky. 'As if *I* need bloody saving!'

The thought of Maleneth seemed to madden Gotrek more than anything else. Korgan decided to remain quiet as Gotrek strode along the cliff's edge, yelling and tugging at his beard as he cursed the aelf.

'What happened to her?' asked Korgan when Gotrek had fallen quiet and sat down next to him again.

'Dead.' Gotrek's voice was hollow. 'Bloody dead. Just like I told her she would be.'

Korgan was struggling to tell if Gotrek was furious because Maleneth had betrayed him or because she was dead. He took out a small, wax-sealed

scroll. 'She wrote this,' he said. 'The day before you were taken. Just before the victory feast. She wanted it sent to an address in Barak-Urbaz.'

Gotrek took the letter and stared at it, hatred burning in his eyes. Then he hurled it into the darkness without breaking the seal. 'Still writing to her friends in Azyr,' he muttered. 'Still spying on me.'

Korgan had searched for Gotrek hoping to help him, but he realised his presence was making the Slayer's mood worse. 'Of course you may leave whenever you wish,' he said. 'I just wanted to thank you for everything you have given us. You do not realise the change you have made. The Varrukh are reborn. We are making plans that would have been laughed at before you came. Because of you, the lodge elders are even considering sending an expedition to Karak-a-Zaruk.'

'Karak-a-Zaruk?' Gotrek was looking in the direction he had thrown the letter, as though he regretted not keeping it. 'Is that another one of your holds?'

'No. A ruin. I believe you discussed it with Thurgyn after the battle of Karag-Wyr. Do you remember? It's swarming with skaven now, but it was once the capital of a duardin kingdom, our ancestors' kingdom, the Khazalid Empire.'

'Oh, aye.' Gotrek nodded. 'I've heard of it.' His tone remained bitter. 'A glorious, realm-spanning dawí empire. The sky dwarfs of Barak-Urbaz were banging on about it. I admit, the idea caught my attention. It sounded so much like my own...' He shook his head. 'But if it was everything you people claim, Chaos could never have taken these lands.' He glanced at Korgan. 'Why did this great dawí kingdom fall? Let me guess, were they obsessed with hoarding wealth? Or blinded by hubris and too proud to realise the danger? Or did they stop listening to the wisdom of their elders?'

Korgan shrugged, recalling the sagas and legends of the Khazalid Empire. 'It wasn't any of those things. The empire stood firm. It lasted for many centuries. It would probably still be here now if the Maker hadn't left the realm. He left the duardin to fend for themselves. It was only then that the empire fell.'

Gotrek had been gazing out to sea again but he stiffened and turned to Korgan. 'Grungni?'

'Yes. According to the old sagas, at least. He guided and ruled them, granting them wisdom and performing great feats of engineering. Under his

gaze the Khazalid Empire thrived. But then he left and the empire fell. Then came the Age of Chaos and all the terrible things that followed. Our lands were taken from us and the duardin race was sundered. According to the legends, Fyreslayers and Kharadron and all the other races of duardin are remnants of that one, single kingdom.'

Gotrek was staring at Korgan. He spoke quietly. 'Where did the Maker go?'

'Who would claim to know the movements of the gods? But the Sigmarites claim he's with them. They say Grungni dwells in the Celestial Realm, working as a weaponsmith for Sigmar.'

Korgan realised that Gotrek's mood had suddenly shifted. Rather than despondent, he now looked incensed. 'You're telling me that dawī once ruled these lands, and kept them safe, and Grungni abandoned them?'

'I didn't say abandoned.'

'Abandoned,' growled Gotrek, rage sparking in his bloodshot eye. 'I'll bloody say it.' He slapped the lifeless piece of metal in his chest. 'This is what gods do. Do you see? They play with mortals. Use them like toys. Then they cast them aside when something else catches their eye. All this mess. All these deaths. It's on their heads. They sprawl in the heavens, feathering nests while everyone else burns. I've seen it with my own eyes, everywhere I go. Cannibals burning innocent people. Sorcerers welcoming daemons with open arms. The bloody skaven, left to run free, squatting in your old capital, filling it with their filth.' He snatched his axe from the ground, filling the air with embers. 'Well, not any more. This Slayer has had enough. Let Grungni hide up there with his feet on the hearth. Let him be Sigmar's bloody lapdog. I don't need him. I don't need any of them.' He pointed his axe at Korgan. 'Where is it?'

Korgan had fought unspeakable horrors in his life, but faced with a raging Gotrek he struggled to keep his voice level. 'Where's what?'

'The capital. The seat of this old empire. Karak-a-Zaruk. Where is it?'

There was such wrath in Gotrek's eye that Korgan's pulse hammered. 'It lies to the north, somewhere past the Grymmpeaks. No one knows exactly where. And it would be a long journey. Are you well enough?'

'Oh, I'm well enough.' Gotrek glared at his axe, firelight glinting in his eye. 'I'm not done yet, lad. Not by a bloody long shot.'

Gotrek's fervour was so infectious that Korgan felt like howling a battle

cry, but he tried to think logically. He shook his head. 'Rebuilding a kingdom means more than reclaiming an old ruin. We could sacrifice thousands of lives trying to drive out the skaven, but what would be left of us? We'd be a spent force. We'd die trying to right an ancient wrong.' He could feel Gotrek glaring at him and he almost backed down, but then he thought about his new role as runefather and held his nerve. 'I will not sacrifice my lodge needlessly.'

'Needlessly?' snarled Gotrek, rising to his feet and glowering at Korgan, his voice trembling.

Korgan stood and backed away from Gotrek, gripping his latchkey axe. As they stared at each other Korgan cursed himself for coming to find Gotrek. He should have left him to brood alone. Now one of them was going to die. And he doubted it would be Gotrek.

Gotrek readied his weapon, his muscles shaking and glistening with sweat. Then he lowered his axe and stared into the distance. 'It's my fault she died.'

It took Korgan a moment to realise that Gotrek's rage had vanished, leaving him as quickly as it came. He lowered his weapon but kept hold of it just in case. Gotrek's mood changes were unpredictable, even for a Fyreslayer. 'The Khainite?'

'Aye.' Gotrek's expression was bleak. He looked as old as the cliffs, like a piece of blasted, volcanic rock. 'We could have escaped. One of the fish aelves wanted us gone. Maleneth died because I wouldn't listen. Because I couldn't think straight. I couldn't let go.' He looked up at Korgan. 'And here I am, trying to do it again. Trying to lead you to your death. Trying to ease my grief with your blood. I'm bound by my past. I can't shake it off. Everywhere I go. Everything I do. I can't escape it.'

Korgan shook his head. 'I don't know what happened with you and the Khainite, but I know this – she was no pushover. She made her own choices. And you've told me things that give me hope for the future of the realms. *Hope*. Who could have ever expected that? After all these years.' He thought for a moment, then continued. 'You said something at the victory feast. You said you want to drive evil from the realms. And that it was possible. That's not living in the past. That's not trying to right old wrongs. That's making a stand. And I'd stand with you, Gotrek Gurnisson. We all would. And who knows, perhaps then, if we gathered enough allies,

if we won enough victories, perhaps there *would* be a way to rebuild the things we've lost.'

Gotrek stared at him, emotions flickering across his face: grief, rage, hope and pain all warring in his eye. Then his gaze cleared and he looked resolute again. 'No. I'd be your bloody death knell. Just like all the others. I won't do it.'

Korgan was going to disagree but Gotrek held up a hand to silence him. 'You're a true dawí, Korgan-Grimnir. You'll make a good runefather and I'm proud to have met you. You've made me realise I was wrong about many things.' He brandished his axe. 'But if you try to stop me, you won't live to regret it.'

Korgan shook his head but he had the sense not to argue. 'Good luck, Gotrek Gurnisson.' They clasped each other's arms.

Then Gotrek slung his axe over his shoulder and marched off down the coast. Korgan stood at the edge of the precipice, watching him go. There was another storm whipping in from the sea, lashing against the cliffs and stirring up the waves. It moaned and howled around Gotrek as he disappeared into the darkness, as though unwilling to lay its fingers on him. Then he was gone.

Korgan whispered a prayer for him, then turned away, heading back towards the hulking silhouette of his magmadroth. He had not gone far when he spotted something pale lying on the rocks. As he picked it up he realised it was the letter Maleneth had written just before she was killed. He opened the scroll and started to read.

Your Celestial Highnesses,

I hope this missive will reach you, but my current hosts are unpredictable, to say the least. I have bribed a servant to deliver it to an agent in Barak-Urbaz but, in truth, he's as likely to leave it under an empty ale cup or accidentally set it alight. The Slayer and I are residing in a Fyreslayer magmahold by the name of Karag-Varr, in the southernmost reaches of the Grymmpeaks. The Fyreslayers are an unruly rabble and we arrived to find them in a state of disarray. To add to the confusion, the hold has been attacked, several times, by Idoneth aelves for reasons that are beyond me. What interest could aelves have in such a place? I know very little of the Idoneth but, as far as I can tell, they have no desire to take the Fyreslayers' lands or goods, so I can only presume the attacks stem from a vendetta of some kind.

When we arrived at the magmahold, the Fyreslayers were in the grips of a religious mania but Gotrek employed his usual tactic of shouting until people lose the will to argue. As a result of his browbeating, the Fyreslayers are now in the process of reclaiming their territories. His behaviour since we left Barak-Urbaz, and the impact he has had on the Fyreslayers, has confirmed a suspicion I have been grappling with for a long time. Great as Blackhammer's Master Rune is, Gotrek is greater. We thought that the rune was a weapon that could help us reclaim the realms, but I now see that Gotrek himself is the realms' greatest hope. He is an appalling specimen, in almost every respect; my opinion remains unchanged in that regard. But he is also unstoppable. Nothing we have encountered has held him back or even slowed him down. And, in recent weeks, he has set aside his various personal obsessions and remained fixed on his idea of setting the realms to rights. I may have ridiculed his ambitions in the past, but the more time I spend with him, the harder it is to mock him. I think he actually has the strength and resolve to make a difference. I can imagine your snorts of derision as you read this, and I can understand your cynicism, but let me say this: until you spend time in the company of

Gotrek Gurnisson, you can have no idea of what he is capable of. I have decided that, whatever fate has in store for him, I must do my best to keep him alive and to hold him to this course he has set himself.

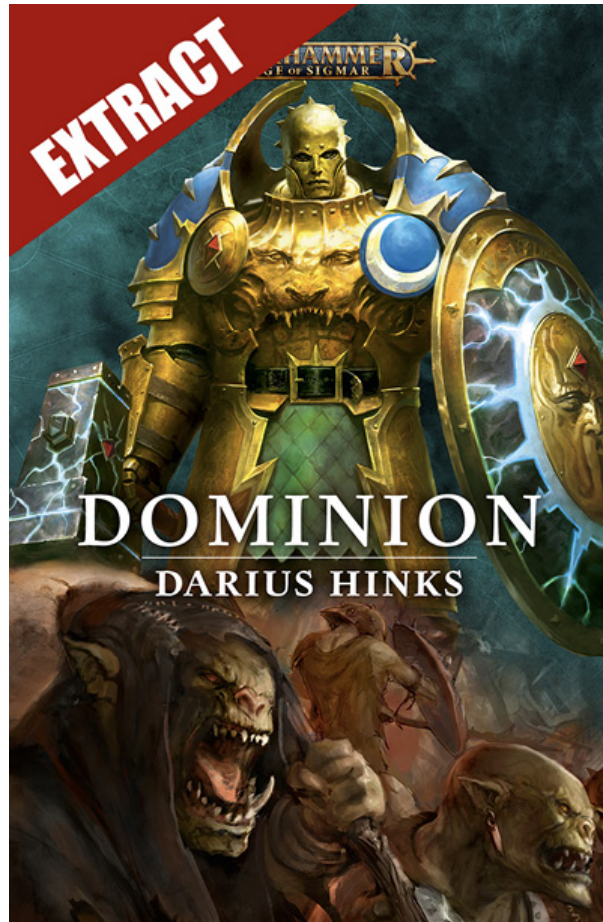
Since leaving Azyrheim, I have come to fully understand the scale of the challenge that lies ahead. The worshippers of Chaos are legion. Sigmar's Stormhosts are like a spear hurled at an ocean. There are many reasons for despair, but in Gotrek I see a reason for hope. And I have decided that the best way to utilise his power is to keep him here, on the front lines, where the wars of reclamation are taking place, rather than ensnare him in the halls of Azyr. I realise this is a deviation from our plan, but I urge you to keep faith in me and refrain from sending other agents to intervene. I recently heard a rumour that Captain Drymuss had been killed, not far from here, while attempting to track me down. Drymuss was a valuable agent and, as I'm sure you know, he was also a great personal friend of mine. I would not want you to sacrifice any more members of the order on my behalf. If I need your help, I will contact you, but until then, I assure you, I am perfectly capable of looking after myself and I remain,

*Your most loyal and faithful votary,
Maleneth Witchblade*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Blackstone Fortress*, *Blackstone Fortress: Ascension* and the accompanying audio drama *The Beast Inside*. He also wrote three novels in the Mephiston series: *Mephiston: Blood of Sanguinius*, *Mephiston: Revenant Crusade* and *Mephiston: City of Light*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*. His work for Age of Sigmar includes *Dominion*, *Hammers of Sigmar*, *Warqueen* and the Gotrek Gurnisson novels *Ghoulslayer* and *Gitslayer*. For Warhammer, he wrote *Warrior Priest*, which won the David Gemmel Morningstar Award for best newcomer, as well as the Orion trilogy, *Sigvald* and several novellas.

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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