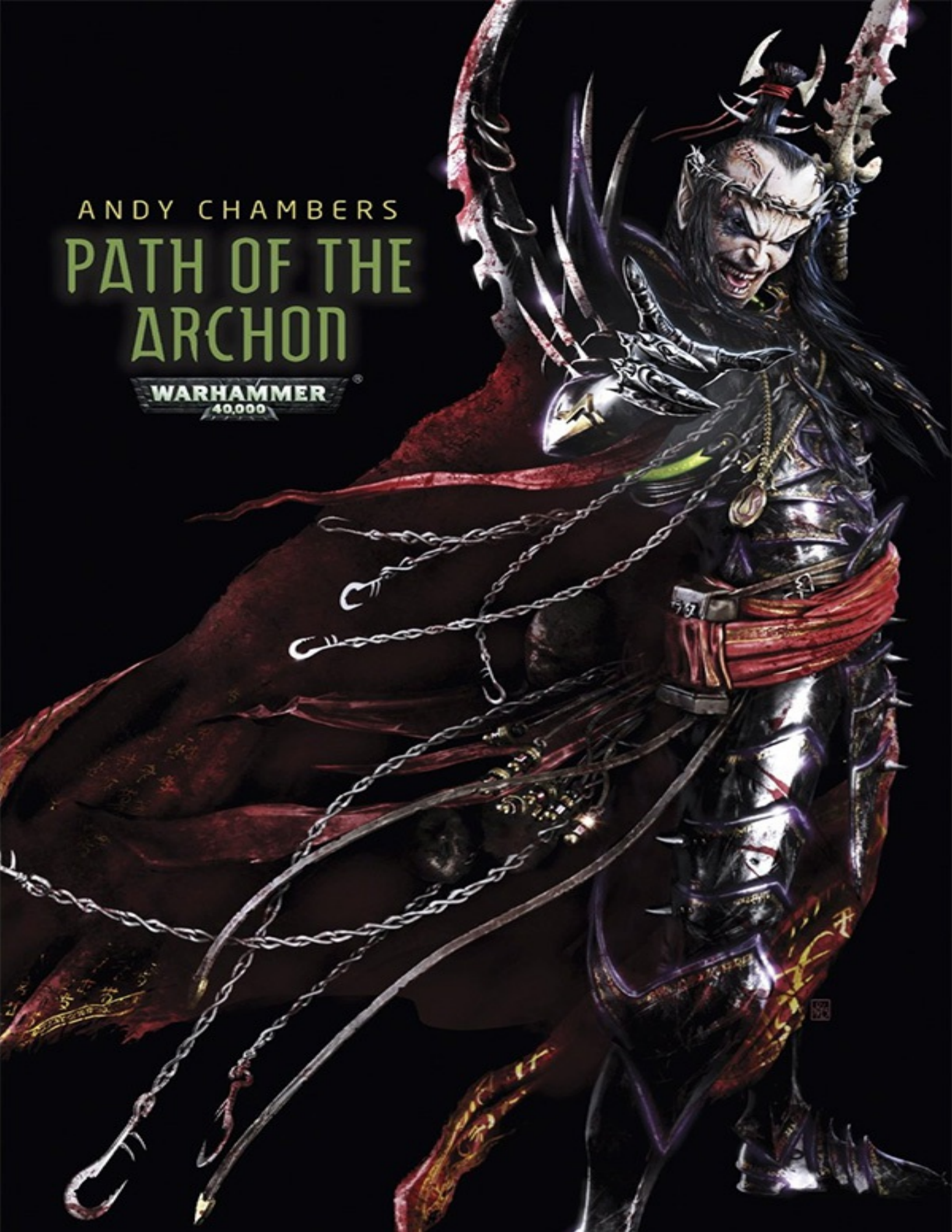


ANDY CHAMBERS  
PATH OF THE  
ARCHON

WARHAMMER  
40,000



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40,000

# PATH OF THE ARCHON

ANDY CHAMBERS

v1.1

BernyBenuyas 12.02.15



*Dedicated to Jessica,  
the Archon of my House.*



TORTURERS AND SADISTS, NIGHTMARE MADE REAL, THE DARK ELДАР ARE EVIL INCARNATE. COLD AND BEAUTIFUL, SLENDER OF BONE, THEIR LITHE APPEARANCE BELIES THEIR DEADLY TALENT FOR SLAUGHTER AND CRUELTY.

FROM THE HIDDEN CITY OF COMMORRAGH, THE DARK ELДАР LAUNCH THEIR LIGHTNING RAIDS INTO THE DEPTHS OF REALSPACE, SOWING TERROR AND LEAVING DEVASTATION IN THEIR WAKE. THEY HUNT FOR SLAVES, FODDER FOR THE HELL-PITS AND THE PETTY AMUSEMENTS OF THEIR LORDS WHO DRAW SUSTENANCE FROM THE BLOOD SHED IN RITUAL BATTLE. FOR IN THIS HELLISH REALM, LIVING FLESH IS CURRENCY AND OVERLORD ASDRUBAEL VECT RULES ABOVE ALL WITH THE GREATEST SHARE.

BENEATH THEIR SUPREME MASTER, THE ARCHONS OF THE DARKLING CITY MURDER AND CHEAT TO KEEP ONE STEP AHEAD OF SHE WHO THIRSTS. FOR THE DARK ELДАР HARBOUR A TERRIBLE CURSE, A WASTING OF THEIR FLESH THAT CAN ONLY BE SLOWED BY THE INFLECTION OF PAIN. LIFE ETERNAL IS THE REWARD FOR THIS SOUL HARVEST, AND THE FAVOUR OF THE ANCIENT HAEMONCULI CAN EXTEND AN ELДАР'S MORTAL COIL YET FURTHER... FOR A PRICE. THE ALTERNATIVE IS DAMNATION AND ENDLESS SUFFERING, A WITHERING OF BODY AND MIND UNTIL ALL THAT REMAINS IS DUST.

BUT SUCH HUNGER CANNOT EVER BE SATIED. IT IS A BOTTOMLESS PIT OF HATE AND DEPRAVITY THAT LURKS WITHIN THE DARK ELДАР, A VESSEL THAT CAN NEVER TRULY BE FILLED, EVEN WITH OCEANS OF BLOOD. AND WHEN THE LAST DROP HAS BLED AWAY, THE SOUL THIEVES WILL KNOW TRUE TERROR AS THE DAEMONS COME TO CLAIM THEM...



## PROLOGUE

*The flow of events is now sweeping rapidly to its conclusion: a flock of dark birds settles on the carcass it has made, a school of fish darts together at the approach of a predator. To begin a description of an ending one must surely begin at the beginning, but that is a tale unto itself, and in any case the beginning too often flows from a previous ending. I think you'll agree it's a pretty quandary and no mistake. So consider this:*

*We might say that this tale began with the Fall of the eldar race, a race of such brilliance and star-spanning genius that the entire great wheel of the galaxy was their playground. Their collapse, their Fall, only came about through their own hubris. Thinking themselves untouchable they unconsciously wrought an entity that could touch even them. Their doom was the manifestation of their own unspoken desires to indulge without limit, to inflict beyond sanity, to take and to ravish with a force so potent that their boundless passion became atavistic and unstoppable. Their passion gave birth to the entity the eldar call She Who Thirsts, and that entity went on to destroy them.*

*We could equally say that it began with Commorrhagh – a place that was old and wicked even before the Fall. Commorrhagh, the great port-city nestled deep within the void. Commorrhagh, the unique node lodged into the vast interdimensional labyrinth of the webway, itself the key to the eldar race's galaxy-spanning empire. Commorrhagh, the city of portals, from whence its denizens can range across all that remains of the ragged, oft-torn webway to take what they will from a thousand tremulous realities.*

*Commorrhagh survived the birth of She Who Thirsts and the subsequent Fall. It seems such a little thing to say it thus, yet it was a dark miracle of such dimensions as to be almost incomprehensible at the time. When She Who Thirsts came into being the vast majority of the eldar race was snuffed out in an instant by the psychic shockwave of her birth. The very home worlds of the eldar race were dragged from the skein of reality and plunged into the roiling madness of warp space to feed the daemon-queen's appetites. The eldar gods were overthrown and broken by the upstart usurper...*

*...And yet buried deep within the webway, warded and protected with arcane mysteries, Commorrhagh survived.*

*Perhaps the truth is that it began with the denizens of Commorrhagh. They were too proud, too vicious and too desperate to bow to the madness of the doom that overtook their race. The Commorrites slew all those vulnerable to She Who Thirsts, and then they massacred the fearful, and then they culled the weak. What survived in Commorrhagh was a race of pure-bred survivors with the blackest hearts imaginable. They became a people of flint and stone, ready to set their faces against any vicissitudes unleashed upon their race by the*

*uncaring Fates. They would live on, no matter the cost, clawing their continued existence from the belly of creation without gods or allies or friends to help them.*

*Some say the Commorrites were like this even before The Fall, and that it was their own unbridled excesses that brought She Who Thirsts into being. Bitter wars have been fought over such contentions among the dwindling eldar kindreds that survived The Fall. In time wisdom prevailed and it became understood that such recriminations serve only She Who Thirsts. For she still desires the last drops of vitality from the race that gave birth to her. In the depths of the void and deep inside every eldar heart she lurks, waiting to consume the very last of them: a siren sickness, an addiction, a black hole draining away all life, all hope.*

*But this is still all just ancient history. We must look closer to the present to find the origins of our current tale.*

*Commorragh itself has been ruled over by a great tyrant named Asdrubael Vect for more than six millennia. This supreme overlord elevated himself from the ranks of the lowliest slaves by dint of his intellect, ruthlessness and daring. He swept away the ancient aristocracy and instituted a new order of absolute meritocracy in its place. For six thousand years only those cunning and bold enough to survive his blood-soaked reign have enjoyed the privileges of rank and survival. The tyrant has many enemies but few that could be called rivals. Past attempts to unseat him have been spectacularly bloody and ineffective, yet this has done little to dissuade those who would see the tyrant fall.*

*Which brings us to the current conflagration; a trio of Commorrite nobles with dreams of a return to the old order plotted against Asdrubael Vect. These three, Yllithian, Xelian and Kraillach, led the most powerful of the old noble houses and hungered for vengeance against Vect. In their ambition they unleashed forces beyond their capacity to control. As masters of the physical with troops, ships and fortresses at their command, these nobles fatally overlooked the metaphysical implications of their actions. Events spiralled out of control to such an extent that it was almost too late to prevent disaster before wiser heads could intercede.*

*You must understand that due to its unique nature Commorragh can be both stronger and more fragile than it seems. Its presence at the nexus of so many paths through the webway means that any sufficient perturbation in the void can set the whole, vast place thrumming. Native Commorrites call such an event a 'Dysjunction' and it is rightly feared. In a Dysjunction the bubble of reality separating Commorragh from the wild chaos of the void becomes stretched very thin indeed. Under successive shocks it becomes porous to the predatory entities that dwell in the depths, permitting their ingress to the city. Furthermore the galaxy-spanning portals which connect Commorragh to the outside universe can unpredictably reorient themselves and even spew unbounded etheric energies into the city. In short, as a result of a Dysjunction, the entire mighty edifice that is Commorragh teeters on the brink of ruin and madness.*

*This is what the nobles' ambitions won for them and now all but one has been destroyed by it. The last noble, Yllithian, can only hope to survive if Asdrubael Vect remains ignorant of his role in the disaster... and it seems possible that the supreme overlord already knows the truth. Yet even in their failure the nobles have succeeded after a fashion. The Dysjunction has damaged much of the city. The resulting chaos has killed or scattered many of its citizens and the whole affair has placed the rulership of the supreme overlord in a highly precarious position. The race is on to see who will adapt and turn the changing situation to their advantage*

*first: Vect, Yllithian, or other, even less savoury entities waiting in the wings.*

*Come now and we will enter the highest courts of a dark kingdom beset by ruin. See now through the eyes of one without passions, without ambitions – a perfect observer for the events coming to pass.*





## CHAPTER 1

### THE GELDING

I have no name, only a function. Though nameless I am bestowed many titles: supreme overlord, great tyrant, Archon of Archons, Allfather – and yet none of these are my own. I am a living cypher, an encoded shadow given a form that lives and breathes, that observes and learns and yet is nothing, a passing fancy to be used as desired and expended when necessary. If I should sound too dour shed no tears for me. I would not do so for you.

I am the image of my creator, and he is the wellspring of my existence. I worship him with a purity that you cannot imagine. He is quite literally everything to me, the quintessence of all that I am. It is a rare chance that allows us to be together at the same instant – some argue that it diminishes my function, but my creator knows better than they. Once I called him father. He punished me for it.

My purpose is simple. When we are together my creator's enemies cannot tell us apart. Sometimes he speaks, sometimes I speak. I laugh inwardly to see their eyes flicker uncertainly between us as they try to determine which of us is the master and which of us is his shadow. It is our secret to keep and ours alone. A shared, precious thing.

His true name is Asdrubael Vect, and the titles of supreme overlord, great tyrant, Archon of Archons and many others belong to him. I have no name, but behind my back those who know what I am call me 'the Gelding'. They may hold me in contempt, but at times like these it is I who stands unbowed by the aura of black menace that clings to Asdrubael Vect while others quail. I exist to be destroyed and if that becomes my master's desire then it is my pleasure and my duty to obey.

Vect walks now, stalking from mirror-shard to mirror-shard in the highest tower of Coespur. Each fractal crystal shard shows a different view of his city plunging into ruin. Some of the shards are completely black, their invisible eyes blinded by an unknown agency, and these appear to disturb Vect most of all. He is angry, vengeful. Enemies have struck at the heart of his power and he does not know how or why.

But he suspects. He always suspects.

One living crystal facet shows a mighty spire in High Commorrhagh. Flames wreath its base, white-hot and preternaturally hungry. The spire is kilometres high and yet somehow the flames have found a path all the way from its wide base to its narrow crown. Blade-sharp palaces at the tip are melting away,

drooling onto terraces below as molten slag. As we watch, the base of the spire flakes away to reveal ant-like chambers and rooms glowing in the heat. These flash into a new inferno as oxygen rushes in. The spire lurches and seems to bulge along one side for a heartbeat before toppling with the slow majesty of a falling forest giant.

I notice a particular set to my master's shoulders at the sight and I utter a bleak, cold-hearted laugh on his behalf. No doubt some of his enemies dwelled in that fallen spire. He has many enemies.

Another crystal shows a wide curve of low Commorragh slums, an accretion of slave shops and vice dens wedged between the bases of the spires and their foundation slabs. This area would have once held the inhabitants of a small nation but now it has been inundated. A foul upwelling of toxic wastes from levels even lower than this has drowned the area. Now only a handful of shanty islands and tumbled ruins project from a strangling sea of foul, lapping ooze. Crusting the ooze is a thick layer of bloated corpses that bob obscenely in the swell.

Vect walks past this scene with barely a glance. The battle is already lost in the district shown. He deigns not to notice the black, wavering tendrils that have begun pushing their way up out of the ooze, their presence slowly blotting the crystal's viewpoint.

He stops before a crystal pane that shows a confusing melee. A great, gleaming gateway of emerald and brass is vomiting an unending stream of multicoloured foulness. Wherever the substance touches the ground it warps and twists it like melting wax. Formless shapes rear up from flux to take on brief solidity: claws, fangs, limbs, eyes, tongues are shaped in an anarchic mockery of natural life. At the edges of the frame kabalite warriors are blasting and slashing their way to the gate. One after another they are pulled down by the gateway's metamorphic excrescences. They give no heed to their casualties and push on regardless. A bare handful of survivors win through to the gate, but they do stop the flow.

Asdrubael Vect nods in satisfaction. I issue orders for the surviving kabalite warriors to be richly rewarded on their return. My orders will be obeyed as if the great tyrant himself had spoken the words, since few here know that I am not he. In the fullness of time the heroic survivors will be killed off, one by one, to ensure there is no chance of them spreading the ineffable corruption they were touched by as they fought against it.

The final crystalline pane that Vect examines is not like the others. This one shows a bloated, gibbous star against a storm-wracked sky. This is an *Ilmaea*, one of the captured suns that were enslaved to heat and light Commorragh long aeons in the past. The star appears to be caught within a gossamer net so fine that it is almost imperceptible against its constrained bulk. In reality the half-seen net is unthinkable vast and the star itself is shrunk to a fraction of its normal size, imprisoned in a pocket of dimensional space like a prisoner in an oubliette.

Angry flares roil from the *Ilmaea's* circumference, yet it is clearly quietening now with each black arc of fire weaker and smaller than the last – a reverse of its situation just minutes ago. Vect gestures at the crystal and the view shifts closer to one section of the net surrounding the *Ilmaea*. It is revealed to be a network of vast structures connected by billions of kilometres of cables. Flights of dark, dagger-like kabalite craft are diving from a towering edifice, a rain of black knives plunging towards Commorragh.

The supreme overlord straightens and stares intently at the scene. Archon Yllithian and his White Flames kabal have survived. I know that Vect's suspicions about Yllithian run deep. He had ordered Archon Aez'ashya of the Blades of Desire to destroy the White Flames. Clearly the task was beyond her. I sense that the true Asdrubael Vect is about to speak and I move to his side as softly and silently as a shadow.

'Get Sythrac and Malys in here,' the true Vect says, 'and send for my Medusae'. A terrified slave gladly flees from the chamber to fetch two of the high Archons waiting outside. My heart rises even further at the news that I will have a rare opportunity to see my one and only true friend. This is truly a day of wonders.

In the atrium outside Vect's scrying chamber an assembly of the most powerful Archons of Commorrhagh awaited the supreme overlord's command. The lofty onyx walls of the atrium rose to a sloping ceiling inset with unbreakable ruby panels, letting through the shifting light of the *Ilmaea* even as they transformed it to the colour of blood. A pain-choir had been summoned to supply entertainment and light refreshment for the Archons while they waited. The thin, white-skinned choirmaster was a haemonculus named Uverashki who was famed for his discretion and artistic sensibility. The thin, high wails of the choir never interrupted conversation or become atonal for an instant beneath Uverashki's assured touch.

Unfortunately not even Uverashki's consummate skills in the arts of flesh-sculpting and excruciation could distract the Archons from one another. The atmosphere crackled with an undercurrent of barely restrained tension. Bitter rivalries, murderous jealousies and long-running vendettas of such vehemence existed between the Archons that they could snuff out suns and consign entire races to oblivion.

Among them there was Valossian Sythrac, the soul hunter who acted as Archon of Vect's own Black Heart kabal. He stalked impatiently back and forth as he awaited the call for action from his master. Nearby Archon Malixian of the Ninth Raptrex perched in his feathered cloak and beaked mask mournfully contemplating the destruction that the Dysjunction had wrought upon his beloved aviaries. Lady Aurelia Malys, Archon of the kabal of the Poisoned Tongue, whispered conspiratorially with Archon Khromys of the kabal of the Obsidian Rose, a renowned artificer and creator with a mind as sharp as the monomolecular blades she forged. Lord Xerathis, Archon of the kabal of the Broken Sigil, stood to one side gazing out of the atrium's many slit-like windows. Xerathis was looking across the riven cityscape of Commorrhagh with a voracious expression, perhaps wishing that the damage done there had been by his own hand.

Such games as these great leaders were wont to play with one another had brought untold misery to countless billions in the past, but usually only outside the confines of the great port-city of Commorrhagh. Assassinations, ambushes, infiltrations, blackmail and kidnapping were the tools of choice within the eternal city, lest the supreme overlord should take issue with stronger measures

being used. Now the Archons were constrained to sit and wait upon the tyrant's command while their home burned around them. Even among such paragons of ancient wickedness as these the strain of inaction was beginning to tell.

With the possible exception of Valossian Sythrac it would have been a mistake to think of the assembled Archons as being Asdrubael Vect's staunchest supporters. That would be to give them entirely too much credit. Personal loyalty was a coin of little value in Corespur or anywhere else in Commorrhagh. Rather these Archons were the ones most fatally bound to Asdrubael Vect in one form or another – whether through his patronage, his protection, the threat of his retribution or because of secrets known only to themselves and Vect.

Over the centuries the supreme overlord had spun a web of subtle interdependencies through Commorrhagh to the point where he could command these particular Archons with every confidence of being obeyed. Their kabals and their strength were reliant on the existing order in the eternal city and thus any threat to that order also represented a threat to them as individuals too. Not one of them could or would trust any of the others for a moment, but in the current crisis they would act in perfect concert to maintain their collective grip on the reins of power. Even traitorous murderers can be persuaded to work together in the presence of a greater threat.

As the finely etched doors of the scrying chamber swung open, all of the Archons glanced expectantly towards it, each perhaps anticipating that Vect would be calling for them alone. The pallid slave that appeared found himself pinioned by the merciless, black gaze of a dozen individuals steeped in untold centuries of murder and torture. To his credit the slave swallowed only once before announcing in a quavering voice.

'The supreme overlord calls for the lord Sythrac and the lady Malys.'

His words were greeted with a frosty silence. The two so named exchanged a calculating look before striding confidently into the scrying chamber. Behind them the remaining Archons were left to contemplate one another and reassess their potential standings in the supreme overlord's eyes.

'So the faithful hound has returned just in time to heed his master's call,' Malys observed slyly as the doors swung shut behind them.

'It only remains to be seen why the master calls for his bitch at the same moment,' Sythrac shot back. Lady Malys smiled thinly at his crude response. In truth Vect's desire for her had waned all too quickly. Malys's quick wit and cunning mind – attributes the supreme overlord had once found so highly attractive – seemed only to irritate him now. Finding herself paired with Vect's puppet kabal-master was a novel and not entirely reassuring development.

'It was fortuitous that you escaped the moment of Dysjunction, Valossian, it was quite the most terrible I've witnessed at its height. How is it that you always have the good fortune to be away at just the right moment?'

Sythrac paused and looked her full in the face before answering. Malys was renowned as an astonishing, indeed bewitching, beauty even by the extreme aesthetics of High Commorrite society. Unsurprisingly Valossian Sythrac seemed entirely unmoved by the sight of her. He knew that the

beautiful face was merely a mask over a cold, intricate intellect of cogs and gears. Her comradely observation was just a probe, a reconnaissance-by-fire to reveal weakness or self-doubt on his part. It was easy to rebuff as he had none to be revealed.

‘The webway was riven and the portals failed as soon as the Dysjunction occurred,’ Sythrac said flatly. ‘Finding my way back was... challenging. Had I delayed leaving the Sable Marches by even an hour I would have been completely trapped there. So tell me, Aurelia, if I knew what was about to occur why would I go hunting in some backwater and risk not being able to come back at all? Now, assuming that your pointless curiosity has been satisfied, I, for one, do not wish to keep our supreme overlord waiting any longer.’

Malys smiled radiantly and nodded indulgently to him as if to imply that their brief dalliance had been at Sythrac’s own behest. He paid her no heed and stalked away with the dangerous poise of a hunting cat. The scrying chamber was circular in plan. Its faceted walls rose high overhead until they came together into a central point lost in shadows. The floor of the chamber was almost entirely occupied by concentric rings of tall, irregular crystals, each flattened and polished on their inward-pointing face. At the centre of it all they found Vect poised like a spider in the middle of its web. The supreme overlord was seated in an ugly metal throne with his doppelgänger at his side and his Medusae squatting a discreet distance away.

Both Vect and his double wore identical dark, floor-length robes embossed with eye-twisting sigils of glossy black metal. The whole was topped by a high crown of curling obsidian horns. Sythrac recognised Vect’s regalia as one that he had frequently adopted in the earliest days of his tyranny after his overthrow of the old noble houses. In more recent times Vect had worn it occasionally as a reminder of the past. It was a costume that the supreme overlord affected only when there was momentous, bloody work to be done.

‘Don’t waste time squabbling over my favours, children,’ the supreme overlord observed coldly as they came into view, ‘there’ll be time enough for that later – and I can assure you that not a few disappointments will be entailed in the final reckoning. Now kneel before me.’

Malys and Sythrac knelt as Vect commanded, ritually casting their gaze downwards and exposing their necks as a sign of submission. It was a humiliating ritual and intentionally so, a reminder that even among the apex predators of Commorragh one alone ruled supreme.

Naturally it also offered the supreme overlord an excellent moment of vulnerability to seize or kill those that had displeased him. Long seconds passed for Sythrac and Malys but no blade fell from the shadows. Finally Vect bade them rise and directed their attention outwards to the scrying crystals before speaking. A thousand scenes of destruction, conflict and despair confronted them.

‘The kabals have been busy, they fight with the strength of desperation and so we win our city back step by step. I have watched their progress through the crystals, but that isn’t enough to satisfy me. The time is ripe to reassert control.’ Vect paused, inviting comment.

‘How may the kabal of the Black Heart serve your wishes, supreme overlord?’ Sythrac said immediately. Both Vect and his duplicate smiled at the Archon’s simple statement of loyalty.

‘Very simply, I want you to push through Sorrow Fell to Ashkeri Talon and secure the docking ring. You have my authority to take over the White Flames fortress to use as a base of operations for the duration of the crisis. Tell Yllithian to come and complain to me if he has a problem with that. Kill anyone that attempts to resist your progress, lock down any gates you find that are still open. In a short time I will follow your forces and my Medusae will observe your progress. I hope you haven’t spent so much time hunting the slave races that you’ve lost your edge, Valossian, the city’s fate may rest in your hands. Now go.’

Valossian Sythrac straightened and bowed stiffly to the supreme overlord. He did not believe for a moment that the fate of the city rested in his hands. Sythrac knew Vect well enough to understand that the supreme overlord would never permit such a thing to happen. However, the mere fact that Vect had chosen to flatter him in such terms indicated that the tyrant was in an indulgent mood and at least a little reliant on Sythrac’s dutiful execution of the task in hand. Sythrac pursed his lips and then dared to ask a question.

‘Supreme overlord, may I ask something that is pertinent to my assignment?’

Vect looked at him sharply. The hard, black eyes of the tyrant were an almost palpable force as they swept across Sythrac’s face. The Archon of the Black Heart could sense Malys looking at him too, cat-like and inscrutable as she tried to determine if Sythrac had lost his mind. After a moment Vect smiled thinly and said:

‘Very well, Valossian, I shall indulge you by listening to your question, but I will be the judge of the pertinence of your query and whether it deserves an answer. Speak.’

Sythrac bowed his head. ‘I’ve heard it said before that even whilst they are unpredictable no Dysjunction affects the city without cause. Whether it be wars between the Ruinous Powers, ill-starred experiments, sorcerous happenstance or plain perfidy, all Dysjunctions happen for a reason. What was the reason for this occurrence?’

‘An investigation into that matter is under way,’ Vect replied sharply, ‘and its results will be for me alone to know, although I will tell you one thing: the preliminary indications are that this Dysjunction was instigated by a person – or more likely several persons – within the city itself. This was a self-inflicted wound. Now go.’

Sythrac’s eyes burned with cold fire as he nodded his understanding and turned on his heel to leave. The Archon of the kabal of the Black Heart was a remorseless hunter. His sport was the pursuit of famous, and even legendary, souls from among the slave races: heroes, leaders, philanthropists, healers, warriors. Sythrac hunted them all and trapped their souls so that the slave races would always know that their greatest achievers were mere footnotes in a history dictated by the dark city of Commorrhagh.

The slightest scratch from Sythrac’s deadly huskblade was enough to turn a victim’s body to dust. With its mortal form destroyed the quarry’s soul was left naked to be devoured by the Archon’s voracious spirit-traps. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of souls had been captured within Sythrac’s armour, where complex bio-harmonics diverted their stolen energies to invigorate his ancient body.

Now Sythrac was determined to turn his skills to the relentless pursuit of those that had threatened his home.

Lady Malys remained silent until Sythrac was out of earshot. She eyed the two Vects speculatively as she tried to decide which of them was the fake. The one sitting in the throne had done all the talking yet that of itself meant nothing. The whole point of a geldling was that it could flawlessly impersonate the original. The two of them seemed to sense her indecision and smiled maliciously at her.

‘I see you have a question of your own,’ the standing one said.

‘It’s written all over that minx-face of yours,’ the one in the throne said.

Malys gave up trying to guess and simply addressed them both. ‘I was going to ask you why you invited both me and Valossian into the chamber together. Then I realised why when you were talking to Valossian – it was just to keep the other Archons outside guessing, wasn’t it? You’ll have them all in here in pairs so they will be afraid to plot because you’re so obviously up to something yourself. You really can’t help yourself. It all just comes so naturally to you.’

The Asdrubael Vect that was standing beside the throne shrugged negligently, the one sitting smiled and said carelessly, ‘One does not rule Commorrhagh for six millennia without gathering many pearls of wisdom, dear heart. Here’s another that I that will dispense to you free of charge – for now anyway – simple precautions cost little and sometimes reap huge rewards. You should learn from this and understand that much like the crystals in this chamber the Asdrubael Vect you see before you is only a single face of a multi-faceted entity.’

Malys kept her serene smile in place while she dissected Vect’s words. He could be implying that both of the individuals she was seeing as Vect were geldlings, and that the real Vect was elsewhere scheming with other forces to win back the city. Equally Vect could be trying to keep her off balance by planting the seeds of doubt in her mind. Machinations came as naturally to the supreme overlord as eating or breathing were performed by others. In either case Vect was successfully dictating the direction of their encounter and that was something she felt constrained to counterattack. Perhaps she could even shake loose some useful information from the old monster.

‘Yet this multi-faceted entity doesn’t know who caused the Dysjunction?’ she retorted with breathtaking boldness, ‘I find it surprising that your omnipresent spies have failed you so badly.’

She knew was taking her life in her hands to speak to Vect so, but she was quite prepared to gamble that the supreme overlord would be willing to play at least for a little while. The fate of the city must surely be weighing heavily on his shoulders by now, what harm a little diversion verbally fencing with an old flame?

The Vect standing beside the throne had hissed at her challenge while the seated one smiled indulgently for a moment and then stood. The two exchanged places, with the one previously seated moving to stand behind the throne while the other seated himself. Malys felt as if she were watching a charlatan’s parlour trick being played out as a strange form of performance art.

‘You would be surprised by what I know,’ the now-sitting Vect said evenly. ‘Suffice it to say that there are complexities beyond those needed by the loyal, straightforward Valossian Sythrac to do his

job. The individuals who were responsible for this Dysjunction had outside help. They also benefited from great good fortune and supreme opportunism in equal measure.'

'Those all sound dangerously like excuses, Asdrubael, or are you just trying to be mysterious with me as well?'

'I'm giving you what little information you need to perform your role at my dictation,' the standing Vect said as though he were speaking to an obstreperous child.

'Surely then you would include the identity of these suspected outsiders that have had a hand in so wounding our beloved city,' Malys replied, 'I'll need to be on the lookout for them, won't I?'

Both Vects smiled disconcertingly and Malys sensed a shared joke was being made at her expense. The 'outsiders' Vect was referring to must be pretty obvious in the flesh – or perhaps they weren't, and that was the source of the joke. The list of suspects was pretty short anyway; it could only be other eldar or entities from beyond the veil. The slave races lacked both the knowledge and the means to attempt to manipulate the warp in ways that could bring about a Dysjunction.

'I have a task for you in the lower levels,' the standing Vect said. 'Something that will require your skills of both violence and discretion.'

'Oh goody,' Malys smiled sweetly, 'I am yours to command, as Valossian would say. Tell me more.'

'Go to the Valzho Sinister and bring anyone you find there back to me – alive.'

Malys arched her perfect eyebrows before pouting. 'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'I feel as if you're trying to get me out of the way for a while. Why would you want to do that, Asdrubael?'

'You underestimate the importance of the task you're being given,' the seated Vect replied sharply. 'Be on your way before you try my patience. A Dysjunction is a time of change. It means renewal as well as destruction for the city, a clearing of the dead wood to permit new growth. Be mindful which side of that equation you play to, Aurelia, or you may be consumed by the fires when the time comes.'

The audience was over and Malys decided not to try and push her luck any further. Valzho Sinister was deep inside Low Commorrhagh and despite her flippancy she knew that reaching it during the current crisis would be no small feat... one that would be matched and exceeded by bringing back its inhabitants alive. She smiled to the Vects and turned on her heel with her mind already processing what forces and weaponry to take with her, the feints and disinformation to spread to the other Archons about her route and destination.

She caught sight of Vect's Medusae squatting apparently forgotten a short distance from the throne. The creature's current host was a grey-skinned, gangling specimen of the slave races. The Medusae itself clung to the host's head and spine like obscene bunches of fruit, the individual brains of the Medusae collective pulsating gently as they drank in the sensations their host provided them with. Later, Vect had only to pluck one of those obscene fruit and taste of it to relive everything that happened here through the Medusae's expanded perceptions.

What would the supreme overlord conclude when he reviewed all his meetings with the Archons he



was relying on for support? Some might well be consigned to the fire if Vect detected any wavering in their loyalty. As Malys left she passed through the circles of scrying crystals and saw the agonies of Commorragh being played out again in flickering silence. Behind her she heard the supreme overlord call out for Malixian and Xerathis to be sent in next. Malys cursed as she caught herself wondering if that meant Vect was going to speak with Archon Khromys alone – no doubt just as he'd intended she would.



## CHAPTER 2

### FALLING

Nyos Yllithian, Archon of the White Flames kabal, watched as the pock-marked surface of Commorrhagh swelled with alarming rapidity before the prow of his personal barque. They were plummeting straight down towards it as fast as the craft's grav-compensators would permit.

Yllithian gripped the arms of his throne on the barque to prevent them from visibly shaking. His new body – the one so recently taken to escape the grip of the glass plague that had finally killed El'Uriaq – was betraying him. The true Yllithian, the soul that inhabited this body, was well inured to shocks and frights – almost pathologically so – but the body he had taken possession of still seemed to retain some of the youthful instincts of its former occupant.

Adrenaline pulsed through his veins, his heart hammered in his chest. Yllithian had not felt this *alive* in a very long time and the pulse of life seemed to have sharpened his already well-honed fear of death. Yllithian briefly wondered what had become of the renegade haemonculus, Bellathonis, who had enabled his seemingly miraculous escape from the clutches of a true death. Having the haemonculus killed afterwards had seemed like the only logical option.

Bellathonis's connections to Yllithian and the Dysjunction were all that Asdrubael Vect would need to crucify him. The damnable creature had disappeared before the deed could be done, although in retrospect that was probably just as well. Matters were moving so rapidly that Yllithian felt he might need the renegade haemonculus's services again.

Around him his remaining kabalite warriors hurtled downwards. They were carried in the Raiders and Venoms that had survived the fighting above Gorath, the tortured *Ilmaea* now shrinking in their wake. The last remnants of Yllithian's reavers and hellions were circling above and behind the formation watching for another attack by the Blades of Desire. The treachery of the Blades' new Archon, Aez'ashya, had not exactly been unexpected but it had come with childlike directness. Yllithian was forced to admit (although once again only to himself) that he had been taken a little off guard.

'What course shall I set, my Archon?' Yllithian's helmsman called out. His voice held an edge of trepidation in it.

What course? Yllithian's keen mind was already darting through the options and being equally repelled by each in turn. There were only two realistic courses available to him. He could flee to his own

stronghold or he could go back to Corespur and decry Aez'ashya's treacherous attack to Asdrubael Vect – the very same individual who had, in all probability, ordered it.

The baroque vista of the eternal city was spread swiftly below them as they fell. Soon it blotted out all else, a jumble of jagged, irregular upthrust spires like a fist full of porcupine quills...

'My Archon?' the helmsman prompted again nervously. Yllithian shot him a glance that held the promise of unending pain if he interrupted his Archon's thinking again. Beyond the barque's ornate prow Commorragh was rushing ever closer. Yllithian's mind was racing faster than the falling grav-craft.

There was a chance that Aez'ashya *had* acted alone, and there was also a chance that Vect would be sufficiently disgusted at her failure to disassociate himself from the attempt on Yllithian's life. However, there was an even greater chance that Vect would welcome Yllithian back like a trusted ally before simply stabbing him in the back again.

Before Yllithian's eyes the city was rising into the dark, angular mountain range that was Corespur – Vect's unassailable fortress. Corespur seemed intact but around it in Sorrow Fell there were many fires burning unchecked. Yllithian's sharp eyes could pick out the tell-tale flicker of weapon fire all across High Commorragh. The fighting was still going on. Yllithian allowed himself to relax by just a hair's-breadth – the worst had not happened yet.

'Set a course for the White Flames fortress. Take us home,' Yllithian ordered crisply. The helmsman heaved on the craft's tiller bar with a sigh of relief. Their angle of descent immediately shifted, the crushing G-forces Yllithian should have experienced almost entirely mitigated by the craft's compensators. Behind them Yllithian could see the rest of his force altering their course to stay with him. He turned back again to gaze out over the burning cityscape in cautious wonderment.

Yllithian had already feared the worst when Vect had sent him off on the incredibly dangerous mission to retake control of the *Ilmaea*. The Archon of the White Flames was to be killed off quietly while the rest of the city was brought back under the tyrant's control. It had seemed likely that Aez'ashya's attack had been timed to coincide with Vect's victory elsewhere as a simple tidying of loose ends, but that evidently wasn't the case. The city was still in uproar, the kabals were still fighting the invaders brought to the city by the Dysjunction – and no doubt each other. Yllithian smiled a small, tight smile to himself. That fact meant the supreme overlord was weaker than he seemed.

A warning call drew Yllithian's attention upwards, back towards Gorath. The black, swollen disc of the *Ilmaea* had shrunk to a size no greater than his fist. Now he could make out high, faint arcs of glittering blue below the slave-star that were curving around into pursuit positions. There was no mistaking the drive-trails of the craft.

'Razorwings!' cried the helmsman in alarm.

'Dive down into Sorrow Fell,' Yllithian commanded evenly, 'and don't slow down whatever happens.'

The gleaming prow of Yllithian's personal barque dipped again to plunge them towards the upper spires of High Commorragh. The Archon of the White Flames prayed they were close enough to reach cover if they should need it. Vect had sent two forces to support Yllithian's attack on the *Ilmaea* Gorath.

Aez'ashya's kabal – the Blades of Desire – and a flight of Razorwing jetfighters to clear a path for them through the daemon swarms that had been drawn to the imperfect interface of Commorragh's wardings where they junctioned with the *Ilmaea's* sub-realm. Aez'ashya had shown her true colours as soon as the fight over Gorath was won. Yllithian found himself rather naively hoping that the fighters didn't have similar instructions to hers. He would know for certain soon enough.

The highest peaks of Commorragh were still distant but they were sliding rapidly closer as his gravcraft swept down towards them. Once within the tangled landscape of blade-sharp towers and barbed steeples the pursuing Razorwings could do little harm to Yllithian and his followers. It was only in the open air that the jetfighters' vastly superior speed and acceleration gave them a lethal edge. Now that Yllithian had forced their hand he was not surprised by the Razorwings' response.

'Missile launch!' cried the helmsman. Yllithian twisted around in time to see several small, bright stars accelerating towards his force. They would be monoscythe missiles, Yllithian concluded, diabolically clever devices that detonated into a toroidal ring of planar force. Objects caught in the explosion of a monoscythe would be sliced in two as neatly as if a giant scalpel had passed through them – which wasn't far from what actually happened on a molecular level. He watched the missiles' approach with his face showing only a cool, disinterested mask, while inside his intestines seemed to twist with barely controlled dread at the approaching salvo.

Despite their greater speed the missiles appeared deceptively slow at first. The seconds crawled past as they relentlessly overhauled Yllithian's fleeing force. The reavers and hellions at the rear of Yllithian's formation started twisting into complex evasive manoeuvres as the missiles bore down on them. Flickering fingers of splinter-fire and dark energy rose from Yllithian's flotilla in a fruitless attempt to claw the oncoming missiles out of the air. But the missiles were fully as agile as the wildly dodging hellions and considerably harder to hit. It was a hopeless effort.

The missile salvo detonated among the hellions and reavers with startling suddenness. Tumbling wreckage plummeted downwards from the points of impact trailing smoke and fire in its wake. A wounded reaver caught at the edge of one blast careened wildly to its destruction as its now one-armed pilot struggled vainly to regain control. Yllithian's barque dipped and lurched in the shockwave as debris fragments peppered off its protective energy fields.

Glancing around, Yllithian saw that the bulk of his force remained intact. The Raiders and Venoms carrying most of his warriors had escaped serious harm thanks to the lighter reavers and hellions absorbing the brunt of the missile salvo. The Archon of the White Flames tensely watched the distant Razorwings waiting for another missile launch. Seconds passed and the spires of Sorrow Fell swept closer, yet no more missiles came. The Razorwings had already expended much of their ordnance in the fighting over Gorath, so now they must close to within cannon range or give up the chase. Yllithian had little faith that they would simply give up and ordered his surviving craft to close ranks for mutual support.

The highest peaks seemed almost close enough to touch when the Razorwings rolled onto their backs and dived in pursuit. As they accelerated into Commorragh's artificial gravity well the jetfighters

announced their approach with a rising roar and a series of thunderous sonic booms. Yllithian grinned mirthlessly – for all their bluster the pilots had hesitated a moment too long. Towers of metal, crystal and stone were now rising all around him, delicately leaping bridges and curving conduits flashing past both above and below. The dagger-winged jetfighters roaring in pursuit were built more for speed than agility and in this environment Yllithian's own forces had the upper hand.

The Razorwings knew it too and they opened fire at extreme range. Darklight beams sliced past Yllithian's force, each retina-burning slash promising a fiery end to its recipient. Not one of the shots had connected before the jetfighters had to pull up. A single enemy pilot refused to play it safe and charged downwards into the increasingly tangled upper tiers of High Commorrhagh. This particular foe flew with breathtaking agility as it hunted Yllithian's bobbing, weaving collection of craft through the peaks and spires of Sorrow Fell.

The searing caress of the Razorwing's twin dark lances stabbed into the fleeing formation with deadly accuracy. One of the White Flames' Venoms immediately belched smoke and fell away into the depths. A storm of answering fire from a nearby Ravager lashed the jetfighter from nose to tail. None of the hits scored were immediately fatal, but they were enough of a distraction to cause the Razorwing's pilot to misjudge the next manoeuvre. The speeding jetfighter clipped a gantry and ploughed full into the serrated edge of a spire where it instantly vanished in a dirty orange puff of flames.

The surrounding spires and bridges came to life as if they had been awoken by the violence of the jetfighter's impact. Shots zeroed in on Yllithian's force from all angles and set the air buzzing with splinter rounds and energy bolts. It was scattered, inaccurate, but plentiful enough to wound some of the White Flames craft. Yllithian's well-protected personal barque sailed through the barrage untouched. The remaining Razorwings were quickly left behind as they circled in frustration above the tangled cityscape of High Commorrhagh. They were helpless to intervene as Yllithian's force slipped away from them.

It was symptomatic, Yllithian thought, of his current situation to see every hand turned against him, predators circling overhead while assassins sniped at him from every window and archway. Under the stresses of the Dysjunction the thousands of kabals across Commorrhagh that Vect deliberately kept weak through his scheming had turned upon each other. They were fighting tooth and nail in an almost reflexive effort to grab a bigger slice of the pitifully small pie the tyrant habitually forced upon them. Ironically, at this moment, with enough leadership and visible show of force, the kabals could be welded together into an entity powerful enough to overthrow the supreme overlord.

Sadly, Yllithian reflected, he possessed neither leadership nor strength in sufficient quantities to impress the lesser kabals in the numbers that he needed. If his old allies Kraillach and Xelian had still been at his side with their own powerful kabals behind them it would have been a different story. Then it could have been done, the old noble houses could have staged the kind of resurgence they had dreamed of for centuries. Unfortunately for Yllithian his closest allies were no more.

Kraillach had been struck down by mysterious assassins inside his own keep, rumoured to have

been led by Kraillach's own chief executioner, an incubus named Morr. Kraillach's remains had been deliberately obliterated to the point where no restoration of him could be possible even by the most skilled haemonculi. Xelian had suffered a less severe body-death, but her remains had vanished before they could be placed into a life-giving sarcophagus and restored. The latter occurrence was almost certainly a scheme of the daemoniac El'Uriaq. Certainly the absent Xelian had been quickly replaced as Archon of the Blades of Desire by El'Uriaq's chosen puppet – Aez'ashya.

With El'Uriaq's unlamented demise Aez'ashya had apparently re-oriented herself to follow Asdrubael Vect. Yllithian grimaced at her wayward foolishness. Perhaps she held some naive belief that loyalty to the supreme overlord would grant her protection in the long run. She would find herself a victim of Vect's schemes at the earliest possible moment; of this Yllithian had no doubt. Nonetheless it was bitter to have to think that Aez'ashya could boast of having powerful allies, no matter how treacherous, when Yllithian had none. His scheme to raise thrice-accursed El'Uriaq as a weapon against Vect had backfired so spectacularly that it had shorn Yllithian of all support when he needed it the most.

Through a canyon-like gap between two spires Yllithian glimpsed the familiar alabaster peaks and rooftop gardens of his ancestral home – the White Flames fortress. For all the black cynicism that dwelled in Yllithian's heart his spirits lifted to see that the place was still standing. It could be said that the house of Yllithian was as much the physical entity embodied by the White Flames fortress as it was a noble bloodline that ran through his veins. It was delightful to see that Vect had neglected to strike at it so far. Possibly he already had and failed here as he had failed above Gorath. As they got closer a notable circle of devastation could be seen radiating outwards from the fortress like the charred spokes of a wheel. It was ready evidence of hellish energies that had been unleashed by its defences.

Yllithian could see that a dark, skeletal spire nearby had been partially slagged and melted down to half of its original height. He decided he would definitely shed no tears if that indicated the annihilation of the ever-adversarial Venomyst kabal that had dwelled there. Other surrounding spires showed cleaner cuts made in them by monofilament and darklight weapons. There had been trouble here, but evidently nothing the fortress and its defenders couldn't handle. For a moment a warm sense of security threatened to creep over Yllithian and he angrily crushed it. Something was not quite right; everything seemed a little too quiet. Even the random sniping at Yllithian's force of grav-craft had tailed away to virtually nothing.

Some sixth sense drew Yllithian's gaze upwards and there they were – Razorwing jetfighters circling high above the fortress like their feathered namesakes. When Yllithian's force had dived into the tangled strata of High Commorrhagh it had merely frustrated their pursuit and not ended it. The Razorwings must simply have used their speed to surge ahead to where they could await Yllithian's emergence at the most likely destination. The comparatively open area around the White Flames fortress was essential for its defence but now its primary purpose had been subverted by the lurking jetfighters – it was a killing field that Yllithian would have to cross before he could reach the safety of the fortress itself.

Yllithian's force was only seconds away from being in the open and vulnerable to attack. He briefly considered landing so that he could disembark and make his way into the foundation layer to reach the fortress through the hidden ways. He immediately discarded the notion. That course of action carried its own set of unknown risks, he decided, and they were ones that considerably outweighed those posed by a single flight of jetfighters. A quieter, more cynical part of his mind told him that he was simply panicking. He was on the run and, like a hunted animal, he could think of nothing but fleeing for shelter as quickly as possible. Yllithian crushed that thought, too, before it robbed him entirely of his determination. The jetfighters were attempting to delay him until more of Vect's force could arrive. If he hesitated now and was caught outside the fortress when they did he would be truly doomed.

'Ready your weapons!' he called out to his followers, 'stay low and make full speed for the fortress!'

His personal barque shot away into the open space surrounded by its sleek, escorting shoal of grav-craft. Yllithian instantly saw the blue tail-fires of the Razorwings braiding as one after another the enemy pilots rolled their craft over to begin their power dives. The tall, gabled peaks of the White Flames fortress seemed to leap closer as the grav-craft raced flat-out towards them at top speed, but the Razorwings were hurtling down at them faster still. Yllithian did not need to issue an order to open fire. All around him his warriors could see that this was the final stretch and they fired at the diving Razorwings with everything they had.

It seemed impossible that the hook-winged jetfighters could come unscathed through the flickering storm of darklight beams, disintegrator bolts and hyper-velocity splinters that Yllithian's warriors threw up, yet they did. They were too fast for even the lightning-quick reflexes of eldar warriors to track and hit with any certainty. The Razorwings' return fire was far less spectacular but far, far more deadly. Paired darklight beams punched efficiently through the Raiders and Ravagers closest to Yllithian's barque as if they were made of paper. The air was filled with the shriek of explosions and scything metal as the craft were spectacularly torn apart.

Yllithian saw little else as twin retina-burning scars of purple-black splashed across his vision. Yllithian's barque shuddered in midair as the craft's energy shields just barely shunted the lance strikes aside. The scent of hot metal and ozone assailed Yllithian's nostrils as a high-pitched screaming sound began to emanate from somewhere beneath the barque's ornate grillwork decking. He tried to keep the Razorwings in sight as they roared past but he could see nothing but a series of fast-moving blurs. Ahead the walls of the White Flames fortress were rearing up like a huge, white cliff as Yllithian's force closed in on them at breakneck speed.

Yllithian managed to spot the Razorwings again as they looped up and over to begin another strafing pass. His force had been almost halved by the first attack and the dispersed survivors were still trying to get back into a defensive formation. Thick, shaky lines of static were crawling across the ordinarily invisible sphere of energy that protected his personal craft. Yllithian reckoned it would not withstand another hit. Should two of the Razorwings decide to target his barque it would all be over. He settled back into his throne to await whatever fate had in store for him, staring defiantly at the fast-approaching jetfighters.

A blaze of energy from the fortress swept abruptly across the sky. Two of the attacking Razorwings blossomed into rapidly expanding balls of fire and debris. The remaining three veered sharply aside as dark spirals rose above the fortress – its garrison of scourges taking flight to confront the airborne intruders. Individually the winged warriors could pose little danger to the speeding jetfighters, but they had the true agility of flying creatures and outnumbered the Razorwings by more than twenty to one. Cheated of their prey for a second time the Razorwings turned tail and vanished as quickly as they had come.

Yllithian permitted himself a small, triumphant smile as his barque slid into a docking port low down on the flank of the fortress along with the remnants of his battered escort. Inside there were White Flames warriors clustered along the quaysides suspiciously covering the new arrivals with splinter rifles and disintegrators. Or rather they were suspicious only until they caught sight of Yllithian standing in his barque. To his astonishment the Archon of the White Flames found himself greeted by salutes and cheers from his troops, in a tide of excitement and noise that seemed to rise until it echoed through the entire mighty fortress.

They were relieved, Yllithian realised, relieved that he was alive, so they could continue to follow him through the terrible crisis of the Dysjunction rather than think for themselves. Yllithian had always worked hard to be feared rather than loved by his followers and yet it seemed that sufficient terror from outsiders was enough to make them love him anyway. He smiled graciously and raised a hand to acknowledge the unexpected approbation.

Looking at the thronging warriors Yllithian also realised that he had been wrong. He had sufficient leadership and strength to unify the lesser kabals against Vect. He hadn't considered the true depths of fear and desperation that the Dysjunction had brought to Commorragh. All he had to do was exploit it as thoroughly as he would exploit any other resource. He clenched his raised hand into a fist and the cheers of his followers roared louder still.





## CHAPTER 3

### INTO THE SHADOW-REALM

Commorragh is not a single city any more than it is a single place. Over the course of its existence many times many pockets of reality have been subsumed into the fabric of the eternal city. These sub-realms – Shaa-Dom, Iron Thorn, the Sable Marches, Malixian's Aviaries and a thousand more – exist just around a multi-dimensional corner from the twisted heart of Commorragh. In metaphysical terms the sub-realms of Commorragh exist behind a door, through an arch, beyond a looking glass or – in the case of Aelindrach – within the darkest shadows.

*At this moment, deep within the shadow-realm of Aelindrach a darkling creature squats and gazes at the unexpected culmination of its efforts. This being might once have been of the eldar race but if it were then time and strange tides have changed it greatly. Its skin is as black as pitch, its eyes are merely empty sockets of deeper shadow, its hair is as pallid as cobwebs, an additional pair of long, sinewy arms sprout from its shoulders and cradle a straight, sharp sword of dark metal. This is Kheradruakh, 'he who hunts heads', who is also called the Decapitator.*

*Even among the mandrakes the Decapitator is a dark legend and a patron saint of stealthy murder. Kheradruakh has collected heads for time immemorial, serving no master but his own strange agenda. He kills lowborn and highborn without prejudice. He even hunts among the slave races, searching for suitable additions to his collection. Not one in a thousand of his victims does Kheradruakh deem perfect enough to be enplaced in his inner sanctum. This vast, hemispherical chamber is lined with the flensed skulls of his victims, each one carefully placed so that their empty sockets are focused at a point in space before Kheradruakh's dais.*

*The Decapitator has laboured remorselessly down long millennia to complete this macabre collection. Each chosen skull holds an echo of its former occupant, a soul fragment caught and pinned in place by Kheradruakh for his own ends in a grand design only the Decapitator understands. Of the bare handful that know of Kheradruakh's strange, eldritch obsession, some believe that the skulls' collective gaze is aligned on a single spot to slowly wear a hole in reality. They say that with each new addition the knots of creation loosen a little more at the point where their empty gazes rest.*

*Now Kheradruakh gazes with his own sightless eyes at the changes wrought in the fabric of reality with what, in his alien suite of emotions, might be termed as incredulity and shock. The eye is opening. It has come*

*too soon, the collection is incomplete and yet the conduit has been formed...*

Xagor tumbled helplessly through gossamer sheets of blackness with bright spots dancing before his eyes. The master still clung to Xagor's back as they fell together, the master's new, sinewy arms twisted so tightly around Xagor's neck they were almost choking him. Xagor held on to the flapping, useless legs the master had recently inherited as tightly as he dared to, but they were inexorably slipping away from him. They were dropping quickly, more quickly than Xagor had thought they would fall and yet still less quickly than an outright plummet should have been. It was also getting colder.

'Not long now, Xagor,' the master's new-old voice whispered hoarsely in his ear. 'We're approaching the umbral nadir.'

For all the master's calming words Xagor was close to panic. He did cry out in fear when the arms around his neck abruptly loosened and the master's legs slipped away from his grasp. More blackness clutched at his vision, denser now as though he fell through layers of rustling silk. Xagor wailed in terror when he felt his progress begin to slow as he crashed through the insubstantial barriers. His mind filled with the image of a gigantic, shadowy web with himself plunging ever deeper into its snares. At the centre, his terrified subconscious gibbered, was the dark and monstrous spider that had spun all this. Xagor would be cocooned in shadows to be drained until he was a frozen husk.

Xagor: a so-called wrack, a faithful servant to his master, the haemonculus Bellathonis, apprentice in the arts of sculpting flesh, an accomplished torturer and murderer in his own right. He still screamed like one of his own victims as he finally struck a soft, yielding surface and fell no more. The master's laughter cut through Xagor's unreasoning panic like an icy blade. It lacked something of the wicked, inhuman liquidity of the master's old laughter, but it had a younger, wilder edge that chilled the soul just as effectively.

'Open your eyes and look about you, Xagor!' the master commanded. 'We have arrived.'

Cautiously Xagor opened one eye and then the other, then shut and opened them again to make sure of what he was seeing. The darkness around them was so complete that it was impossible to tell if his eyes were open or shut. He could feel the moisture of his breath forming inside his mask in the frigid air, he could hear his wheezing lungs, but he could see absolutely nothing at all.

'Aelindrach... is here?' Xagor weakly asked of the blackness.

'More precisely, we have passed into Aelindrach,' Bellathonis said from somewhere ahead (or above? Xagor could not tell), 'although you are also quite correct in saying that Aelindrach is here – it didn't used to be, so in a sense it has come to us as much as we to it. A fascinating development, although not one without precedent.'

The master's voice was strange-sounding, echoing and yet muted at the same time. Xagor could no longer tell how far away the master was, or in which direction. Panic stirred in him again.

'Xagor cannot find the master,' Xagor wailed a little petulantly.

'Try focusing on the sound of my voice and relying less on your eyes,' the master said dismissively.

Your senses are still trying to adjust to the shadow-realm. Physical laws are different here and it takes a certain... realignment of perception to get used to it.'

Although the disembodied voice remained muted Xagor found that the echoing effect was fading as the master spoke. This in turn made it easier for Xagor to locate the source of his master's voice. Turning his head from side to side he caught a glimmer of greyness in the dark and tried to concentrate on it.

'Here sight, sound and indeed all of the other senses become co-mingled,' the master's voice continued, 'perhaps in the same way that light becomes one with its absence in this environment. Substance is a more tenuous proposition here, for bereft of our usual visual and tactile certainties it becomes difficult to decide what is and is not real in an environment where either is very much possible. Will is a more important attribute than perceptions of physical solidity under such circumstances: I live, I breathe, I am real, I exist here because it is my desire to do so. By my self-belief I am not absorbed into the shadow even as I become one with it in order to exist in this realm. Do you understand, Xagor? It may be the death of you if you don't.'

The greyness had taken on a form to Xagor's senses. It was little more than a rough sketching of blurred lines and indistinct, smudged highlights but his warped senses could tell that the master was speaking to him from a short distance away. Furthermore he perceived that the master had a form that was upright, somehow standing on legs that had been crippled in a Raider crash before they had entered the shadow-realm.

'Xagor sees you now, master – no, Xagor senses you now. How does the master stand on shattered limbs?'

'Because my substance is subject to my will and it is my will that I am able to provide my own locomotion in this place.'

Xagor looked down at himself and realised he was standing too, even though he had no recollection of getting up. What had seemed impenetrable blackness around him a moment ago had *texture* now, a thousand subtly different variations of shadow. There was the soft brush of sable and moleskin, the gritty density of basalt, the close-grained hardness of teak, the clinging liquidity of oil. With a start Xagor realised that they were in an open area, the vaguest hint of curved walls suggesting itself at the edge of his perception.

'Master said that Aelindrach had come to us and we to it. This one would ask, in that case, where are we now?'

'The shadow-realm has expanded its boundaries to encompass a greater part of Commorragh than is normal for it to interact with,' Bellathonis replied. 'I can only assume that the Dysjunction has... unshackled it somehow. This area was part of the travel tubes we were moving through previously, but this section has been consumed by Aelindrach.'

'This one is confused,' Xagor said sadly. 'Thought Aelindrach was a place and not a monster gobbling up Commorragh.'

The grey wisp that was Bellathonis seemed to be shrinking and Xagor realised that it was moving

further away from him. He hurried after it before it could fade entirely into the all-encompassing shadows. Bellathonis's voice continued to drift back to him. 'In essence Aelindrach is a sub-realm, just like any other,' the master lectured distantly, 'and like any other sub-realm it exhibits its own peculiar traits. In the case of Aelindrach, however, the differences are more grossly obvious. For one thing the boundary between Aelindrach and Commorragh is more... permeable than that of most other sub-realms, as we've already seen. I've heard it said that all the gateways to Aelindrach have collapsed and that is why its borders are so ill-defined. I confess that I'm not entirely convinced by that argument.'

Bellathonis had reached what Xagor could perceive as a curved, charcoal-black expanse of wall. At this distance (angle? It was all so confusing) he could tell there were even darker blots that showed openings in the wall. The blurred shape of the haemonculus merged smoothly into one of the openings, the grey emanation of its presence subtly altering the quality of it as Bellathonis moved inwards. Xagor drifted obediently behind him and noted the slightly denser grain of the shadowy medium they now traversed. For all the apparent solidity of the landscape around him Xagor felt as if he could simply push through it if he desired.

'This one wonders...' Xagor began before stopping as he realised the disquieting way that the sound of his voice brought their surroundings into sharper focus. He began again, whispering more quietly this time. 'What Aelindrach turns to shadow – can it be returned?'

Bellathonis's laughter was a tiny, tinkling storm that swiftly dissipated. 'You mean can we return, don't you, Xagor? The simple answer is yes. The insubstantiality of shadow intersects both our realm and this one under normal conditions – after all, it only takes the application of light to show that shadow is all around us. Also consider the mandrakes – they are creatures of Aelindrach that dwell here yet can travel to Commorragh or indeed elsewhere in the universe if they have a mind to go. We may yet become fully consumed by Aelindrach, but for now we are free to come and go as we please.'

In the rush of strangeness surrounding their arrival Xagor had forgotten about the mandrakes. The shadow-skinned slayers were rightly feared by Commorrites and the subject of endless blood-freezing tales about their stealthy murders and inscrutable ways. They were entities that were generally shunned, yet they could be bargained with by those brave or foolish enough to risk their soul in doing so. Xagor recalled his last encounter with mandrakes with a chilling sensation. He had been captured by them while on an important mission for the master. He had only survived the experience with his skin intact because–

'The master is friends with mandrakes!' Xagor blurted suddenly. The statement expanded like a bubble, coating the thick grain of the tunnel walls momentarily before fading away. Bellathonis stopped and turned to face him so that Xagor was able to perceive his master's face clearly in the gloom.

'Only some mandrakes,' Bellathonis hissed, 'or to be specific only one – and I'd very much hesitate to call our mutually beneficial arrangement a friendship. With the city in tumult and enemies hard on my heels I've come here with the slender hope that the arrangement we have can be extended to my protection.'

The haemonculus fell silent and turned his face away before beginning to move again. ‘You need to calm yourself, Xagor,’ the master murmured back over an insubstantial-looking shoulder, ‘or your continuing presence may become an impediment.’

Bellathonis’s implied threat seemed to hang in the air between them for a long time. Xagor gave himself over to resolute silence thereafter. They travelled for what felt like an eternity through the freezing darkness in complete silence. Xagor was distressed to find that moving through the shadow-realm still required effort, since it took an application of willpower to force himself through the darkness. He had also started to become aware of the effort that it took him simply to prevent himself falling. Xagor had a suspicion that the simple act of falling might have dire consequences in Aelindrach. From what the master had said it would quite possibly mean losing all sense of direction in the interwoven mesh of shadows – sinking into a sea of darkness with no hope of escape.

Bellathonis drifted tirelessly ahead while Xagor struggled to keep up. Fear of being left behind, lost and alone in the dark, kept the wrack moving. Despite his almost animalistic loyalty to his master, Xagor held no illusions about the renegade haemonculus. Bellathonis would abandon Xagor without a second thought if he lagged too far behind.

They emerged from narrow spaces into what seemed to be a more open region. Icy breezes that had previously seemed to toy with Xagor became savage creatures that were forever howling and tearing at his exposed flesh with frigid claws. Dark gulfs appeared to either side of their path, standing cyclones of shadow that plunged to impossible depths. Ebon strands of solidity formed criss-crossed patterns around them like ramshackle scaffolds or the winter-stripped branches of dead trees.

Xagor wondered if they were still within Commorragh at all or whether they had crossed the hazy boundaries into Aelindrach proper. The paths they were treading reminded him horribly of the riven sections of webway he had traversed to escape the maiden world of Lileathanir, and of the daemon-haunted ziggurats of Accursed Shaa-Dom. The unfettered power of the warp was closer here than it was within carefully warded Commorragh, an energising tingle that excited and repelled at the same time. The fateful, siren call of She Who Thirsts was present too, a deadly undertow that could draw a soul into the all-consuming depths if it weakened and heeded it for even a moment.

There were the first signs of life – of a kind – that Xagor had seen since entering Aelindrach; furtive scurrying, half-perceived movement flickering between deeper tracts of shadow. Xagor’s nape-hairs rose when he realised that ghostly markings were appearing on what he thought of as the ground beneath his feet and the walls around him. As Xagor turned his head to look at the markings they seemed to vanish before reappearing as he turned away. He decided to risk pausing for a moment to study one set of the marks more closely. They were illegible, a collection of cryptic-looking scratches similar to runes of some kind. Perceived at precisely the right angle the scratches glowed with pallid witch-fire that made them highly noticeable in the shadow-stuff of Aelindrach. Xagor looked up to tell Bellathonis but found that the haemonculus was already hovering close by, examining the sigils for himself.

‘They are markings left by the mandrakes for others of their kind,’ Bellathonis explained in a

whisper, 'challenges, taunts, boasts. Each is different and indicates a different mandrake grouping... clan or kin would be the closest translation but to call it a hunting pack would be more accurate. We must have come to regions that they commonly traverse.'

'This one has seen – no! This one has sensed movement,' Xagor whispered back.

'Very good, Xagor. Just vermin so far, gloomwings and such, although I don't doubt that we are being watched right now and we've been followed for a while. It's time to show our teeth and make a stand.'

'Master?'

'One can only enter Aelindrach as predator or prey. Which one do you want to be, Xagor?'

'Predator,' Xagor responded promptly.

'Well then we must act like predators and make a challenge of our own. If we don't we'll be hunted down as prey.'

Bellathonis had produced a curved, talon-like blade. In the darkness the edges of the knife seemed to glow faintly with their own inner light as the haemonculus busied himself scraping out a row of angular shapes. The individual sigils blazed with cold light for an instant before fading.

'Come now,' Bellathonis told Xagor as he finished, 'we'll let those trailing us see our sign and await the results. It should be easy enough to tell where we stand after that.'

'This one would ask, what message was left?' Xagor whispered as he hurried to follow his master.

'The answer to that question is somewhat complicated but I can simplify it for you. There are rulers in Aelindrach, anarchic though it is. Kings and princes, and upstarts too. Two of the most feared rulers – which is to say the most powerful – are brothers at least in the sense that they sprang from the same source at the same time. One of the brothers is indebted to me, so naturally that makes the other brother a mortal enemy of mine.'

'Message was statement of same?' Xagor asked nervously.

'Just so. Either we'll be fortunate and the message will reach the ears of Xhakoruakh promptly, or we'll be unfortunate and his brother will hear of it first.'

'This potential outcome sounds bad.'

Bellathonis had begun to drift away again. His whisper came to Xagor as the faintest breath of sound. 'Potentially very bad indeed,' the haemonculus sighed.



## CHAPTER 4

### AFTERMATH OF AN ASSASSINATION

Kharbyr woke to the sensation of burning. He thought that he was back at the Raider crash and caught by a rupturing fuel cell. He thrashed wildly for a moment before realising that if that had been the case he would have been in no condition to thrash at all. Strangely, his legs were working again, but they felt odd. His whole body felt odd, altered in some way as if he'd been stretched out across too large a frame. He realised that the sensation of burning was the heat coming from a drool of molten rock that was creeping slowly towards his face.

He flinched back instinctively and found himself scrabbling to sit upright on a cracked, rubble-strewn floor. Kharbyr's confusion deepened. The smashed-up Raider was completely gone. The whole wreck had vanished even though it had been pinning him a few moments before when Xagor had dragged him out of it. Kharbyr shook his head stupidly and then froze as he realised that the whole travel tube was gone. He was somewhere else entirely.

He was in a windowless space so he reckoned he was still underground. It was hard to see; his vision was blurred and doubling up worse than after a week-long binge. One wall was a slope of rocky debris with an opening melted through it that was still glowing from the blasting heat of its creation. It was from here that the rivulet of molten rock had come. There were tumbled stacks of cryptic-looking equipment and upturned tables scattered around the floor amid the rubble. Closer at hand there was a sled piled high with boxes and containers. There was blood, too, lots of it, splashed around in large quantities, and several huddled, still forms that didn't look like piles of equipment.

A whisper of sound from the other side of the chamber made Kharbyr freeze again. Something was moving out there, something that made a soft swish of sound unlike anything made by a living creature. Kharbyr had heard a similar noise after Xagor rescued him from the Raider crash and glimpsed a prowling shape in the darkness. The wrack had told him they were being stalked by something but he hadn't said what it was. As Kharbyr listened to the sound it came to him where he had heard it before. On the banks of the Grand Canal – a Talos-engine hunting for a fresh victim. The soft sigh of its gravitic impellers mirrored the sound he could hear in the chamber now.

+Don't panic, I can help you to get out of this.+

The voice was a dry whisper in his mind. Kharbyr's nape hairs rose in response. A thousand dread

tales combined with all of the dire events he had recently witnessed in the Dysjunction made him fear for his very soul.

+...Don't be such a witless fool. I'm no daemon from beyond the veil. I only want to help you, not swallow your soul.+

The Talos-engine was returning. Kharbyr caught sight of a curving, insect-like carapace gleaming dully with the red glow of reflected fires as it came into view. It was a smaller machine than the engine Kharbyr had seen at the Grand Canal but no less deadly in appearance. This one was narrower and sleeker-looking – an assassin rather than a warrior. A curved, scorpion-like tail held an imposing barbed stinger above the carapace while beneath it dangled a plethora of pincers, saws and flails. The Talos-engine was moving slowly and methodically as if searching for something.

+It's here for Bellathonis – it almost had him too. He used an old Chiarasco trick to transmigrate his soul between bodies and escape. Very risky, but I think Bellathonis was desperate.+

Kharbyr was ignoring the voice in his head because he was busy being shocked by the sight of his hands. They weren't his hands any more. One was longer-fingered and as pallid as a corpse, the other was sinewy and thick. Kharbyr blinked in surprise and felt eyes that he shouldn't have respond in kind, eyes that seemed to be set into his shoulder blades. The words being whispered into his mind suddenly took on ghastly new import.

The haemonculus, Bellathonis... Kharbyr had been carrying a talisman for him. Xagor had implied the talisman was some sort of insurance when he delivered it into Kharbyr's hands. Kharbyr groaned at the memory of the pain he'd felt, the wrenching sense of dislocation. The pain had radiated from the hidden pocket where the talisman lay. He fumbled with his unfamiliar hands to search through his equally unfamiliar clothing – strange, glossy leather robes that stank of acrid chemicals and old blood. The talisman was right there, or rather its twin was, tucked into his sleeve.

'That bastard!' Kharbyr snarled. 'He's stolen my body!'

There was a hissing noise as the Talos-engine suddenly spun on its axis and sped towards Kharbyr. The thing was *fast*. It crossed the length of the chamber before he even had time to flinch. The Talos stopped abruptly within arm's length, its chain flails rattling and pincers snapping in agitation.

+Hold still and shut up if you don't want to die,+ the voice in Kharbyr's head commanded.

Jewel-like sensors set into the Talos's metal carapace were regarding him balefully. Rods and spines flicked in and out of pits in the curved surface as the murder-machine tasted the air. Kharbyr froze in place as the probes extended almost close enough to touch him.

+If you're very lucky it will be clever enough to be able to tell that you aren't Bellathonis even though you're inside his body. If you're even more lucky it might be stupid enough that it won't kill Bellathonis's old body just to be on the safe side.+

The Talos-engine designated as 'Vhi' by its creator was locked in a state of confusion. Multiple contradictory inputs were triggering a series of cascading protocol conflicts in its mind-state. Vhi was



caught re-examining the available data thousands of times per second while it assessed the unexplained event, even though it knew a significant amount of time was passing. Yet every action the Talos could take violated its specific mission parameters, its core protocols, or both at once, with an unacceptably high possibility of failure. In the terms of a living creature, which in credit to its creator Vhi did closely resemble, the Talos was caught in a quandary about what to do next.

Vhi's assigned target had been present in the chamber prior to the moment of entry. The physical traces and the psychic spoor had correlated to a significant degree of certainty and this had been vindicated by a visual confirmation of the target after the wall of the chamber was breached. Eliminating the target's guards had taken Vhi less than twenty seconds and yet the target had abruptly vanished from its sensors some eighteen seconds after initiating combat. The physical component was still present and still functional to judge by its movements and vocalisations, but the psychic component had been reduced to trace elements only. Vhi's parameters stipulated very specifically that the target was to be completely annihilated in all respects. For a target-focused hunter like Vhi it was highly perturbing to find a key portion of its quarry being so wilfully elusive.

The mystery of the vanishing target could have been solved easily by Vhi's sibling-machine, Cho. Their creator had constructed the pair of them as a matched, complementary set; Vhi for strength and speed, Cho for intellect and subtlety. When they had first encountered the confused psychic spoor of their quarry in the city they had elected to separate and function independently to enhance their chances of success. With its wider array of sensors and higher cognitive prowess Cho was the better hunter, while Vhi was the better killer. Each machine had felt itself equal to the task of eliminating the target and a certain degree of rivalry existed between them. Both had welcomed the hunt as a chance to test their capabilities to the fullest.

Yet Cho's presence-signal was no longer being received by Vhi. It was possible that background interference was inhibiting Vhi's reception. Some light damage sustained while eliminating the target's bodyguards might also have degraded Vhi's communications array. However, neither possibility appeared to correlate with Vhi's own diagnostics and that left the disquieting possibility that Cho was now inoperative. Cho's signal had ceased shortly after the target vanished from Vhi's perception; Vhi estimated a strong probability that the two events were interrelated.

With only part of the quarry at hand and Cho unavailable for interrogation Vhi was undecided whether to destroy the fragment it had cornered. Extrapolation from the limited amount of known data for a scenario of this kind indicated a high probability that the physical component would reacquire the psychic portion – or at least provide useful information as to its whereabouts – at a future point. Destroying the physical component of the target was a key mission priority, but then Vhi had no meaningful plan for tracking down and extinguishing the psychic element of it.

The conflict could not be resolved without incurring mission failure of one form or another. Thus Vhi ruminated back and forth about the fate of its captive. Logic could give no guidance in such an illogical scenario and so instinct must provide an answer. Unfortunately Vhi was a construct, so raw instinct was a trait it was not overly blessed with. Theoretically time pressure was a constant;

reacquiring the escaped psyche would become increasingly difficult the longer Vhi remained logic-locked.

There was really only one solution.

Kharbyr held perfectly still as the seconds dragged by with certain death hovering only a breath away. Perversely his consciousness spent the time filling in terrifying details about the murder-machine in front of him; the caked blood crusting its pincers, the mangled ribbons of flesh caught in its chain flails, the cyclopean red glow of its armed heat lance. Kharbyr was sufficiently arrogant enough to imagine that – properly armed and prepared – he could have fought this machine with an even chance of victory. Unarmed and disoriented as he was, even Kharbyr could not delude himself as to the likely outcome of trying to fight it under the current circumstances. Still, the thing hadn't killed him yet and that must mean it could be bargained with. Kharbyr decided to ignore the witch-voice in his head and speak directly to the Talos.

'I-I'm not him,' Kharbyr said to the machine. 'Bellathonis – he stole my body. Let me live and I'll find him for you. I'll find him for you and then you can make the bastard pay for what he's done to me.'

The Talos showed no sign of hearing him, or of caring if it had. It remained poised, hovering in the air like a guillotine frozen mid-fall for another second – and then it was gone, flicking away and exiting the chamber like a shark vanishing into the depths. Kharbyr let out a long, slow breath and willed his heart to stop racing. He virtually jumped out of his skin when he heard the witch-voice inside his skull again. It was laughter; a dry, rustling chuckle like ashes sifting through dead leaves.

+You want revenge on Bellathonis?+ the voice sighed mockingly. +Then you'll need to get in line with all of the others. It's dangerous to ignore my advice, little Kharbyr, particularly when you know so little about what's going on.+

'Who are you?' Kharbyr growled as he pushed himself to his feet. 'And how do you know my name?' He swayed unsteadily, feeling as if he stood on mismatched limbs. His whole body felt as if it had been pieced together or altered. He found that he had to stoop his neck forward to achieve an even vaguely comfortable posture. The voice continued to whisper in his mind, insidious and infuriating.

+My name is Angevere, and I know yours because all that you are is an open book to me. I see you've already met my old master, El'Uriaq, and my murderer, Nyos Yllithian. You even helped to bring El'Uriaq back from the dead so I suppose I should be grateful to you.+

'El'Uriaq? You're talking about when Yllithian sent us into Shaa-Dom!' Kharbyr cried in dismay. The daemon-haunted sub-realm with all of its terrors and temptations had very nearly destroyed him.

+Yes, you were sent to find the bones of a tyrant so dreadful that he could threaten even Asdrubael Vect... And you brought the girl, the worldsinger, from Lileathanir to be his pain-bride too. You've been in the thick of this from the start.+

'The thick of what?' Kharbyr whined unconvincingly. 'I was just doing as I was told!'

+The Dysjunction, of course – you're one of the individuals that made it happen.+

A wash of icy terror swept through Kharbyr's guts at the accusation. He was a Commorrite and as murderous as they come; he'd enjoyed many a thrill-murder and torture-hunt as he'd fought his way up from the dregs of the Old City. He'd participated in raids against the slave races and he'd seen their hovel-cities burning like stars in a night sky. Despite all that, the scale of the destruction the Dysjunction had wrought upon Commorragh had truly terrified him.

For Kharbyr a lifetime of wickedness and cynicism had been bolstered by the belief that there was a place for him in the universe and that Commorragh was it. The mean, tangled streets and glowering spires had been his nursery and his tutor; he fitted into that world like a knife into its sheath. What he'd seen in the last few hours looked very much like the end of the world, his world, and to find that he'd had a direct hand in making that happen was a horrifying prospect. The insidious voice continued to whisper into his doubt-filled mind, seeming to feed off his crumbling bravado as he confronted the ugly truth.

+Don't feel bad, little Kharbyr, you were used just as the ones ordering you around were used. We've all been made the pawns of greater powers in this affair.+

Vengeance was a concept to which Kharbyr could still rally his flagging ego. He already wanted vengeance on Bellathonis and now he wanted vengeance on all the greater powers the witch-voice was harping on about, too. The voice chuckled appreciatively at his directionless fury.

+You certainly have spirit, I'll grant you that much. It's probably why you've been such a useful agent up until now. I can help you, Kharbyr, if you'll help me. We can take our vengeance together.+

Kharbyr's head came up and he looked around the rubble-choked chamber again. Now that the Talos was gone he was absolutely sure there was no one else present. The disembodied voice seemed disturbingly close to him. It felt as though someone were standing by his shoulder and whispering into his ear.

'And just how would I help you?' Kharbyr asked it warily. 'If you're so knowledgeable and so... so wise about everything I'd think you could help yourself.'

+Alas, my capabilities have been severely curtailed, as you'll see. Step over to that sled piled with equipment. Look for a metallic cylinder on it that's about as long as your arm.+

Kharbyr hesitantly followed the instructions. The low, bier-like gravity sled was piled with metal crates and boxes covered in an indecipherable script. There were bundles of gleaming tools: saws, scalpels, tongs and pincers of various kinds. Glass tubes, jars and alembics held in place by nets twinkled at the top of the pile like snow atop a miniature mountain. Kharbyr searched carefully, his mind full of the horrors he might find inside a haemonculus's toolbox. He found the cylinder in plain sight. It was resting on end atop a box and unsecured, as if someone had simply put it there absentmindedly a moment before. He realised at once that the cylinder was simply a sort of casing. One half of it was open to reveal a crystal tube inside, full of fluid.

Another icy chill dripped down Kharbyr's neck as he looked into the crystal tube. A medusa's nest of black coils floated in the fluid, masses of lustrous dark hair that all but obscured a pallid, wax-like face. The eyes and mouth of the face were sewn shut and yet they still moved. Dry, croaking laughter erupted

into his mind.

+Now you can see that I am in no condition to pursue anything on my own. Bellathonis kept me like this for his convenience while he tortured and exploited me. I want my revenge too, Kharbyr, I desire it with a passion that a stripling like you can only dream about.+

Actually seeing the thing called Angevere had restored some of Kharbyr's boldness. She was as helpless as a babe in arms, all she could do was cajole or persuade with her mind-speech. He felt confident that he could simply ignore her wheedling if he wanted to.

+You're wondering where we are. We're in the foundation strata beneath the White Flames fortress. This is what's left of a temporary bolthole Bellathonis established while he was working for Yllithian.+

'So how can you help me to catch up with Bellathonis and make him give me my body back when you don't even have a body of your own?' Kharbyr demanded with studied insolence.

+Through wisdom, child, a characteristic that you are not overly burdened by. Think! You wear the face of Bellathonis now and that makes you a target for his enemies. It also means that you can find help by tricking Bellathonis's allies into thinking that you are him.+

'You mean like tricking Yllithian. Those two were always hand in glove together from what I saw, and Yllithian is extremely powerful.'

+Yes – though be warned that until recently Yllithian had thought to rid himself of Bellathonis. Fortunately I know that he's now had a change of heart. Would you like to spy on Yllithian? There is a simple way that you can do so.+

Intrigued, Kharbyr followed Angevere's instructions and dug through some pouches on his belt. From one of them he retrieved a multi-faceted red gem that was a little smaller than his thumb. While tapping it on the top of a crate three times he incanted the name 'Nyos Yllithian'. After a moment a small, crimson-tinted picture formed in the air above the gem. It showed a first-person perspective view from the deck of a grav-craft that was racing through the spires of Commorragh. Kharbyr heard Yllithian's voice barking commands to his lackeys and noticed the way they shifted deferentially as the viewpoint was directed towards them. The gem was showing events as seen through Yllithian's eyes.

+Bellathonis did not trust Yllithian, so when he performed a transmigration to save the Archon's life he made certain modifications to the new body without telling him.+

'Wait, Yllithian's been transferred too?'

+Of course. Bellathonis had reasons to test the process before using it on himself. Yllithian's old body was being devoured by the glass plague at the time so he was grateful for the chance to escape from it – although Bellathonis disguised the risks involved anyway.+

Kharbyr nodded to himself. Tales of strangeness like soul-transfers, body-swaps, transmigration and a thousand others were nothing new in Commorragh. It was common knowledge that for the right fee a haemonculus could reconstruct a body from ashes, or that death was a mere inconvenience for the wealthy elite. Some of those wilder stories had to have a grounding in reality.

'I'm still tempted to just leave you here and go it alone, it'll take more than a few tricks like that gem

to prove you're useful to me.' It was a half-hearted threat and by now they both knew it.

+You would never be able to find your way out of the maze of tunnels around here, much less get to the White Flames fortress unmarked. Once there you could never pass as Bellathonis without my help. You need me, Kharbyr.+

'All right, let's say that I do, what happens next?'

+We watch Yllithian carefully and choose our moment. Then we approach him for help in finding the errant Kharbyr and reunite the two of you.+

'Then what?'

+One thing at a time, child, a moment ago you were within a hair's-breadth of your doom.+

'You think the Talos will come back?'

+Only if we stop looking for Bellathonis. It wants him too.+

To Angevere's expanded perception Kharbyr's mind was quiescent and malleable. It was simple enough to prod him along into a plan to meet with Yllithian. Angevere chose not to share with her unwitting tool that her real objective was Yllithian, always Yllithian. A chance to repay Bellathonis for his tortures and humiliations would be welcome indeed, but the focus of Angevere's hatred was reserved for Nyos Yllithian. The Archon's downfall should have been complete by now and yet he kept slipping out of the noose. Angevere planned to change that.



## CHAPTER 5

### AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR FOR VECT

Asdrubael Vect was in the midst of a light repast when they brought the calling card to him. He had moved to another of the great atria that girdled the highest peak of Corespur, a vast open space with one wall and most of the roof pierced with hundreds of tall, narrow windows looking out over Commorrhagh. Ordinarily the view outside was breathtaking – the jagged, precipitous slopes of Corespur falling away to the peaks and valleys formed by the spires of Sorrow Fell, beyond them the shining towers of High Commorrhagh in all their barbed profusion, and in the distance the radiating talons of the docking ring where armadas of sleek vessels twinkled like stars in the outer dark. Now the view was a hellish scene dominated by clouds of smoke under-lit by sullen fires. The wan, poisonous light from the quiescent *Ilmaea* that came spilling in through the windows threw dark bars of shadow across the exquisitely tiled floor such that despite its openness the atrium felt like an enormous cage.

A troupe of scantily clad Lhamaeans whirled and cavorted across the centre of the floor in perfect time with the ululating shrieks of their victims. A veritable host of the poor, damned souls were hanging from the ceiling, dangling in chains so that they were swinging helplessly in the midst of the sinuous dancers. The Lhamaeans stroked and caressed their playthings lasciviously as they gyrated between them. With every scratch of their poison-encrusted fingernails the Lhamaeans introduced more of the nerve-shredding neurotoxins that were slowly, exquisitely killing their victims. The screams embodied not only unimaginable pain, but agonised arousal and unfulfilled lust. Vect smiled as he enjoyed these simple pleasures and feasted on the outpouring of raw suffering that the adepts of Shaimesh were provoking.

A black-winged scourge came fluttering into the chamber through an open window. Before the scourge even alighted, Vect saw his trueborn warriors moving to bar its path. There was a low, hurried exchange of words and then there were nervous glances towards him as they tried to decide whether or not they should interrupt their supreme overlord with whatever news was being brought. Vect ignored them and continued to watch the Lhamaeans while the guards quietly squabbled over what to do. Finally the scourge seemed to tire of their indecision and broke away, stalking forwards on its own and forcing the guards to follow it with looks of fury on their faces. The scourge dropped to its knees a dozen paces from Vect and held up a small wafer of crystal for his inspection.

Vect frowned balefully at the interruption and held up one hand to the dancers. The Lhamaeans instantly froze into place mid-step like living statues. The shrieks of their victims faded away into low-pitched babbling and weeping. Vect lowered his hand and twitched his finger towards the scourge to signal it to approach. It did so at a half-crouch as though approaching an open furnace door and trying to avoid the resulting blast of heat. The crystal wafer it held so delicately in its talons was small enough that it would have fitted into the palm of Vect's hand, rectangular, and unmarked save for a superimposed image of two stylised masks, one laughing and one weeping.

Vect arched one eyebrow and sighed volubly before turning to signal for the Lhamaeans to continue. Behind him he heard a short scuffle as his trueborn warriors seized the scourge and dragged it away with its talons scraping across the tiled floor. The shrieks of the Lhamaeans' victims rose swiftly to obliterate the final fate of the unfortunate winged messenger.

Unusually as he completed his repast, Vect found himself relenting a little. He formed a growing belief that he could gain some value in bandying words with the one that had sent him the calling card and that the momentary diversion in itself might bear unexpected fruit. The individual in question would likely know more about how matters fared outside Commorrhagh and inside the webway than Vect cared to admit.

The Lhamaeans had almost completed their performance. The moans and whimpers of their victims were becoming softer and softer as they were finally devoured. The supreme overlord looked up and addressed his trueborn guards as though there had been no prior interruption.

'Very well, I've seen his calling card. Bring in the Fool that sent it. Let's hear what he has to say for himself.'

The onyx-armoured guards accompanying Vect's visitor were unsure of his status when he arrived. They compromised by trailing a half-step behind the approaching figure with their splinter rifles held at the ready and looking as if they were preparing to leap into action at any moment. The visitor strode in front of them as confidently as if he were at the head of a guard of honour. He was little enough to look at: small, slight, dressed in faintly ridiculous archaic garb that was patterned with alternating diamonds of black and white so fine that they appeared grey from a distance. He wore a domino-style half-mask beneath which his full, mobile lips were visible, fixed in an overly wide smile.

For all the visitor's non-threatening appearance there was, Vect noted, an underlying dynamism to his movements he tried to keep carefully hidden – more than the poise of a dancer or the power of an athlete, something more like the sprung wiriness of an assassin. Vect watched with an inscrutable expression as the stranger sketched a needlessly baroque bow before kneeling. The supreme overlord waved his guards away with an air of disdain.

'What do you want?' Vect asked without preamble. 'Your time here with me will be short, so employ it wisely.'

'Supreme overlord!' the visitor sprang up and wrung its hands in apparent misery. 'Those I represent wish to extend their deepest and most heartfelt commiserations on the dire events that have beset the great city of Commorrhagh—'

'My city,' Vect snapped.

'...*Your* great city of Commorragh,' the Fool continued without missing a beat, 'and to take the opportunity to offer any and all assistance they can in restoring it to its former glory.'

'How very neighbourly of you,' Vect observed sarcastically. 'If I find myself in need of troupes of jugglers to fill my arenas and bordellos I shall certainly look no further.'

The stranger's smile hardened a little when he responded to the jibe. 'Of course – you'll be needing a great many souls to restock your city with, I imagine. I see this particular winnowing has been especially thorough.'

Vect gave a hard smile in return to acknowledge that the empty pleasantries had now been dispensed with. 'A culling of the weak, nothing more,' Vect said dismissively. 'Commorragh has endured far worse during its history and always emerges the stronger for it.'

The slight stranger refused to rise to Vect's bait and opted to nod sympathetically. 'While I sense that the immediate shocks have passed there is something deeply... moribund about the city in the aftermath, don't you think? It's my fear that a canker is forming that might eventually poison this entire reality.'

Vect reappraised the creature for a moment, looking behind the mask being presented to him at that moment for the real motivations driving beneath the surface. The stranger was a Harlequin, certainly, one of the vagrant warrior-troubadours that claimed a mystical connection with the dead past of the eldar race as they wandered the webway. This one had the bright, fervent eyes of a fanatic, a true believer in their trickster deity, the so-called Laughing God. Although he was trying to disguise the signs, the Harlequin was tense, bursting with barely suppressed energy. Vect surmised that this Harlequin had other work that he was desperate to be doing, but that he had felt constrained to come before the supreme overlord first. It was an intriguing conundrum and Vect decided to strike at the heart of it.

'You know something about the Dysjunction,' Vect said incisively, 'something that you felt you had to come straight here and warn me about. Something you're now hesitant to reveal.'

The Harlequin spread his hands helplessly and hunched his shoulders as if to feign innocence. Vect smiled maliciously; this one was as weak as all the others.

'I'll make it easy for you,' the tyrant added conversationally. 'Stop wasting my time and tell me what you know or I'll have my Castigators rip it from your bones.'

The Harlequin's ever-present smile became a little wistful, as if he could think of nothing more welcome. Vect scowled and the Fool seemed suddenly to remember where he was with comic dismay. Defeated, the Harlequin blew out his cheeks and puckered his lips as if tasting something bitter.

'Forgive me, great one. I truly desire nothing more than to unburden myself to you. I have borne witness to great and terrible events in the recent past which I'm hesitant to bore you with. Suffice to say that I've seen signs that the gods of Chaos have caught up Commorragh in their sport. This is what brought about your Dysjunction. The Grandfather of Pestilence and the Architect of Fate have pursued their mutual conflict into realms that are usually considered the sovereign hunting grounds of She Who



Thirsts...'

Vect laughed outright at the Harlequin's little speech. 'Gods! Daemons! Always the same with your kind. You see things only through the lens of The Fall. You endlessly replay the old mythic cycles to teach us about the gods and our past yet you fail to see how utterly irrelevant you've become to the present. The past is gone, there is only the future for us. The powers of Chaos have schemed against Commorragh for its entire existence and they have never gained a permanent foothold here.'

Vect almost smiled to see the Harlequin virtually bouncing from one foot to the other with barely repressed eagerness to contradict his specious claim. 'Perhaps that has been true until now, mighty lord, I would certainly never gainsay someone so knowledgeable as yourself about the details of their own domain,' the too-wide smile flashed again. 'My one fear is that this happy state of affairs may have now come to an end.' The smile vanished into a concerned frown like the sun disappearing behind a cloud.

'You're using a great many words to say very little,' Vect said pointedly. 'Perhaps the Castigators will be the best solution after all. I often find that hearing reports of what people say is much more efficient and informative than actually speaking with them.'

The slight figure paled noticeably. It seemed that this meeting was not proceeding in the manner he had anticipated it should. The Harlequin glanced around for a moment as if just now fully absorbing the enormity of where he stood: the chains with the bones of the Lhamaeans' victims swinging in the breeze, the coterie of the Lhamaeans themselves curled watching the visitor with the insatiable intensity of cats, the legion of black-armoured guards poised in the shadows, the stink of the burning city blowing in through the windows and most of all Vect himself, the pitiless tyrant with the power of life and death over it all. The little Fool looked very lost and lonely as he realised just how much he was at Vect's non-existent mercy. Vect let the feeling of dread settle in for a few seconds before he considered the Harlequin was feeling sufficiently crushed for him to be able to shake loose some useful information.

'Give me specifics,' Vect snapped. 'Give me places, people and details. Tell me how and why you've reached the conclusions you've reached and you might still walk out of here on your own two feet.'

The Harlequin, who was named Motley, felt as though he were dancing on hot coals. It had always been a gamble to approach Vect directly, but try as he might Motley could think of no better way to try and protect the city as a whole than co-opting its supreme overlord to the task. Motley hadn't counted on the fact that Vect did not care about his opinions and saw him only as a resource to be exploited. The idea of torture did not elicit any real sense of dread within Motley, although he was cautious enough to allow Vect to continue thinking that it did. Imprisonment, however, could be deadly to his cause.

'It began with a real space raid on a maiden world called Lileathanir,' Motley began and Vect's dark, disturbing gaze intensified immediately. The supreme overlord had heard that name before.

'During the raid a small group kidnapped a worldsinger from her shrine. As a result of this the world spirit of Lileathanir became enraged and struck back – first at the raiding force to drive it away and later at the raid's point of origin – Commorragh.'

For all his avowed contempt for talk of gods and daemons Vect fully comprehended the implications of Motley's story. As supreme overlord of Commorragh, Vect understood that repositories of souls like a maiden world's world spirit or a craftworld's infinity circuit represented a source of real power in the metaphysical realm of warp space – raw, atavistic and potentially supremely dangerous power.

'Continue,' Vect spoke the word with distaste.

'In the intervening time,' Motley recounted, 'the worldsinger was brought to Commorragh and used in an... undertaking to resurrect one of your old enemies, El'Uriaq, I believe. The attempt failed, or rather it seemed to succeed, but the result was corrupt and became the possessed vessel of a very potent daemon. The emergence of the daemon, the destruction of it and its offspring, the wrath of the world spirit – these factors combined, reflected and redoubled their effects to produce the Dysjunction that has wracked the, ah, your city.'

'It should come as no surprise to you that I am aware of these facts,' Vect said coldly, 'and – although I find myself wondering at your knowledge of them – I find nothing in what you've said that implicates the gods of Chaos at work in some master scheme. Greed, opportunism and a lack of foresight breed disaster. So it ever was.'

Motley smiled despite himself. Like any good storyteller he had saved the best until last, an implicit twist for the tale that had – so far – kept Vect interested. Now they came to the point where he would find out if his best was good enough. Motley had fought daemons and confronted the darkness in mortal hearts more times than he could speak of and yet his mouth felt dry at this moment. He was wagering his life and his very soul that the tyrant didn't know what he was about to be told. The little Harlequin moistened his lips and plunged onwards.

'Ah yes, your gracious eminence, but in my incompetence I have failed to communicate the critical ending of one part of the story – the quieting of the world spirit on Lileathanir. It was an event of such magnitude that it brought the active phase of the Dysjunction to an end!'

Vect's gaze was hooded. 'You're using too many words again,' the tyrant said, raising a warning figure when Motley opened his mouth to reply, 'and don't test my patience by telling me that you're supplying details. You're not. Give me the facts without the dramatic embellishments. I need only to look out of the windows, little clown, to be fully appraised of the gravity of the situation.'

Motley nodded and chose his next words carefully. 'One of the original kidnappers, an incubus named Morr, went back to Lileathanir to confront the world spirit in the hopes of appeasing it. He succeeded, partially, and was confronted by an agent of Tzeentch. A craftworlder warlock named Cereis had been tainted – I don't know how long ago – but when the time came he nearly, very nearly, acted as a conduit for a Scion of the Opener. If it had fully manifested as intended it would have consumed Lileathanir's world spirit and pulled the entire planet into the Realm of Chaos. The Dysjunction would still be happening now if it were not for Morr's sacrifice.'

'All very tragic and very heroic. I'll build a memorial to him,' Vect said sarcastically. 'And if we assume for a moment that everything you've said is true, I'll grant you've tenuously connected a Chaotic

influence to the occurrence of the Dysjunction, but not to Commorragh itself.'

Vect was toying with him now, Motley was certain of it, squeezing him for exactly what he knew. The Harlequin prattled on, nonsensically counting points off on his gloved fingers as though he were playing a game.

'No agent of the Weaver can be revealed without it unravelling part of a larger scheme. The raid on Lileathanir and the kidnapping of the worldsinger were opening moves on the great game board, ones that would bring the Scion to Lileathanir when the time was ripe, but that wasn't all. In Commorragh itself Tzeentch's agents were whistling up a storm and then they planted a lightning rod in the city to receive it. Exactly why they did so or whether they even knew what the outcome would be we can only guess at, but I'm certain that they did it under the influence of the Architect of Fate.'

Vect gazed at the Harlequin for a moment before he turned and stalked away to the tall windows to gaze out over his city. Motley was momentarily taken aback by the turnabout and then skipped quickly to catch up to the tyrant, feeling like a chastened child. The guards in the shadows shifted warningly at the sudden movement before freezing again, statue-like. The tyrant was silent for so long that Motley jumped slightly when Vect suddenly spoke to him again.

'I take it you have no proof for your supposition that the plague lord, Nurgle, is involved,' the tyrant said flatly.

'Only that the two, weaver and destroyer, are never far apart. Where one appears the other must follow.'

Vect grunted in a muted acceptance of the Harlequin's statement. 'There have been signs,' the supreme overlord admitted finally, 'unusual but not unique. I had thought them thoroughly crushed, but now I see I must look again and make sure. Tell me about these supposed agents in the city. Name them to me.'

Motley hesitated for an instant. Naming names to a monster like Vect was in effect handing out death sentences. However, the Harlequin found that he could bite back his moral compunctions readily enough. Redirecting Vect's ire at deserving targets was an infinitely worthy cause, on top of which two of the three names he knew belonged to individuals that were already dead. The last was thoroughly deserving of death.

'I learned from Morr that three Archons were behind the scheme to raise El'Uriaq – Morr's own master, Kraillach, Xelian and Yllithian. Of the three Yllithian was portrayed as the ringleader.'

Vect nodded slightly, leaving Motley with the impression that he had just passed some sort of test. The tyrant turned his gaze back to the roiling, fire-lit clouds below before speaking again.

'So you're here on some harebrained scheme to save Commorragh, root out the wicked people and protect all the precious innocents,' Vect murmured. 'I don't think you represent anyone at all, little clown, just yourself, a big bag of suspicions and an overwhelming desire to meddle in other people's business.'

Motley's smile was sickly as he realised that Vect had seen through his little ruse. It was unfair to say that the Harlequin was entirely without resources – the other members of his troupe would come, or

rather they might come, if he called on them. Motley had not done so because in the magnitude of something as awful as the Dysjunction striking Commorrhagh they were as effective as a thimbleful of water in a forest fire. Not to mention that few of the Harlequins in the troupe could be relied upon to be as enthusiastic in saving the dark kin from themselves as was Motley himself.

Motley saw the tyrant was grinning wickedly at him and was evidently well aware of his discomfort. The tyrant of Commorrhagh appeared to be reading his mind even though such a feat was patently impossible. The Harlequin spread his hands apologetically.

‘Not everyone hates Commorrhagh and wishes to see it fall,’ Motley said.

‘But most do,’ Vect shot back. ‘Do the craftworlds send their condolences and offer me their aid? They do not. Do the Exodites grieve for our loss? They do not – in fact they would rejoice if they knew of it. The sensibilities of our various backward cousins in the greater universe remain what they have always been – an irrelevance. Commorrhagh does not need them and I would reject any such overtures anyway, or better yet I would accept them and enslave all of the simpering fools that came here crying their false tears of conciliation. Commorrhagh stands alone as it has always done and I will destroy any fool that preaches otherwise.’

‘As the supreme overlord that is your right, in accordance with the diktats you made on your ascension to power,’ Motley agreed sadly. ‘The loyalty of your subjects must remain unquestioning.’

‘Just so,’ Vect pinioned the Harlequin with his merciless gaze. ‘You treat the words like an indictment, but you know that you speak the truth. While others may weep or cringe or wring their hands in the midst of disaster I live for these times of challenge. This is why I rule here, because I will always endure and this city will endure with me no matter the cost.’

The tyrant fell silent for a moment and then, unexpectedly, he smiled at the Harlequin disarmingly. Motley was more shocked by the sight than anything else he had seen so far. Vect had played at being the monstrous tyrant from the moment the Harlequin had arrived. Now he smiled as if that had all been a tiresome but necessary piece of play-acting between old friends.

‘You’ve performed a great service to myself and my city at no small risk to yourself,’ the tyrant said agreeably, ‘now tell me what you would take as your reward.’

The reversal was so complete that it made Motley feel a little giddy. The Harlequin sensed a more dangerous trap waiting for him now than at any point previously in the conversation. A cold, forbidding tyrant was one thing to deal with, a suddenly generous one was quite another. Motley had always rather prided himself on his measure of headlong foolhardiness but he instinctively shied away from claiming any rewards. Vect might take any request and twist it into some heinous crime or ironic punishment on a whim.

‘I ask only the permission to move freely through the city so that I can investigate further,’ Motley smiled before bowing again with a flourish. Vect appeared to weigh the request for a moment before replying.

‘Very well, though I will supply you with neither transportation nor protection beyond the boundaries of Corespur. You might join me in following the progress of Valossian – he’s pushing

further into Sorrow Fell even as we speak – or stay here until things become a little safer.’ The supreme overlord’s eyes glittered with malicious humour at that and Motley understood that Vect believed staying in Corespur was the very last thing he should think about doing.

‘Supreme and overwhelming mightiness, it is my wish to set out forthwith so that I need trouble your monumentalness no further,’ Motley said and struck a heroic pose. ‘I go to seek our enemies wherever they may lurk.’

‘Enemies are everywhere,’ Vect said as he waved a hand to dismiss the Harlequin. ‘Wisdom comes from knowing which ones to eliminate first.’



## CHAPTER 6

### THE COURT OF THE SHADOW-KING

Sliding sidewise through the cracks and crevices in his reality Kheradruakh crept forth from his ossuary of skulls. He followed his altered senses outwards on the trail of the wrongness that was leaking into his lair. Confusion and anarchy greeted him, a billion fractured blades of other realities writhing in delectable torment. With his nostrils flaring and tongue flickering, the Decapitator tried to make sense of the tumult.

*Aelindrach was altering, shifting its wavering boundaries outwards to encompass new territories. Many of the hunting grounds of old had already been absorbed into the ancient heartland of the shadow-realm, disrupting its still, icy perfection with their brash addition. Mandrakes and their kindred raced through the bloated realm slaughtering one another with an unholy fervour, mewling prey fluttered hither and yon with life-sparks so feeble that they were as valueless as ashes.*

*Among it all Kheradruakh caught an alien scent. It was the scent of something that was neither prey nor mandrake, life-sparks from the outer realm at large in Aelindrach. Kheradruakh was intrigued enough to seek them out. Cross-currents and undertows conspired to obscure the scent but Kheradruakh was indefatigable. He found the prey that believed itself not prey near the boundary of the outer realm. It stood at bay with mandrake hunters already circling – just a single pack closing in for the kill. The Decapitator lurked deep in the shadows and watched with unseeing eyes as events unfolded.*

A blood-chilling howl cut through the darkness and was answered from afar. Xagor shivered involuntarily at the sound. It was a bestial sound, a sound that mingled hunger and rage as it tore itself free from the throats of their pursuers. They were getting closer now. The master had chosen the place for them to make their stand, a coffin-shaped declivity with a narrow entryway. There was no exit save by the way they had entered and that, Bellathonis had confidently assured Xagor, meant that their pursuers would have to come at them from the front. Xagor would have preferred somewhere with a way to retreat, but he was wise enough to hold his tongue.

Time crawled by in frigid silence as Bellathonis and Xagor waited. They clutched the weapons they had brought to Aelindrach like talismans. The haemonculus held the long knife and a skeletal-looking

splinter pistol that had been the favoured weapons of Kharbyr, while Xagor had the heavy-barrelled hex-rifle that he had looted from the ruins of the Lower Metzuh at the beginning of the Dysjunction. It was a sparse enough selection of armaments with which to confront mandrakes, but Xagor at least had faith in his hex-rifle. He had seen its mutagenic bolts rip apart even the warp-infused flesh of daemons. He told himself that skulking mandrakes would soon come to fear its bite.

A thin rime of frost had begun to spread across every surface, the tiny crackling sounds of its progress as loud and sinister as footsteps in the enclosed space. A darker shadow suddenly flitted across the entrance and Xagor gripped his rifle tighter. The shape reappeared and Xagor thought he caught a glimpse of needle-sharp teeth being bared in the blackness outside. Xagor fired instinctively and the shape vanished so quickly that for a moment he thought he'd just imagined it. Then – a hissing shriek from outside that rose to an agonised pitch before being abruptly silenced.

'Good shot, Xagor,' Bellathonis murmured quietly, 'that's one down. Now get back into that angle like I showed you.'

Xagor obeyed and squeezed himself into one corner of their tiny redoubt so that he couldn't see the entrance any more. The haemonculus's wisdom was vindicated an instant later when the entrance was lashed by blasts of cold fire. The air was already freezing but now became life-sapping in its own right as the temperature plummeted. If any flesh had been directly exposed to the mandrakes' bale-fire it would have shattered like glass.

Bellathonis sprang out of his hiding place and fired several shots from his pistol without taking the time to aim. The haemonculus was relying on the vicious whine of the impacting splinters to make their enemies outside duck back. Xagor mirrored the movement a split second later and stepped out with his hex-rifle levelled. He strained his senses to pierce the swirling shadows and find a target but his teeth were chattering so much that he could barely focus. A flicker of movement in the deeper blackness caught his eye and the wrack loosed a half-blind shot at the area before darting back into safety.

An uneasy peace settled for a moment. It seemed their pursuers faced an impasse where they either dared not or could not attempt to overwhelm Xagor and Bellathonis with a frontal attack. The haemonculus had gambled that this would be the case, but he had little data to use in predicting what would happen next. The mandrakes might wait them out, call for reinforcements or simply leave. The difficulty came in trying to determine what they had actually done rather than what they could do – to assume that they had left could be both embarrassing and fatal if the mandrakes subsequently reappeared and sank their icy claws into Bellathonis and Xagor's backs. They could only watch and wait for the mandrakes' next move.

They came without warning. Their attacking rush was utterly silent as the entrance suddenly filled with surging forms. Xagor heard Bellathonis's pistol shooting and fired his own weapon by reflex. An instant later a saw-toothed sickle of bone was flashing down at his skull. He hauled his heavy rifle up just in time to block the descending blade and caught a glimpse of an inky, shifting face framed by pallid hair. Xagor swung the stock of the hex-rifle around in an effort to smash it into the face of his adversary, but the shadow-skinned mandrake oozed away from the clumsy blow before it could

connect.

Xagor was distracted by the sight of his master clashing blades with another pair of the slinking shades. The wrack dared not fire again at such close quarters for fear of hitting Bellathonis, so he was reduced to fighting with what amounted to an ungainly club. Xagor's own assailant came surging back before Xagor could even move forward to Bellathonis's aid. The saw-toothed sickle swung down again, this time searching for his neck.

Xagor tried to block the attack with his rifle but the swing became a looping thrust that sank into his midriff. He gasped and dropped his rifle as a biting wave of cold from the wound threatened to freeze his heart. He wavered for a moment, grunted and grabbed at the wrist holding the sickle in an effort to stay upright. Xagor felt icy, corded muscle ripple beneath his grip and glimpsed the mandrake's face again – this time with its jaws opening like a fresh wound to display rows of needle-sharp teeth glimmering in the gloom.

'Xagor, your master is in peril! Help me!' The sound of Bellathonis's voice snapped across Xagor's fading consciousness like a jolt of electricity. He smashed his masked face into the mandrake's grinning visage with all the remaining strength he could muster. The ink-skinned fiend sagged beneath the blow and lost its grip on the sickle still protruding from Xagor's guts. The wrack twisted the creature's wrist savagely as it fell, evoking a bubbling hiss, and then stamped on its vertebrae in an effort to snap its neck.

To Xagor's surprise the mandrake simply came apart in his hands, instantaneously transforming into runnels of ichor-like shadow that slipped between his fingers and vanished into the stuff of Aelindrach. The wrack turned and staggered again as he tried to leap to the defence of Bellathonis. He realised what the problem was, stopped and absentmindedly pulled the mandrake's saw-toothed sickle out of himself. He ignored the crimson splatter of blood that came out with it as he tried to advance with a more measured tread.

The two remaining mandrakes were swirling about Bellathonis like wolves, snapping and worrying at the haemonculus's defences as he fought to keep them at bay. Xagor swung awkwardly at the closest shifting blur and felt the sickle connect with something solid. His knees gave way and he fell, still clutching at the saw-toothed sickle and feeling it tearing through insubstantial flesh as he did so.

There was a hiss and Xagor dimly glimpsed Bellathonis thrusting his blade through his other attacker's throat. As he slithered to the ground Xagor's rapidly dimming mind decided that since he could no longer trust his legs he should crawl away and find his rifle so that he could at least shoot. He had dragged himself less than a metre before greyness closed in around him and provoked a final, panicked thought that he would be lost in the shadow-realm forever.

Xagor awoke to waves of excruciating pain alternating with the sensation of swaying. His wrists and ankles were bound to a pole being carried none too gently between two slaves. He sensed Bellathonis nearby and felt the reassuring presence of the haemonculus looming over him.



‘Be still now, Xagor, everything’s perfectly fine,’ Bellathonis murmured quietly to him. ‘Xhakoruakh’s followers found us in time. They’re taking us to him now. They seemed impressed by our little performance, hulp—’

The haemonculus was abruptly dragged away by a collar around his throat. A thin line of black cord connected to the collar was being held by a mandrake nearby. The shadow-skinned creature jerked it vigorously to bring Bellathonis to heel. Xagor saw that the haemonculus’s arms were also bound behind his back with more cords as he was yanked away. Xagor loyally snarled and thrashed at the sight of his master being treated like a slave, but that only served to send further waves of pain down his legs and arms.

The slaves continued to carry Xagor along listlessly, too cowed and frightened to even raise their heads. The wound in the gut where Xagor had been stabbed felt numb and he started trying to concentrate on that in preference to the hotter pain in his extremities. As a wrack Xagor was well versed in both dispensing and receiving pain. The master was very insistent that a balance was maintained – those who felt no pain, Bellathonis had said, could scarcely be expected to apply it with any degree of finesse. Xagor felt bolstered by the thought and stoically bore the sickening jolts of travel as they merged into one long torture.

By the time they approached the court of Xhakoruakh both Bellathonis and Xagor were being dragged by collars held by silent mandrakes. The number of slaves in the mandrakes’ coffle had shrunk dramatically as they were mercilessly consumed by their captors. To Xagor it seemed as if the creatures were gorging themselves by feasting on as many of their captives as they could before they reached the shadow-king’s demesne. Bellathonis’s strident protests had saved Xagor from being slain, but now the wrack had to stagger along unassisted and do his best to keep up with the fluid movements of the mandrakes as they travelled down ever-darker paths. Xagor was tough but he was close to the end of his endurance.

Xhakoruakh had made his holdfast in what amounted to a great cathedral of darkness deep within the heart of Aelindrach, a true palace of shadow. From a distance the place gave the appearance of a titanic, dusky spider’s web – an image that recalled to Xagor his entry into the shadow-realm so clearly that it made him shudder. As they moved closer crooked columns of onyx, ebony and basalt resolved themselves from the darkness and could be sensed climbing upwards in anarchic fashion to unseen heights. The columns branched, crossed and re-crossed to support a haphazard profusion of floors, steps and walls. There was no internal logic to the construction; stairs climbed to nowhere, walls stood in splendid isolation or clung to floors with no visible means of support.

Xagor and Bellathonis were dragged inside without ceremony and entered a multi-dimensional maze that assailed the senses with its flagrant impossibilities. What had seemed anarchic and haphazard from the outside revealed itself inside as an inversion, a shadow of itself built of corners and crooked ways, a labyrinth of impossible angles that led *elsewhere*. At times the deep network of shadows seemed to be alive with slinking shapes and baleful eyes, or the air would pulsate with sinister whisperings. In other moments the great edifice seemed utterly desolate and empty. The mandrakes

led them ever deeper through shadow-choked crossways and dusty rooms. Discarded trophies and forgotten treasures lay scattered in odd corners: corroding weapons and rent armour, torn clothes and mouldering bones, trinkets, children's toys, books of forbidden lore and bejewelled caskets all tossed aside like garbage.

They found XhakoruaKh in an empty, echoing space carpeted with fleshless skulls and hung with countless narrow banners that drifted slowly in a spectral breeze. Forbidden runes blazed coldly from the banners in complex tracteries of emerald witch-fire that hurt the eye and the mind. The shadow-king was squatting at the centre of it all, his muscular arms outstretched and his midnight flesh rippling with glowing runes that outshone the ones gleaming on the banners around him. The dark, faceless figure rose at their approach and it became apparent that it was a giant among its kind. It stood head and shoulders above the mandrakes that were accompanying the prisoners and possessed an aura of dark and terrible majesty.

The mandrakes had already forced the prisoners to their knees. Now at the shadow-king's approach they too crouched and averted their ever-shifting faces fearfully as the towering figure spoke. Its voice was rich and timeless as if welling up from sombre depths, the tolling of lost bells drowned in the deep.

'Petty morsels these – why have you disturbed my meditations with such slender offerings?'

Xagor had readily slumped to the ground with the other slaves, dumbly accepting of his fate. Bellathonis, however, struggled up and shrugged off his guard's first attempt to drag him back down. 'It's a great honour to meet you again, XhakoruaKh,' the haemonculus said quickly. 'You've... ah... certainly grown since we last met in person. It's me, Bellathonis, although I wouldn't blame you for not recognising me at present.'

'Bellathonis... I remember that name, but you are not him,' the shadow-king ruminated slowly. 'I had an arrangement with Bellathonis once. Slaves for services rendered. One hand fed the other and it was satisfying for a time. Such petty trade has no place now.'

'It was Bellathonis that freed you from Zykleiades's trap in the labyrinth of the Black Descent and I'll wager you've never told anyone about that,' the haemonculus insisted. 'I know because I'm Bellathonis in another form, I've changed just like you've changed.'

The giant raised its arms again so that the glowing runes set into its flesh writhed with unholy power. 'The past is gone. The shadows spread and consume all. Old agreements are empty words in the new kingdom that I rule.'

'Oh? So you've defeated your brother already? Then I presume the mandrake pack that attacked us before your loyal subjects came along must simply have been disobedient or insane.'

XhakoruaKh's arms dropped and his shifting, featureless head was downcast. 'Tracherous Azoruakh still defies me from the throne he stole,' the shadow-king grumbled. 'Just as my kingdom has grown, so has his.'

'Well if our old agreement is null let us make a new one. I will help you to defeat your brother.'

The dusky giant immediately became wary and Bellathonis knew that the mandrake-king had accepted that the haemonculus was who he said he was. 'What price would you exact for your services

this time?’ Xhakoruakh said.

‘Only the tools and materials I require,’ the haemonculus said lightly, ‘basic protection and a place to work without any disturbance. Such a little cost to gain an individual with my talents and you’ll get so much in return. I’ll craft minions for you that will make your brother’s deluded followers flee in terror.’

The great ebon head of the shadow-king nodded slowly as it considered Bellathonis’s offer, but Xhakoruakh’s next words were troubled.

‘Strange for you to come to me now – I had not foreseen it in the shadow-skein nor was it shown by the carven ones. I know all, I see all and yet you are a mystery to me. How can this be?’

Bellathonis found the giant’s demeanour increasingly disturbing. The creature he had released from the Patriarch Noctis’s lair had been whip-thin and hungry, a quick-witted and infinitely dangerous entity. This being seemed to be almost literally drunk on power, bloated and engorged with it. Its mind seemed to be fevered or deranged in some way and Bellathonis found himself wondering what strange influences the Dysjunction might have had in the already half-unreal environment of Aelindrach.

‘The Dysjunction has made Commorrhagh too dangerous for me to stay in for the present,’ Bellathonis said, deciding to forego mentioning the assassin-machines that had been sent in pursuit of him, ‘so I naturally thought of you and the welcoming land of Aelindrach as a good place to wait out the aftermath.’

Xhakoruakh’s booming laughter rang horribly in the sepulchral silence of his palace. ‘The Dysjunction. Of course, such glorious terror, such rampant fear. No wonder I could not see you in it. I think no one before you has ever come to the shadow-realm seeking safety. Inversions, all is inversions.’

The shadow-king pointed at the mandrakes and spoke commandingly. ‘Release this one and take him to a place where he can do his work. Bring him whatever he needs. I care not from whence it comes – steal, scavenge, strip bare if you must. Bellathonis’s creations will join with my other weapons and then... oh Azoruakh, my murderous, treacherous, beloved sibling... Azoruakh, you will be utterly destroyed just as I have foreseen.’

Bellathonis tried to bow at the waist as best he could before he gave up and flexed his tightly bound arms helplessly. A razor-sharp blade whispered within a hair’s-breadth of his flesh and the cords fell away. The haemonculus indicated his distinctly sickly-looking wrack.

‘Thank you, my Archon. I’ll need Xagor too, of course...’ Bellathonis began to say. But the arrival of the haemonculus had already been forgotten by the mandrake-king. Xhakoruakh turned away to gaze up at the forest of floating, rune-etched banners with sightless eyes.

A dreadful premonition sprang into Bellathonis’s ever-active mind. Power of the kind suffusing Xhakoruakh, Bellathonis knew, had to come from somewhere. It might be channelled, stored, amplified or redirected but it had an origin. Perhaps the expansion of the shadow-realm had fed its kings directly as Xhakoruakh claimed, or perhaps not. As he and Xagor left the shadow-king’s chamber Bellathonis could not stop wondering about the other ‘weapons’ that Xhakoruakh had alluded to, and what manner of beings were crafting them.





## CHAPTER 7

### THE TEARS OF SORROW FELL

We sweep together through Sorrow Fell, we are a tidal wave of terror, a firestorm of fear. Long lines of Raiders and Ravagers loaded with Black Heart kabalites stretch all the way back up to Corespur. We slide down from Vect's unassailable fortress-mountain like a mass of iron filings following lines of magnetic force, the vast fleet of grav-craft weaving around jutting spires and barbed steeples as they seek out the living and the damned. This close to Corespur resistance to the Black Heart's advance has been virtually non-existent. Most of the survivors that catch sight of the approaching armada either flee or give themselves over to singing loud and obvious praises to the coming of the supreme overlord. Where fighting does flare up the weaving lines of force converge momentarily to annihilate it in a flickering blaze of dire energies. Valossian Sythrac is chafing at the easy progress being made so far. He finds it insufferably dull.

I am well protected as I ride to war. We are aboard a floating ziggurat in the midst of the Black Heart kabalite armada. Thick walls of metal and invisible boundaries of force enfold us protectively, energy cannon and warriors guard the parapets of our moving fortress. The air thrums with a soft, insistent babble of voices reporting, ordering, observing, speculating. Our view of the city comes to us through remote feeds and photon-woven windows that are poor cousins to the scrying crystals of Corespur, but they suffice under the circumstances. From Vect's throne I see all as we drift between the fuming spires. I see the tiny, far-off figures of once-proud Archons standing covered in blood and ashes shaking their gory weapons aloft in salutation to Asdrubael Vect. I see Black Heart warriors crucifying prisoners as a warning to others of the price of resistance. I see scourges and hellions racing along the cliff-like flanks of spires looking for loot and plunder.

Valossian Sythrac paces like a caged animal. He is longing for something worthy of his attention. I secretly hope that his frustration will build to the point where he will leave, but Sythrac is too loyal and conscientious to give in to the desire just yet. If serious trouble begins he will be best placed to learn about it here in the central hub and he knows it. Still he chafes, stomping up and down in his baroque armour with its captive menagerie of souls. It's said that his armour is inhabited by ten thousand ghosts, their strength enslaved by spirit-engines to serve their hunter. I would like to ask Sythrac to explain the process to me in more detail, yet I feel constrained not to by the presence of an outsider in

our midst.

This outsider calls himself Motley and I do not like him at all. His gaze is too direct and too clever. He was brought to the ziggurat after we left Corespur and seemed surprised to see me at first. Now I catch him glancing at me with ineffable sadness as if he has realised what I truly am. The outsider constantly makes jokes and offers suggestions in a friendly way, but I think he has really come to watch and listen. Much like Sythrac, this Motley character would rather be somewhere else (and I wish he would go), but he feels that he must stay – for now at least – and continue to spy.

At least my friend is here with me. His silent presence beside the throne is oddly reassuring as he takes in all the sights with me. I have never witnessed so much change in the city before. For me it has always been a timeless place completely unaltered by the lives of the beings passing through it. Now I see that so much can change so quickly... and I find I am excited by the idea.

I turn to my friend, the Medusae. The jelly-like clusters of the exposed brains carried atop the host are engorged and trembling as the Medusae's expanded consciousness flits to and fro gathering raw emotions and impressions from all the minds it can reach. Grape-like fruits are swelling up on the host's neck and along its spine as the Medusae secretes the choicest collected memories of its experiences into the host's adapted nervous system. I reach down and tenderly pluck one of the smaller fruit from the host's back. I tell myself that it is a slight indulgence in order to perfectly maintain my disguise as the supreme overlord. The self-told lie is almost as exciting as the act itself.

The smooth-skinned bulb bursts in my mouth as I bite into it. The taste is bittersweet and releases a heady rush of sensations directly into my consciousness:

In my mind's eye the jagged maws of shattered windows now flash past only centimetres away as I whip my skyboard into a tight turn. A hundred metres away I can see a body half hanging out of a window with its dead hands still clutching an ornate-looking heat lance that fires my mind with avarice. I dive as I hear the snap of the scourges' wings closing in behind me and my heart sings with the thrill of the chase...

...The memory fades and now instead I experience the agonised wailing of a runaway slave as it is hoisted up by Vect's soldiers to die twisting on barbs of merciless iron...

...The shrieking gives way to the triumphant howling of gore-slicked, exhausted warriors as they salute the endless black stream of dagger-like craft passing overhead...

The visions fade and I find myself back inside the ziggurat seated in Vect's dark throne, smiling wistfully at the memory. I, too, would like to leave this place and wander the city, to see with my own eyes the things I have experienced vicariously, yet I know it cannot be. I must stay here playing my role like a puppet on a stage. The others can leave but I may not, until my puppet master whisks me to a new location to try and draw out the assassin's blade. Sythrac abruptly stops pacing and lifts his head like a hound catching a scent – the background babble of voices has altered slightly. We give our attention to the displays and see our first real challenge set before us.

The grand processional called the Alzos'Querion Vha had become a carpet of bones. Above the charnel house the skies rained with livid, actinic fires and around it kilometres-high spires of glittering onyx, silver and crystal belched clouds of filthy black smoke like the chimneys of some infernal industrial complex. The processional had become the main battleground in a multi-cornered war between kabals in the adjacent spires. The most likely victors were set to be the kabal of the Flayed Mask and the kabal of the Twisted Sword. These two kabals held twin spires that stood like bastions at the far end of the Alzos'Querion Vha. In more peaceful times they had enjoyed exercising the privileges of their position with great frequency. They extracted tithes and enacted ambushes on all the traffic passing between their monumental flanks on its way up from the docking ring to the higher slopes of Sorrow Fell.

With the advent of the Dysjunction the most immediate neighbours of the Twisted Sword and the Flayed Mask had seized the opportunity to rid themselves of the avaricious pair forever. The fighting that ensued had turned into a bloodbath. Armies of slaves armed with improvised weapons had been hurled across the processional to be slaughtered in their tens of thousands. Above them armadas of aerial craft locked in combat so fierce that their progress could be marked by the constant rain of burning wreckage and plummeting bodies.

The turf war between the kabals had quickly spiralled into a self-sustaining conflagration that dragged more of the surrounding spires into the flames. Allies were summoned from elsewhere in the ruined city and mercenaries sprang up as if by magic to offer their services to all sides. Matters were further enlivened by the random arrival of daemons attracted by the scent of slaughter. Within hours the proud architecture and towering statuary of the Alzos'Querion Vha had been torn into rubble and the spires had taken on the appearance of shot-scarred fortresses battled over for months at a time.

Such was the scene when Valossian Sythrac's heralds first arrived. The ebon-winged scourges from Corespur spiralled down slowly into the conflict bearing the icon of the Black Heart on swallow-tailed gonfalons of fluttering purple silk. The winged warriors called with their screeching, altered voices for the combatants to put up their arms and declare their fealty to the supreme overlord. In the roar and crash of battle their calls had no more impact than the cry of gulls over a storm-wracked ocean. Almost inevitably when the first of the heralds dipped low enough to be seen they were fired upon. The surviving scourges turned tail to flee back to their masters and the forces that were even now approaching the head of the processional.

It was doubtful that any of the kabals involved in the fighting set out with the intention of defying Asdrubael Vect. Their conflict was purely with one another, but the scourge-heralds reported back with tales of treachery and wilful anarchy. In the confusion of the fighting no kabalite authority could be found in time to try and avert the approaching disaster.

Sythrac needed no more encouragement than the first reports of serious resistance. He immediately

issued a string of orders to the Black Heart forces. Within moments a wave of Voidraven bombers escorted by a mass of Razorwing jetfighters swept overhead to begin softening up the area. Closer at hand the lazily twisting lines of Raiders coming from Corespur re-formed into serried ranks as they prepared for battle. Soon a veritable wall of barbed grav-craft stood poised at the head of the procession like a frozen tsunami. Reavers, hellions and scourges raced ahead of the mass and fanned out to seek the boundaries of the constantly shifting battlefield. The warring factions were going to be sealed off and then annihilated.

‘Surely you can’t mean to wipe out absolutely everybody down there?’ the Harlequin objected incredulously. ‘Why don’t you simply support the winning side and speed their victory?’

Sythrac, who had been about to turn on his heel to leave and join his warriors, paused to glance at Vect for direction. The supreme overlord smiled cruelly and gestured for Sythrac to wait for a moment. ‘Explain your mission to the outsider, Valossian,’ Vect said equably. ‘I think he misunderstands the nature of it.’

‘Of course, supreme overlord,’ Sythrac replied before tersely addressing the Harlequin with tones of contempt. ‘Support the winners and you gain allies of dubious worth, ones already flushed with their own success. Later their gratitude will turn into demands and then plots to gain what they claim should have been theirs by right of conquest. Better to destroy them now while they’re hard-pressed.’

‘Then why not buoy up the losers and force the winners to negotiate?’ the Harlequin persisted in the face of Sythrac’s warning glower. ‘Surely even that is preferable to going headlong down the route of mass slaughter?’

‘The losers have proven themselves weak and now deserve only death,’ Sythrac snarled. ‘All those fighting below us have defied the supreme overlord and broken his laws. They will pay for that transgression with their lives so that their deaths serve as a warning to others. Obey or die. There is no other path, no negotiation, no compromise to be had. That time has already passed, and now we’ve come to the moment of retribution.’

Even as Sythrac spoke Shatterfield missiles were raining down on Alzos’Querion Vha. As each Voidraven bomber swooped down it birthed a quartet of the streaking projectiles. The Shatterfields produced their own unique detonation signatures on impact – a double blast with the two explosions microseconds apart. The first detonation plunged the ambient temperature around the target to absolute zero so that it flash-froze everything in the area. The second detonation then propagated a vicious shockwave to shatter anything affected by the first. Seen through the displays the explosions flashed black then white as shattered, crystalline debris was thrown up into the air by the secondary blasts. The chain of detonations ravaged up the procession and across the spires on both sides.

Sythrac watched avidly as the bombers did their work. In the aftermath the Razorwing escorts swooped down to annihilate any surviving grav-craft in a fury of missiles and darklight blasts. There was so little hunting to be done in the air that some of the Razorwings peeled off to begin strafing the procession itself. Return fire from the ground had dropped away to virtually nil, the warring kabalites too stunned to organise a coherent defence. Sythrac looked towards Vect with a pained expression.



'I must go,' Sythrac pleaded. Vect gave a small nod and the Archon strode away.

Motley remained silent, too stunned by what he had seen to interject. He knew that the city had suffered terribly already; millions, perhaps even billions must be dead. Even so the level of violence Vect was willing to casually unleash against his own unruly subjects was coming as something of a shock. Motley was a great believer in negotiation and compromise (and, he had to admit, even a little targeted assassination when it was called for) as ways to ensure that everybody got what they wanted. In this case that would seem to be no one else dying.

Vect didn't see it that way at all, nor did Sythrac. Even the tragic imitation of Vect currently sitting in his throne placed no sanctity on life for its own sake. Obedience was the only matter of importance to them, and even obedience was valueless without enough strength to be useful backing it up. Motley shook his head ruefully as he contemplated his own naivety. He was still seeing every surviving Commorrite as something precious, a soul to be saved that had, if anything, become even more valuable after living through the trauma of the Dysjunction. It seemed a cosmic injustice for them to live through a daemonic invasion and randomly warping reality only to be killed off by their own kind.

Motley had wondered at first how anyone aboard the ziggurat actually believed they were in the presence of Asdrubael Vect. To Motley, the aura of the creature was completely different; a thin and hollow presence compared to the towering black colossus projected by the tyrant himself. Then had come the realisation of how completely insensitive the Commorrites had made themselves in the psychic realm as a matter of survival. Centuries of excessive perfectionism had trained Commorrites to overcome the forfeit of something that, for Motley at least, was an essential part of his sensory landscape. Even so the Commorrites were blind in this regard and the real Asdrubael Vect had known how to turn that to his advantage.

The Vect-double was gazing at Motley intently as if it were aware of his thoughts. Vect's curious 'pet', the Medusae collective, was ignoring him after initiating numerous unsuccessful psychic probes in an attempt to harvest some of his emotions. The thing was weak but exceptionally subtle in its approach – something that made Motley wonder how long Vect had been keeping it around for.

'You shake your head and sigh, outsider,' the doppelgänger said, its pitch and tenor absolutely perfect matches for the original. 'Your overt demonstrations of disapproval offend me.'

'Forgive me, eminent dominator,' Motley said with little real enthusiasm for the play-acting, 'my disapproval was directed inwards at myself for my foolishness. I thank you for taking some of Sythrac's valuable time to instruct me to my betterment.'

'Lies flow from your lips like water,' the false-Vect observed coldly. 'You should know that Valossian will hate you now for keeping him from his troops at a critical moment. You should try not to be left alone with him, or indeed be around him at all, when he returns.'

Motley smiled at the little performance. It was a trifle petty for the true tyrant, he thought, but the doppelgänger was probably a better judge of whether or not that was the case than he was. Motley's welcome was certainly wearing thin, he thought; it could be time to move on soon. However, it was hard to tear himself away from the hypnotically shifting displays and their constant outpouring of

information. He needed to understand more about what was going on in the city to watch for signs of corruption. Here he was at the heart of things, at least for now.

On the displays the barbed wall of grav-craft that had been hanging motionless at one end of the Alzos'Querion Vha was beginning to move. It rolled down the processional at what appeared to be a surprisingly leisurely pace. Raiders descended to disembark squads of blood-mad warriors onto the bridges between the spires and in a strict grid arrangement along the rubble-strewn processional itself. The last few enemy gunners on the ground that were feeling foolish enough to take their chances against the slow-moving mass were instantly countered by pinpoint salvos of cannon fire from squadrons of Ravagers drifting overhead. The overall advance was smooth and machine-like in its precision.

The real trouble began at the far end of the processional, where two intact spires stood like bastions to either side of the open path to the lower tiers. One of the spires took the form of a double helix of lustrous jade. The other rose in bladed tiers of polished silver. As the Black Heart advanced on the latter, concealed weapon ports swung open and bulbous-looking cannon appeared. Motley's heart clenched at the sight of the weapons; he knew their kind and could only watch with horrified fascination at what happened next.

The weapons belched forth not fire or lightning but gossamer sprays of dark strands so fine that they were almost imperceptible on the ziggurat's displays except as a blurring in the air. Where the dark clouds drifted into the vanguard of the Black Heart's force the Raiders and Ravagers seemed to simply *unravel* at their touch. Slivers of metal and flesh rained down from the stricken craft as the dark strands glided effortlessly through them.

The Black Hearts saw the danger and frantically twisted their craft around to escape the all-destroying strands. In the ensuing confusion craft collided or were caught in more clouds as the bulbous cannon filled the air with their lethal payload. In a few moments the rest of the Black Heart grav-craft had pulled clear of the danger zone. The warriors that were left behind on the ground were doomed. They tried to run, until the dark clouds drifted down to cover them like a shroud.

The defenders were using monofilament webs, nets of wires so fine that they slipped between molecules, severing sub-atomic bonds as they went. Motley used hand-held weapons of similar ilk and witnessed first-hand their truly awful effectiveness at flensing through armour, flesh and bone with the lightest touch. The very idea of using monofilament weaponry indiscriminately on such a scale as he'd just seen made him feel a little queasy.

'Perhaps I should go, your incomparable mightiness,' Motley said. 'Many thanks for your hospitality, if you could just let me off somewhere...'

'No,' the false-Vect said flatly. 'You will remain here until you've seen Valossian's riposte.'

False-Vect or not, Motley could not simply disobey the creature, for fear of how the Black Heart kabalites might choose to defend their supreme overlord's authority. The Harlequin settled himself to watch the displays again with an expression of rapt attention. Behind the fixed half-smile he wore Motley's mind was racing. He wouldn't find what he was looking for here on the frontlines of Vect's

reconquest of Commorragh. He had to go deeper, go to places where he could see and touch things with mind and hand.

The Black Heart craft had rallied out of range of the monofilament cannon. No more than one in ten of them had been lost in the initial encounter yet the remainder now circled like frustrated hornets, apparently unwilling to try their luck again. Minutes passed before Motley understood the reason for the delay as the Voidravens reappeared. The cannon belched forth their deadly webs to create once more an impenetrable wall of death at the end of the procession. The blade-winged bombers swept down into the maelstrom without hesitation even though they looked to be rushing headlong to their doom.

Bright fires kindled beneath the attacking aircraft's wings as they executed a simultaneous missile launch. The missiles leapt ahead in a fan-shaped arc before plunging into the clouds of drifting monofilament and exploding. The Voidravens were using Shatterfield missiles again and the clouds were effectively torn asunder by the double pulse of the detonations. The Voidravens flashed through the gap they had made to deliver their real attack against the spires themselves. Twin ruby-red beams sprang from each craft and gouged deep wounds into the flanks of the spires like fiery claws. The Voidravens pulled up and climbed vertically away at the last possible moment. As they did so each craft released the last part of their payload – a single device that was deadlier than their void lances and Shatterfield missiles combined; void mines.

The void mines detonated in two stages much like the Shatterfield missiles. However, in this case the first warhead was in itself harmless. It created a momentary ripple in the fabric of reality, an impenetrable sphere of force to contain the detonation of the second warhead – a single particle of pure darklight energy. The void mine's destructive potential was so vast and unpredictable that it had to be limited to give the Voidravens a chance to escape the danger zone. Black, crackling spheres began to spring into being at the base of each spire. Some of the Voidravens demonstrated their pinpoint accuracy by dropping their mines directly into the open wounds they had torn in the spires with their void lances. In a few heartbeats the speeding aircraft had vanished into the thin upper air of High Commorragh leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Both spires were now deeply pockmarked around their bases as though a giant had been scooping out their innards with a spoon. Motley watched in horrid fascination as the double helix of lustrous jade lurched drunkenly to one side and began to slump against the tiered silver blades of its neighbour. Size and distance made the process appear slow but Motley knew that for those caught in the collapse it would be terrifying and inescapable. Dust and flames billowed up to draw a merciful veil across the scene. Further along the procession the Black Heart kabalites began to move forwards to root out any survivors.

'All this death!' Motley blurted, unable to contain himself any longer. 'Don't you see you're putting the city at further risk? Commorragh is one of the greatest surviving bastions for our dying race and yet you level it as if such actions hold no consequences.'

'Consequences?' The false-Vect was smiling at his success in baiting the Harlequin into another

outburst. 'What you are seeing are the consequences of the poor decisions made by others. Do not blame the surgeon when he has to cut deep in order to save the subject, blame instead the infection that requires such drastic measures to cure. Rebellion, sedition, civil war – it is these things that threaten Commorragh with complete obliteration and I will see them excised!'

The Harlequin listened to the tirade with astonishment. Knowingly or not the false-Vect had struck at the very heart of the matter. The fighting was a symptom of a deeper disease. It was ever the way with the Chaos powers that their agents would spread disorder wittingly or unwittingly as they went about their work. As the host society broke down it became ever more vulnerable to their blandishments until the slow dissolution became an unstoppable avalanche.

Motley had heard similar tirades from members of another race – the human race, the latest and most contemptible of the *mon-keigh* to lay claim to the galaxy. Brutish and contemptible they might be, but the humans had yet to fall completely to Chaos as the eldar had done. The humans had wobbled on the edge of the abyss repeatedly but each time they had avoided their own destruction by doing precisely what Vect was doing now – excising the infection before it killed the host. It was frightening to think that there was something to be learned from a race that was so backward in so many other ways.

'By your leave, gargantuan terror, I must go,' Motley pleaded again with all the humbleness he could muster. 'While I benefit greatly from the truths that spill so readily from your wise lips I feel I can serve better by going out into the city...'

'You mean you want to go and spy elsewhere. Fine. Guards, throw this fool out.'

Two onyx-armoured warriors had evidently been waiting for just such a command. They grabbed Motley by the elbows and hustled him out of the control room. Once outside they thrust him off the bottom step of the ziggurat in what they doubtless felt was an inspired piece of literal-mindedness. If they were hoping that the Harlequin would scream as he plummeted to his doom they were sorely disappointed. Motley smiled, waved at them and fragmented into a kaleidoscopic cloud of colours that drifted away from the processional and its ongoing bloodshed. The scintillating diffraction created by Motley's holofield quickly disappeared down towards the darkened tiers of Low Commorragh.



## CHAPTER 8

### CAGED FLAMES

Archon Nyos Yllithian was strolling casually through his pleasure gardens atop the White Flames fortress as if he had not a care in the world. Beyond the dazzling alabaster parapets the eternal city might shudder and gasp in its agonies, but here Yllithian was untouched by it all. Dressed in loose, comfortable robes and soft shoes he passed between rows of ever-changing fractal sculptures along pathways of crushed sapphires. He paused to breathe deeply of the heady scents of dream poppy and lotus blossoms nodding lazily in the chill air.

Time was pressing but Yllithian refused to be rushed, even if it was hard for him to maintain the illusion of introspective calm. Beneath the flowing robes he wore concealed body armour and a shadow field projector. Close on his heels there marched all of his surviving incubus bodyguards, their double-handed klaives in hand and their blank-faced helms scanning warily for threats. Behind the Incubi were a hand-picked cadre of trueborn White Flames kabalites that Yllithian considered sufficiently trustworthy to protect rather than threaten him in a crisis. A discreet distance away and concealed behind a large pergola were two Venom sky-chariots lurking ready to bring additional reinforcements and serve as a means of escape if it became necessary.

Yllithian might once have found taking such precautions in the heart of his own stronghold a trifle excessive, but not any longer. The time had come to declare himself openly against Vect and that brought with it immeasurable perils. As Archon of the White Flames, Yllithian had always been extraordinarily cautious about rooting out spies and traitors within his kabal. Deep in his heart Yllithian had known that inevitably this day would come and yet there could be no certainty that Vect had no agents left within the White Flames fortress. They would watch and wait and work to do the most damage they could whether it was with a backstabbing blade, a disobeyed order or simply a piece of bad advice. From this point forth he could literally trust no one. As he walked further through his sumptuous gardens Yllithian smiled to himself at his conclusion. He had spent his entire life trusting no one and nothing as a general rule of self-preservation; having a specific, definable cause for doing so would be... refreshing.

Turning a corner of the glittering path Yllithian emerged into a small paved courtyard centred on an intricate, multi-tiered fountain of silver and gold. The fountain had originated in the workshops of

Alaitoc Craftworld before its installation into an eclipse-class cruiser. That vessel was subsequently looted by the illustrious Zovas Yllithian. Of course that was in the days before Asdrubael Vect would lay claim to any such booty by his right as supreme overlord. Yllithian hoped the underlying message was not lost on the individuals waiting around the fountain for his arrival.

There were three petty Archons from Low Commorragh: Naxipael of the Venom Brood, Khovoros of the Red Blades and Verixia of the Splintered Word. More importantly there were two Archons of the mid-tiers: Malchierith from HyKran and Xhubael from Yolosc. These were in attendance as representatives of more than three dozen other kabals in their districts, a complex assortment of long-standing alliances that were creaking badly under the conflicting pressures of the Dysjunction.

A motley assortment of gang leaders stood towards the back of the small courtyard under the splinter rifles of wary White Flames guards; wyches, hellions, reavers, scourges, even an ink-skinned, slinking mandrake. These flotsam and jetsam had washed up at the White Flames fortress seeking sanctuary, each with their own handfuls of followers. Past associations or outright bribes had secured them a place at the foot of the walls under cover of the guns but as yet only these leaders had been permitted inside to plead their case.

As Yllithian strolled into view a babble of demands, questions and entreaties rose from the throng. The Archon of the White Flames smiled as he sensed his power over them.

‘The city lies in ruins and Vect does nothing!’

‘My people need sustenance!’

‘The lower city has been drowned!’

‘Aelindrach is coming for us!’

Yllithian’s incubi bodyguards stepped forwards to keep the supplicants at bay with their klaives raised warningly. Yllithian himself waited and allowed the Archons to feed off their own desperation for a few moments. He listened as their voices became more and more shrill until he finally raised a hand for silence.

‘Calm yourselves,’ Yllithian told them firmly, ‘I understand your great woes and I know of the tumult in the city as well as any of you. Why come to me and not go to Vect? As supreme overlord he holds all the power, while I am a mere Archon like the rest of you.’

Yllithian told the lie with a straight face but he was mocking them and they knew it. The noble line of Yllithian, along with Xelian and Kraillach, had ruled the city for centuries before Asdrubael Vect had brought about their downfall. Even so the house of Yllithian had survived through the intervening millennia to stand before them in the personage of Nyos Yllithian. As the ‘mere’ Archon of the White Flames kabal Yllithian possessed the kind of resources and influence that the Archons present could only dream of.

‘Vect has only secured Corespur and some parts of Sorrow Fell, all our messengers sent hence do not return,’ Archon Xhubael said with evident disgust, ‘and we have been alone and dying since the first shockwave.’ Xhubael was large and heavy-set for a Commorrite, her fingers glittering with rings. Yllithian found it hard to believe that she had ever suffered much in the way of privation.

‘And so you came to me as a cure for loneliness?’ Yllithian smiled. ‘I’ll be intrigued to hear you tell me what I can do about that.’

‘We know that Vect has tried to destroy you more than once,’ Archon Malchierith added slyly. ‘He sees you as a threat.’

‘Indeed,’ Yllithian nodded sagely. ‘He’ll willingly squander all of the forces he’s got hoarded away on Corespur in the hopes of ending me and any who associate with me.’

Yllithian watched their reactions to his gloomy prophecy carefully. A few of those present had not fully thought through the ramifications of coming to the White Flames kabal for help. Only now did some of them realise that what they were doing could easily be seen as treason in the eyes of the supreme overlord. Xhubael and Malchierith were no such fools; they had already given up on Vect just as, from their perspective, he had given up on them.

‘Let us be clear, then,’ Yllithian said. ‘Tell me what you want of me.’

‘Allow us to carry your icon into Low Commorrhagh so we can show that we have the backing of High Commorrhagh,’ Malchierith pleaded. ‘The mere sight of the White Flames will pull the other Archons into line.’

‘And what happens when Vect comes against you and claims that you’ve usurped his authority in bringing your tiers under control?’ Yllithian asked evenly. He wanted them to openly admit their opposition to Vect. When the histories looked back on this meeting it would be important for future generations to know that the noble, patriotic Nyos Yllithian was moved to help by his fellow citizens beseeching him in their hour of need.

Malchierith and Xhubael exchanged glances warily, but they were merely hesitating at the final pinch of the noose. They knew that Vect would kill them in the most horrible ways imaginable if they were caught using Yllithian’s patronage to reclaim their districts of Commorrhagh. Yllithian concluded that the situation must be truly desperate in Hy’Kran and Yolosc – and getting worse by the hour.

‘We must act quickly,’ Malchierith admitted with a sigh. ‘If we hesitate now all that we’ve worked for will be lost. If Vect comes against us later for simply doing something to secure ourselves when he would do nothing, then we will fight him. What other choice will we have?’

‘Malchierith has the right of it,’ Xhubael grumbled. ‘We can’t just stand by and wait on Vect’s pleasure while everything collapses into anarchy. Damn him, I say, if he won’t help us we’ll have to help ourselves. He could be dead by now for all that we know.’

Yllithian found it highly unlikely that Vect had met with his well-deserved demise but he chose not to disagree with the sentiment. The petty Archons and gang leaders were all nodding grimly. They apparently understood that any dissension from them right now would bring swift and certain death at the hands of the White Flames. They were trapped and committed by simply being present when such matters were being openly discussed by more powerful Archons. Later they might try to slip away and go squealing to Vect, yet there would always be the dangling question, ‘Why didn’t you do something to stop them?’ Nonetheless Yllithian made a mental note to move their forces inside the fortress as soon as possible. It would be easier to keep them monitored and contained.

'You shall have my support—' Yllithian began, but his next words were interrupted by a shriek.

'Traitor!' the word came from a shock-haired hellion, one of the gang leaders at the back of the courtyard. The lithe youth darted towards Yllithian but two guards were already springing forwards to intercept him. The hellion switched direction and delivered a spinning kick to the closer guard and opened up a vein with his blade-like spurs. The courtyard exploded into pandemonium as the guard flopped to the ground jetting blood. More guards sprang forwards with rifles raised. Yllithian's incubi closed in around him protectively. The rest of the gang leaders, Malchierith, Xhubael and the other Archons backed away from the insane dissenter as one body, momentarily hemming in Yllithian and his bodyguards while they were distracted by the lone hellion.

That was the moment when the real assailant struck.

Yllithian was not by nature given to testing his luck. Cold logic was his weapon of choice, a carefully thought-through plan his preferred methodology. Leaving matters to chance was something he always tried to avoid, even when it seemed like fate increasingly pushed him towards ever chancier endeavours. He felt like a gambler that had staked everything already but had to keep doing so again and again just to stay in the game. He had known there was a chance another attempt would be made on his life when he met the Archons. He had carefully stacked the odds in his favour, but always with the lurking understanding that there would come a moment when his life would hang in the balance and raw chance could intervene.

This was that moment. In a rare uncoordinated moment the incubi left a blind spot in their coverage of Yllithian. A blade instantly appeared in the gap between the incubi's armoured shoulders and arrowed towards Yllithian's chest in an unstoppable thrust. By sheer bad luck Yllithian saw the attack when it was only inches away and tried desperately to twist aside much too late.

The failures continued to compound themselves as Yllithian's shadow field flared microseconds too late to rob all the power from the thrust, the blade surging onwards through a billowing cloud of entropic energy that was slowing it, but not stopping it, as it darted for Yllithian's heart. The needle-sharp point punched through Yllithian's concealed armour with surprising ease, tearing through the diamond-hard matrix as if it were no more than thick cloth. As the questing point dug deep into Yllithian's flesh he began to scream, in the full expectation that he was using up his last breath. Then it happened...

...Somewhere in the roiling uncertainty of the void an ancient and unthinkably alien entity stirred minutely. Strands of Fate were split and re-woven by a movement that was no more conscious than the quiver of an eyelash. The entity settled again, satisfied...

...In Yllithian's garden there was a blinding yellow flash. The stabbing blade shivered and sprang away as if it had struck a stone. Yllithian staggered back, trying to blink away the bright spots that were dancing before his eyes.

He was dimly aware of the incubi closing in around him again with their klaives slashing at his unknown assailant. His vision partially cleared and he saw Archon Verixia lying in a pool of her own blood at his feet. The incubi had severed her arm just below the shoulder. The blade that she stabbed



him with was still gripped by the severed arm, the weapon itself twisted and fused as if it had been heated to unthinkable temperatures.

Yllithian looked down at Verixia, trying to understand why she had thrown away her life to so very nearly take his. Was it loyalty to Vect? Fear of retribution? Even with the cauterising effect of the powered edge of the incubi's klaives she was only seconds away from bleeding out completely. She gazed up at him with undimmed defiance as she spat her dying words.

'Vect will destroy you and everyone with you! You're as dead as me – you just don't know it yet!'

Yllithian had to fight to master himself and keep his adrenaline-soaked body from shaking uncontrollably in the aftermath of his close brush with death. He wanted to stamp on Verixia's dead face, to shout at her, to scream at his guards for failing him, to kill everyone close enough to have seen his momentary terror as the blade gouged his flesh.

Instead he compressed his lips into a thin frown and breathed deeply for a few seconds. The Archons and gang leaders stood as if paralysed as they were surrounded by angry White Flames kabalites. A few metres away lay the body of the hellion. He was half collapsed into the fountain, his corpse puckered with innumerable red craters where splinter rifles had torn apart his flesh, already blackened and bloating from the scores of different toxins racing through it.

Yllithian looked at the frozen, terrified faces before him. They expected to be massacred. That's how Vect would have handled them in the same circumstances. Even a chance that any of the rest of them knew anything about the attempted assassination would have been enough to see them all tortured and killed. In accordance with his deadly, ophidian logic, Vect would consider none of the Archons valuable enough to risk leaving alive after an incident like this. Yllithian closed his eyes and breathed in deeply again. He was not Vect. Not yet anyway. He opened his eyes and smiled graciously.

'As I was saying...' Yllithian said with glacial calm, '...before I was so rudely interrupted. I will support you in your efforts to retake your tiers of the city. I will lend my authority to any Archon that needs it in order to bring our beleaguered home back under our control. Vect has proven himself unworthy to be our leader in the current crisis and it's high time we took the matter into our own hands. Just as you have said – we must band together in order to help ourselves.'

The fools lapped it up, nodding as if in happy agreement with everything that Yllithian had to say. Behind the credulous smiles no doubt the wheels were turning as the Archons weighed up how far to go with the White Flames and what they could get out of it. It didn't matter, because they were *his* Archons now, not Vect's, and every moment they spent in service to him made it harder for them to back out of it. He would bind them closer, and they would drag in other Archons in the hope of mitigating their own risk. It was hard to be a lone revolutionary, but in a crowd everyone could afford to be brave.

Yllithian was distracted for a moment by several reports whispered to him by invisible voices. Two of the reports were expected and one was most definitely not. The Archon of the White Flames gave several terse instructions before turning back to his captive audience. He began issuing them orders with no further pretences.

'So to business then. Naxipael and Khovoros – go and deal with Verixia's Splintered Word kabalites,

kill off the diehards and incorporate the rest into your own ranks. Malchierith and Xhubael – you need to leave for your own tiers now or it's going to get considerably more difficult. You'll be shown a way out through the foundation strata – flying is liable to become very bad for your health at any moment.'

An overlapping series of sonic booms thundered overhead as if to underline Yllithian's words. Glancing up Yllithian saw the thin tail-fire streaks of Razorwings circling high above. They had returned in considerable strength and according to Yllithian's whispered reports an immense force of Black Heart kabalites was not far behind them. For now the jetfighters bided their time outside the effective range of the defences of the White Flames Fortress and waited as patiently as vultures circling over a piece of carrion.

As the Archons and gang leaders were being led away under heavy guard Yllithian had his unexpected guest brought up to the courtyard to speak with him in person. Through various artifices Yllithian ensured that his new allies were delayed for just long enough to see the arrival of the milk-skinned master haemonculus, Bellathonis. Let them wonder what plans he was hatching, let them speculate on how the singular skills of the haemonculi might factor into Yllithian's schemes. They did not need to know that Bellathonis had just been caught skulking around in the lower levels of the fortress or that the haemonculus had only saved his own life by claiming he had urgent matters to discuss with Yllithian.

Kharbyr tried not to swallow anxiously as the Venom sky-chariot he was aboard banked hard over the gardens atop the White Flames fortress. He clutched the cylinder containing Angevere in one hand while hanging on grimly to a curving rail with the other as the grav-craft swung down to deposit him in a little courtyard with a fountain in it. As Kharbyr arrived two bodies were in the process of being dragged out and a knot of anxious-looking people were being ushered away by Yllithian's guards.

He recognised Archon Naxipael in the group and thought for a panicked instant that the whole act would be blown by Naxipael recognising him right back. Then he remembered that he was wearing Bellathonis's face and relaxed. There was no way that Naxipael could know that this 'Bellathonis' was actually the same skinny sell-sword that had run out on him back in Hy'Kran.

Yllithian stood over to one side of the courtyard surrounded by incubi and watching Kharbyr's arrival expectantly. Kharbyr realised it was an entirely new experience for him to be looked at by the Archon of the White Flames with anything but contempt. The few times they'd met Yllithian had always seen Kharbyr as worthless gutter-scum, a barely competent agent used at times by Bellathonis and hence utterly beneath his attention. The haemonculus himself however, Kharbyr now realised, was someone that Yllithian viewed with a touch of wary respect – not quite an equal, but almost certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Angevere's voice whispered in his mind, nagging at him again. +Don't start getting overconfident, it's actually much easier to lie to someone that looks down on you than someone who's paying attention, so don't deviate from what I told you to say.+

Kharbyr had to suppress a shudder in response. He still couldn't bring himself to feel comfortable with hearing the spectral voice speaking between his ears. It felt too much like he was being whispered to by the spirits of the dead.

'Greetings, my Archon,' Kharbyr said as he drew closer. He tried to speak with what Angevere described as the jovial tone of contempt Bellathonis generally used. Yllithian's eyes immediately narrowed suspiciously.

'Bellathonis, I had not thought to see you again,' Yllithian observed drily, 'you look like you've been through a war. I see that you've brought back the crone as well. I suppose she might still prove useful.'

'There was an attempt made on my life,' Kharbyr began, recounting the well-rehearsed words with complacent ease. 'It happened down in my private workspace – the place where I undertook that special project on your behalf.'

Yllithian's expression froze at Kharbyr's allusion to the resurrection of El'Uriaq. 'Attacked by whom?' the Archon demanded.

'My old coven, the Black Descent. They sent a Talos to track me down. They obviously believe I did something bad... No, unforgivable.'

Yllithian's expression was unreadable. He seemed to calculate for a moment and then said, 'This means nothing to me. They are your foes and not mine. As you can see,' Yllithian gestured in the direction the bodies had been taken, 'I have plentiful supplies of my own enemies right now. I've no wish to add to them by taking up some esoteric quarrel with an entire coven of haemonculi on your behalf.'

'You're ignoring the fact that they obviously know what we've done,' Kharbyr insisted with what he considered some credible conviction. He was starting to enjoy his little piece of role-playing.

Yllithian shrugged disinterestedly. 'I doubt that the Black Descent will share the knowledge with anyone else in case they get swept up in Vect's pogrom. Wasn't your old complaint about them always that they wouldn't share knowledge even if the universe itself depended on it?'

The ghostly whisper in Kharbyr's head was sharp and urgent. +Remember what I said. Don't engage with him about what you might have talked about before. Yllithian's suspicious of you and he's trying to trip you up with the minutiae of past conversations.+

Kharbyr had never considered that Yllithian might be alert to imposters posing as individuals that he knew. Angevere's weird insistence on Kharbyr rehearsing all of his lines suddenly stopped seeming so weird. He had to respond with something so he stuck with the script.

'The Black Descent also have something that you want,' Kharbyr said. 'Someone that you've been looking for ever since she disappeared.'

Yllithian's dark gaze bored into Kharbyr's stolen face for a moment. The Archon of the White Flames could not disguise his interest at the implication. Present him with a simple puzzle, Angevere had said, and Yllithian won't be able to resist solving it. It seemed a roundabout route to go for getting vengeance on Bellathonis, but Angevere knew her way around a High Commorraghan courtly intrigue in ways that a thief and assassin like Kharbyr never could.

'You're inferring that the Black Descent have my dear old friend, Xelian,' Yllithian said. 'That's an interesting theory. Sadly I can't imagine that you have anything to back it up with.'

'Xelian was one of your oldest and most powerful allies. With her back you could have the Blades of Desire on your side again and many of the biggest wych cults would follow. You can't win against Vect without her.'

'So you say,' Yllithian grated dangerously. Kharbyr didn't respond to the jab. Angevere had set things up so he could only make statements and not quibble over facts. Perhaps Yllithian could win against Vect on his own, but enough hints had dropped while they spied on him through the crystal that he was actively looking to recruit more allies. According to Angevere, Xelian was the biggest ally Yllithian had. Kharbyr plunged on with his script and tried to shake the feeling that he was digging himself into an ever-deeper hole.

'If you just give me what I need I can lead your warriors into the heart of the Black Descent's labyrinth,' Kharbyr said. 'You can retrieve Xelian and I can see my former coven-mates are repaid for inconveniencing me.'

Yllithian smirked at the suggestion. 'You would drain away my forces on the very eve of battle,' he said, 'to go on a wild hunt led only by your word, and no doubt you see yourself commanding this... expedition.' The Archon of the White Flames shook his head and looked skywards before continuing. There was a dense weaving of fire-trails high above the fortress. Razorwings and Voidravens glittered in the wan light of the *Ilmaea* as they pirouetted impatiently awaiting the orders to attack.

'Vect's lackeys are already at my gates demanding entry. Very soon they will muster their strength to try and crush the White Flames fortress. We will test Vect's hordes against my readiness to receive them. You have come too late, haemonculus.'

Kharbyr could feel his chances of success slipping away. The idea had been to get help from Yllithian for tracking down the real Bellathonis. Now it appeared that the Archon of the White Flames didn't care about being blackmailed by the Black Descent nor did he want to send any troops after Xelian. Kharbyr had run out of scripted inducements to offer. He decided to try something else.

'Why not come yourself?' Kharbyr said. 'You could lead our expedition in person and be assured of its proper handling. Perhaps more importantly you could be absent from the fortress at the critical moment just in case your readiness proves to be less complete than that of Vect's forces.'

+You fool! He'll never agree to that!+ Angevere's whisper was a hateful hiss, +Yllithian is too much of a coward to lead from the front.+

'I could not leave my loyal followers at a time like this,' Yllithian protested, yet Kharbyr found the claim unconvincing – the Archon was considering the idea at least. Perhaps he really feared Vect's hordes more than the labyrinth of the Black Descent.

'You would be able to tell your warriors – in all honesty – that you were undertaking a dangerous mission to return your old ally, Xelian, to the fight,' Kharbyr said. 'If they are as loyal as you say they'll welcome the news and cheer your progress. If you get stuck inside the fortress you'll stop being able to influence the outcome of events outside it.'

Yllithian cocked his head to one side for a moment as if he were listening to an invisible presence. The Archon seemed to come to a decision and his dark eyes blazed with sudden purpose. 'We must move quickly,' Yllithian declared, 'Sythrac is approaching through Sorrow Fell and his outriders have already thrown a cordon around the fortress. If we go now it will be possible to slip through before the main force arrives. Any later will be too late.'

Kharbyr was a little stunned by the Archon's turnabout. He had only thought to introduce a little time pressure and now he was suddenly being swept up by it. The plan had been to ingratiate himself gradually and gain power by dangling tempting bait in front of Yllithian. A full-on rescue mission hunting for Xelian in the trap-filled depths of the Black Descent's labyrinth had never been the point – but that was apparently precisely what Kharbyr was going to get.

+Child, what have you done?+ Angevere sighed bitterly inside his mind.



## CHAPTER 9

### GROTESQUERIES

The Decapitator was a patient hunter, indeed there were none more so. He had tracked individuals for decades across scores of different worlds, he had lain patiently in wait for weeks at a time awaiting the perfect moment to take his prize. He waited while the prey that thought it was not prey fought a mandrake pack to a standstill. He had witnessed another pack arrive and take their prize for themselves. Intrigued, he descended afterwards to examine the marks the packs had left behind.

*Kheradruakh found the shaky bastardisations of the blood-line marks the two mandrake packs had left behind. He knew the signs of old, two brother-kings with a bitter, long-standing rivalry that was of no interest to the Decapitator. The outsiders, though, had left marks of their own declaring fealty to one of the brothers. This additional wrongness only served to irritate Kheradruakh further. Creatures from the outer realm were prey to be hunted, not rivals or brood-mates to be dallied with.*

*His instinct had drawn him onwards, as it always did, towards his most perfect prizes. He had trailed the mandrake pack and its shrinking coffle of slaves until they reached the stronghold of one of the brothers. Now he waited again and patiently listened to the whispers on the night breeze.*

Xagor dragged another corpse across the uneven floor and dumped it into the flesh pit with a satisfied grunt. He lifted a long iron paddle and pushed the cadaver beneath the bubbling slurry. The stench was indescribable but to a wrack like Xagor it was simply the smell of industry in motion and of raw materials being prepared for work. In his own strange way he was the happiest he had been since coming to Aelindrach. The place the master had chosen for his newest temporary home was low and cave-like; the pits in the floor were irregular scoops where tailored microorganisms rendered down the corpse-flesh into a malleable tallow. With the proper stimuli, Xagor knew, this basic clay could then be reshaped into bone, muscle, tissue and even (if one were skilled enough in the arts of flesh-sculpting as his master was) the most complex of the internal organs.

To one side of the pits there was a mismatched array of crude, upright sarcophagi ranged along the wall of the cave. They were a far cry from the ornate, crystal-fronted regenerative chambers used by the Commorrite elite to restore themselves. These sarcophagi were formed from slabs of roughly shaped

bone joined by glistening strips of gristle. They stood up to three metres tall, and a snaking mass of tubes and conduits connected the flesh pits to the occupants of each one. The occupants themselves were monstrous, hulking brutes almost as wide as they were tall. Their features were obscured by a clinging membrane across the front of the sarcophagi, but the shapes pressing on the membranous wall from the inside suggested a substantial amount of sinew, corded muscle and jagged bone featured in their physiognomy.

Bellathonis was there beside the sarcophagi, checking on each of them with the maternal concern of a broody hen. He was clad in robes of black hide, and had blanched his skin so that it more closely approached the haemonculi's personal ideal of pure milk-white. It made Xagor particularly happy that his master seemed more and more like his old self. The loss of Kharbyr made Xagor a little bit sad but he consoled himself that the loss of the master would have made him much, much sadder.

The master looked troubled, however, as he constantly re-examined one sarcophagus with a lens-like apparatus he held up to one eye. At length he approached Xagor as the wrack was hauling another body across the floor towards the pits.

'Kindly tell me, Xagor,' the haemonculi asked with a fatherly smile, 'how many of these ur-ghuls you've placed in the pits and where you put them.'

'Seven, master,' Xagor replied as he pointed out the pits he had used.

Bellathonis struck him in the face just as he finished pointing. The blow was precisely aimed to crunch Xagor's iron mask against his nose with eye-watering effect. Something popped inside Xagor's face and he felt hot blood start to cascade over his lips immediately. He fought with an urge to tear off his mask, or (in some deeply buried part of himself) to strike back. Instead he bowed his head miserably before his master's inexplicable wrath.

'Why must I be constantly surrounded by idiots?' Bellathonis hissed as he raised his hand to strike again. 'Diseased! All of them! We shall have to empty the infected pits and start them over. The grotesques linked to them are ruined – riddled with parasites and pathogens the like of which I've never seen! How could you not notice the materials were tainted?'

The haemonculus's disappointment stung Xagor more than the blow had done. He had given little thought to examining the corpses, merely collected them from where they were dumped outside and dragged them to the pits. It was pure chance he had noticed how many of the whip-thin ur-ghuls had gone into the stew at all. Most of the bodies had been of slave races, with a few bloodied Commorrites, a handful of coal-black mandrakes and some weird, nameless things that Xagor had never seen before mixed in. Desperate to redeem himself Xagor blurted out the only other pertinent information he knew about ur-ghuls.

'The ur-ghuls we saw in Commorrhagh were diseased too. This one thought nothing strange when their bodies arrived part-rotten, imagining that to be their natural state of being, like those of above.'

Bellathonis stopped, hand still raised to strike, and stared at Xagor intently. 'What did you just say about the ur-ghuls in Commorrhagh? Repeat it to me exactly.'

'T-The ur-ghuls we saw in Commorrhagh were diseased too?' Xagor stammered uncertainly.

Bellathonis lowered his hand slowly. 'That would seem to be more than a coincidence to me,' the haemonculus murmured to himself as he turned back towards the flesh pits Xagor had indicated. The lens device was produced again and the bubbling slurry was subjected to Bellathonis's scrutiny for a long time. Eventually the haemonculus drew a long, thin stylus from his sleeve and touched it to the surface of the foul-smelling mess with exaggerated caution. He withdrew it and examined the glistening drop clinging to the tip of the stylus through his lenses for several more minutes before dropping both it and the stylus back into the pit.

The haemonculus sucked in a long, rasping breath before speaking again. 'Xagor, I believe we have some jars of denaturant on hand, run along and fetch them for me. Quickly now.'

Xagor hurried to haul out the jars Bellathonis had indicated from a niche at one side of the cave. The smooth stone the containers were made of was one of the few substances in the universe that could withstand sustained contact with their contents. Unfortunately it also made the jars exceeding heavy for a single wrack to move. Xagor was reduced to dragging them one by one over to where Bellathonis stood deep in thought. Although the jars were carefully sealed the air around them was tainted by a sharp, astringent scent that cut through Xagor's bloodied nose and straight to his sinuses to make his eyes water again. By the time Xagor had dragged over the last jar he had also plucked up the courage to ask a question of the master.

'Master... this one wishes to ask what is going on?' Xagor ventured.

Bellathonis turned and lifted the last jar from Xagor's hands with a surprising show of strength before answering. The haemonculus's deft fingers busied themselves with breaking the seals as he responded. Xagor was disturbed to see that Bellathonis had now donned a face mask, a unique occurrence in the wrack's experience of his master.

'The sickness present in those corpses is not one of a... usual nature,' Bellathonis said. 'It is a creation every bit as specific as the glass plague and just as unnatural in origin.'

The haemonculus tipped the jar's contents into the closest pit. The thick, amber fluid that poured out of it produced clouds of smoke as it mixed with the flesh-slurry. The noisome mass in the pit boiled and bubbled spectacularly for a few seconds before collapsing into a black, tar-like mass.

'Unnatural?' Xagor repeated uncomfortably. For a haemonculus to use such a word indicated that something was truly and spectacularly out of the ordinary.

'It's my belief that it is an instance of the sort of plague we most commonly associate with daemons and other entities from beyond the veil. It is an infection capable of corrupting not just the body of the host but also the soul as well.'

Xagor crouched fearfully watching the master moving back and forth destroying the contents of the tainted pits. The foul stench already present in the cave soon became positively toxic. A daemonic plague was something new to Xagor; he was far more used to the concept of a plague of daemons.

'Must we flee from Aelindrach?' Xagor asked finally. 'Where will we go?'

Bellathonis shook his head. 'We could not set one foot outside Xhakoruakh's palace without his minions seizing us and dragging us back. That, plus where we would go, is a separate, insoluble and



entirely valid question in its own right. If what I'm theorising is correct, nowhere will be safe...'

'Because of the daemon-plague, master? Can it not be cured?'

'The only real cure is the death of the host, but even then the corrupt soul – despite the supposed immortality souls are alleged to exhibit – will continue in a blighted existence enslaved to the plague's maker. In short – no, there is no cure that I can imagine. Fire and lots of it would be my favoured prescription.'

'Then what will we do?' Xagor whined. The master's evident disturbance was making the wrack increasingly fearful. Xagor's entire world was built on the concept of Bellathonis's nigh-omniscience in all matters pertaining to flesh. Seeing the master balking before such a well-known foe as disease made no sense to him. A virus, a bacterium, a plague, a pathogen or a parasite were all simply more factors to manipulate for a master haemonculus... weren't they?

'We will do the only thing that we can, Xagor,' Bellathonis said. 'We will present Xhakoruakh with our findings and see what he has to say.'

Bellathonis and Xagor made their way slowly through the shadowed paths of Xhakoruakh's palace seeking the mandrake-king. It was easier said than done, for much like the realm of Aelindrach itself the palace was not fixed and permanent. Its internal dimensions shifted constantly; solid walls of blackness appeared to block old routes while rents and tears in previously impenetrable shadow opened new paths. The two of them had to find their way as best they could, blundering through the shadow-etched crypts and darkened passageways, feeling their way up stairs and down spiral ramps. They were still treated as outsiders and shunned by the lurking mandrakes that infested the seemingly infinite space in ever greater numbers. No shadow-skinned denizens barred their path but none offered guidance either.

At length they found their way into a space that gave the impression of a grandly vaulted gallery of such length that its far end passed beyond perception. Here they found Xhakoruakh at last holding court beneath cressets of burning green witch-fire that served only to deepen the shadows around him. A clutch of nightfiends were abasing themselves before the giant figure of the mandrake-king, more evidence of the forces he was gathering to go to war against Azoruakh.

'Bellathonis, my master of monstrosities and fiends,' the shadow-king boomed, 'what brings you before Xhakoruakh? Is your work completed already?'

'Alas no, my Archon,' Bellathonis replied. 'The grotesques are still maturing at present, though, and they will soon be ready to join your followers. I've come before you because we've run into a problem that I felt you should be informed about immediately...'

Bellathonis paused awkwardly as he studied the nightfiends that had now moved to cluster around Xhakoruakh's knees like a brood of soot-skinned waifs. Each of the nightfiends would be the leader of a mandrake pack, a fearsome hunter and stalker in their own right, yet they seemed oddly quiescent, almost animal-like, in the shadow-king's presence. The forbidden runes etched into the fiends' coal-

black hides shared the same sickly emerald hue as those on Xhakoruakh himself.

‘Perhaps it would be best to discuss the issue in private?’ Bellathonis pleaded, ‘I would not wish to detain your eager followers from their duties with my dull domestic worries.’

‘There is no privacy in Aelindrach,’ Xhakoruakh rumbled. ‘Every whisper ever made can be found caught somewhere in the shadow-skein. Every secret can be ferreted out by the patient hunter – for where else would secrets come to hide but within the realm of shadow?’

‘Yes... quite,’ Bellathonis said. ‘Well, nonetheless, it’s one thing to have to ferret out a secret and quite another to lay it out in the open for all to see.’

Xhakoruakh shrugged and gestured. The nightfiends scattered into the deeper shadows of the gallery and vanished without a sound. The shadowy giant folded his long arms and waited expectantly.

‘Some of the raw materials supplied for my production of the grotesques were tainted,’ Bellathonis began, ‘specifically the bodies of ur-ghuls sent to the flesh pits bore highly contagious plagues. These have already spoiled several of my creations and I’m very close to thinking we should terminate the whole batch and start again.’

The mandrake-king shook his head slowly. ‘There is no time, we will move soon with or without your creatures. In the final reckoning they would improve the odds greatly – why do you fear some pox? The haemonculi are supposed to be the masters of flesh – does Bellathonis now say they can be defeated by a microbe?’

‘This is no ordinary infestation,’ Bellathonis replied defensively. ‘These ur-ghuls are infected with something from beyond the veil. They carry the taint of daemon-seed. My assistant reports that he saw other ur-ghuls in Commorrhagh that were also infected. I fear we are witnessing the start of an epidemic the like of which Commorrhagh has never seen.’

‘Do you know where ur-ghuls originate, Bellathonis?’ the shadow-king mused without apparent concern. ‘It’s said that they were first bred by the lords of Shaa-Dom to protect their labyrinthine ziggurats. Only later did they spill out of that accursed realm to form the verminous hordes that haunt Low Commorrhagh.’

‘I’m aware of the story, yes,’ Bellathonis said with some puzzlement.

‘Shaa-Dom became a daemons’ playground after the fist of Vect shattered their wardings. Strange winds blew there for millennia. Who can say what alterations might have been made to the creatures caught in its grip?’

‘But ur-ghuls bear no such taint in the normal scheme of things,’ Bellathonis chided gently. ‘Believe me, I’ve vivisected enough of them in my time to know the difference. This is something new.’

‘Is it? Perhaps they return to their base state when mated to Aelindrach and the power of the Dysjunction. Strange winds blow once more and the ur-ghuls are caught up in the shadow-skein. Where once they served the masters of accursed Shaa-Dom now they serve only Xhakoruakh...’

Bellathonis gazed up at the dark, featureless face of the mandrake-king trying to divine what madness lurked there. The discomfort he had felt when they first arrived at Xhakoruakh’s court returned with redoubled strength. The king claimed the diseased ur-ghuls as his own servants, and by

extension he was using them to spread their plague to Commorragh in full knowledge of its daemonic origins. The haemonculus pursed his lips and thought carefully before responding with the most mundane complaint he could think of.

‘Well, the ur-ghuls are unsuitable for my purposes. I need untainted flesh and blood to shape with.’

‘It will be as you desire,’ Xhakoruaikh granted carelessly, ‘now go and prepare your monsters. Time is growing short before we must move against my brother, and when our victory is won all of Aelindrach will be at my command!’

Bellathonis bowed and backed away from the mandrake-king in silence. It seemed the plagued ur-ghuls were Xhakoruaikh’s secret weapon, but not one he could employ against his sibling to bring him certain victory. That left the only other possible target as Commorragh itself. Xhakoruaikh’s ambition ranged beyond claiming the expanding sub-realm of Aelindrach for his own. He had designs on the whole city.



## CHAPTER 10

### INFLUX

Valossian Sythrac ghosted along a cracked passageway and descended a set of stairs that now leaned at a precarious, drunken angle. Dust and smoke stung his nostrils and in the distance roaring fires and screams echoed hollowly, but here everything was deceptively calm and quiet. Sythrac paused and crouched for a second, holding his huskblade carefully back behind his body as he leaned down to examine the steps more closely. The thousand captive spirits that inhabited his armour shifted and whispered in the back of his mind; pleading, threatening, advising, cursing.

Elphor Helmanriss, the shade of a human Primaris Psyker that Sythrac had hunted down eight centuries before, could sense the recent footfalls of Sythrac's current quarry still echoing in the aether. Inquisitor Ilem Kharporov, another human who had been more recently taken, could not help but notice there were three sets of tracks and that one was more heavily burdened than the others. Vy'ssandorsz Az, a Makelian strider who had once been a legend among his own people, could still taste faint traces of blood, sweat and metal in the air. Sythrac was on the right track.

Sythrac moved on down the fractured stairs as they went through a slow, clockwise spiral. He was still angry, even a little dangerously frustrated. The Harlequin had delayed his departure from Vect for so long that he'd almost missed out on the most immediate and visceral stages of the battle. He hadn't fought an engagement in the city on this sort of scale for a long, long time and he didn't want to let the moment pass without something to remember it by. Now, as the fighting was beginning to gutter out around the Alzos'Querion Vha, he was rather desperately searching for a memento of suitable worth to really mark the occasion.

The stairs opened onto a low-vaulted corridor. As Sythrac stepped cautiously into it he heard the grinding sound of a lock mechanism cycling from up ahead – that, and the low, hurried murmur of voices. He quickened his pace slightly, stalking forwards with his huskblade poised and ready. Light spilled in as unseen doors slid back into the corridor walls and Sythrac saw the wasp-like hull of a Venom sky-chariot revealed before him. Beside it three figures were busily readying the craft for departure. They were all covered with soft-looking plates of armour that were coloured a glistening, raw-meat red. The central figure, distinctive in a spired helm and cloak of pale hide, was in the midst of stowing an angular casket on the Venom's rear passenger deck. Sythrac stepped out into full view of

the three and spoke.

‘Archon Vhigis, your journey is at an end.’

The Archon of the Flayed Mask kabal hissed and sprang back from the Venom as if he’d been burned. His two trueborn siblings drew weapons and sprinted at Sythrac without hesitation. To them Sythrac was only one opponent and they were battle-hardened, trained from birth with all the lethal focus of Commorrite warcraft. Kill this one enemy and the three of them could escape from the killing field of the Alzos’Querion Vha and perhaps find a new life together somewhere in the lower tiers. So they believed as they ran at Sythrac with weapons at the ready, never realising what they truly stood against.

Sythrac allowed a fraction of the power from the captive spirits in his armour to flow through him. The running trueborn seemed to slow down in his altered perception, drifting slowly towards him with blurring images of their past and future locations multiplying backwards and forwards along their course. The first trueborn was beginning a feint attack that was intended to leave Sythrac open to the agoniser whip wielded by the second. Archon Vhigis was behind them both levelling a blast pistol. He would fire it regardless of the risk of hitting his siblings, Sythrac sensed; Vhigis was gambling on a lucky strike from the compact darklight weapon to end the fight before it had even begun. The Archon of the Flayed Mask was probably perceptive enough to realise that the gaunt, baroquely armoured warrior that had found them was no ordinary kabalite.

Sythrac simply ignored the swinging blade of his first attacker. Instead he stepped around the rushing figure to cut at the one behind, the one with the whip. Sythrac’s huskblade sliced through the whip-wielder’s wrist just as he was raising the barbed length of cable and sent the vicious weapon writhing away like a wounded snake. Sadly such finesse was entirely lost on Sythrac’s opponent as the huskblade fulfilled its primary function and desiccated the trueborn’s body in the blink of an eye. The raw-meat red armour collapsed, empty, as the shrivelled husk disintegrated into dust.

Sythrac dropped flat an instant before Vhigis’s blast pistol spat a retina-scarring ray of darklight through the spot where he had been standing just a split second before. The first trueborn, the one who had tried to feint, caught the blast squarely between his shoulder blades. There was a flash of heat and light as the trueborn’s chest was vaporised by the hit and then his body collapsed beside the empty armour of his sibling. Sythrac stood and looked at Archon Vhigis balefully. As befitted his title as Archon of the Flayed Mask, Vhigis wore the skin of his predecessor stretched across the faceplate of his spired helm. The eyes visible behind the holes radiated fear and fury in equal measure.

‘You shame yourself. Fight me properly and you might yet win your life,’ Sythrac said.

‘Says you, Valossian Sythrac!’ Vhigis spat back at him. ‘I know who you are – you’re Vect’s dog! Why have you come for me?’

‘Your kabal defied the supreme overlord and now they pay the price...’ Sythrac replied. He twitched the huskblade back and forth leaving smoky trails as it carved through the air, ‘...as shall you. Your soul is forfeit to me.’

‘To hell with you! Where was Vect when the daemons crawled up from the under city? Where was

he when every hand turned against us? Damn him and damn you, too!

The witch-sight of the spirits showed Archon Vhigis levelling his pistol again before he had even finished speaking. Sythrac turned aside and the bolt creased past him by a hair's-breadth. He allowed more of the captive energy of the armour to flow through him, the thousand ghosts stung into action screaming and roaring in his mind. Vhigis's movements became slower still and Sythrac closed the distance between them in seven preternaturally long strides. He dodged two more blasts from Vhigis's pistol with a twist or a pivot to left or right before arriving within arm's reach and snatching the weapon from the Archon's hand. Sythrac threw the pistol away with contempt and slowed himself down for a moment.

'Fight me or die where you stand,' Sythrac snarled. 'You are no Archon of Commorragh to flee when your kabalites are falling. Fight and reclaim some shred of honour.'

Vhigis finally saw the inevitability of the doom laid out before him and drew his own sword with an anguished yell. Sythrac traded blows with the Archon to test his mettle, allowing the howling spirits to ebb away so that he fought skill against skill alone. It soon became clear that Vhigis was an excellent swordsman by Commorrite standards, a deadly foe for a slave and a worthy adversary for any trueborn. To Valossian Sythrac, even unenhanced, he was nothing but a disappointing child. Sythrac soon tired of the uneven contest and allowed the power to flow through him again, landing a blow that shattered Vhigis's darting sword into quivering fragments.

To his credit Vhigis did not give up. He flung the sundered hilt in Sythrac's face and dived for his fallen blast pistol with the speed of a striking snake. It was still a hopeless manoeuvre against a skilled opponent like Sythrac and they both knew it. Sythrac allowed him to get one hand onto the knurled grip of the weapon before plunging his huskblade through Vhigis's exposed back. The tip of Sythrac's blade penetrated the Archon's torso with such force that it sunk into the flagstones of the floor beneath him. Vhigis was pinned in place like a grotesque insect as he writhed in the seconds before his body crumbled away into dust.

Sythrac opened the fingers of one gauntleted hand over the crumbling remains. The gesture revealed a soul-siphon embedded within the gauntlet's palm, a cold, blue circle of light. The spirit-trap glowed spectrally as it extended an aetheral vortex across Vhigis's desiccated corpse. The Archon's soul, even as it cried in horror at the ineffable claws of She Who Thirsts closing around it, was snatched up and drawn inside Sythrac's ornate armour to be trapped, stored for Sythrac's pleasure. Archon Vhigis of the Flayed Mask joined innumerable others in the ghostly menagerie contained in the network of softly glowing soul stones which festooned Sythrac's armour. The Archon was reduced to less than a helpless prisoner; a power supply, perhaps a source of secret knowledge, but most of all for Sythrac, Vhigis would be a memento of this day on the Alzos'Querion Vha when he had made the spires fall.

Sythrac shook himself and pulled his huskblade out of the floor and Vhigis's dust-filled armour. Unsatisfying as it had been, the ghost of Vhigis and the memory would have to suffice. There would be others to be made in the vast, suffering cityscape of Commorragh as it struggled to survive the Dysjunction, of this Sythrac had no doubt.

He paused and looked over at the Venom that Vhigis had been preparing to flee on. The casket the Archon of the Flayed Mask had been stowing there caught his eye – what treasure had Vhigis been so attached to that he had dragged the unwieldy thing all the way down here when he knew there would be a danger of pursuit? Sythrac could have squeezed the answer directly from Vhigis’s soul if he had a mind to, but he decided to look for himself.

The ugly, angular casket was old and worn-looking, with deep scratches and an encrustation of what could only be dried blood. Sythrac idly flipped open the lid and gazed upon dozens of flat, leathery faces lying inside. These were the faces of all the previous Archons of the Flayed Mask, no doubt, each lovingly peeled and preserved by his or her successor in a kabalite tradition that must have been in place for centuries. Sythrac shrugged. Apparently Vhigis had had his own cargo of precious mementoes too.

Sythrac sighed and walked along the corridor to the end where a pair of concealed doors had been opened to the outside world. The screams and stink of burning became stronger as he emerged into the wan light of the *Ilmaea* shining high overhead. The base of this particular spire fell away before him towards Ashkeri Talon and the docking ring. Spread out before him was a series of deep valleys between lower spires that stepped down to the broad, flat knuckle on Ashkeri Talon that held the White Flames fortress.

That particular spire gleamed like a bone needle at this distance, and was notable for the way it seemed to stand alone amid a blackened wasteland of other structures. Sythrac paused and listened for a moment to the many voices begging for his attention – not voices from the spirits this time, but his worthless underlings craving orders, direction, praise, acknowledgement or whatever else they wanted.

The first squadrons of jetfighters were already prowling the upper air above the White Flames fortress, Sythrac could see as much from where he stood. The fact that they were staying so high indicated that they had met resistance from the fortress itself, a fact confirmed by the endless gibbering of invisible voices in Sythrac’s ear. He looked up and saw the first dark arrow shapes of Black Heart Raiders emerging from the Alzos’Querion Vha and passing directly overhead. Moments later the sharp angles of Vect’s mobile fortress blotted out the light of the *Ilmaea* as it passed in stately procession over Sythrac’s head.

He sighed again and began issuing orders: splitting the Raiders up to begin probing the deep valleys ahead for ambushes, threatening the scourge-heralds with blasphemous tortures if they didn’t approach the White Flames fortress right this very instant and demand a concrete pledge of fealty from Archon Yllithian. The momentary diversion of hunting Archon Vhigis was over. It was time to get back to the far more dreary business of crushing Commorrhagh spire by spire if necessary.

Several kilometres below Sythrac’s lofty perch a lowly Black Heart sybarite called Vaellienth just couldn’t stop grinning. Every day of his life he’d dreamed about a day like this, a day when he could go

into the city and do whatever he wanted: kill whoever he felt like, steal whatever took his fancy, destroy at will. The rest of his clique felt the same way, he could see it in their wild eyes and fixed smiles – the Dysjunction was the best thing that had ever happened in Commorragh.

The wind whipped at Vaellienth's face as their Raider plunged into a steep-walled canyon between spires, curving sharply to closely follow the riven flank of one as they searched for more survivors. Above and behind them dozens of other Raiders sliced through the air with their open decks packed with more black-armoured warriors hungrily searching for new victims. Vaellienth shouted to his helmsman and the Raider glided to one side to slip beneath a bridge of silvery spars that had been buckled by some unthinkable violence.

A spray of hyper-velocity splinters rang from the prow armour of their Raider as soon as it came into view. Below them on a protruding terrace tiny figures raced to get into cover as the shadow of the Raider fell across them. Vaellienth swung the Raider's forward cannon around to etch a searing line across two of the running figures before they could get out of sight. He could see they were escaped slaves, a mismatched selection of squat and gangling forms armed with an equally mismatched selection of captured weapons. Vaellienth's clique of warriors used their splinter rifles to pick off some of the other runners with clinical precision. The return fire coming up from the terrace was so pathetically inaccurate that Vaellienth had the helmsman bring the Raider in lower so he could leap down to finish off the handful of remaining slaves at close quarters.

As his armoured sabatons crunched onto the terrace Vaellienth had a moment of heady exhilaration as he realised there were more slaves than he'd originally thought – a lot more. A dense knot of dirty, club-wielding wretches came bursting out from a rubble-choked entrance where they had been hiding and Vaellienth grinned again at the crude ambush the slaves had set up. Doubtless they'd hoped to lure him in and gain some more usable weapons, maybe even capture themselves a Raider. Instead they'd caught something far too big and dangerous for their puny trap.

The slaves had the strength of desperation but little else on their side. Vaellienth impaled the first one that ran up to him on his rifle's combat blade. He left the weapon hanging from the wretch's guts and drew a knife as he leapt forwards to take the next slave in the neck. Screams erupted all around him as the rest of his clique took down their own chosen victims in short order. The lumpen flailing of the slaves as they tried to defend themselves was almost comical. They were blatantly outmatched but they knew they could expect no mercy from the kabalites, so they fought to the death – or at least they tried to. Vaellienth kept two of the slaves half-alive to be hung from the Raider's trophy chains, replacing two recently expired prizes from one of their previous encounters.

The word had come down from the supreme overlord himself – subdue the city – and subdue it they would. Vaellienth's squad had swarmed through Sorrow Fell with a thousand others of the Black Heart kabal all racing with one another to be the first at the kill. They had swept through the upper spires like the fires of vengeance, killing anything that stood in their path. It was easy to tell who the rebels were; they were the ones that tried to fight or tried to run. Now the Black Heart forces were coming up to the maze-like boundaries of the old city: the slums, the flesh farms, the factories and the workshops that



formed the functional heart of Commorragh once you dipped beneath the tips of the glittering spires.

The long chains of Black Heart Raiders began to split up as they plunged down into the darkened streets, fanning out as they went. The destruction was more obvious here than it had been up in Sorrow Fell. Tumbled slabs choked the canyon-like gaps between the flanks of the spires. Streets and walkways had collapsed onto one another to produce a complex, multi-levelled maze. Jumbled spars, statues and metalwork shaken loose from the higher levels completed the tangle. Vaellienth and his followers eventually had to disembark from their Raider to make their way deeper into the mess on foot.

Thousands of metres above, most of the Black Heart kabal forces would be closing in around the White Flames fortress. Rumour had it that Archon Yllithian had turned traitor and would defy their approach. Vaellienth was not sad to be assigned to probing the depths instead. Any fighting at the White Flames fortress would be dominated by vast, unleashed energies and titanic machineries of destruction. The opportunities for personal skill and daring to make a difference in such an environment would be virtually non-existent, while the chances of sudden annihilation stood immeasurably high. Vaellienth felt better to be below on a battlefield where a quick blade and a steady aim could still win the day.

They found their way down into a more-or-less intact boulevard that had been unevenly roofed by fallen debris but not entirely blocked. Broken pipes burbled foul effluent into black, reflecting puddles in places where the tiled pavement had cracked. A few dim lights showed in places but the darkness beyond their reach was absolute. As Vaellienth and his warriors advanced along it he suddenly spotted a huge, bestial shape standing motionless in the shadows. He raised his rifle instinctively but in the same instant some sixth sense told him that what he was looking at was not alive.

Vaellienth advanced cautiously and realised that the shape was actually a statue of some sort that had been meticulously woven out of sections of pipe and lengths of wire. It was a depiction of a giant, antelope-like creature with spiral horns that had been partially crushed by fallen masonry so that it now looked as if it were supporting part of the sloping ceiling. A little further on there was another statue of a crouching predator about to spring. Nearby a tangle of limbs and part of a horned head protruded from beneath a pile of rubble marking where a prey-animal had stood. Now he knew what to look for Vaellienth realised they stood within a frozen zoo of off-world beasts. The whole boulevard must have been festooned with them before the Dysjunction.

He wondered briefly if the creations were the work of pureblood Commorrites or slaves. He decided the animal motif spoke of slaves trying to recreate something vaguely familiar from their home world in the harsh, alien environment of Commorragh. The existence of the works indicated that some petty Archon in this area had indulged in letting his or her slaves be creative for a time. It had probably been a piece of studied cruelty in loosening their bondage just a little before reapplying it again with double force. Possibly the unknown Archon had simply liked the things – there was a kind of crude exuberance about them that was appealing.

Vaellienth snapped alert as he heard the sound of running feet in the distance. He gestured sharply and his clique went into cover on both sides of the boulevard with their weapons at the ready.

Vaellienth remained standing in plain sight as he listened to the running feet getting closer. He heard the footsteps splashing through a pool, stumbling on the other side and then the distinctive whip-crack sounds of splinter pistol-fire. Three wyches suddenly sprinted into view with blades and pistols in hand. They were glancing fearfully back over their shoulders in the direction they had come from. The leading wych suddenly saw Vaellienth and started to shout.

'Don't!' was all she managed to yell before Vaellienth shot her in the mouth, the hyper-velocity splinter round partly decapitating her as it opened a grotesque second mouth in the nape of her neck. The rest of his clique opened fire a split second later and cut the other two wyches down in their tracks. They had been sprinting so hard that their lifeless bodies slid along the tiled pavement for a few paces even after the splinter rounds knocked them off their feet.

'Huh,' Vaellienth opined vacantly as he allowed the muzzle of his rifle to drop. He had expected the wyches to come straight at him with their knives out for his blood. Instead they had seemed almost relieved to see someone else in the Stygian darkness of the boulevard. It was bizarre behaviour even for wyches. He swung his rifle up onto his shoulder for a moment as he looked over at the fallen bodies again. Something looked wrong with them but it was too dark to see exactly what.

He was walking closer for a better look when a new sound caught his attention. It was a sort of susurration, a long, drawn-in sound like an intake of breath, which emanated from further along the boulevard. The sound was soft but it seemed loud as if it came from many places at once. Vaellienth's rifle was in his hands and aimed along the boulevard in a flash. Behind him he heard the muted rattle as his clique also pointed their weapons into the pitch-darkness. From ahead of them there came a waft of a stench so foul it made Vaellienth's eyes water.

He realised with the slightest qualm of panic that despite his preternaturally excellent night vision it seemed to be getting darker even while he was standing there. Details he could make out before – chunks of rubble, wire statues, dark puddles – were becoming blurred and indistinct as though a mist were rising even though there was no mist. The shadows seemed to ripple as they deepened before his eyes. The sound came again, the shuddering hiss of air being drawn into hundreds of quivering scent-pits.

There was a rapid scrabbling rattle of claws on stone as the darkness came alive with the needle-fanged, whip-thin forms of hundreds of ur-ghuls rushing towards him. Vaellienth yelled and reflexively shot down the first in his sights, but there were a dozen more behind it. Sybarite Vaellienth and his clique of Black Heart kabalites were still shooting wildly into the dark tide of troglodytic monsters as it rolled over them in an unstoppable wave.



## CHAPTER 11

### THE BLACK DESCENT

Kharbyr was gradually getting used to the body that he had inherited from Bellathonis. He still didn't like it much. The sense of it being a gangling mismatch of pieces cobbled together like a puppet master's marionette never seemed to go away, but gradually he was getting used to it. Some of the strangeness was definitely useful in its own, twisted way. He never seemed to get tired or hungry, for example, and pain of any sort seemed to be only an interesting and not at all disagreeable sensation. Try as he might, however, Kharbyr couldn't force himself to get used to having subsidiary eyes in his shoulder blades however useful they might turn out to be in the long run.

They were descending again. Kharbyr had been launched up to the top of the White Flames fortress for his brief talk with Yllithian like a cork popping out of a bottle. Now he was being hustled back to the base of the fortress to re-enter the foundation layer he'd emerged from in accordance with Angevere's directions only an hour before. Four White Flames warriors arranged in a tight diamond around Kharbyr steered him almost, but not quite, by the elbows between successive anti-gravity drop tubes and flight after flight of seemingly endless, winding steps.

The steps gradually changed from being white marble, sweeping and magnificent near the top of the fortress, to being mean, narrow and steep towards the bottom. The warriors allowed Kharbyr no time for gawking along the way but he could see clearly that the fortress was being locked down even more thoroughly than it had been before. Squads of armoured warriors were rushing everywhere, and there was a general clangour of shutters being sealed and gateways being closed.

Yllithian's people really were getting ready to fight Asdrubael Vect. Kharbyr had grown up in a part of the city where that sort of thinking was the punch line to innumerable jokes. Nobody went up against the tyrant and lived – those were the legends you heard in Low Commorragh. Up here closer to the top of the food chain in Sorrow Fell things were obviously seen a little differently.

There was a sense of... *excitement* in the air as if the warriors were engaging in the fulfilment of a day that they had long looked forward to. Say what you would about Yllithian, the support of his own kabal seemed to be as solid as a rock. It made Kharbyr wonder a little about Yllithian and his apparently remorseless ambition. Perhaps the Archon of the White Flames was really a product of his environment; maybe that was what made him so mad and power-grasping that he would try to match

wits with the supreme overlord.

+Nyos Yllithian climbed to the top of his house over the bodies of his murdered siblings. Nothing was forced on him – he was the one that undertook to do anything and everything in the pursuit of power.+ Angevere’s dry whisper was in his mind again, temperamental and pedantic-sounding. She still hadn’t forgiven him for breaking with her ridiculous script and inadvertently inviting Yllithian along with them to the labyrinth of the Black Descent. Now instead of being able to dictate events they were being swept along by them – as personified by the four White Flames warriors marching him so resolutely down into the bowels of the fortress.

+Do you even know anything about the Black Descent? Don’t worry, I can see from your empty memories that you don’t. Of course you scarcely know anything about haemonculi or their covens at all, do you child? I forget, sometimes, how young and impoverished you truly are.+

Kharbyr sighed internally. He’d already found to his cost that he couldn’t seem to block Angevere out or even reply to her directly through his thoughts. Speaking aloud worked but he couldn’t do that while Yllithian’s warriors were watching him. He was being incessantly nagged by an invisible ghost that took pleasure in picking fault with everything he did. The agony was that he daren’t simply ditch her and be done with it. Angevere represented the one slender hope he had of regaining his old body and avenging himself on Bellathonis, however tenuous that hope might be. The idea that he might find himself stuck inside Bellathonis’s mismatched, cast-off skin for the rest of his existence was simply unthinkable. Kharbyr was finding that his revenge fantasies were starting to widen to include Yllithian and Angevere, too. He tried his best to keep that particular thought hidden from the witch.

They had reached the bottom of the steps and debouched into an area of crooked corridors and dank, moisture-streaked walls. Angevere’s whispers continued while they marched through the corridors and she forced knowledge into his unwilling head.

+The haemonculi were in Commorrhagh even before The Fall. You might say that the city gave birth to them and that in their own way the haemonculi contributed to the destruction of the eldar race, too, but there are altogether too many culprits for that crime. Just prior to The Fall the eldar had become a divided people. They were divided because the realisation had come upon them that their power was effectively limitless. Their culture and technology had reached such a pitch that they were like unto gods. They could create or destroy simply through the application of their will. The realisation of that power brought about a great schism because some embraced it whilst others were repelled by it.+

The warriors were leading Kharbyr down a ladder into a cistern that had been recently drained. Green slime clung to the walls and floor of the otherwise unadorned and empty cubic space. At the bottom of the ladder the four of them stopped for a moment and just stood there, waiting, with Kharbyr effectively imprisoned in between them. Kharbyr had an unpleasantly queasy premonition that they had brought him all the way down there just to execute him somewhere quiet and out of the way.

There was a cracking sound and a circular section of the floor began to drop away in neatly divided segments to create a spiral stair. Wan yellow light shone up out of the hole along with the murmur of voices swiftly stilled. Kharbyr and his guards descended into a roughly cut chamber filled with dozens

more warriors all wearing the sigil of the Black Heart. Kharbyr was chilled to the core by the sight – members of Vect's own kabal were here in the very heart of the fortress! Then he smiled at his own foolishness. It was a trick all right, just not the kind of trick he'd thought of at first.

+Yes, they're Yllithian's followers. They're wearing Vect's sigil in the hope that they can bluff their way past the Black Heart's roving patrols. Pay no attention to them and listen to me. What I have to tell you is important and it will affect your chances of survival when you meet the Black Descent.+

A circular, hatch-like door occupied most of one of the chamber's walls, while narrow passageways entered via the other three. The stir caused by Kharbyr's entry soon settled down and the spiral stair retracted silently upwards to lie flush with the ceiling. The warriors in the chamber were fully armed and armoured. Kharbyr noticed a preponderance of heavier portable weapons than normal among them; snub-nosed monofilament shredders and darklight blasters seemed a particular favourite.

+A large part of the schism from before The Fall was centred around the concept of Form. The conservatives saw their form as being something inviolable, the pinnacle achievement of evolutionary forces reaching back to the birth of the universe itself. The radicals believed that the form a soul took was not predetermined but a matter of cosmic accident. They saw no harm in changing their form as they willed once they had access to the technology for doing so. The most extreme transmigrated themselves into animals, ships, structures or even entire sub-realms.+

The warriors were awaiting the call to action and were evidently anxious to be about their business. However, first and foremost they were disciplined warriors and in Kharbyr's experience that meant they were used to having to wait. He stood to one side while they busied themselves with endlessly checking and rechecking their wargear. Meanwhile Angevere's scratchy voice wittered on inside Kharbyr's skull without pause.

+Far more people took to physical modification of a more limited sort. Improved genes, faster reflexes, enhanced senses, regenerative cells, all that kind of thing – on and on 'improving' the evolutionary process. This is where what we now call haemonculi come in to play. They started as a sort of loose society of surgeons and scientists who arose to pioneer the most extreme kind of work. For a variety of reasons – most of them ethical and legal – many of them chose to make their homes in the port-city of Commorragh and other sub-realms in the webway.+

Just a few days in the past Kharbyr would not have cared less about some dusty old argument about the residence of souls. Such things had no relevance for him then, but now the subject had a deeply personal aspect. He perked up a little as Angevere seemed to be winding her way closer to some sort of point.

+Those who would become the first haemonculi performed some truly radical experiments of their own over time. They created artificial races and adapted existing ones to their purposes. The most stable proved to be the scourges, a transformation that could be undertaken by anyone with the urge to soar on their own wings. It's entirely possible that some even less savoury creations were brought into being at the same time – like the mandrakes, for example, and a variety of deranged creatures that are now purely the preserve of the beastmasters.+

+Body-sculpting, alteration, eugenics; these proto-haemonculi raced to outdo one another in their pursuit of entirely amoral science even as the rest of the eldar race slid into anarchy– Ah, Yllithian is arriving, we must continue your education a little later.+

At that moment the hatch-like door began rolling to one side and the warriors turned to face it as one body. Through it Archon Yllithian entered the chamber surrounded by his incubi bodyguards. He was resplendent in his exquisitely finished armour and wargear, fully armed and accoutred for battle. The assembled warriors gave no overt sign of recognition, no martial salutes or cheers, but a perceptible change ran through them all like a jolt of electricity. Shoulders were squared and chins rose proudly in the presence of the Archon. The atmosphere in the chamber had been tense while the warriors were waiting, now it veritably crackled with expectation. Yllithian looked around at them with pride shining from his face. One of the warriors knelt before him and delivered a brief, muttered report.

‘Good, good,’ Yllithian murmured in response. ‘And the second group were dealt with too... We’re all set then.’

The Archon of the White Flames glanced sharply over at Kharbyr before speaking to his troops. ‘The stage has been set for us to proceed. Move out by squads and in Lhitiu’s name maintain your intervals correctly. I will be right behind you – with Bellathonis at my side – until we reach the sluices in the third strata. We’ll consolidate our forces again once we’re there. Now go.’

Yllithian strode over to where Kharbyr was standing as the first squad of warriors departed the chamber through one of the adjoining tunnels. ‘My dear Bellathonis, you look terrible,’ Yllithian smiled but his eyes were bright and hard, ‘as if you’re going to your own execution. You should exhibit a little more confidence if only for the sake of the troops.’

‘I have every confidence in your preparations, Archon Yllithian,’ Kharbyr said quickly. ‘They’re very... impressive.’

Yllithian looked a little disappointed. “‘Thorough’ is the word I would have preferred to hear. Still I suppose you are entirely ignorant of the minor miracle involved in both anticipating this requirement and acting upon it in the ludicrously short period of time available.’

‘Requirement?’ Kharbyr echoed.

‘For exiting the fortress undetected by any of Vect’s lackeys.’

‘Ah...’

+Ask Yllithian what he knows about the labyrinth of the Black Descent.+

‘How much do you know about the labyrinth of the Black Descent?’ Kharbyr asked the Archon in what he hoped would sound like a conversational tone of voice.

Yllithian looked at him oddly and then smiled again. ‘The usual tales I’ve heard spun about the labyrinth involve its innumerable and fiendish death traps or the hideous fates of intruders. Both you and Syiin, my previous haemonculus, have been singularly close-mouthed about the topic and about the coven of the Black Descent in general.’

The Archon spread his hands in a dismissive gesture as he continued, ‘It’s generally thought best to

leave haemonculi covens to their own devices under ordinary circumstances, so obviously I've never been down there in person before – that's where you'll come in, of course, being the expert in this case.'

'Of course,' Kharbyr echoed again, his mouth dry.

They descended through a series of recently drained tunnels for a short time before striking off along a broader branch to drier ground. The dense, stone-like foundation layer beneath the spires (or rather the foundation *strata* as Yllithian knew it, for it was comprised of many layers) was a dense honeycomb of service tunnels, travel tubes, waste pipes and hidden ways. It had long been used as a way to transport personnel and property without risking the dangers of street and airborne movement. Indeed in some places entire underground rivers passed through the foundations of spires and afforded them either a useful point of ingress or a major security headache depending on perspective.

Each kabal kept its own secret maps of the foundation strata just as each kabal constantly blocked off or opened up different routes through it from time to time. Some parts of Low Commorragh merged seamlessly into the strata by becoming strings of caverns, quarries or mines. Deeper still the pits of the haemonculi were accessible at the points where they clung, hive-like, to Commorragh's underside. All manner of dangerous wildlife, escaped slaves, insane Commorrites and other unnameable horrors lurked in the foundation strata, but none of them were more horrifying than the haemonculi themselves. Angevere persisted in 'educating' Kharbyr further as they travelled, her ghostly whisper forever at the back of his mind:

+After The Fall the surviving not-quite-yet-haemonculi realised that they stood on a metaphorical knife-edge. With their abilities they could cheat death, age, pain and disease for all intents and purposes. They could have ruled Commorragh and the other sub-realms purely through the promise of granting immortality to those loyal to them. However, the soon-to-be haemonculi were wise enough to understand that they had neither the desire nor the skills to lead the unwashed masses. They were only concerned with pursuing their craft further, but they also knew that if they tried to do so as individuals they would be enslaved and forced to labour for others.+

+So the haemonculi covens formed. Like-minded individuals banded together to organise the distribution of their effort. Pacts were formed between the covens and the ruling authorities – the noble houses originally and then later the kabals when Vect took power. The Black Descent has been one of the more powerful haemonculi covens in Commorragh for longer than anyone can remember. They are also and perhaps not coincidentally one of the more... orderly covens in regard to their practices.+

+The Black Descent has at least thirty-three strictly regulated ranks in its hierarchy, 'the degrees of descent' as they call them. Individual coven members are subject to the authority of those further up – or rather down in this case – the organisation. Coven members keep their true identities secret from those of lesser status and are referred to by their ranks alone.+

+You're wondering how I could possibly know all this. Well it's easy enough when you've had the misfortune to be around the real Bellathonis as much as I have. The problem is that the real Bellathonis didn't progress very far through the Black Descent's ranks before deciding to go it alone, and that's a problem because of the labyrinth.+

+The labyrinth of the Black Descent is not only that – a physical maze to deal with intruders – but also a method of imposing discipline on the membership of the coven. Each member is only taught a limited number of pathways through the labyrinth according to their rank. The more exalted the member, the more routes they will know through the labyrinth.+

+The labyrinth itself is not fixed in place. The primary elements of the labyrinth take the form of interlocking cylinders nested inside one another. The cylinders slowly rotate so that the corridors and entries inside them line up with different points at different times. The routes that the members of the Black Descent learn as they progress are as carefully metered as dance steps so that they can move within the cylinders in time to make their appropriate connections. A mistake will lead the coven member into those fiendishly deadly traps that even Yllithian has heard about.+

+Bellathonis only knew of a fraction of the traps in the labyrinth, but it makes for a long list. Molecular acid jets, kinetic swarms, monofilament webs – both fixed spinnerets and free-floating ones, darklight fusillades, gravitic anomalies, splinter discharges, contact desiccants, nerve gases. The one piece of hope I can offer is that none of the traps will block progress entirely – there’s always a way past if you know the right steps. Bellathonis managed to steal into the chambers of a highly ranked member of the coven once by infecting his superior with a traceable bacterium that he used to follow him through the labyrinth. Unfortunately for you that was quite some time ago and the same trick won’t work again.+

Twice they passed bodies in the tunnels that had been freshly slain by the White Flames’ vanguard. The first were a sizeable group of half-naked kabalites bearing a sigil Kharbyr didn’t recognise – although Yllithian obviously did. The Archon nodded with satisfaction and moved on without comment. The second group of bodies was larger. They all bore the sigil of the Black Heart and it took Kharbyr an instant to realise that in this case there had been casualties on both sides. Some of the fallen were Yllithian’s warriors that had been caught in a vicious close-quarters fight with Vect’s own people. Yllithian looked grim at the sight.

‘Curse it all,’ the Archon murmured, ‘I had started to think we might get through cleanly. Still, word of the ruse will give the Black Heart kabalites plenty to think about – they’ll be so busy looking at each other twice that we’ll slip past them easily. We’re almost at the sluices already.’

Kharbyr nodded in a fashion that he hoped looked wise. He decided to try and put up a bit of flattery in the hopes it would keep Yllithian busy too.

‘You seem to know the strata very well, Archon Yllithian,’ Kharbyr ventured. ‘An impressive feat if I may say so.’

Yllithian was dismissive. ‘Any Archon worthy of the title knows that nothing enters or leaves his domain without it being reported on by Vect’s spies. It became clear to me... well, let’s just say it was a long time ago now... that I would need ways to move unseen. I made it my business to learn as much about the foundation strata as I could.’

Kharbyr knew the true import behind Yllithian’s easy statement: teams of desperate agents clashing in the dark, secret maps being stolen, kidnappings and torture for information. A thousand



tiny, independent vortices of pain and terror would have been brought into being by Yllithian's thirst for knowledge. Each one would grind away producing tiny nuggets of information that once placed together made an increasingly clarified whole.

Just as Yllithian had promised, they reached the sluices shortly afterwards. Kharbyr could tell they were getting close by the trembling of the passageway beneath his feet and a distant rumbling sound that gradually rose to a deafening roar. They emerged on to a gallery that was open along the left to an empty, echoing space while the towering wall to their right was pierced by hundreds of arches. High-walled channels entered through the arches, crossing the gallery from one side to the other before dropping away at a precipitous angle when they reached its further edge. Decrepit-looking metal-strutted bridges formed a precarious walkway across the channels.

Most of the channels were full of swift-flowing liquids that thundered over the edge without pause. However, a handful were entirely dry or carried such sluggish flows that they barely trickled past. It was into one of these that Yllithian and Kharbyr were led, finding the bulk of Yllithian's false-flagged warriors and a small gaggle of nondescript-looking agents. The Archon went over to speak with them while Kharbyr risked a glance over the edge.

The sluice channel disappeared away at a forty-five-degree angle, its straight edges compressing rapidly towards a vanishing point that was lost in the darkness below. To his left and right the fuller sluices pushed their contents over the edge with an unceasing roar and producing billows of fine mist that Kharbyr wished he could believe was made up of water droplets.

A thin, black, ruler-straight line followed the sluice channel down at head height before vanishing out of sight. It was secured to one of the less dilapidated bridge struts further up the channel where Yllithian was issuing orders to the warriors. Kharbyr resisted the urge to touch the line. It would be braided monofilament – light and incredibly strong but also apt to shred anything it came into contact with that didn't have the right kind of protection.

Yllithian returned and handed Kharbyr a loop of black metal. He recognised it immediately as a friction brake. They were all going to go sliding down that line into the middle of whatever lay at the bottom of the sluice. His look of trepidation must have been obvious because it made Yllithian smile.

'No need to look so aghast, Bellathonis,' the Archon said. 'You won't be the first one going down. I'm reliably informed that there's an entrance to the Black Descent's labyrinth scarcely a hundred paces from where we'll arrive.'

'So you'll be heading down before me, I suppose, it being so safe and all,' Kharbyr blurted out tetchily. Yllithian simply smiled in response.

+There is one more thing I should tell you,+ Angevere whispered as Kharbyr took a firm grip on the gravity-line and pushed himself away. The initial acceleration was ferocious and he clung on to the friction brake grimly with the razor-sharp line hissing alongside his head as he slid down it. By now he was barely heeding the witch's incessant, doom-laden prattle.

+The Black Descent will recognise the presence of Bellathonis, of you that is, the moment you set foot in their labyrinth. They'll do their best to single you out and kill you as a matter of priority. I'm sure

they would rather capture you instead, but I suspect they will probably be feeling more pragmatic than that, so do try to be careful.+

Kharbyr's exasperated oath was swallowed up by the thunder of the sluices.



## CHAPTER 12

### ANOTHER REPAST

Asdrubael Vect had returned to his scrying chamber at the tip of Corespur. Much to his disgust more of the upright crystals had turned to inky black in his absence. It had now reached a point where his view of the lower city was almost totally occluded. Vect growled in vexation as he prowled back and forth between the darkened crystals.

‘Even a Fool knew something was going on,’ he announced to the chamber’s only other apparent occupant. ‘I had seen it too, of course, but it seemed to be of such minor import on the broader canvas. A loose end to be tidied up later, nothing more.’ He stopped and shook his head bitterly. ‘My mistake, but not a fatal one. Not yet.’ His self-assurance rang hollowly in his own ears.

The Fool had been right, something was indeed brewing in Low Commorrhagh that stank with the abyssal reek of daemoniac interference. Vect spat a few sulphurous oaths in the general direction of the ineffable machinations of Chaos as he did his best to mentally set the conundrum to one side. The real frustration was that there was little that could be done about that particular state of affairs at the current time.

Vect resettled himself in his throne with something of an effort of will as he mentally dissected the complex orrery of interconnecting elements that were already in motion. No, the bulk of the Black Heart kabal was already fully engaged with protecting Corespur and subduing Sorrow Fell. All of his trusted Archons were about their appointed tasks or they would be very shortly. The orbit of events had been influenced as much as possible for the present and now Vect had to see the outcome of some of those events before he could make his next move.

‘I hate the feeling of powerlessness that waiting can impose at times like these,’ he opined to his silent companion, ‘but over the centuries I’ve come to understand that waiting is an essential, indeed inescapable, part of the role of supreme overlord. All manoeuvres and stratagems come to fruition at their own pace – attempting to hurry them along is usually a precursor to disaster. Even with access to all the power of Commorrhagh I still can’t make time run faster or slower than it is normally wont to do.’

He stared down at the grey-skinned Medusae squatting in front of his throne before nudging it with his foot. ‘I think you’ll agree that I speak from experience in this regard.’ The Medusae was silent, its steel visor inscrutable. The clusters of brain-fruit covering its head and back pulsed gently, ripe

and swollen with vicariously won experiences. Vect leered unpleasantly before reaching out and plucking a handful of the soft, fleshy nodules. He could at least pass the time usefully by witnessing events as they had unfolded.

One bite and he was reliving the moment that Valossian Sythrac left the ziggurat to take charge of his forces on the Alzos'Querion Vha. He saw the Harlequin, Motley, blanch at the techniques being employed and eventually get himself ejected by the geldling. On one level the experience made him laugh a little as a master is apt to do when its pet accurately apes his mannerisms. On another level it left a thick bile of frustration on his tongue. By the time Vect's messenger had arrived carrying orders for them to send the Harlequin and the Medusae back to Corespur the little Fool had already flown.

Another bite and he experienced the dying moments of a rebel. The idiot gazed hopelessly up into dark, roiling skies as swarms of black, dagger-winged craft descended from them in an awe-inspiring display of raw power. The ground shook as explosions of white fire raced over the battlefield to engulf the rebel and his misguided friends, their agonised shrieks obliterated by the carpet of death that rolled over them.

Vect selected another fruit. This one carried him with Aurelia Malys as she separated the columns of Black Heart forces leaving Corespur. The iridescent green craft of her Poisoned Tongue kabal spiralled away in a leisurely fashion giving no indication as to what their final destination would be. Vect knew where she was going, of course, he'd given the orders to her himself. Even so it was informative to see how carefully she saw to her own safety before setting about pursuing them. The group that Malys had taken with her was relatively small – a compromise between speed, stealth and strength – but there was a persistent worm of doubt at the back of her mind as to whether she'd brought too many or not enough.

The next experience was ripe with anguish. One of Sythrac's heralds was winging his way between palls of smoke towards the White Flames fortress. Its gates and docking ports stood invitingly open and no violence was offered as the herald flew closer to the vertiginous alabaster walls. Emboldened, more heralds descended bearing their swallow-tailed gonfalons and together they hailed the defenders in the name of Vect, supreme overlord. Their answer came sped on rays of all-destroying darklight. The heralds were slashed out of the skies by the retina-scarring beams in a heartbeat. Vect had a momentary impression of burning wings as the ground seemed to leap towards him...

Yllithian had shown his true colours openly at last. That news had reached Vect already, and the crystals had shown the White Flames fortress displaying its defiance to Sythrac's first approach. The formalities of it all were irritating but necessary. Word of Yllithian's stand would be spreading like wildfire, a focal point for any kind of organised resistance to the evil depredations of the great tyrant, Asdrubael Vect. Vect rubbed his hands with undisguised glee. The idiots would come running to make common cause with Yllithian and the White Flames without realising they were conveniently gathering themselves beneath a single banner for the deserved receipt of his unquenchable wrath.

The next fruit was strangely bitter. Vect followed the Sybarite Vaellienth as he dropped down into Low Commorrhagh on his Raider. As the sybarite and his clique entered the rubble-choked lower streets

Vect felt the tension growing there in ways a mere warrior would have missed or dismissed. By the time the swarm of ur-ghuls erupted into view Vect was prepared for something of the sort occurring. He ignored the flailing emotions of Vaellienth as the sybarite was torn by hooked claws and bitten by needle fangs. Instead Vect concentrated on observing, dissecting and deducing everything he could from what he saw.

Vect stood and paced between the darkened crystals once more. Encounters with beasts and slaves released by the Dysjunction's impact on the city had been universal. They figured into Vect's calculations as mere tertiary considerations at best or distractions at worst. Now he recalled ur-ghuls figuring in a disproportionate number of reports. Large numbers had been seen in Low Commorragh even before this incident.

He returned to the Medusae and carefully selected several of its smaller, less-developed fruits. These would be the ones secreted from the very fringes of the Medusae collective's roving senses. Each one was bitter and evoked another impression of darkness and corruption coming roiling up from the lower tiers. Swarms of ur-ghuls featured everywhere, apparently immune to pain and carrying a disease so foul that the slightest scratch could lay its victim low within minutes.

Not every such skirmish Vect witnessed was lost, the superior firepower and fighting skills of the kabalites sometimes enough to overcome the overwhelming numbers and preternatural vitality of the troglodytic horrors. Nonetheless the pitch-blackness and tight confines of the lower city worked against his warriors and everywhere they were being forced to give ground. Where the ur-ghuls emerged into the open they were easily dealt with, but the darkness seemed to be forever at their backs, advancing as they advanced.

The crystals of the scrying chamber remained just as opaque as ever but now it was clear in Vect's mind where the daemon-seed admitted by the Dysjunction had taken root. This rising darkness could only be coming from Aelindrach. The mysterious shadow-realm had long been a part of Vect's acquisitions, but too strange, too alien to properly assimilate with the rest of the city. The mandrakes made useful agents but their reticence about their place of origin was always universal and virtually unbreakable. They were lawless and clannish by nature, yet someone or something in Aelindrach was making a concerted effort to expand the shadow-realm and absorb all of Commorragh. That could not be countenanced.

Vect moved back to his throne and began bringing the lesser wardings into action. At one point the mastery of the wardings had been a jealously guarded secret fragmented among ancient, noble families. Vect had threatened and tortured his way to full understanding, eliminating each former possessor of it as he went. In time the last few bearing any scraps of knowledge came forward to teach him willingly in the hopes that he might spare them. They were proved wrong. Now the secret was Vect's alone and he held it as part of his great armoury of weapons for use against those that might oppose him.

The greater wardings girdled the entire city, eldritch barriers of force that kept the restless tides of the warp in check and prevented them from swamping the reality that was Commorragh. The lesser

wards were originally intended as an additional safety feature that subdivided the city itself. They were capable of placing additional, temporary barriers between the city's innumerable tiers and districts in case of a breach. Their deployment placed a small but noticeable additional strain on the nigh-infinite energy reservoirs of Commorrhagh and Vect proceeded with care by only erecting a few carefully selected wardings. Sealing off the whole city would not serve his purposes; it could even have quite disastrous results.

The work was almost complete when he heard the doors of the scrying chamber opening. He glanced to one side to look at the crystal dedicated to the chamber itself. The individual that he saw to be approaching assuaged his mood somewhat and he settled himself on his throne to await their arrival.

'Archon Khromys,' he said just before the leader of the Obsidian Rose came into view. The Medusae retreated behind the throne as the renowned artificer strode forwards to kneel before him. She wore a kilt of blades that seemed to float cooperatively with her movements and baroque-looking gauntlets of green glass. The plates of her shoulder armour mimicked the curves of rose petals, black and razor-edged.

'Supreme overlord, I have done as you bid me to do,' Archon Khromys said.

'Then rise and report. You found the vaults I directed you to, that much is clear. Tell me about their condition.'

'Twelve were completely untouched, seven showed signs of exterior damage but no breaches. I was unable to reach the others as they had been buried by debris that will take time to clear. My kabal are working on those even as we speak.'

The Archon of the Obsidian Rose was keeping something from him, he was sure. Vect's gaze was penetrating as he interrogated her further, 'You must have discovered the contents of the vaults – one with your skills would not be able to resist looking inside. Speak and tell me what you saw, and do not insult me by attempting to lie to me.'

Khromys went pale. 'No! I could clearly see they were stasis-locked. Only a great fool would tamper with that, and only a greater fool would return to their owner and report on it. I input the codes you supplied, examined the vaults for damage and came straight back.'

Vect sat back and steepled his fingers ruminatively. Khromys was young for an Archon, a relative newcomer to the ever-changing inner circle of Corespur. She played on that sometimes by acting the innocent – which was an almost laughable conceit to place before anyone who knew Khromys's personal history in detail. As a newcomer she was also one of the less reliable Archons in his court.

'Very well,' Vect said dismissively, 'you may go. Report to me again when the remaining vaults have been uncovered.' Khromys nodded, puzzled but relieved, bowed deeply to cover her relief and turn to leave. Vect let her get a half-dozen paces away before he called out to her again.

'You have a celebrated intellect, Archon Khromys, tell me what you *deduced* was inside those vaults.'

Khromys froze. She knew that she could not leave the chamber without answering. 'Weapons,' she said after a moment. 'Something too destructive to leave out in the open.'

'You can do better than that,' Vect purred.

Khromys looked back at him with a spark of defiance in her eyes, 'I think it's where you've been hiding your Castigators. I think you sent me to prepare them to be unleashed. Like I said before, weapons.'

Vect's answering smile was merciless.



## CHAPTER 13

### OVERTHROW

Kheradruakh listened to the whispers on the ever-changing night breezes of Aelindrach. He heard the two rival brothers arming for their war to determine who should rule over a place which could never be ruled. He listened as Xhakoruakh's outsider allies bred monsters for his shadow war. He listened as Azoruakh bartered souls for weaponry from beyond Aelindrach, the secret shipments entering through a gate known only to him. As the Decapitator's alien senses caressed the shadow-skein he learned their deepest desires and the true sources of their mutual rivalry.

*Xhakoruakh had lied when he told his outsider allies that secrets could not be kept hidden in the shadow-realm. In fact it took a rare gift to ferret out a secret within the deceptive tangle of shadows and angles that was Aelindrach. Few might boast the tenacity and skill required to make the effort, while the number of secrets to be found was very, very large. However, once the taste of conspiracy was on the Decapitator's tongue he could hunt it down effectively through the skein. The ghosts of recently made pacts still echoed there, and within them was an interlocking puzzle box of motivations, actions and influences that opened at his touch.*

*Kheradruakh slid from shadow to shadow, always unseen. He whetted his blade and bided his time. The moment would come soon, whirring past on the raven wings of fate. He would be ready and waiting when it did.*

While Xhakoruakh held court in a palace of shadows, his brother Azoruakh ruled from the top of a mountain.

As they approached the place it seemed to be a solid curtain of blackness rising up beyond the boundaries of perception. As they came closer it was possible to tell that Azoruakh's fortress leapt upwards in a succession of tiers that mounted threateningly overhead like angular storm clouds rendered in obsidian. The ledges and angles of it were seething with the followers of Azoruakh. The silent, shadowy garrison awaited the approach of Xhakoruakh's horde with weapons in hand; the dull patina of smooth bone on the saw-toothed hooks, sickles and knives that they bore seemed to gleam in the Stygian darkness of Aelindrach.

Xhakoruakh's minions outnumbered those serving his brother many times over, but Azoruakh's



followers had the advantage of position. As the horde surged against the obsidian walls Azoruakh revealed another advantage he had held in secret against the day when his sibling returned to reclaim his throne. Strange and terrible weapons were unleashed to rain destruction down upon the shadow horde. Lucent beams played across the charging ranks disintegrating everything they touched as the killing began in earnest.

It had begun with the braying of horns echoing through Xhakoruakh's palace, deep-throated bellows that hung on a single flat note which resonated in every nook and cranny. The signal was pre-arranged yet Bellathonis still experienced a curious tightening in his guts at the sound. The limited time he'd had for preparation was at an end and ready or not his offspring were going to be tested in the crucible of battle.

The grotesques he had bred were, to Bellathonis's mind, not yet fully grown. Their musculature was underdeveloped due the paucity of the specimens he'd had to work with, the bony growths protruding from their spines, craniums and shoulders were as hard and sharp as flint, but equally brittle. They were quicker than ordinary grotesques and exhibited a sort of feral rapaciousness that was unusual for their kind. All in all Bellathonis was proud of them. The horns blared incessantly as if to hurry him along, their unwavering tone reverberating through the fabric of Aelindrach as they announced Xhakoruakh's challenge.

Bellathonis and Xagor emerged from their womb-like cave under the palace with his battalion of grotesques to muster with Xhakoruakh's other forces. The multitudes of dark angles in the cracked plain surrounding the palace were filled with them: mandrakes, ur-ghuls, crawlers, creepers and other nameless things summoned from the depths of the shadow-realm. Bellathonis's iron-masked grotesques drooled and whined as they were driven into position within the multitude. In comparison to the other creatures present the grotesques were thunderous slabs of moving muscle and bone. They surged through the flitting entities like ships crossing a sea of shadows. The resonant horns stopped abruptly. In the oppressive silence that crowded in with their absence the only sound was the hiss of an icy breeze scouring the plain.

The giant figure of the shadow-king emerged from the heart of his palace into the expectant silence. He was surrounded by nightfiends bearing tall banners marked with twisting sigils of green witch-fire. A rippling intake of breath swept over the horde as they basked in the presence of their lord, Xhakoruakh. Bellathonis took in a sharp breath too. It seemed to him that he could feel the fever-heat of Xhakoruakh's bloated form against his skin even from a distance. The shadow-king flourished a monstrous, rusted scythe above his head and cried out in a voice that rolled like deep thunder.

'My restless children of Aelindrach! The time has come to take back what is rightfully mine. Trophies and riches will be yours for the taking when we unseat my treacherous brother! All those who take the road to victory with me shall reign as lords over the broken slaves of Azoruakh!'

The crude promises elicited an eerie, hungry moan from the assembled horde, but Bellathonis had eyes only for the weapon the shadow-king was holding. He could see that even Xhakoruakh's brawny arms were knotted with the effort of keeping the heavy scythe aloft. It stood taller than the

giant shadow-king, while its blade was close to a metre wide and two metres long. Its workmanship was crude, like that of a tool rather than a weapon, with some portions unfinished. The metal it was made from was so heavily corroded that it looked as if it had been lost underwater for centuries. Vivid green slime oozed from the scythe's blade but the inscriptions carved into it were still sharp and well-defined enough that Bellathonis could recognise them. They were inscriptions in Chaos runes, the language of the damned.

Bellathonis knew the script from dusty tomes he had studied in the past as he delved into the nature of souls, books that had been filled with the esoteric warnings of long-dead scholars. Now that he stood with the shadow-king's sighing horde in the icy wind on a cracked plain in Aelindrach the warnings seemed less obscure and more relevant. Any remaining doubts in the haemonculus's mind that Xhakoruakh had been tainted by powers from beyond the veil evaporated completely in that moment.

There was a kind of blindness Commorrites suffered in relation to the Chaos gods, Bellathonis thought. She Who Thirsts had such a claim on their souls that it occupied all of their thoughts on the subject – when they gave it any thought at all, which was rarely if it could be helped. Every waking moment was dedicated to eluding the grasp of the daemon-queen and restoring the vitality she drained constantly from every living eldar in Commorragh. Small wonder that she should dominate their world-view.

The other Chaos gods were known to be older than She Who Thirsts. They were ancient, atavistic deities from the dawn of time and seen as being almost as irrelevant by Commorrites as the dead gods of the eldar. That was a conceit, but not too far from the truth under ordinary circumstances. Commorragh had been designed and built specifically to exclude the influences of entities like the decrepit gods of Chaos under normal circumstances. The wardings were supposed to keep Commorragh hermetically sealed from the surging tides of the warp – the preferred playground of the Chaos gods – so that its citizens could exist without succumbing to madness and mutation. That was how the wardings were *supposed* to work, but during a Dysjunction they could be compromised and what was without could find its way within.

Xhakoruakh raised a mighty shout over his shadow horde and they replied with a whispering sibilance that held words in tongues seldom heard among the living. The rise and fall of their eldritch chanting crashed like waves against a shingly shore as the horde stirred with common purpose. It dispersed into a hundred separate spills and runnels and began flowing away from the palace as the tide of shadow-skinned creatures flooded across the plain.

Bellathonis whipped the grotesques viciously to get them lumbering forwards in the same general direction. The slab-muscled beasts were showing entirely too much imbecilic fascination with Xhakoruakh and the monstrous scythe for Bellathonis's liking. He glanced over at Xagor to see if the wrack had noticed anything amiss about Xhakoruakh. Recently Xagor's duty to Bellathonis had taken him into Shaa-Dom and some of the less stable parts of the webway. The wrack had witnessed something of the power of the warp unchained and could probably read the signs of it here, too. Part of

Bellathonis still wanted to be wrong, to write off his fears as a product of the strange sub-realm of Aelindrach tricking his senses. The frightened eyes that he could sense peering from behind Xagor's mask told Bellathonis everything he needed to know.

The road to Azoruakh's mountain-fortress had been no road at all. It was a trackless wasteland of rippling darkness that rose and fell in frozen waves as jagged and angular as the teeth on a saw-blade. It was not without opposition either. There were skirmishes and ambushes, murdered guards and mutilated scouts. All of them carried out with the vicious glee the denizens of Aelindrach reserved for striking from the shadows. Both sides fought in the same fashion, unseen and unheard until a blade kissed flesh or hooked claws wrapped around a throat.

Bellathonis did his best to keep himself, Xagor and the grotesques out of reach of such games by resolutely sticking with the largest groups of Xhakoruakh's followers that he could find. Whenever Xagor and Bellathonis needed to rest, the haemonculus ordered the grotesques into a circle facing outwards, packed so that they were shoulder to shoulder and formed a living palisade of flesh, blood and bone. The precautions seemed to work well enough to keep Xagor and Bellathonis alive as they listened to the blood-chilling shrieks and howls from the skirmishes occurring around them.

Ultimately Xhakoruakh's followers had the strength to push through his brother's delaying tactics and the horde steadily approached the mountain-fortress. At first it was only a dark blur on the edge of consciousness but it grew ever greater as they approached. Just short of the mountain Xhakoruakh halted and sensibly brought his streams of followers together into a single body before advancing further. However, the shadow-king gave his minions no time to rest and instead drove them forwards with bellowed imprecations as soon as sufficient numbers were gathered. The horde of Xhakoruakh lurched forwards against his brother's fortress and into a hell-storm.

Bellathonis had kept his charges back from the front lines while he assessed the situation. When the all-destroying lucent beams wielded by Azoruakh's defenders stabbed down from the cliffs for the first time he was initially dazzled and then fascinated by them. The energies being employed clove smoking trails through the very fabric of Aelindrach; even the ground beneath the victim's feet was blasted upwards in sooty columns at the beam's touch. Such power was entirely in keeping with the effects of disintegrators and darklight weapons in more normal surroundings, but the shadow-realm was notoriously opaque to those kinds of high-energy discharges.

There was movement in the serried terraces that etched the cliffs. Shadows were descending from them like crawling bats. Some of Azoruakh's followers were seemingly so confident of victory that they were keen to come to grips with the pitiful handful of Xhakoruakh's minions that had reached the bottom of the cliffs so far. Further from the cliff the burning rays probed back and forth like restless fingers of light searching for those that had gone to ground to escape their lethal luminosity. Wherever one of them latched onto to a huddled knot of mandrakes or ur-ghuls more swung across to annihilate them in focused radiance.

Bellathonis looked around for Xhakoruakh but among the flashing beams and fractured darkness he could see no sign of the giant shadow-king. He did see a wall of mist that was rolling towards the

cliffs with unnatural speed. The death-beams gouged hungrily through the mist, tearing it into tatters and revealing the shadow-king and his cadre of nightfiends charging towards the fortress.

For an instant Bellathonis believed his problems would be solved there and then. However, as the beams moved to sweep over the group they were held back by a shimmering emerald dome of force. Xhakoruakh's charge was slowed to a crawl as he and his minions battled their way forwards. They suffered as they did so, their bodies smoking and thrashing beneath the attenuated yet still potent blaze of Azoruakh's arcane weapons. Xhakoruakh pushed onwards with the strength of desperation, yet his nightfiends were falling one by one.

Bellathonis snapped his attention back to the grotesques drooling unconcernedly nearby and Xagor, who was shivering in anticipation of his imminent demise. 'Quickly now, Xagor!' Bellathonis called over the shriek of the destroying beams. 'Help me ready the grotesques while there's still a distraction going on.' In a few words he quickly explained what he needed the wrack to do. Despite his terror Xagor was obedient enough to carry out the necessary tasks without question.

When all of the slab-muscled monsters were prepared Bellathonis jabbed a finger towards the black cliffs and shouted the command phrase to them, '*Khourankir V'sylthi!* Awake! Go up there! Kill the beamers! Kill! Kill!'

The lumbering grotesques were dazed and half-deafened by the battle raging around them. At first they were slow to understand the mnemonic phrase Bellathonis used and he had to repeat it. On the second incantation the iron-masked faces of the grotesques lifted slowly to focus on the cliffs while the bellow-pumps stitched to the monsters' backs began to clench and unclench faster. Blocks of syringes lodged into their spines automatically depressed plungers to dump concentrated doses of hormones and stimulants into their already heavily boosted systems.

The grotesques shook themselves and roared with bloodlust as the hellish cocktail pulsed through their veins. The thick-limbed giants abruptly lunged forwards with their legs pounding and arms flailing as they ran headlong for the cliffs with quite astonishing swiftness. Bellathonis blinked in surprise then dashed after them, fearful of losing track of his creations entirely. Xagor, fearful of losing his master, ran after him.

A vagrant beam slashed across the grotesques as they charged forwards. The beam was turning to rain more hell upon Xhakoruakh's failing defences, so it was only a glancing blow, although that alone would have atomised any mandrake or ur-ghul in its path. Bellathonis was delighted to see his creations storm through the shaft of previously all-destroying light and come out of it only mildly scorched. If anything the grotesques only seemed to get angrier and ran even faster to reach their tormentors.

They reached the deeper shadows directly beneath the cliffs. These were a battleground where the remnants of Xhakoruakh's vanguard were in the process of being slaughtered by Azoruakh's triumphant troops. The grotesques crashed into the snarling melee with all the finesse of a tsunami. Body parts flew as the monsters tore through friends and foes alike with hooks, claws and cleavers driven by bulging muscles and berserk, atavistic rage.

'No!' Bellathonis shrieked at the top of his lungs. 'Up! Up! Climb! Kill the beams!'

A few of the masked grotesques heard Bellathonis's cry and their compulsion to obey their creator sent them lurching headlong against the cliffs. As the first few began to climb, ape-like, up the rough surface, the rest of the pack turned to follow them. Within a few seconds the entire group of lumpen meat-devils were hauling themselves on to the first terrace to renew their onslaught. Bellathonis ascended to join them through sheer force of will, briefly decoupling his false perceptions of Aelindrach's solidity and gravity to float up as easily as if he'd been wearing a gravity harness. Xagor was left abandoned to his own devices and had to scramble up behind the haemonculus as best he could manage.

As he alighted on the terrace and permitted physical laws to take on a more recognisable aspect Bellathonis finally got to see one of Azoruakh's strange weapons up close. It was mounted on a forked metal pedestal with two handles that allowed it to be swivelled and tilted to direct the beam. The weapon itself was bell-shaped with the open end acting as the emitter. A simple lever appeared to be the only way of activating the device. There was something familiar about the workmanship, Bellathonis thought. The weapon was certainly not something made in Aelindrach yet it had clearly been created with its effectiveness in the shadow-realm in mind.

Bellathonis turned the pedestal so that it pointed to a higher tier where several more of the weapons were busy concentrating their beams on Xhakoruakh and his shrinking entourage. He pulled the lever and watched with interest as a hazy column of luminescence sprang into being before it and seemed to almost *tunnel* its way through the air towards the target. The section of cliff he'd aimed at flared with milky incandescence as the beam struck it, a billowing plume of soot and shadow spurting away from the circle of light. Nothing else seemed to happen for a moment and Bellathonis felt a sense of disappointment.

Then the beams springing from the weapons mounted near the spot flailed wildly and then tumbled as the cliff underneath them gave way. An avalanche of dark shale and spinning shafts of light gathered pace with awful deliberation. It thundered into the ground with a bone-jarring impact that kicked up vast plumes of detritus in all directions.

From his perch the haemonculus contemplated the resultant destruction and then hastily shut off the beam. He picked up the skirts of his robe and ran headlong away from the weapon, trying to put as much distance between himself and it as he could. He was barely in time. Close at his heels shafts of light from higher tiers swung down to annihilate the traitorous device before it could inflict any more harm. The dense, rocky material of the terrace reverberated like a tuning fork under his feet. The back-scatter from the beams produced roiling clouds of darkness that engulfed Bellathonis and robbed him of any sense of direction.

He staggered and felt the surface beneath him begin to give way. A single beam was traversing slowly along the terrace towards him. Its awful brightness pierced the clouds of debris thrown up by its progress as it methodically annihilated everything in its path.

Bellathonis tried to summon the concentration required to fly again so that he could escape. To his

disgust the sense of imminent danger ensured that his simple-minded subconscious kept him thoroughly bound by what it considered to be unbreakable physical laws. With disintegration rapidly approaching him Bellathonis felt only a mild sense of annoyance at his lack of self-control.

A fiercely strong grip latched onto Bellathonis's arm and yanked him clear of the beam's path. Once away from the blaze Bellathonis's perception cleared a little and he realised that Xagor had pulled him into a niche in the cliff face.

'The master takes too many risks!' the agitated wrack shouted fiercely over the howling sound made by the beam as it passed.

Bellathonis smiled indulgently at his servant. 'As ever your loyalty does you credit, Xagor, most gratifying,' he said. 'I confess my little experiment drew rather more attention than I'd anticipated. Tell me, did you see if any of the grotesques survived?'

Xagor nodded rapidly and pointed further up the cliff. The grotesques were climbing again in obedience to Bellathonis's last command. They looked like ugly grey ticks on the flank of a black-haired animal as they hauled themselves upwards. Their obedience would soon disintegrate if they were left to their own pitifully limited recognizance for too long. They would enter a berserk state again and attack anything in reach. Given where the grotesques were now and where they were heading Bellathonis decided that under the circumstances he didn't care too much if they did.

The attack by the grotesques and Bellathonis's own improvised experiment had opened a chink in the defences. Xhakoruakh's followers were beginning to rally and swarm upwards in the wake of the success. At first there was only a trickle, but the numbers swelled into a flood as realisation spread that there was a way to escape the killing rays. Mandrakes, ur-ghuls and nameless things climbed, wriggled and crawled up the cliffs. Fighting spread along the tiers like cold lightning. Bone-blades, teeth and claws flickered with deadly intensity.

The beams that held Xhakoruakh in check were overthrown as their operators were forced to look to their own survival. Finally the giant shadow-king was able to break free and hurl himself into the fray. He sprang up the cliffs roaring out his brother's name as he plied his heavy scythe with lethal effect. Nothing could stand before him.

'You know what, Xagor?' Bellathonis said with a cold smile as the enraged shadow-king swept past their niche. 'I believe that Xhakoruakh may win this thing yet.'

'Hooray?' Xagor wondered miserably.

When they broke down the doors of Azoruakh's throne room Bellathonis expected some sort of last-ditch defence. Only three of the grotesques had survived, but Xhakoruakh had been so favourably impressed by the beasts' performance that he insisted on their presence at the front of the assault squad. The shadow-king had been most taken with the grotesques' ability to survive Azoruakh's exotic weapons in a way none of his other minions could.

'When I saw the beams being used against us I made a realisation about them,' Bellathonis had explained. 'They were based on a principle of resonance that is sometimes referred to as cataclysmic harmonics. In the context of Aelindrach such weapons perforce have to rely on the *perceptions* of their

victims to convey more of their effect than would ordinarily be the case.'

'So how did your creatures overcome it?' Xhakoruakh had rumbled with some discontent at the haemonculus's long-winded answer.

'I partially blinded and deafened them. An eye and an ear drum were removed from each on the battlefield. That, plus their inherent resistance to pain and damage, rendered the light and noise of the beams survivable for them over a limited exposure. If I may ask something myself? How did you survive? Virtually their entire arsenal was directed at you alone for a while.'

'Powers beyond Aelindrach favour me, just as others favoured my brother,' Xhakoruakh replied cryptically. 'Find your flesh-creatures and bring them to breach the throne room. Their strength will serve us well again.'

Bellathonis had dutifully rounded up the grotesques and placed them before the heavy obsidian doors of the throne room. Between them they held a section of broken column to use as a battering ram, the hallway behind them a seething mass of Xhakoruakh's triumphant followers. At Bellathonis's shouted order the grotesques swung the ram with vigour. A single, thunderous crash and the heavy obsidian doors flew back in ruins. Bellathonis shouted another order and the grotesques dropped their cumbersome ram and charged inside.

Bellathonis and Xagor hung back a little to permit the blood-hungry tide of shadow creatures to flood into the throne room with Xhakoruakh at their head. To the haemonculus's surprise there was no immediate clash of arms or any dramatic declarations of sibling rivalry to be heard being exchanged between Xhakoruakh and his cornered brother. Instead there was only silence coming from the throne room. An ominous silence and the unmistakable stench of death.

After a moment's hesitation Bellathonis sent Xagor into the throne room to investigate. There was a chance that Azoruakh's final defence was something so devastatingly lethal that it could destroy Xhakoruakh and all his followers in utter silence. The Black Descent guarded their labyrinth with devices that were just as mortal or just as silent, though none could claim to possess both properties at once. His speculation was terminated by Xagor reappearing in the sundered doorway.

'All safe, master,' the wrack said somewhat shakily. 'Also worthy of the master's inspection. Outcome surprising.'

Intrigued, Bellathonis followed the wrack inside the room. It was a tall, almost conical space with walls that appeared to be formed out of the swirling collision of jet, onyx, obsidian and basalt. Azoruakh's – now Xhakoruakh's – throne stood at the top of a high dais of skulls piled against the back of the chamber. The centre of the floor was dominated by a circular pit. Heavy black chains hung down over the pit and swayed gently as if in response to some movement above.

Bellathonis could perceive no termination to the chains above him – they stretched up and away into a dark, rotating cloud that seemed caught at the pinnacle of the chamber. The pit swiftly became darker than anything Bellathonis had experienced in Aelindrach, a complete absence, an utter nullity that seemed to suck at the soul, consciousness and life itself. The grotesques were milling around near the piled dais of skulls confusedly looking for enemies. Xhakoruakh and his followers were ranged

around the pit staring fixedly at the chains in silence, or more accurately at what was hanging from them.

A body, soot-skinned and gigantic, hung from the chains. It had some kinship with Xhakoruakh but would have stood taller and possessed a somewhat rangier form in life. The body had its skin tattooed in blue and yellow witch-fires that were now slowly dying.

A body without a head.





## CHAPTER 14

### LABYRINTH

The gravity line hissed past centimetres from Kharbyr's face as he descended the sluice channel fast enough to make his eyes water. Yllithian's warriors were ahead of him and behind him too, spaced along the line at regular intervals like beads strung on a wire. They were plunging through clouds of mist thrown up by the active sluice-ways to either side and Kharbyr quickly became slick with the aerosolised waste that was plunging downwards from High Commorragh around him.

+Some things never change, eh child?+ Angevere whispered sardonically in his mind.

Blinking through the tears Kharbyr saw flashes of light in the Stygian darkness at the bottom of the sluice, the droplets in the air hemming the bursts with rainbow outlines. A split second later he heard the crack-crack-crack of splinter weapons firing. An ambush! The Black Descent must have learned of Yllithian's plans and laid a trap for him. All it would take was a few well-placed snipers and they could pick off the warriors coming down the gravity line one by one.

More flashes – disintegrators and blasters for sure – pulsed near the bottom of the sluice. By their light Kharbyr could see that he was getting close to where the channel levelled out and widened. A few more seconds and he would be caught in the fire-trap down there with the others, but there was nowhere for him to go. If he released the line early he would still be trapped within the sluice channel with no way out of it and no further control over his descent. He could crash into the others coming down and would certainly lose plenty of skin through abrasion before ending up in exactly the same place as if he'd held onto the line. There was nothing to do but hang on and hope the unseen snipers missed him.

The gravity-line did not follow the course of the sluice precisely. Instead of turning through a bone-smashingly sharp angle near the bottom in order to become horizontal the line curved and lifted Kharbyr out of the high-walled channel. For a second he could see that the sluice channels fed into wider canals that angled off in all different directions. In the distance he glimpsed the faint gleam of what looked like a lake. Then the line was plunging back into the channel again and it began to corkscrew gently to shave off his remaining momentum. Kharbyr could see charcoal-black figures outlined by the flash of weapons fire in the distance and Yllithian's warriors ahead of him dropping from the line. This was it.

Kharbyr dropped from the line himself and rolled to one side of the channel with his ill-matched limbs flailing as he skidded to a halt. He bounded to his feet and ran along the edge of the channel on hearing the approach of more White Flames sliding down. The last thing he needed right now was to get tangled up with someone else and provide the enemy with a big, fat, two-for-one target to aim at.

The warriors ahead of him were dutifully hurrying forwards with their guns levelled as the strobing flashes of weapons fire continued. Kharbyr drew his own weapon, a curious-looking pistol with a spiral barrel that Angevere had advised him to use if he was cornered. He had laughed at the idea that he would have to wait to feel cornered before fighting back. With the pistol in hand Kharbyr began to look for targets, jogging forwards towards where the sluice opened out into a wide, dry canal.

Yllithian's warriors were in a loose semicircle firing outwards into the canal. A few metres in front of them there were heaps of blasted, pulped and torn flesh that had doubtless once been bodies but were now mostly... parts. As more of the warriors arrived and joined the semi-circle it expanded and moved forwards, its members still occasionally firing at unseen foes. Kharbyr realised there had been no return fire and that none of the White Flames had fallen. Not an ambush after all, then, but Yllithian's forces had run up against an enemy of some kind. It was an enemy that made the warriors slightly nervous, if the gratuitous display of firepower being used was anything to go by.

The warriors that had arrived behind Kharbyr joined the semicircle just as the shooting died down. They advanced as a single body and things grew silent again save for the occasional kill-shot as they passed the heaps of fallen. Kharbyr moved up behind them and finally got a good look at their enemies.

The first thing that struck him was the stench. Kharbyr had killed enough creatures to know the foetid smell of split intestines and opened stomachs but this... this was so much worse. He covered his mouth and bent down to examine the bodies more closely.

+ Don't touch them!+ Angevere hissed in his mind. +They're diseased! The mark of Nurgle is on these corpses. Step back! The foulness of them offends my senses as much as it does yours.+

Kharbyr had absolutely no intention of touching the things anyway. He could see enough hooked claws and eyeless, domed skulls split by maws full of needle-like teeth to know that they were the remains of ur-ghuls. He suppressed a shudder as he looked at the visibly rotting corpses. He had encountered ur-ghuls in Low Commorragh when he was trying to escape from there with Xagor – right before Bellathonis had stolen his body. Packs of the creatures had been coming up from below and they had seen more of them in the travel tubes. Those had looked diseased too.

+You skimmed the edge of Aelindrach when you were with Xagor,+ Angevere announced suddenly, +and there were more of these ghuls on the loose? That's interesting and very bad news. Someone's been busy.+

Kharbyr heard footsteps and he turned to find Yllithian approaching in the company of his seemingly omnipresent incubi bodyguards. The Archon looked down disdainfully at the heaped corpses.

'Ur-ghuls. Nothing to worry about,' Yllithian murmured dispassionately as though speaking to himself. 'Packs of them tried to swarm the vanguard...'

Yllithian broke off and looked Kharbyr in the face before continuing, ‘...they proved highly resistant to injury, apparently, and had to be just about dismembered to stop them. Fortunately the exceptional weaponry possessed by my warriors ensured that they could prevail. So, what would your professional opinion be about these deathless beasts, Bellathonis?’

‘The ur-ghuls? There were packs, um, reported in the old city right after things went crazy—’ Kharbyr fumbled for the words as Angevere hissed into his mind.

+Shut up! Tell him nothing!+

‘— maybe the Dysjunction had something to do with it?’ Kharbyr finished lamely. ‘Their toughness, I mean.’

Yllithian looked around with renewed interest at the charnel house his warriors had created. ‘Infused with energy by the Dysjunction... I suppose it’s possible,’ the Archon said as he examined the corpses more closely. ‘Ah yes, but a very specific colour of energy – note the lesions on the skin and the triple-lobed pustules – I’ve seen those marks all too recently when we fought over Gorath. The gods of Chaos are attempting to inveigle us in their sport.’

Angevere emitted a mad peal of laughter inside Kharbyr’s skull at Yllithian’s words. He was momentarily too distracted to respond and the Archon wandered away with his bodyguards in tow. For one mad moment he had the urge to run after him, confess everything and beg Yllithian’s forgiveness for tricking him. Anything that could get him away from the mad witch seemed preferable to continuing to serve her.

+He’d just kill you, child,+ Angevere chuckled inside his mind. +Or perhaps he would corrupt you and pledge your vagrant soul to his secret master if he understood who he truly serves. It matters not. Hurry along and attend to him, you don’t want to miss out on what comes next.+

Yllithian’s warriors had moved on and were now guarding an open hatch in the sheer wall of the dry canal. As he approached Kharbyr could see that there was a spiral design roughly carved into the lintel over the hatchway. Sprawled in the opening were the bodies of more ur-ghuls and two Commorrites clad in rough, nondescript clothing. They looked to be another pair of Yllithian’s agents to Kharbyr’s eyes and they had clearly been killed by ur-ghuls swarming out of the hatch when they opened it. The looks of horror frozen on their torn faces still faithfully communicated their shock and surprise.

+Do you see the design? That marks the beginning of the Black Descent’s territory,+ Angevere whispered. +You must tread carefully. The labyrinth proper begins further inside, but the traps start here.+

Yllithian caught his eye and gestured expansively at the hatchway. ‘From this point our guidance must flow from you, Bellathonis. I can console myself that any shortcomings on your part will be swiftly remedied by the plethora of death traps your friends in the Black Descent are alleged to be so keen on.’

The White Flames warriors stood around him, silent and enigmatic in their coal-black armour, but Kharbyr could see by the upward tilt of their chins that they were amused by Yllithian’s dark humour. The incubi gave no such indications. They watched him just as dispassionately as they watched everyone that might threaten the safety of the Archon they had sworn to protect. Kharbyr hesitated.

+You have to go in, child. There's no need to be afraid with me here to help you, as long as you obey my orders to the letter.+

Kharbyr swallowed his fears and wished that it were true that there was nothing to be afraid of. He stepped through the hatch into the gloom beyond it. The first thing he became aware of was the stench; a stomach-twisting, bile-rising, eye-watering putrescence that made him completely forget the mild unpleasantness of sliding down through the sluice-mists. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he saw a rough passageway with openings irregularly spaced along either wall.

+Go to the fourth opening on the right,+ Angevere whispered. Kharbyr did as he was bidden and noticed another spiral design chalked beside the opening. The hole itself looked as if it had been gnawed at by vermin. Beyond it was another passageway, narrower and arrow-straight with sharply defined walls. A faint breeze wafted out of the hole and the putrescent stench waxed even stronger. Kharbyr stopped in his tracks – not due to the smell this time, but at the sight of more bodies. A dozen or more dismembered ur-ghuls lay scattered along the passageway.

After a moment Angevere whispered in his mind. +It's a simple monofilament spinner but it fills the whole corridor if you trigger it. Have Yllithian's thugs shoot at the walls halfway down the passage at shoulder height and that will disable the sensor.+

Kharbyr hesitated again as he wondered whether the witch's insight could really be so accurate. As he did so he became conscious of Yllithian's warriors moving up behind him and felt a sense of mounting dread. The only way was forward and only Angevere could help him with that. Truly feeling like a puppet now, he directed the White Flames warriors where to shoot, as Angevere had ordered him. They used disintegrators to punch holes in the walls just to be sure, but they still made Kharbyr walk to the end of the passageway first.

The passage came to a dead end. Kharbyr stood in front of the blank wall in confusion for a moment before he noticed a slight breeze against his face. Closer inspection revealed that the wall in front of him was inching with infinitesimal slowness from left to right.

+Just wait here for now,+ Angevere whispered. +You're still wondering how I can guide you through it. Trying to explain it to you would be like trying to describe colours to a blind person. Understand it this way. One who can see into the weft and weave of the warp can see into the future and the past, into destiny and desire, into action and reaction, because the void contains all of those possibilities.+

+So take heart, young Kharbyr. At this time and in this place it is a child's game to see which footstep will bring about your doom or which path will lead you to your goal. For example, I can tell you that the real labyrinth begins at this point, and that this is one of its entrances.+

As Angevere fell silent a gap appeared at the left-hand edge of the wall and slowly widened like a maw opening. Through the opening another passageway was revealed that stretched off into the gloom. The passage was featureless apart from some fresh, ominous-looking stains and still at a slight angle to the one Kharbyr was in. As the wall inched towards making a perfect alignment he stepped impatiently through the entrance and into the labyrinth of the Black Descent. The only way forward was to get this over with.

Zykleiades was a Patriarch Noctis in the coven of the Black Descent. To his inferiors – the various masters, secretaries, elects, provosts, custodians and stewards over whom he held the power of life and death – his rank represented a degree of almost incomprehensible descent within the coven's byzantine hierarchy. Most of these lesser coven members were only permitted to know the ranks of their immediate superiors and lived forever in the belief that they were getting closer to the hidden ruling powers within the coven with each advancement of their own. Some of them had never even heard of the rank of Patriarch Noctis. Nor would they ever do so throughout their entire miserable careers unless they fouled up so spectacularly that his presence was called for at their subsequent excruciation and execution.

Zykleiades had been promoted through the coven ranks a total of twenty-one times during his exceedingly long and eventful life. Each time new ranks and complexities had been revealed. Each time he had discovered himself to be now beholden to a whole raft of shadowy individuals that seemed if anything more numerous than they were before. By now he was convinced that he would never advance far enough to truly become one of those invisible rulers of the coven that might be speculated to exist at its lowest degree of descent. He was just as answerable to his superiors in the coven now as when he had joined its ranks as a lowly, wide-eyed wrack centuries ago.

He now stood in his chambers facing a dark mirror almost as tall as himself that had a rim of twisting leaves rendered in molecular carbon. Agitated clouds of inky blackness swirled on the mirror's surface as a voice spoke from behind it. Vocal modulators had been applied to make the voice sound as sibilant and unrecognisable as an aural shadow. The individual communicating with him was ranked as a 'Descendant Interlocutor' and that was as much as a Patriarch Noctis like Zykleiades was permitted to know.

'...retain control?' the voice whispered. Zykleiades snapped his attention back to the last few seconds of conversation. His attention had drifted momentarily. It was becoming a common problem these days. Fortunately it was easy enough to cover his distraction.

'The labyrinth is besieged!' he cried with some feeling. 'While I can appreciate the desire to retain control I can assure you that every means to do so is being fully deployed already.'

'...Yet still our beautiful labyrinth is being overrun by vermin – precisely the kind of filth it is designed to exclude... This is... unacceptable.'

'Then release more coven members to my control! Forgive me, Interlocutor, but I have already detailed how the forces at my disposal are insufficient for this allegedly minor task. The labyrinth was heavily damaged by the Dysjunction and the ur-ghuls... the ur-ghuls continue to appear in quite literally inexhaustible numbers despite their losses.'

'...Others in the coven labour beneath the same difficulties as you and yet enjoy more success... Learn from their dedication.'

One of the compensations of Zykleiades's rank was that withstanding the outright criticism of his superiors had become a less gruelling affair. He was not humiliated in front of his fellows to illustrate a

point or given demeaning tasks to perform that would reinforce his menial relationship with the true exercise of power and authority. He had moved beyond such games. Instead he was simply being warned: improve your performance or face removal by your replacement.

‘As you wish,’ he said with resignation, ‘I shall redouble our efforts armed only with the materials on hand.’

‘...Ensure that you do...’ The clouded mirror cleared abruptly as the Interlocutor broke the connection.

Zykleiades stepped away from the mirror and wiped cold sweat from his face with shaking hands. The mirror now showed only a reflection of himself: a white, glistening face cut to display a wide, permanent smile amid hanging jowls that twisted into a beard-like mass of purple tendrils at his chin. Black, ribbed robes concealed the Patriarch Noctis’s surprisingly corpulent body while a pointed demi-hood rose from the nape of his neck to frame his pallid visage. He had made recent alterations to give himself the beard-like fringe of finely attuned sensory tendrils. Now they were giving him ample opportunity to experience the rank taste of his own fear.

Normally he would have said that another compensation of achieving the rank of Patriarch Noctis was that direct communications from his superiors became so rare as to be almost unknown. The fact that he had now received three of them in as many hours was highly disturbing. The Dysjunction and the renegade Bellathonis’s part in it all had already been a source of considerable alarm for Zykleiades even before hordes of ur-ghuls arrived, inexplicably obsessed with entering the labyrinth.

The Patriarch Noctis’s secret chambers were located in a series of wide, low rooms on differing levels nestled deep inside the labyrinth. How deep he did not know exactly. Like all coven members he was only taught the safe routes necessary for passage between a number of selected destinations, ‘interstices’ in the jargon of the coven. Wandering in the labyrinth without knowing the precise steps and timing needed to evade its innumerable death traps was tantamount to suicide – as the ur-ghuls were discovering to their cost. The troglodytic predators were dying by the thousands, clogging passageways, glutting traps, dulling blades with their numbers... and yet more continued to arrive. The labyrinth was designed to catch or kill individual intruders, certainly, but it was not designed to hold an army at bay. The only real blessing was that the ur-ghuls lacked weapons and direction.

All of Zykleiades’s rooms interconnected with one another via multiple archways and short flights of steps. Now the Patriarch Noctis shuffled restlessly through them as he tried to reason out a solution to his dilemma. His rooms were furnished with spindly-looking chairs and tables made of metal or carved bone. Skin-covered tomes and intricate alchemical apparatus gleamed on shelves in some rooms. Mosaics of dark gems and captured weaponry glittered from the walls while rich furs and exotic skins covered the floors. Being Patriarch Noctis did carry a few small compensations, he did have to admit.

While many of the pieces in his sanctum were of quite spectacular value, Zykleiades kept the majority of the collection for sentimental reasons. Each object represented a keepsake extorted out of some notable coup made by him: silvered alembics claimed from an old rival after his overthrow, pre-Fall furniture seized from an Archon who had been unable to repay his debts, the rolled skins of an

entire bloodline that had provoked the ire of the coven centuries before. Valueless junk in some cases, but every piece was precious to him.

A recent addition to Zykleiades's chambers were the shrunken, hairless heads that hung beneath every archway. The Patriarch Noctis hated the sight of them. They served as a reminder that even before the Dysjunction struck, Bellathonis had been a poison within the coven. The renegade had somehow traversed the labyrinth and broken into Zykleiades's own chambers. He still shook with rage and humiliation at the memory of the discovery. Zykleiades had had to increase his own security as a matter of course after that and the shrunken heads remained the most visible sign of the additions made.

A minimal level of consciousness still clung to the grisly artefacts, enough to register intruders and remember their passage or, as in this case, to warn of their approach. Their eyes rolled and lips moved as they struggled to form words with no breath behind them. Nonetheless words formed in the air seemingly from a hundred dry throats – it was synthesised, unfortunately, as there had been no time to create a more elegant solution.

'Ekarynis, Master Elect of Nine, has entered,' the voices intoned.

Zykleiades looked up to see the hatchet-faced Master Elect approaching, his hands tucked within the sleeves of his slate-grey robe. The Master Elect moved with an overly precise, mechanical gait as though his limbs were constructed of wheels and steel rods. Long ago Ekarynis had his eyes replaced with flat plates of black crystal that now winked ominously in the uncertain light.

'Master Elect Ekarynis,' Zykleiades said formally, 'I am displeased. This continued trespass—'

'—Has encountered a new development,' the Master Elect interrupted brazenly. The sound of Ekarynis's voice was a special kind of torture: a grating, slicing, crushing mockery of language without a sense of warmth or comradeship with any living thing. For a wild moment Zykleiades feared that his superiors had already decided on his replacement and that the Master Elect was about to make an attempt on his life.

But that was not Ekarynis's style at all. The Master Elect's preferred methodology was one of relentless endurance. Where others faltered or failed Ekarynis drove ever onward like a machine – unemotional, tireless, soulless. He advanced through the coven via the simple expedient of stepping over the bodies of those who had fallen ahead of him. The Master Elect was punctilious, but he was loyal (in his own way). He would simply wait for the Patriarch Noctis's downfall without acting to hasten it. Naturally he would also not act to prevent it.

'What new development?' Zykleiades snapped, his underlying fear manifesting itself as irritation. 'Don't waste my time with mysteries, Ekarynis, my patience has grown thin with them.'

'A force of kabalite warriors have entered the labyrinth and are advancing through it in a highly determined fashion,' Ekarynis grated.

'Which kabal?' Zykleiades blurted in astonishment.

'The warriors bear the sigil of the Black Heart.'

The colour drained from Zykleiades's tendrils at the news. It was just as he'd feared. Asdrubael Vect had uncovered the coven's albeit tenuous connection with the Dysjunction and decided to punish them

for it.

‘Who... who is leading them?’ he whispered.

‘The renegade Bellathonis is leading the warriors,’ the Master Elect noted with acidic distaste, ‘and due to his assistance they are proceeding rapidly and with very few casualties.’

‘Impossible,’ Zykliades murmured. ‘No... no, Vect would never swallow Bellathonis’s lies so completely as to send him back here with a force of his own. Something else is going on if Bellathonis is involved... A ruse of some sort, a third party trying to make us antagonise Vect... But who? Who has that renegade found that has common cause to act against us?’

Ekarynis had been about to speak but he fell silent at Zykliades’s rhetorical question and appeared to be considering it in a literal fashion. The flat black crystals in his eye sockets winked as the Master Elect tilted his head first one way and then another to consider the problem. After a moment Ekarynis’s head came up and his glittering gaze locked with that of the Patriarch Noctis.

‘Archon Nyos Yllithian of the White Flames,’ Ekarynis spat. ‘Recent reports indicate White Flames have acted in open rebellion against the supreme overlord’s authority. Yllithian also has prior association with Bellathonis and is believed to have sponsored the renegade’s actions in the build-up to the Dysjunction.’

Zykliades narrowed his eyes shrewdly at Ekarynis’s summation. He had spoken with Nyos Yllithian at Corespur very recently. As the Dysjunction broke upon the city Vect had summoned the surviving leaders to Corespur to issue them with instructions and, doubtless more importantly in the tyrant’s eyes, to reassert his dominance. Zykliades had attended as the representative of the coven of the Black Descent.

Unexpectedly the Archon of the White Flames had accosted Zykliades outside the audience chamber. With veiled words Yllithian had strongly implied that he knew about Bellathonis’s role in triggering the Dysjunction. He had further suggested that he would be amenable to joining forces to eliminate the troublesome haemonculus once and for all. The Patriarch Noctis briefly outlined the encounter with Yllithian to Ekarynis.

‘A calculated lie to determine your allegiance and intentions,’ Ekarynis pronounced with finality.

‘Or, admittedly with decreased probability, it was a statement of intent that later events have caused the noble Archon to reconsider – a Dysjunction renders all events fluid and chaotic,’ Zykliades added brusquely. ‘In either event I concur that Yllithian is the most likely suspect as Bellathonis’s patron. Furthermore if we are correct in that assumption it is likely that the Archon in question is here, commanding his kabalites directly.’

‘Yllithian is the only possible suspect,’ Ekarynis insisted.

Zykliades peevishly waved away the Master Elect’s pedantic narrow-mindedness. ‘I believe that I just said I concur with your findings. Even if we assume the supposition to be correct, though, the question then becomes, what is it that has brought Bellathonis and Yllithian together against the coven? They could not have known the difficulties we are having. They undertook a mortal risk by entering the labyrinth, so we can assume their need must be great. What is it that they want?’



Ekarynis tilted his head to one side in calculation. Zykleiades waited for the Master Elect to come to the same conclusion he'd made the moment Yllithian's name had come up. Bellathonis's motivations were easy to understand: revenge, avarice, showmanship, hubris or petty vindictiveness were all distinct possibilities and the truth probably hovered between them all. There was only one possible reason for Yllithian to have an interest in entering the labyrinth of the Black Descent.

'They seek the release of Archon Xelian,' the Master Elect concluded.

Zykleiades nodded thoughtfully in confirmation, his mind already moving ahead to calculate how to shift the pieces under his control and alter the game board in his favour. The problem with Ekarynis was that he had no imagination, no flair for speculation without hard data. The Master Elect might become Patriarch Noctis one day, but he still had a great deal to learn about how to manipulate people when they *weren't* screaming in agony.

'Gather up all your haemonculi, their wracks and their grotesques,' Zykleiades said, 'even the Talos if any are still functional. Concentrate them around the sixty-fourth interstice. We need to put on a show of force rather than sit passively by while Yllithian corners us in our lair.'

'The kabalites are heavily armed,' Ekarynis warned. The grinding discord of his voice made the statement into a sharp denouncement of Zykleiades's competence.

'I'd expect nothing less from Yllithian – the White Flames remain one of the wealthiest kabals despite enduring more than sixty centuries of Vect's malice. As I said, only a show of force is required, Ekarynis, something that will confirm to them that they are on the right track and close to their goal.'

Ekarynis cocked his head to one side as he assimilated the new data. 'And then?' the Master Elect asked succinctly.

'And then we give them what they're looking for,' Zykleiades said with a wide smile.



## CHAPTER 15

### DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

Motley crept cautiously through the ruined workshops, slinking from pillar to bench to cabinet to doorway. The place was in semi-darkness lit only by guttering fires and sparking power feeds. He believed that he was in a cantonment far down in the city from High Commorrhagh and Sorrow Fell, somewhere close to the fringes of what was known as the Old City. The simple truth was that he was more than a little lost.

After being ejected from Vect's ziggurat Motley had drifted aimlessly for a while. His flip-belt had saved him from an immediate and messy kinetically induced fate on some barbed spire. The anti-grav suspensor harness was concealed beneath his costume as it would be during any other performance, an adjunct that enabled the spectacular acrobatics sometimes called for during a Masque. In this case the simple device had saved his life.

He had watched the ziggurat and its accompanying armada from a shattered rooftop as they pushed onwards through the towering spires of High Commorrhagh kilometres overhead. The fringes of their advance were marked by the false-lightning of their weaponry and a persistent wail of psychic anguish as Vect's boot heel was reapplied to the throats of his people.

When Motley spotted a smaller force splitting away from the main body his interest had been sufficiently piqued to begin following it. It was the first sign he'd seen of anything breaking formation with Vect's aerial armada, so evidently some sort of scheme was afoot. The offshoot had spiralled lazily downwards, and using the flip-belt he'd bounded along from rooftop to steeple to buttress keeping pace with them.

He'd kept them in sight until they sank completely into the tangled streets of Low Commorrhagh. There, unaccountably, Motley had lost them. By the time he arrived at the spot there were none of the Venoms or Raiders in sight. They had vanished into the riven cityscape as effectively as hunting cats slinking into a jungle.

The area Motley was now investigating had been little more than a bazaar formed by families of artisans working together under the titular lead of a petty Archon. With the mutual protection afforded by one another the craftsmen were generally left free to pursue their work without constant fear of enslavement by trueborn from higher up the food chain. It had been just one of a patchwork of tiny

territories that existed in Low Commorragh. Among the great sprawl of spires, tiers, districts and blocks that formed Commorragh, the town-sized area he was now traversing was referred to merely as a street. The Commorrites called it the Street of Knives.

Like so much of the Commorragh that Motley remembered this had once been a place of dark wonders. Millennia of accumulated wisdom and talent had been dedicated to the crafting of truly fantastic artefacts here. Admittedly they were nearly all weapons of one kind or another; sharp, light, wonderfully balanced and absolutely lethal – or not, if their makers desired it. Many of the weapons that had been so lovingly crafted in these workshops were made not merely to kill but to inflict the maximum amount of harm. Rifles that launched high-velocity splinters of complex crystallised toxins, neural agonisers, flesh-shredding flails, envenomed blades, on and on; a whole list of horrors created with all the wicked ingenuity of long ages spent plotting in the dark.

It was all very different from the equivalent spaces on the eldar craftworlds. There in light, open halls the psychic bonesingers drew their creations into existence from the very stuff of creation. Wraithbone and other psychoplastic materials would be shaped into the necessary forms over months or years, each a unique expression of those dedicated to its creation. There were no such methods available to the psychically blunt dark kin. They, or more accurately their slaves, physically shaped their weapons with tools and machines from the very quintessence of diamond or steel, forged them in plasmatic fires and instilled them with energies stolen from the stars themselves.

Motley stepped lightly, taking care to avoid the spilled coils of monofilament wire and scattered blades gleaming dully on the ground. This place had been abandoned quickly; perhaps it had already been closed when the Dysjunction struck the city. The rank stink of warp energies and daemon-spoor clung to the area, but that had become more and more commonplace the further Motley had descended into Commorragh's labyrinthine lower tiers.

Motley disliked creeping, or even slinking. He would much rather have sauntered or even skipped, but sadly this was neither the time nor the place for such antics. The intrusions of Chaos across the city snarled at the edges of his consciousness like tiny nails of migraine being hammered into his skull. There seemed to be a gradual quelling of the sharply ominous feeling Motley had felt when he had first arrived in the city, but it was being replaced by something that he felt was entirely worse.

It was getting hotter. The further he penetrated into the Street of Knives the more the temperature climbed. At first Motley feared he would have to turn back and find a different route because of a fire ahead. It was not the first time he'd run into such a complication, but this time he could smell no smoke at all. Ahead of him a wavering orange glow spilled across the crooked thoroughfare he had been following, but even that lacked the fiery animation of a true blaze.

Motley cautiously made his way forwards to get a better view of the source of the light and heat. At a twist in the crooked thoroughfare a side alley cut between the buildings before ending abruptly at a set of broad, rough-hewn steps heading downwards. The alley walls were bright with reflected light and a furnace heat met Motley as he came to the head of the stair. Further down he could see that the steps had been swept away as cleanly as if they'd been cut with a knife. He edged downwards as far as he

could go and hung on to a protruding strut so that he could lean outwards and look around from the bottom of the steps.

A massive net of firefalls was drooling slowly down from the upper tiers. Long, glutinous strings of molten metal and rock spilled down the structures on both sides of Motley. The strands were braiding and twisting their way down as they ate into the fascia of the buildings and re-sculpted it into a smoking, vertiginous wasteland. The radiant heat was fierce against Motley's exposed skin as he stared at the spectacle in wonder.

It could only be the by-product of some unimaginable blaze occurring higher up in one of the spires. Perhaps a ship had crashed and its fusion-fuelled heart was burning its way downwards, or a blaze the size of a city had generated a self-sustaining firestorm fed by its own rotating winds until it roared white-hot. He shook his head ruefully. The firefall could equally be the result of weaponry unleashed by the dark kin themselves. Whatever the cause the scene exemplified his worst fears for the city – that either neglect or overreaction would leave it a lifeless wasteland ruled over by inimical elemental forces.

Motley looked down. There were places to go further down where sections of steps, balconies and balustrades had survived the molten downpour of metal and rock. The protruding chunks were unevenly spaced and none too stable-looking. The flow of the firefall altered moment by moment so there was no way to judge if what started out as a safe path would soon become inundated with slowly drooling, fiery death. Towards the very bottom of the cliff-like expanse it disappeared from view into a dense, roiling darkness that seemed to be trying to climb upwards and was only being kept in check by the frequent firefalls.

The Harlequin was far from averse to risks – being foolhardy was very much a part of his reason for existence – but attempting to traverse the constantly shifting firefalls as he was contemplating doing, on nerves and flip-belt alone, would have been a truly suicidal act. He pouted and allowed common sense to have its boring way (again!) and turned back to head up the steps to the Street of Knives.

He stopped short. A group of dark kin were gathered at the top of the steps. They were clad in barbed armour and had an array of equally barbed weaponry that they were pointing straight at him. He began to raise one hand in a jaunty wave but he could see from their auras that they weren't just being cautious. They were intent on his death.

He turned the movement of his arm into the beginning of a handspring instead, twisting and pivoting sideways in one fluid motion. He triggered his holo-suit as he moved so that his outline shattered into a cloud of glittering fragments. The high-walled alley had become a death trap and now it sang with the high-pitched staccato of splinter weapons firing on full auto.

Stone chips flew as hyper-velocity rounds whip-sawed across the steps after him. Motley spun desperately to stay ahead of the barrage of fire. He ran partway up a wall to find temporary escape before having to flip backwards to land on the steps again. More rounds chased him to the edge of the precipice and he teetered at the edge for a split second, arms windmilling comically. Motley gave up with a wild laugh and jumped, flinging himself into the super-heated air with the thought that boring

old common sense didn't always get its own way.

He flipped in midair and angled himself to land on an outthrust shelf of rock a dozen metres down from the alley mouth. A thick rope of liquid fire was running down the wall nearby and pooling at one end of the shelf before oozing over the edge to continue its downward fall. The heat was intolerable and Motley was forced to quickly leap again as his skin started to blister.

This time he tried to propel himself horizontally as far as he could. He landed on a skeletal framework of girders and grilles that had been heavily damaged but still clung to the cliff-face of the city like broken cobwebs. Lava-like flows from above had passed straight through the framework, warping and buckling it as they went. In places the metal still glowed a sullen cherry-red and the structure creaked alarmingly beneath even Motley's feather-light weight as he landed. He held perfectly still as he glanced back towards the alley mouth for signs of pursuit.

He couldn't even see the alley with its broken steps from where he was. The smoke and slow cataracts of flame obscured too much of the scene. The point he had jumped from might be any one of a hundred dark crevices in the riven cliff face above. He was safe for now – as much as could be claimed by an individual in his somewhat precarious position only metres away from fiery death. Where had the assailants come from? Motley was not easy to take by surprise; he should have been able to sense their presence and intentions long before actually seeing them.

The framework lurched abruptly beneath his feet and Motley spun to confront his true hunter.

'You don't even have a weapon ready, I'm disappointed,' purred Lady Aurelia Malys as she stalked forwards across the twisted metal.

The Archon of the Kabal of the Poisoned Tongue was a shimmering vision of exotic beauty in the light of the firefalls. Her armour was fitted to accentuate every alluring curve, her hair was a river of pure midnight touched by flame and her red, red lips held a secret promise of maddening desire.

'Clearly I am disarmed by your beauty, dear lady,' Motley said with an ingenuous smile, 'although the truth is that I'm more of a lover than a fighter, which is to say I'm more a clown than a grim warrior type. Perhaps you were hoping to challenge me to a duel or something? Not really my thing I'm afraid.'

Malys smiled slyly in return before coquettishly snapping open a fan of blades as if to hide her indiscreet pleasure. 'There's no need to be so shy. I don't really want to kill you, little clown,' she assured him, and Motley thought that never had a sweeter lie been told. 'I just want to find out if it's possible.'

She flicked her fan almost casually towards Motley. With the gesture monomolecular shards no bigger than a fingernail detached from the fan and streaked towards his exposed throat. The Harlequin twisted sharply at the waist to avoid the micro-blades but kept his eyes locked on hers.

'I am every bit as mortal as you are. I can assure you of that, my lady...' he said gallantly before swiftly ducking as a second flight of blades followed the first, '...and I won't fight you without cause.'

'You'd dare accuse me of mortality?' Malys's beautiful face twisted with contempt. 'I'm no slave to time and chance. I'll live forever unless my wits or my strength fail me. Which they will not.'

So saying she drew her sword with her free hand and flourished it at Motley. With a blade measuring over a metre it was unusually long for a single-handed Commorrite weapon. The first third

of the weapon below the point was elegantly curved in the fashion so beloved of Commorrites and the metal was inscribed with flowing runes that glowed with inner fires. Motley smiled again, this time more apologetically.

‘Forgive me for my thoughtless offence, my lady, I did not mean to impugn your timelessness by including you in my confessions of my own fragility. Self-belief is truly the greatest asset bred by this magnificent city and you are especially well-favoured in that regard–’

Malys took a leisurely cut at his head. Motley skipped back a pace to avoid the swinging blade and felt the metal grille they stood upon shift minutely under his feet. Over Malys’s shoulder he could see a reddish glow getting brighter through the murk, perhaps another drool of liquid flame spreading closer to them.

‘–and once again I must insist on my passivity,’ Motley said with more urgency. ‘We’ve no reason to fight at a time like this.’

‘You’ve said that you’re a lover and not a fighter,’ Malys said as she sent the point of her blade darting at Motley’s eyes. ‘I find that fighting and seduction are very much alike, so by your own testimony you should be well practised.’

Motley twisted again to avoid the point and was almost caught as Malys turned the thrust into a short slash with a flick of her wrist. ‘I confess I fail to see the direct connection,’ he replied easily as he dodged. ‘A lot of sweating and grunting can be involved in both activities, I suppose, but the end objectives might be said to be diametrically opposed.’

Lady Malys lowered her blade a fraction and gave Motley a positively luminous smile before demurely hiding it from him behind her fan. So far she had just been toying with him. Her attacks were lazy and almost playful, but there was still a hint of the blinding speed and skill that she possessed to back them up. The Harlequin kept his weight carefully balanced as he tried to weigh the odds of escape.

‘Very good,’ Malys said and took another idle cut at Motley. ‘I meant that both incorporate three distinct phases. They begin with the pursuit, finding your partner and making them aware of your existence so that they know that they are desired. Next comes the first intimacy where your true passion is revealed.’

With those words Lady Malys exploded into action, spinning and slashing with her long blade and fan of knives as she unleashed a whirlwind of blows. Despite his caution Motley was caught off guard by the swiftness and strength of the resulting storm. He was reduced to ducking and diving to stay ahead of the flickering blade as she drove him back across the twisted gratings like a callow student.

She forced him back until only the yawning gulf was at his back and only his toes were still on creaking metal. A final, contemptuous thrust came arrowing in for his heart – a blow that dared him to leap for safety into the distinctly unsafe void or surrender his life.

Lady Malys’s blade shivered aside at the last instant as it was deflected by a short, curved blade that appeared in Motley’s hand as if by magic.

‘So you do come armed after all,’ Malys mocked as she flicked her steel fan at his wrist to sever the tendons. ‘So small though – you must feel inadequate around the incubi with their great klaives.’

The Harlequin knocked aside the razor-edged fan and ducked beneath Malys's follow-through swing with her sword, rolling beneath the hissing blade to gain a pace back onto the shaky framework. 'I find it adequate for my needs,' he explained equably as he parried another of her attacks, 'although I always consider my wits, limited as they are, to be a better weapon.'

The course of any battle between a long blade and a short one wielded by fighters of equivalent skill would inevitably be dictated by the individual with the greater reach. At least so Motley had been taught when he learned to handle a blade from beings that had spent whole lifetimes in the contemplation of such things. He tried to keep her talking to distract her while he kept his distance.

'For example, it seems obvious to me now that you must have been the one I was following down from the upper city,' Motley remarked brightly. 'You're off on a little job of your own, aren't you? Patently with Vect's blessing since you made no secret of your departure from his armada of doom.'

She rushed at him again and he gave ground. The blade-masters had taught him patience. Attempts by a combatant with lesser reach to push for a resolution would almost certainly have a fatal outcome for them rather than their opponent. Patience was key.

'Your wits must be as limited as your blade if it's taken you this long to reach that conclusion,' Malys laughed as she cut and thrust at him mercilessly. 'When my kabalites reported we were being followed I was delighted to hear by whom. I decided that I simply must meet you myself. Ha!'

Motley sprang back from an eviscerating cut that left Malys wide open to a counter blow. The only real recourse for the short-blade wielder was to defend until their adversary was generous enough to supply them with an opening by overreaching – like Malys had just done. Motley ignored the opportunity and danced away instead, sketching a courtly bow as Malys rushed after him.

'I regret our lack of a formal introduction, dear lady,' Motley said. 'I'm called Motley and it's a great pleasure to meet you, Lady Aurelia Malys of the Kabal of the Poisoned Tongue.'

'I know who you are,' Malys laughed as she cut at him again, 'and I know that you went to visit dear Asdrubael. What did you tell him when you were there? Share it with me and I might let you live... perhaps only shorn of a limb or two.'

Malys's sword missed Motley by millimetres. Again he was forced to deflect it at the last instant with his knife. To some extent a knifeman's decisions became easier in a fight like this. A full defence would keep even a mediocre fighter alive for a limited time. It was the urge to attack, to take the offensive, that killed even the most skilful combatants in the end.

'No secret there,' Motley grinned at her. 'I'll happily share intimate details of my conversation with the supreme overlord – I warned him of dangers from the so-called gods of Chaos, that there had been schemes set in motion to allow their influence into the city. He told me that he believed what I had to say.'

'Very good,' Malys said without any apparent care for the message Motley had brought to Vect, 'so why did he order you to follow me?'

'He didn't–' Motley replied without thought as he ducked another swing.

Malys gave a radiant smile of triumph. 'Then he can't complain about me killing his agent, can he?'

she said and came after him again with redoubled fury. This time her strikes relied on strength rather than skill as she pressed her full advantage in reach and leverage. She was actively mocking him by taking his unwillingness to strike back and rubbing it in his face.

Motley ducked, dived and parried as the framework beneath them made ever more distressed imprecations protesting of imminent collapse. He concentrated his considerable skills on protecting himself and hoped that she would tire.

The lessons of the blade-masters about patient defence were further reinforced by the fact that Motley had no desire to kill his assailant on this occasion. However, he was fast reaching the point where he could foresee himself trying to hurt her simply to stay alive. If the ferocity of her attacks didn't subside soon he felt as if he would be the first one to tire.

'I've been... polite enough to grant... full disclosure,' Motley panted after a seemingly endless period amid the deadly dance of blades. 'Why not indulge a poor, doomed fool by doing the same? Where is it you were going to?'

Lady Malys's lips quirked in a mischievous smile. 'You think I overlook my objective? I may choose to dally with you but my kabalites aren't sitting on their hands waiting for me to finish. In fact they should be almost there by now...'

She paused abruptly in her attack and smoothly took up a guard stance. She looked poised and magnificent against the firefalls as she stood and regarded him coolly. Motley, however, thought he could detect the slightest tremor in her blade as though her grip was becoming weakened by fatigue. It appeared she was not entirely indefatigable after all. He forced himself not to relax his own guard. With a Commorrite appearances could be deceptive and anything could be a trick.

'Asdrubael would say that the better question to ask is not "where am I going?"' Malys offered with a sly glance, 'but rather "why am I being sent there?". I'll admit that I can provide you with no satisfactory answer to that question. Our supreme overlord treats information as his most precious treasure and he's overly miserly with it. He commands. We obey.'

'I'd not believed the Archons of Commorrhagh to be such blindly obedient drones,' Motley replied tartly, 'I'm sure you have at least an idea of what you're about – that would seem in keeping with your purported predilection for precocious cunning.'

She shook her head in response, glanced up and then began to circle him very slowly. 'Flattery does become you, fool, but I won't tell you my suspicions. I'm as miserly as Asdrubael when it comes to information. I will, however, offer you a few observations I've made just for the entertainment you've provided me with so far.

'First – I won't be the only one that Asdrubael's sent out on a special task. He never has just one scheme in motion. He'll have several plans going that are all capable of destroying his opponents because he trusts no single element to succeed. What I'm doing could be a ruse, a secondary objective or a vital cog in whatever infernal scheme he's building up to next. Regardless, there will be others being readied, you can count on it.

'Second – Asdrubael Vect is partial to weapons. He likes unexpected, devastating, irresistible



weapons best of all. It's not like he's incapable of subtlety, quite the reverse. But unlike a lot of us here in Commorragh – and I'm including myself in that sweeping statement – he understands when the time for subtlety is over. When that happens he gets the biggest weapon he can find and ends the fight before anyone else has a chance to realise how far he's about to escalate it.

'Third and last is that I was wrong about you not being Vect's agent. If he's seen you and then let you get out of his sight alive while the city's in this state you're working for him whether you know it or not—'

At that moment Fate took an unexpected hand in affairs. A great gob of liquid fire dislodged from higher up dropped towards them like a slow meteor falling to earth. Motley leapt back and felt the grating he landed upon tilt at a crazy angle. Smoke and flames erupted across his view as the fireball crashed into the already mangled framework and carried what remained of it away into the depths with a terrifying scream of tortured metal.

Motley turned and ran up the tilted grating as he felt it beginning to drop away beneath his feet. The tiny boost he could get from sprinting on such treacherous ground made his leap feeble even after the assistance of the flip-belt. He fell short of the protruding metal stanchion he was aiming for and was sent skipping down the wall. An angular wedge of stone struck at his falling shins and almost sprawled him onto a narrow ledge that had been invisible from higher up.

He twisted himself in midair to grasp at the ledge with a grateful sigh of relief. Looking up, he saw dangling remnants of the framework where he had fought with Lady Malys. His sharp eyes picked out a figure holding on to a piece of the wreckage, her long sword still in hand. He waved and called out as she started her long climb to safety.

'The third act in your drama of seduction and slash-or-murder?' Motley yelled glibly up to her. 'You never said what it was!'

Lady Malys laughed musically, the sweet sound of it drifting down to Motley across the hiss and crackle of the surrounding firefalls.

'The final act,' she called, 'is the fulfilment of all that expectation and passion. Two entities are brought together, for better or worse, and become intimately entwined. Neither of them walks away entirely unchanged!'



## CHAPTER 16

### XHAKORUAKH'S ASCENT

The first brother was destined to fall into his grasp as easily as overripe fruit, the Decapitator could feel it in his bones. The battle beyond the walls formed the perfect distraction as Kheradruakh slipped between shadows and angles to gain entry. While the brother's minions crashed and struggled against one another the Decapitator quietly slipped through their ranks and made his way to the vault of ascension. There he settled into the deeper darkness as patiently as a spider in its web. He would wait until the time was right.

*Waiting for the precise moment to strike was not only a matter of form. The power-play of energies unleashed by the rival siblings had confirmed the Decapitator's most dolorous assessments about the forces at work in Aelindrach. The brother he had chosen to stalk first had struck unholy pacts with forces outside Aelindrach for the strength to keep his throne. The challenger outside had sunk just as low for a chance to usurp it.*

*Kheradruakh's lips curled back over his yellowed fangs at the thought of such shameful compromise. The tainted thinking of the outsiders pervaded everything the brothers did: power, possessions and rulership were their goals even if they had to bend their knee to eldritch gods to get them.*

*This was not the way of Aelindrach. The shadow-realm was a dark lover to be embraced, a cruel paramour to be coaxed and worshipped in its own right. It was a place where the purity of darkness and fear compacted like a diamond into something so hard-edged and beautiful that it scarred the mind to grasp it. The idea that Aelindrach could be tamed and exploited by naked ambition was a truly offensive concept to him. Kheradruakh found he gripped his long, sharp blade tightly as he waited in the shadows and wondered at the stirring of passions he had long thought to be extinguished.*

*The shadow-skein tightened inescapably towards a conclusion. With his forces facing disaster the defeated king sought to take the coward's path and flee. No guards were in the vault to impede Kheradruakh's progress as he unfolded from his hiding place and struck. He caught the deposed king just as he began to climb the chains to escape. His falling body became tangled in the dark metal links where it jerked like a grotesque puppet. The Decapitator ignored it as he scooped up his prize and stepped back into the shadows. He was just in time. The chamber doors burst asunder as the other brother stormed in to claim his worthless throne.*

*Kheradruakh did not wait to see the outcome. He was already speeding to his hidden place, his secret*

*ossuary deep in the heart of Aelindrach. He would strip the flesh from his prize, taste of the skull and examine it with his own sightless eyes to judge its worth. Then it would join his collection and give proper praise to the dark for all eternity, or if it proved unworthy it would be discarded.*

*Then and only then would he return for the other brother.*

The dark was rising in Low Commorragh. From the armoured flanks of the port of lost souls to the jagged eaves of Nightsound Ghulen the shadow-stuff of Aelindrach bled into Commorragh and claimed it for its own. The dark was like a palpable, living thing that oozed out of drains and through culverts to lurk in the shattered ruins left by the Dysjunction. In the narrow streets and crooked alleys the darkness spread and multiplied as it infested everything at the foot of the spires. The creeping shadows swallowed up whole groups of survivors that had endured the psychic shock of the Dysjunction and then the citywide quakes and daemonic incursions of its aftermath. Their very fear seemed to feed the encroaching dark and call forth its slinking denizens to quell their unthinkable hunger.

Bloated packs of diseased ur-ghuls swarmed through Low Commorragh like plague-rats slick with the foul ordure of their own corruption. Hooked claws scrabbled across broken stone and scent-pits hissed in the dark as thousands of the frenzied horrors hunted down anything too slow or too weak to escape from them. The eyeless predators were well suited to the narrow, shadowed streets and they quickly emptied them of prey. Still ravenous, the packs pressed onwards, always following the spreading stain leaking out of the shadow-realm of Aelindrach. Their unquenchable thirst drove the ur-ghuls ever upwards to places where other predators lurked.

The strongest and most astute Commorrites had long since fought their way into defensible locations. They had barricaded and secured them with everything available, then recruited or murdered any latecomers, or else been murdered by them in turn and so, by the feral laws of Commorragh, forfeited their right to security. In many cases the improvised strongholds had already made tentative alliances with their nearest neighbours against mutual foes. Many were giving heed to the rumours of the White Flames' rebellion and weighing the gains to be made versus the risks to be run by taking on the mantle of loyalist or rebel.

As the dark rose around these tiny survivor-fortresses their inhabitants did not feel fear. Instead they congratulated themselves on their foresight in protecting themselves. They sealed off the entry points and set lamps to keep the shadows at bay. They patrolled their corridors and landings as they kept a close watch. When the hissing tide of ur-ghuls crashed against their doors they took up weapons and threw them back so that they stood as unconquered islands of light in a midnight sea.

Lady Malys's Poisoned Tongue kabalites fought their way down to Valzho Sinister and only just made it to the brass-bound portals of that particular underworld ahead of packs of ravening ur-ghuls. Around the labyrinth of the Black Descent swarms of the foul troglodytes gave up their obsessive efforts to pierce the deadly maze and began to climb for the upper city in unprecedented numbers.

As the creatures began to broach High Commorragh and the fringes of Sorrow Fell their advance

became frustrated. Shimmering boundaries of force were in place that blocked off streets, avenues and entire districts. The flood of ur-ghuls was split and redirected, channelled and dammed as they became caught up in a confusing maze that had been called into being by Vect from his throne in distant Corespur.

Such tricks were not designed to keep the tenebrous, plague-ridden hordes at bay forever. Some sent packs of ur-ghuls into box canyons and dead ends overlooked by enough firepower to wipe them out in an instant. Others took them out into open courts and plazas where they became prey for marauding gangs of reavers, hellions or scourges.

However, by far the majority of the invaders from Aelindrach were gradually directed into a single area of High Commorragh – the broad swath of wrecked wasteland surrounding the White Flames fortress. Patient observers from Valossian Sythrac’s besiegers took note of the fortress weaponry as it visited high-energy carnage upon the skulking ur-ghuls. The survivors were driven below into the tunnels of the foundation strata, where they posed an entirely new problem for the defenders of the White Flames fortress.

The dark was rising, yet it had reached its limits, so it seemed. The ur-ghuls, unable to make an impression on the upper towers of Commorragh, slunk back into the shadows. For the thousands of survivor-fortresses clinging on in Low Commorragh it seemed a victory, a moment of respite amidst the disaster-strewn times of the Dysjunction.

So it seemed until the coming of the mandrakes.

‘I remember the first time I saw this place,’ Xhakoruakh rumbled contemplatively. ‘He who spawned my brother and I showed it to us long ago. He promised it would be the wellspring of future greatness for Aelindrach. In truth it has changed little beneath Azoruakh’s rulership. I shall eclipse his reign.’

‘In this fond memory of yours your brother would not happen to be headless, I assume?’ Bellathonis snapped with a trace of irritation. Emotional self-indulgence annoyed him at the best of times.

They were standing in the throne room and watching as the lifeless corpse of Azoruakh was lowered from the hanging chains and borne away. Recent experiences had caused the haemonculus to conclude that he generally disliked mysteries, and mysteriously headless bodies doubly so. Xhakoruakh seemed to have become even more bloated than before and the ugly rusted scythe in his hands was emitting the sickly-sweet smell of rotting flesh. The shadow-king appeared to be introspective in his moment of victory.

Xhakoruakh continued as if Bellathonis had not spoken. ‘We were young then, barely suckled at Aelindrach’s teat, yet even then we knew we would be rivals one day – that this moment would come. I think our maker intended it to be that way.’

‘You don’t find it troubling to find your brother like this?’ Bellathonis insisted. ‘That someone entered the chamber, removed his head and then exited with it while we were standing right outside the door?’

Bellathonis was disturbed by the way that Xhakoruakh's minions were reacting to the death of Azoruakh. He would expect to see shock and fear. Instead they whispered among themselves excitedly, nodding wisely as if the event had been entirely foreseeable or even pre-ordained.

'The Decapitator came for him,' Xhakoruakh shrugged as if that explained everything. Before Bellathonis could reply Xagor scurried over from where he had been examining the body in detail.

'Single cut left to right. Large, straight-edged power weapon. Very clean, very precise,' Xagor chattered nervously. 'Cranium entirely absent. Assume taken by attacker.'

Bellathonis nodded distractedly as he considered Xhakoruakh's statement further. In his studies about the shadow-realm he'd come across occasional references to a legendary figure named The Decapitator, Kheradruakh – literally 'He Who Hunts Heads'. He'd thought of the Decapitator as a mythical figure, a paragon for the mandrakes rather like the Father of Scorpions was a paragon for the incubi – the first and greatest of them or some similar nonsense. It was unsettling to know that there really was an untraceable killer on the loose who was sufficiently expert to be both feared and respected by the mandrakes.

'Master, this one made another observation,' Xagor leaned in closer and hissed in a stage-whisper to Bellathonis. 'Marks of Chaos on the body! Rapid mutation!'

Bellathonis's eyes narrowed and he stole another glance at the body as it was hauled unceremoniously out of the chamber. The wrack was right: too many fingers on one hand, one foot curling itself into a bird-like claw. Azoruakh had become corrupted by the daemonic influences from beyond the veil just as Xhakoruakh had.

For a moment Bellathonis experienced a curious tightening sensation around his chest and forehead at the sight. It was an autonomic bodily response he recognized from his own test subjects as the onset of fear. It was interesting to note how the body he was inhabiting responded without any conscious input from its current occupant. It seemed that fear of the void, or at least fear of infection by its unpredictable energies, had been something deeply ingrained in young Kharbyr. There again the real Kharbyr had been to accursed Shaa-Dom in person. He might be said to have had more intimate experience of the untrammelled power of the void than Bellathonis could claim himself.

The seeds of corruption may or may not have been present within the shadow-realm before the Dysjunction, but its impact had certainly caused them to sprout there with frightening vigour. After Bellathonis had evaded the Black Descent's assassination attempts Aelindrach had seemed like a safe haven to escape to. Now it was beginning to feel very much like a trap, or a prison with some particularly nasty inmates.

'So what next for your kingdom now that your throne has been rightfully re-acquired?' Bellathonis asked Xhakoruakh.

Decades spent interacting with Commorrite Archons both high and low enabled the haemonculus to keep all his fears and suppositions carefully concealed behind a pallid mask of superciliousness. The sable giant finally tore his attention away from the hanging chains and turned it upon Bellathonis with the air of one indulging an overly demanding pet.

‘Aelindrach has been united under my rule. A few renegades may choose to hide and sulk, but after this...’ Xhakoruakh gestured reverently towards the hanging chains, ‘...this blessing from the Decapitator, no one can deny my power.’

‘His intercession certainly cleared the way for you in an unexpected fashion,’ Bellathonis observed somewhat sceptically. ‘No climactic duel to the death between the two rivals. No battle royal where you both got to truly test your strengths – and the favour of your respective patrons in full...’

Xhakoruakh shook his great head slowly and boomed, ‘No. No final battle. My brother was fleeing when the Decapitator took him. Azoruakh sought escape from Aelindrach at the end – he was a coward and a traitor to the last.’

‘Fleeing? How so?’ Bellathonis said. ‘There is no other way out of this room save the one we entered by – although admittedly that was no barrier to the escape of this Decapitator character of yours.’

The shadow-king chuckled. It was an ugly, thudding sound like cudgels smacking into flesh. The bloated giant was still chuckling as he turned and waddled over to settle himself rather awkwardly into the throne with the iron scythe resting across his knees.

‘You know so much and yet understand so little,’ Xhakoruakh boomed. ‘You perceive only a room with a chair and call it a throne room.’

‘This place is important not just for its symbolism. There is a portal here. No one can say how old it is but it’s as ancient as any in Aelindrach. Some believe that it was the very first portal to open in this realm, that it is the navel of our world.’

Bellathonis glanced uncertainly towards the pit in the centre of the room. Portals in Aelindrach commonly appeared as dark rifts or crevices without any of the ornate arches and over-engineered fail-safes to be found around warp gates in Commorragh itself. Now, with the shadow-realm expanding its boundaries almost organically as it bled into Commorragh, such strictly defined delineation points were becoming blurred. Xhakoruakh laughed again.

‘No. Not down there, haemonculus, even your heart is not dark enough to descend that path,’ the giant pointed upwards to where the hanging chains were lost to perception at the top of the chamber. ‘Up there. We call this place the vault of ascension for that reason, the way out is above and leads directly into Commorragh.’

‘A useful thing to control in ordinary times, I understand,’ Bellathonis shrugged, ‘but surely now it has become meaningless. One needs only to walk to the fringes of Aelindrach and it is possible to step into Commorragh right now – or at least so I’ve been led to believe.’

Xhakoruakh smiled disturbingly, his shadowy face seeming to split open to reveal far too many fangs packed into a shark-like grin. ‘Ah yes,’ the shadow-king chortled, ‘but this path leads us into the very heart of our foes, Bellathonis. I had my ur-ghuls try to pierce their defences from Commorragh so they might invade Azoruakh’s stronghold from within but the simple creatures were unequal to the task. Now we will reverse the strategy and emerge inside the labyrinth.’

‘The labyrinth? You can’t mean...?’ Bellathonis exclaimed. Xhakoruakh positively shook with merriment at the haemonculus’s surprise.

‘Yesss,’ the shadow-king hissed, ‘the labyrinth of the Black Descent – did you never wonder how it came by that title? I’ll wager that few outside the shadow-realm can remember the source of that particular jest.’

Bellathonis nodded in understanding, ‘The coven hierarchy always took great pains to keep its secrets well hidden. Even though I once stood among their ranks I never even heard a whisper of a rumour about this one.’

‘The Black Descent trapped me at Azoruakh’s behest – by so doing they placed my brother in their debt and also held me in readiness, poised to replace him if they so desired.’

‘Would you have still served them after your incarceration and torture? You were in a sorry state when I found you in Zykleiades’s chambers.’

‘I would have done anything to regain my throne. I would have gnawed off my own limbs. I would even have obeyed my oppressors... for a time. They were too wise to put my loyalties to the test, but the threat was always there and gnawing at Azoruakh’s mind.’

Bellathonis stood in silence gazing up towards the portal hidden by clouds at the apex of the chamber. He had wished to escape from Aelindrach and here he was presented with the solution with all the customary mockery that the dark gods reserved for the delivery of their decidedly mixed blessings.

‘So now that you have control of this portal what do you intend to use it for?’ Bellathonis asked at last. He felt he already knew what the answer would be but he wanted to hear it from Xhakoruakh’s own lips.

‘The city will be ours. Even now my creatures bring the blessings of Aelindrach to the arrogant denizens of Commorragh. They treated the shadow-realm as being beneath their attention for too long. They can ignore us no longer.’

‘The city is too vast for you to conquer with ur-ghuls and mandrakes alone,’ Bellathonis said, but there was a worm of doubt in his mind about that. Xhakoruakh did not need his minions to conquer the city in order to rule it. They only needed to spread the daemon-plague among enough of the surviving population and the dynamics of a pandemic would take care of the rest.

‘There will be vengeance too, of course,’ Xhakoruakh boomed. ‘I will take my revenge on the curs that kept me away from my throne for so long. They will all drown in lakes of blood. You should take joy in the fall of the coven that branded you a renegade and sought to end your life.’

‘In fairness I can’t say that I didn’t provoke them,’ Bellathonis said, leaving unspoken the thought that he really had made a serious error of judgement by letting himself become involved in Yllithian’s schemes in the first place. ‘Besides, I told you when we first met that I don’t personally give myself over to vengeance. I find it’s far too time-consuming and self-destructive to be a worthwhile pursuit. I also feel I should warn you that if you act against one coven all of the other covens will move to oppose you, and without the haemonculi on your side... well, Commorragh just isn’t Commorragh any more, is it?’

Xhakoruakh’s smile vanished and Bellathonis understood immediately that he had made a mistake. The shadow-king’s plans had no need for the arts of the haemonculi or immortality in general. In fact

quite the reverse was true and every haemonculus represented a threat – an individual that could resist the plague and even discover a cure for it. Bellathonis moved swiftly to correct himself.

‘Listen, I know the Black Descent and I know the haemonculi. They are all cowards and they will be terrified by the power rising out of Aelindrach – turn them into your slaves! Make them work for you in gaining final victory instead of letting them become a distraction from it. That is a plan I can wholeheartedly support, for the selfish reason that I will gain access to all of the equipment, supplies and wracks I’ll need to keep making more of my grotesques for your armies. You seemed to like the grotesques and I’m sure you’d appreciate having more of them available.’

The shadow-king nodded slowly. Xhakoruakh seemed too mired in his own plots for the future to believe that Bellathonis would do anything but play along with him. The urge to punish the coven of the Black Descent for holding him prisoner had probably been slowly eroded away by the more grandiose plans of his patron Chaos god.

‘Yes, there is wisdom in that. We must make them fear the night and then take delight in the bonds of their terror becoming bonds of slavery. They will serve Xhakoruakh and make more flesh-beasts as you instruct. Your creatures will be in the vanguard of all my new conquests – the ones you have already made... and a million more like them.’





## CHAPTER 17

### XELIAN

Angevere was not infallible.

The sound of the blood wasps was a nightmare – a high, angry buzzing that sawed at the ears so hard that it felt as if they must burst. The sound of the warriors screaming was worse as the vicious insectile weapons burrowed into their flesh, swarmed into their eyes and choked their mouths with tiny, stabbing bodies. The geno-engineered creatures were, in contrast to so many of their kind, permanently fertile and laid their eggs in anything they penetrated with their freakishly oversized ovipositors. The larval offspring hatched in seconds and burrowed deeper so that they could metamorphose just as quickly into their bloodthirsty adult forms.

Yllithian, stepping back adroitly from the mess, allowed himself a moment to enjoy the efficiency of his warriors as they went about cleaning it up. He had hand-picked those accompanying him into the labyrinth from among the finest of his trueborn. All of them had been with him on Gorath and he knew that all of them were dependable.

Plasma grenades and shredders obliterated the razor-limbed swarm while blasters were used to incinerate those overcome by it. There was no hesitation at killing their compatriots, only a swift, deadly efficiency. In a few seconds the corridor was clear again, swept clean by white-hot fires and scoured by monofilaments. He sent for the haemonculus for an explanation.

‘Tell me what happened,’ he said to Bellathonis when the haemonculus arrived. ‘You missed something and it cost me three of my warriors.’

Once again Bellathonis exhibited the curious delay before answering. It was just a fraction of a second and Bellathonis was trying to hide it but to Yllithian it spoke volumes. After a fashion such nuances were his speciality. He’d had to learn a lot about them in order to hide and become able to lie more convincingly. In this case the nuance meant that the individual in question was getting information fed to them from the outside.

‘The trap must have reset after I passed this point,’ Bellathonis said. ‘Blood wasp hives sometimes need a bit of time to regenerate after they’ve been very active. Or it might have been on a delayed trigger...’

‘All of which are speculations that I could supply for myself,’ Yllithian remarked coolly. ‘You need to

do better than this, Bellathonis. I can't imagine that we are even close to our goal yet and we still have to get out of here afterwards.'

'An undertaking like this doesn't work with certainties,' the haemonculus replied wearily. 'I'm doing the best that I can.'

'Then try harder and find me Xelian soon,' Yllithian warned, 'or the next time we find a trap I will feed you into it.'

'You could never find your way out without me,' Bellathonis said with a surprising spark of defiance. 'I'm sure you've been marking the path we've taken like anyone with sense would, but that doesn't work in the labyrinth. If you try to follow your trail back you'll find it's gone.'

'Very true, which is why I took the precaution of bringing something along that I can rely on to get me out of here if it becomes necessary. You really are dispensable, Bellathonis, in every sense of the word. I'll admit I would like to find Xelian after coming all this way for her. However, my patience is not without limits. The only reason I keep you alive is because you are useful to me. If that ends then so do you.'

Suitably chastened the haemonculus slunk away back to the head of the column. Yllithian enjoyed the sense of control he was having. In the past Bellathonis had always been too damnably slippery to pin down and threaten in a satisfying fashion. The incident made Yllithian wonder how he'd ever thought of the haemonculus as anything more than he really was – a lowly carver of meat.

Angevere was not infallible but Kharbyr had quickly learned to obey her commands quickly and without question.

+ Down!+

Kharbyr dropped flat the instant Angevere's voice hissed in his mind. The quickest way to get out of harm's way in a pinch was to let gravity do the work for you – loosen the knees and drop without the fractional delay of tensing muscles to spring. The disadvantage was that it left you exposed afterwards, but in a situation where easier targets were left standing around in the open the trick could be a lifesaver.

Kharbyr dropped and a volley of shots hissed straight over him. The warriors that were standing directly behind him weren't so lucky. He heard the cracking sounds of their armour being pierced and their shrieks as the poison took hold. Kharbyr ignored them and rolled to one side of the corridor where he tried to cram himself into the angle between floor and wall as tightly as he could. A firestorm was about to break out over his head and he had left himself with nowhere else to go.

+Amateurs,+ Angevere sneered. +They should have easily taken you with their first volley.+

Vivid bolts of darklight pulsed down the corridor and splashed the darkness with flares of entropic energy as Yllithian's warriors retaliated. Misshapen, shambolic figures were outlined in the glow and more shots homed in on them like a swarm of angry blood wasps. The charging figures were misshapen giants, monstrously over-muscled, with metal blades and bone spikes jutting out from

them at all angles. Kharbyr had seen their kind before – grotesques. He knew the haemonculi used them as guards or gladiators. He'd never seen a grotesque in its berserker state before.

In the narrow confines of the corridor the hulking grotesques could barely fit two abreast, while seven or eight of Yllithian's warriors could shoot at a time. Simple mathematics said the grotesques should have been cut down almost immediately. Instead they stormed forwards despite missing limbs, cratered torsos and, in one memorable case, a missing head.

Kharbyr came up into a crouch and raised his own pistol to shoot. The compact, spiral-barrelled weapon seemed faintly ludicrous in comparison to the ravaging energies around him but he fired it anyway. The grotesque that he hit swelled obscenely in the course of a few seconds until its straining flesh burst open in a welter of blood. The grotesque lumbered a few steps closer sporting a ragged, bloody crater where its chest had been, before it was cut down by another flash of energy.

The dead grotesque slumped over to become part of an impromptu barricade of mangled flesh that was being formed by the fallen just a few metres in front of Kharbyr and Yllithian's warriors. The remaining grotesques were forced to scramble over this twitching mountain of meat into the teeth of the White Flames' firepower. It was sheer foolhardiness for them to continue but the grotesques were burning with the fires of neo-adrenaline and meta-steroids. Their berserker rage drove them onwards into certain death.

All pretence of battle was lost as it turned into a slaughter. The air became thick with smoke and the stench of burning. Strobing light from blasters and disintegrators converged on the roaring grotesques as they struggled to clear the obstacle, each new casualty piling it higher. Kharbyr stood up so that he could get a better angle to keep shooting – the dead were getting closer to the roof of the passage. Pretty soon the grotesques wouldn't be able to squeeze through at all.

Someone had failed to let the grotesques know that they were being slaughtered. Just as Kharbyr stood up the bulwark of dead and dying flew apart as if an explosive device had been triggered. Through the bloody breach roared the biggest and ugliest monstrosity Kharbyr had yet seen. Glaring red eyes burned behind its iron-grilled mask as it barrelled into the front of Yllithian's warriors. Kharbyr reflexively ducked beneath a swinging, blade-studded fist and rolled to get behind the creature as it tore into the warriors' ranks.

He came up against the piled bodies and wriggled through them in an effort to get away from the rampaging grotesque. Behind him he could hear shrieks and crunching sounds as the berserk monster poured out its pent-up rage. Ahead of him he could see the straight corridor was blotched with blood and lumps of tissue. There was a junction just ahead where a wider passageway crossed the corridor he was in. Masked figures were crouched in the openings on either side pointing heavy-barrelled rifles towards him.

Kharbyr dived sideways and fired before he'd even consciously registered what kind of weapons were being aimed at him. His snap shot was considerably quicker than the rifle-wielders managed. Kharbyr's strange pistol exploded one of his assailants so messily that it seemed to upset the others' aim. Their rifles barked uncertainly and sent rounds smacking into the meat pile behind him, but

Kharbyr was left miraculously unscathed.

Kharbyr's career of gang fights and murder for hire had taught him a few invaluable lessons about close combat. One was that when faced by enemies with rifles and all he had was a pistol he had to close the distance or run away. Running away wasn't an option so he leapt forwards before they could shoot at him again. Several of his masked attackers readily abandoned their own cumbersome guns and came at him with their blades drawn. Kharbyr guessed that they recognised him as Bellathonis.

Wracks. Kharbyr recognised them by the blood-stained leather they wore and the iron masks covering their faces. They were wracks just like Xagor. Their emaciated arms and torsos were crisscrossed with elaborate scars, chains hung from their wrists and ankles. Kharbyr could never stop himself thinking of wracks as being the haemonculi's slaves, yet he knew that the creatures willingly surrendered themselves to the pain and torture inflicted on them.

Two of the wracks slashed wildly at Kharbyr with broad-bladed knives that dripped a viscous-looking green ooze. He ducked beneath their strikes and then darted aside as a third wrack reached out for him with scissor-like claws. The wracks were dangerous opponents but they lacked Kharbyr's steely reflexes and experience in close-fighting. They got in each other's way in their eagerness to strike at him.

He kicked the clawed wrack in the chest and shot one of the knife-wielders with his pistol. The shot wrack swelled and then exploded with an obscene slobbering noise. The knives the wrack had been holding went flying from its nerveless hands and Kharbyr snatched one out of the air with his free hand as it passed. He slashed out with the knife and threatened with his pistol to keep the wracks at bay as he tried to retreat. The roaring and tearing sounds behind him had curtailed, so there was some hope that help would be coming soon.

The wracks that hadn't come forwards to fight him had already backed off. Now they raised their rifles again in response to a shouted command. Someone had tired of their brethren's paltry efforts and wanted quicker results. Kharbyr lunged forwards and thrust his captured knife into the guts of the scissor-handed wrack. The wrack clamped wiry arms around Kharbyr and raked steel claws across his back.

'Die, traitor!' the wrack hissed into Kharbyr's face in a foul mixture of bad breath and spittle. Kharbyr responded by twisting the knife in the wrack's guts and ripping it upwards into his heart.

The rifles barked and Kharbyr felt the wrack before him shudder as rounds ploughed into his back. The other wrack had been about to plunge one of his knives into Kharbyr's neck when the same volley also cut him down in his tracks. Kharbyr chuckled at the irony of the situation as he tried to keep the scissor-handed wrack upright to act as a living (actually mostly dead) shield.

The body he held was stiffening rapidly, far too rapidly for it to be rigor mortis taking a hand. With a flash of inspiration Kharbyr suddenly realised that the cumbersome-looking weapons the wracks were using were hex-rifles. Xagor had once told him hex-rifles typically fired a crystal cylinder that had been impregnated with the glass plague. Kharbyr hastily pulled his knife out of the wrack before the fast-spreading crystalline transmutation brought about by the glass plague could seal it inside the wrack's

guts permanently.

Retina-burning slashes of darklight beams cut past Kharbyr and down the corpse-strewn corridor. He half saw lurking wrack snipers being immolated where they stood by split-second flashes of entropic energy. The wracks burned as if they were paper targets being subjected to an instant of furnace-heat. A brief, vicious firefight erupted in the tight confines of the corridor, in which Yllithian's warriors seemed to be rapidly gaining the upper hand. Kharbyr crouched behind his glass-and-meat shield and tried to weather the storm.

The banshee howl of energy weapons fire lulled for a moment of its own accord. There were no more targets in view.

'Enough! Stop shooting!' a desperate voice cried from the darkness. 'We want to negotiate!'

The sound of the voice was music to Yllithian's ears. The idiots were finally learning some sense at last. He turned away from the smoking wreckage of a Talos that his incubi were in the process of cutting into pieces with their great klaives and shouted back.

'Drop your weapons and come out into the open,' Yllithian called with relish. 'Any further resistance and you'll die like all the rest.'

He looked expectantly along the corridor towards where the main fighting had occurred. Over the heads and shoulders of his kabalite trueborn he could see the narrow thoroughfare was piled with corpses. Many of the bodies were still burning and the walls were pockmarked with glowing craters in mute testimony to the ferocity of the trueborn's fire.

The Talos had pounced on the rear of the White Flames force after they were engaged in front by wracks and grotesques. The pain-engine had enjoyed great success at first, cutting through the trueborn rearguard like a metallic shark. However, Yllithian, and more importantly his incubi bodyguards, had been on hand (Yllithian having sensibly chosen to remain close to the rear) to intervene and stop the rampaging machine.

A hunched figure in viridian and black robes lurched into view from a side passage to display empty hands. After a moment's hesitation a handful of wracks followed the wretched-looking figure into the open. Yllithian smiled with satisfaction. He had been waiting for this moment since Bellathonis led them into the hellish labyrinth. By his reckoning any attack on the Black Descent's precious labyrinth would inevitably force the coven to negotiate if it was pursued with sufficient vigour. Bellathonis might or might not have brought them all the way to Xelian. It wouldn't matter if they made a big enough mess along the way.

Yllithian strode confidently forwards, pushing between his trueborn warriors with his incubi close at his heels. Static defence could only resist for so long, it always came down to a contest of wills between attacker and defender. Yllithian had great confidence in his own willpower over that of a coven of skulking haemonculi. He saw Bellathonis, whom he had mentally written off in the first clash at the head of the column, emerging from beneath a pile of corpses. Yllithian felt a vague sense of relief at not having lost a potential asset. The renegade's direct usefulness, however, was about to come to an end.

'Tell me your name and rank,' Yllithian demanded of the haemonculus in viridian and black.

‘I hold the position of Intimate Secretary to the Master Elect of Nine...’ the haemonculus began haughtily. Yllithian snorted and silenced him with a wave of his hand.

‘Forget it. I don’t care who you are as long as you have the authority to give me what I want,’ Yllithian said, ‘which as a mere “secretary” you don’t have. I suppose you may prove useful for conveying my demands to your masters.’ He turned his head and spoke to his incubi. ‘Kill the wracks.’

The wracks quailed, looking to the Intimate Secretary for support and finding none. The incubi went about their work with the professionalism of butchers in a slaughter yard. Yllithian looked the Intimate Secretary straight in the eyes as the incubi’s bloody klaives rose and fell.

‘Listen to me carefully. I want Xelian and, if necessary, I will destroy your entire coven and pull this labyrinth down around your ears to get her,’ Yllithian said in a matter-of-fact tone. ‘I’m sure you’ve considered all kinds of clever schemes for killing me and wiping out my forces rather than giving in to my demands – plagues, poisons, traps, bombs and all that sort of thing. You might even be brave enough to give up your own life right now to make an attempt on mine, although frankly I doubt it. Anyway, I’m going to show you why that way you will lose even if you win.’

Yllithian gestured and two of his trueborn emerged from the ranks behind him carrying a skeletal-looking device between them. It was a long, narrow aggregation of blocks and sheets of metal overlaid with glass-like circuitry. The Intimate Secretary gazed at it uncomprehendingly. He licked his green-tinted lips and asked, ‘I don’t understand, w-what is it?’

‘The warhead,’ Yllithian replied coolly, ‘from a void mine. Normally there are two sections to a void mine. The first projects a sphere of force intended to contain the detonation of the second within safe parameters. In this example that part has been removed to leave the primary detonator unhindered – that’s a speck of pure darklight that I’m told would annihilate this entire labyrinth and a good chunk of the surrounding city if it were triggered.’

The Intimate Secretary looked suitably horrified. His milk-white face also convulsed through outrage and disbelief but both emotions withered before Yllithian’s unshakeable self-belief. If the Archon of the White Flames were killed the entire coven and their beloved labyrinth would join him on his funeral pyre, of that he had no doubt.

‘Good. I see we understand one another,’ Yllithian said and waved the trueborn carrying the warhead back to their place in the ranks. ‘Just to be perfectly clear, that isn’t the only one. I’ve planted a number of these unfettered void mines in your labyrinth as we’ve moved through it. Should I give the signal or my life signs terminate they will all detonate and obliterate it completely. So you see, I win or no one wins. Now get me Xelian.’

The Intimate Secretary swallowed loudly and said, ‘I will certainly convey your message to the Master Elect. It appears you have a... ah... winning argument for the present. If your demands had been presented to the coven at an earlier juncture I’m sure a great deal of long-term damage could have been prevented...’

Yllithian smiled icily as he responded, ‘Yes, I don’t doubt that you would have given it due consideration and done absolutely nothing. By “long-term damage” you’re implying that my

relationship with the haemonculi will be irrevocably harmed by my actions. You are incorrect. Very soon the covens will be precisely divided into two camps – those who live by understanding that they are merely servants to the new ruler of Commorragh and those who die for thinking themselves free. Vect has permitted your kind entirely too much freedom to politic and interfere on your own account. Such laxity will shortly be at an end.’

The Intimate Secretary took a step back and almost bumped into the incubi behind him. He looked frantically around the blank-faced helms and then back to Yllithian. ‘I will tell the Master Elect immediately,’ the Intimate Secretary babbled, ‘and impress the urgency of the matter on him.’

‘There is no need,’ grated a hideous, clashing voice from the darkness. ‘I am already aware.’



## CHAPTER 18

### THE CASTIGATORS

By the time Motley found his way back up the firefalls and onto the Street of Knives Lady Malys had vanished without a trace. He cast around listlessly for a time searching for some clue as to which way she had gone. It seemed likely to be a fruitless exercise. Through some means the Archon of the Poisoned Tongue appeared able to mask her comings and goings even to someone as psychically adept as himself. The psychic threads of causality he could read from the street and its buildings were too confused and traumatised to yield any useful hints.

It was at this moment that he realised that the darkness was deepening around him. He looked up to where, between the canyon-like walls of the spires, he could see the wan stars of the *Ilmaea* riding high overhead. The stolen suns were not obscured and no dimmer than before. No shadow was being cast by clouds above and yet the light around Motley seemed to be leaching away before his eyes. A strange taint was in the air as if a chilly breeze were blowing onto Commorrhagh from distant, polluted shores. Motley breathed deep of the stench, sneezed and stuck out his tongue before grimacing.

‘Oh, that isn’t good,’ he said to the empty street. ‘That isn’t good at all.’

The Harlequin stood motionless and strained every sense into the encroaching shadows as he tried to divine their import. There was a subtle shift occurring in the fundamental structure of Commorrhagh’s underlying reality, but it wasn’t the raw vibrancy of the warp he could feel. This was something old and fusty that felt as if it had lain undisturbed for countless millennia before it was disturbed, the rarefied air of a mausoleum.

Motley wondered if it were perhaps the influence of a sub-realm as he started strolling along the street and whistling a jaunty tune to see what it might draw out. Around him the shadows deepened swiftly as the temperature dropped inexorably. There were a multitude of separate realities that Vect had annexed over the centuries to expand his eternal city. Most of the sub-realms had their own distinct characters. Some of them were very much at odds with what was generally agreed on as the normal consensual skein of existence for eldar—

Aelindrach. It could only be Aelindrach.

Motley stopped whistling. To his hyper-attuned senses the surrounding darkness was no longer empty. He could hear a faint rustling as stealthy feet slipped between the shadowed angles



surrounding him, he could smell the scents of dried blood and old bone on their weapons, he could feel the handful of corrupted life-sparks closing in with their minds full of hunger and death. The children of the shadow-realm, the mandrakes, had come to Commorragh in force.

They rushed in on him from all sides, their serrated blades singing through the air as they sought his life. Motley sprang high into the air to avoid their rush while pirouetting to break a neck with a snap-kick. He flipped and landed between two of the sable-skinned hunters. He slashed with his short blade to open the throat of one mandrake while he simultaneously punched out at the other. His knuckles had barely brushed the mandrake's coal-black skin before an inconspicuous device strapped to his wrist responded to the move by thrusting a mass of monofilament wires into the target's chest.

The weapon was called a 'harlequin's kiss', a term that always amused Motley with its grim irony – some nameless death jester back at the dawn of time no doubt liked the imagery of victims being rendered weak at the knees by the horrifically simple but deadly weapon. The mandrake he had struck immediately collapsed like a boneless sack of meat, which was effectively what the looping coils of the harlequin's kiss had turned it into.

Motley spun aside from a jagged machete hacking at him from behind. The mandrake recovered from his missed blow with cat-like quickness and whirled his weapon upwards to make a disembowelling cut at the fleet Harlequin. Instead, the mandrake's wrist was severed by Motley's descending blade. Black ichor flew in pinwheeling droplets from the separated appendage as the mandrake clutched the stump and hissed in agony. Quicker than thought Motley reversed his knife and slammed its point up beneath the wounded mandrake's chin.

More mandrakes darted out of the shadows at Motley with their bone-white hooks and cleavers thirsty for his blood. The Harlequin gave a brief thought to continuing the fight and then realised that even more mandrakes were coming. The shadows were alive with crawling shapes and needle-fanged snarls. Motley leapt upwards again, this time catching a hanging chain with one hand so that he could swing himself onto the eaves of an iron-scaled roof.

The mandrakes swarmed after him, climbing up the vertical walls towards his perch with impressive swiftness. The Harlequin took a run-up and leapt again, this time crossing the street and beginning a series of jumps, wall-runs and climbs across the patchwork roofs of Low Commorragh that the mandrakes couldn't keep up with. They used their otherworldly powers to flit from angle to angle in the deeper shadows as they attempted to catch him. Motley flinched aside from their traps and ambushes time and again as he fled ever upwards, always towards the light.

Eventually he paused for breath on a small, copper-clad dome bathed in the wan light of the *Ilmaea* and gazed back down into the abyss. The sheer drop between the spires was enough to make an ordinary observer's head swim, but not Motley's. He clung to the upright spike at the apex of the dome with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other as he leaned precariously and probed the depths carefully for signs of pursuit. The shadow-stain was far below him for now but he could see that it was climbing inexorably. Whorls and spirals of inky blackness were spreading up the flanks of the spires like winter frost.

'There it is, you old Fool,' Motley remarked to himself. 'Tis still a civil war at heart, but I'm thinking it's definitely one with some uncivil patronage involved.'

Mandrakes had a highly peculiar aura about them at the best of times; they were only semi-corporeal with one metaphorical foot kept forever planted in the shadow-realm. The ones Motley had fought in the old city had something more: they bore the distinctive sickly-sweet stench of the Chaos god Nurgle, Grandfather of Pestilence, Lord of Flies, Master of Plagues, etcetera, etcetera. Motley had been gambling when he'd told Asdrubael Vect that Nurgle's involvement was a virtual certainty. It was not particularly reassuring to find his gloomy prediction being realised.

Motley looked about from his rooftop perch. He had come up a long way, so far that he was now perhaps halfway up the side of one of the taller spires at a point where a canyon-like gulf separated the spire from its neighbour with several hundred metres of open air. The titanic structures were striated with tiers and terraces bearing wild-looking parks and ornate formal gardens. Off to one side he could make out the reflective expanse of a lake curving away around the flank of the neighbouring spire.

In between every one of these open areas was an eclectic array of buildings warring for space like weeds fighting for sunlight. Towers, turrets, cupolas, mezzanines, balconies, domes, lesser spires, statues, steeples, arches, bridges and stairways were piled one on top of the other without apparent rhyme or reason. Great swaths of the buildings had been damaged by the Dysjunction and a few had completely collapsed, tearing ragged holes in the cityscape. For all the destruction the scene was oddly peaceful. No fighting could be seen on the terraces and the narrow skies seemed clear save for the occasional speeding grav-craft or winged scourge.

Motley's attention was drawn to one particular crevasse in the spire opposite. A cold, blue light shone from within its depths that seemed at odds with everything else around it. The slight Harlequin shrugged off the sensation at first, telling himself that when confronted with such enormous vistas it was perhaps natural for the mind to seek a point of easy distinction to use as a reference point. He looked up again to see if he could sight Vect's great armada but found his attention kept being drawn back to that blue light. Something about it made his nape-hairs crawl and put an itch in between his shoulder blades.

'All right, all right,' the Harlequin muttered to himself in exasperation, 'the pretty blue bauble demands attention, I see that now, but how to go about consummating such fervent desires, hmm? Too far to leap across the gap, so how's a poor performer supposed to satisfy his idle curiosity?'

The Harlequin looked around for a way to get across to the adjacent spire. The flip-belt could carry him sailing across the gulf in a single leap, of course, but at a cost of losing a great deal of height. He'd be back down among the coiling shadows of Aelindrach and lose sight of his objective. Several bridges appeared to have spanned the gap until they had collapsed or been smashed by falling debris in the Dysjunction. Now all that remained of them were projecting stubs in the spire wall, roadways to nowhere.

There was a broken spider's web of chains and cables still stretched across the chasm in a few places. The more tenuous links had survived thanks to their inherent flexibility and they still formed a

potential bridge that Motley could use. He leapt upwards to catch a wire that was still under tension and swung himself atop it. He ran forwards along the swaying, finger-thick line on quick, sure feet over the kilometre-deep gulf yawning hungrily below him.

As he drew closer to the curious blue-lit crevasse Motley perceived the life-sparks of patient sentinels hiding amid the ruined buildings at its lip. He went forwards cautiously, easing between shadows and slipping along roundabout routes to work himself closer to what they guarded. The watchers were kabalites with calm, disciplined minds who seemed well settled in their positions, as if they had been in place for some time. The kabalites' vigilance was unwavering but they were definitely bored.

Motley's natural inquisitiveness had been excited before; discovering something that apparently warranted guarding made his nosiness become positively uncontrollable.

Quiet as a ghost Motley pulled himself up to a shattered window ledge so that he could peep through it at the closest kabalite. He was careful to wait until their attention was elsewhere before taking a long, hard snoop. He saw a warrior in jade-green armour wearing the sigil of a black rose made up of petals that were individually reminiscent of knife blades. Motley dropped back out of sight to ponder for a moment. A cheery hello would probably be greeted by gunfire. On the other hand trying to sneak past shouldn't be too hard. The problem with that was he would have no idea what he was sneaking into, while angry people with weapons would then be positioned between himself and the exit.

There was another approach and it appealed to Motley from the moment it popped into his mind.

Ozarhyll shifted slightly and adjusted his grip on his splinter rifle. It had been hours without word and he was starting to wonder if Khromys had made it back from Corespur at all. What they'd found might well be sufficiently sensitive to get the whole kabal killed to keep its presence hidden.

The rumours kept rolling in from both above and below: stories of battles up in High Commorrhagh between the Black Heart and rebel kabals led by Nyos Yllithian, panicky reports of the lower city being overrun by mandrakes and worse, news that the internal wardings had been raised, cutting off whole districts, word that escaped slaves had taken over one of the ports, speculation that the supreme overlord had gone mad, or been consumed by daemons, or had fled the city entirely.

The craziest rumour that Ozarhyll had heard personally was that El'Uriaq himself had risen from his grave in Shaa-Dom to rain vengeance down on the city that killed him... although in truth nothing seemed completely impossible right now. With all this happening around them they were all stuck guarding the broken vault like a bunch of fools waiting to get picked off. Their Archon was nowhere to be found and there was plenty of grumbling that they should pick up and move to somewhere more defensible until things quietened down.

'Not a bad idea,' a cheery voice announced from behind him. 'It's certainly exciting times in the dark city right now.'

Ozarhyll whipped around with the speed of a striking snake, his rifle raised. He gained a brief glimpse of a slight, grey-clad figure crouching on a block of rubble behind him. Then the rifle was torn from Ozarhyll's hands and slammed back into his forehead with stunning force. The ground seemed to lurch under his feet and he fell over backwards. As he did so a dutiful yet interminably slow part of his brain tried to get his hands to function and claw out his pistol. The grey figure casually kicked the pistol out of Ozarhyll's grasp as soon as it cleared the holster and then planted an elegantly pointed shoe on his chest when he tried to rise.

'Please don't get up on my account,' the newcomer smiled, his tone jovial. 'I'd much rather we just talked – is that all right with you?'

'Rhzevia! Komarch!' Ozarhyll yelled. 'We're under attack!'

The grey-clad figure watched him curiously. Ozarhyll could see now that it wore archaic-looking clothes and a domino half-mask above a wide, friendly smile. He tried to surge up suddenly and knock his attacker off his feet. He might have had more success trying to rise with a neutron star sitting on his chest.

'I'm afraid your friends can't hear you,' the slight figure said contritely. 'They're taking a nap for the present. I've, ah, interfered with your communications too, so it's really just the two of us. Feel free to keep yelling if it makes you more comfortable, but I confess that you might attract something even less desirable than my company.'

'Who are you? What do you want?' Ozarhyll grated furiously.

'That's the spirit! Asking the right questions! Now calm down and you can guess the answers for yourself – I'll help you with clues and we'll play a little game together – won't that be fun? Let's start with "Who am I?" I'll give you a hint – do you think I'm from Commorrhagh?'

'No...' Ozarhyll admitted. A Commorrite would have killed him by now, or at the very least started torturing him for the answers this intruder obviously wanted. He looked at the stranger's attire again and realised that what he'd seen as grey was a dense pattern of black and white diamonds. The half-mask and smiling lips dredged up a memory of outsiders, of elaborate dances, of acrobatic entertainers shrouded with mystery and dogged by disquieting legends despite their apparently harmless profession.

'You're a Harlequin,' Ozarhyll concluded with disdain.

'That's right! I *am* a Harlequin, but you can call me Motley,' the Harlequin chattered effusively. 'This is wonderful! See how well you're doing? Now for question number two things get a lot more difficult. "What do I want?" Well that could include all manner of things – peace, prosperity, love, laughter and the leisure in which to enjoy them. All sorts of things! No, I think to be fair we'll have to restrain ourselves to "What do I want right now?", don't you think?'

Ozarhyll glared back in silence. He wouldn't play this clown's game any further. This Motley character could only be there for the vault – precisely the kind of intruder that Khromys had placed them there to guard against. His life was already forfeit, either the Harlequin or his Archon wouldn't hesitate to take it once their curiosity had been satisfied.

The Harlequin frowned and said in answer to Ozarhyll's unspoken thoughts, 'Not at all – you need to think more clearly. We're both on the same side or I would, in your world-view, simply torture you and kill you to get what I want. Here, I'll give you another hint – do you think an outsider like me would be permitted to just walk around freely in the city during a Dysjunction? Who would make such a call?'

Ozarhyll's skin felt suddenly cold and clammy as the Harlequin's implication sank in. Only one power in the city could claim authority over something like that – Asdrubael Vect himself. 'You're an agent for the supreme overlord?' he whispered fearfully.

'You said it, not me,' Motley said with a malicious grin, 'but anyway that's cheating – I'm supposed to be the one asking questions in our little game, so let's try again.' The slight figure leaned closer and whispered in Ozarhyll's ear, 'What do I want?'

'You've come to check on the contents of the vault,' Ozarhyll said shakily. 'You want to know if anybody else has been here or knows what's happening. They don't, no one's alive nearby – we used nerve gas to make sure. We can't do anything about the flyers, but none of them seem to have noticed anything yet.'

He was babbling and he knew it, the mere invocation of Vect's name having robbed him of all his courage. Khromys had boasted about speaking with the supreme overlord one to one in Corespur when she got her orders, but Ozarhyll hadn't really believed her at the time. Now he did believe her, because suddenly it looked like they were involved in one of Vect's schemes up to their armpits. This could mean that a great elevation for the kabal of the Obsidian Rose was in the works or it could equally well prove to be a disaster.

Motley watched him with his head cocked to one side as though listening. The Harlequin seemed to come to a decision and removed his foot from Ozarhyll's chest before handing him back his rifle.

'Show me,' Motley said.

Ozarhyll stood quickly and made to point the rifle at Motley before thinking better of it and letting the weapon hang at his side. 'There's an easy way to get down over there,' Ozarhyll said, pointing, 'but I'm not going back inside the vault for any price. Too many ghosts.'

Motley frowned unhappily and shot Ozarhyll a mournful, pleading look. For all the cheap theatrics Ozarhyll understood that the Harlequin was telling him to come along now or suffer retribution later.

'All right! All right!' Ozarhyll cried in exasperation and started to lead him down the path they'd made through the debris when they'd found the place earlier.

Motley followed the kabalite warrior down a narrow trail leading deeper into the rubble. It brought them to the top of a jumbled slope made up of fallen masonry and twisted metal. Towards the bottom of the slope an intense blue light was shining that cast long, hard-edged shadows towards them. In the glare Motley could see an immense, metallic hand half buried in the debris. The hand was broken off at the wrist and seemed to be gripping the hilt of an enormous sword.

'We reckon it came from that statue of Archon Hiyurlarx up on the red raven's spire,' the kabalite offered by way of explanation. 'Not sure if the whole thing went over or just this part of it. Either way Belian Hiyurlarx would be laughing right now if he could see the damage he's done.'

The kabalite began to pick his way down the slope with a long-suffering sigh. The titanic piece of falling statuary had gouged a ragged wound in the cityscape that was over a hundred metres deep and almost twice as long. On the far slope Motley could see torn rooms and sliced corridors that had been left open to the air by the subsequent collapse.

Motley started to follow but hesitated for a moment as he sensed unquiet spirits in the chasm below. The low psychic moan of anguish was completely unexpected after the virtual silence of Commorrhagh and its close-minded inhabitants. This was no daemonic howling or the buzz of void-born predators – it was the suffering of eldar souls in torment. Motley shook his head and summoned up his courage. He had experienced things infinitely more disquieting than this in his time. If anything he was now absolutely determined to find out what the kabalites had been guarding.

As they reached the bottom of the crevasse Motley could see precisely where the light was coming from. A pair of immensely thick, heavy doors dominated one end of the chasm. The doors were sealed by a circular magnetic locking mechanism that stood a good deal taller than the slight Harlequin could have reached on his tiptoes. The giant falling sword of Archon Hiyurlarx had struck just a hand's-breadth from the left-hand edge of the heavy doors. The impact had opened a split in the wall of the vault and it was from this that the light shone.

'Just sheer bad luck really,' the kabalite said uneasily. 'If the sword hadn't come down point first it wouldn't even have nicked the walls. They're made of some seriously tough stuff – fortress grade – but you'd know more about that than me.'

Motley smiled knowingly and moved up to a position where he could peep inside. The blue light was all-pervasive, as if the very air was infused with it. A low mist obscured the floor and was spilling out of the crack in faint streamers. Inside the Harlequin could see the silhouettes of giant figures, smooth-limbed and metallically gleaming.

'Gods, no,' Motley whispered in horror. 'It can't be.'

The figures had the distinctive curving forms of Wraithguard and Wraithlords – the animated guardian-constructs built by craftworld eldar to carry the souls of their dead. Motley squeezed through the cracked wall in a daze. As the trapped souls within sensed his presence the swell of grieving mind-voices grew more frantic. Motley resolutely tried to block them out.

With closer examination he recognised that the machines were not craftworlder Wraithguard and Wraithlords. They embodied many of the same aesthetics but had undoubtedly been constructed by Commorrite hands. The ordinarily fine, clean lines of the craftworlder's designs had been weighted down with masses of additional armour and weaponry. Many had had some of their long limbs amputated in order to keep them quick and agile despite their extra burdens of blades and energy projectors, sacrificing their traditionally compact eldar-like forms for greater performance. Everything about the Commorrite copies seemed to add a vicious tension to the original designs.

The machines were constructed out of wraithbone and other psychoplastic materials Motley would have expected to see on a craftworld. The dark kin had no ability to create wraithbone for themselves and only limited ability to shape it. However, the unique properties of craftworlder materials meant

they were highly prized by Commorrites. Every piece of wraithbone used for the constructs had to have been stolen from the craftworlds or the webway itself. The contents of the vault represented an unimaginable horde of plunder in Commorragh, but that was not what Motley found most horrifying about it.

There were clusters of spirit stones embedded into the construct's carapaces. Each of the war engines had a dozen or more of the glowing gems sunk into their gleaming metal bodies around their foreheads and shoulders. Motley knew that every one of the stones contained a soul caught at the moment of death to keep it safe from the clutches of She Who Thirsts. The spirit stones represented a most despicable theft from their resting place, an act that went beyond grave-robbing to the literal enslavement of the dead.

It was not without precedent, certainly, for spirit stones were a rare and precious commodity in Commorragh, just like wraithbone. They were stolen, hoarded and fought over, twisted into psychically attuned artefacts that the Commorrites could create by no other means.

'How... how many are there?' the Harlequin asked in bewilderment. Ranks of the gleaming constructs stretched away into the depths of the vault. The war machines closest to the damaged wall where he was standing had been knocked over by the impact and now lay in a tangled sprawl of curved limbs and jutting weapons. Beyond them the blue light and mist made it hard to see exactly how many more still stood further inside. There might be hundreds of them in there, thousands even.

Motley's query was met with silence. He realised that the kabalite had not entered with him and was nowhere to be seen outside. Motley shook his head, trying to keep the insistent, tortured voices of the dead at bay so that he could think clearly. The crushing truth was that he could not do anything to help the captured spirits. Filling every pocket he had wouldn't have emptied a thousandth of the spirit stones from their settings, and the kabalites certainly weren't going to let him saunter out carrying even such a small fraction of the fortune on display.

Motley was suddenly struck by what Lady Malys had told him during their duel below the firefalls – *'Asdrubael Vect is partial to weapons. He likes unexpected, devastating, irresistible weapons best of all.'*

Weapons. The war-constructs arrayed before him (Motley refused to think of the twisted perversions as Wraithguard) would certainly be unexpected and devastating. Many of the Commorrites' weapons would be ineffectual against enemies that neither bled nor felt pain or fear.

Motley backed out of the blue-lit vault feeling very much alone and very much a coward for doing so. There was a dreadful wrong here but he could not – dare not – do anything to try and rectify it. To his surprise he found the kabalite was still waiting for him outside. Motley could see from the look in the warrior's eyes that his courage had failed him and he hadn't been able to follow the Harlequin inside.

'How many are there?' Motley asked again numbly. It was all he could think to ask, his mind was still too overwhelmed with sorrow at what he'd seen. The kabalite seemed to misunderstand the question.

'At least twenty,' the kabalite said. 'There's more being dug out on the lower tiers. Most of the ones up top were intact so we got through those more quickly.'

‘Twenty?’ Motley repeated in confusion. There were many more than twenty constructs in the vault.

‘Twenty vaults – including this one, I mean.’

Motley blinked and then cleared his throat a few times as he absorbed the news. ‘Do you know what’s in them?’ he asked finally.

‘Of course, they’re Vect’s Castigators,’ the kabalite said with certainty. ‘Nobody had seen one in a hundred years. Who’d have guessed they were right here in the city all that time? And so damn many of them, too...’

The kabalite smiled and Motley had an urge to kill him for it. A smug, stupid child so pleased with his cruelty deserved to be wiped from existence. The Harlequin took a quick step forwards before he could quash the desire. The kabalite flinched then glared back defiantly.

‘We’ve done what the supreme overlord commanded, we’ve done our part!’ the kabalite snarled. ‘If you don’t like it then go talk to Vect!’

‘I may just do that,’ Motley replied icily. ‘Now, tell me precisely where they all came from?’

The kabalite looked confused and glanced towards the vault. ‘How should I know? Craftworlds? Someone must have plundered a fair few to get all that together.’

Motley tasted bile at the thought. He remembered dead craftworlds adrift in the void, stripped of the souls that had once thronged their infinity circuits. He remembered the terrible acts of vengeance that had been undertaken against the perpetrators of such loathsome acts, but to punish was not to prevent and not every act could be punished. Over the millennia the dark eldar had still preyed upon their craftworld kin just as they preyed on every other living thing in the galaxy. Asdrubael Vect had gathered the fruits of their labours and turned them into weapons to keep his own people under control.

Vect.

Always Vect.

Motley had felt that he’d begun to understand the great tyrant, just a little – perhaps even had a sneaking respect for the absolute righteousness of Vect’s certainty in himself. Vect did not need the city but the city certainly needed him to keep it going. Without Vect Commorragh would have fallen to Chaos and catastrophe millennia ago. Undeniably it was Vect’s power that kept Commorragh alive, but Motley couldn’t feel anything other than hatred for him at that moment.

‘I must go,’ Motley said. ‘I...’

The Harlequin’s next words were cut off by a deafening noise from the vault behind him. A string of loud reports made him flinch and spin round with the expectation of witnessing gunfire. Instead he saw that the huge locking mechanism set into the vault doors was turning, dust spraying from its concentric metal rings as they aligned themselves with a series of resounding metallic clangs. Motley turned back to the kabalite and shouted one word to him over the tumult: ‘Run!’





## CHAPTER 19

### SHADOW AND FLAME

Lady Malys returned to Corespur with a sadly reduced coterie of her kabalites. Their Raiders and Venoms slunk into the gaping ports on the fortress's flanks without fanfare or welcome. All eyes were currently focused elsewhere on the siege of the White Flames fortress and the rise of Aelindrach. Those few who noticed Malys's kabal of the Poisoned Tongue nosing into docking cradles gave them little heed. They gave the handful of prisoners she'd brought back with her even less.

Despite the apparent indifference of Vect's lackeys to her arrival Malys found she was summoned into the tyrant's presence within minutes of setting foot in Corespur. She felt chagrined that her hopes for her own rather minor task to be overlooked in the greater sweep of events had been optimistic, just as she had known they would be. Her mission to Valzho Sinister had been a disappointment as far as she was concerned. She shared none of the apparent eagerness of the supreme overlord to discuss its outcome. Heavily armed squads of Black Heart kabalites arrived to take away the prisoners and escort Malys to the supreme overlord without delay.

She was led onto a spiralling ramp of quicksilver that transported her down into the bowels of the great fortress in a blur of speed. Malys was intrigued by the change in venue. Corespur – as befitted usual fortress anatomy – had its lower areas given over to armouries, dungeons, torture chambers and pits. Every time she had met with Vect it had been somewhere in the upper reaches. She'd begun to suspect that Vect enjoyed the god-like disassociation to be found in ruling from the literal top of the world. Something had happened to propel the supreme overlord out of his usual haunts.

The uncomfortable, obvious conclusion was that she was being brought below for punishment or, at the very least, censure of some kind. Malys disciplined herself mentally for the ordeal to come. There was no escaping it, she'd allowed herself to get distracted by the Harlequin for too long and Vect was undoubtedly well aware of the fact. Why he'd set her up to fail was impossible to determine – a test of some kind probably. If that were the case then she had at least partially passed it by coming back to Corespur at all.

She found Vect in a low-vaulted chamber that was entirely dominated by a three-dimensional representation of Commorragh traced with floating skeins of light. Vect stood in the midst of it all like some unthinkably vast monster wading through the thousands of cubic kilometres of volume it

represented.

‘You’ve returned,’ Vect stated without looking up, ‘and with precious little to show for your efforts from what I’m told.’

Malys sighed volubly. ‘Yes, I’m back with little to show for it. For what it’s worth I brought back all of the survivors from Valzho Sinister alive and unspoiled just as you ordered.’

Vect appeared to ignore her, his attention focused on a tiny point inside his city of light. Malys took in some of the details being displayed as a matter of course, but found a number of annotations were strange to her. The whole city was shown in all of its spiny, eclectic glory; a moderately flattened sea-urchin with the twisted horn of Corespur at the top and the blunt claws formed by the docking spurs spaced around its circumference.

Coloured areas indicated districts according to their allegiance. Corespur and most of Sorrow Fell were tinted purple. One tiny section of High Commorrhagh glowed a persistent, angry-looking red where the White Flames fortress continued to defy Sythrac. The dissonance was repeated by a number of bright embers in the otherwise grey mid-tiers – the known rebel kabals opportunistic enough to declare themselves openly. The lower two-thirds of the city were shown in darkness, a skeletal wireframe of the known topography of Low Commorrhagh that was virtually bereft of the usual indicators. Malys noted that Valzho Sinister, a hanging spindle located on the underside of the city and invisible at this scale, was located somewhere deep within the darkened territories.

‘I’m sure that you have a number of excuses that you want to share with me,’ Vect murmured disinterestedly as he focused his attention on another speck. ‘Get on with it.’

Malys knew that ‘excuses’ were what Asdrubael called facts that he didn’t like. Invoking the word wasn’t necessarily fatal in itself – there were good excuses and bad excuses in the world according to Vect. The supreme overlord was, however, letting her know that she was already standing on shaky ground.

‘The inmates breached their cells during the Dysjunction. A... riot had ensued that was further enlivened by a few entities from beyond the veil getting involved. When I got there only a few inmates were still alive, the rest were already dead or too insane to be useful.’

Vect shot her a cold glance, locking eyes with her for the first time. ‘I am disappointed that you felt the need to take that decision on my behalf,’ he said. Malys thought he looked tired, old even, but his eyes still blazed with dark ferocity. After a moment the supreme overlord looked back to his miniature city and muttered, ‘Continue.’

‘Asdrubael, the crazed ones were literally chewing off their own limbs or setting themselves on fire,’ Malys said with some exasperation. ‘They were void-touched, believe me, you wouldn’t have wanted them in Corespur. Anyway, we got the rest out despite the bowels of Aelindrach opening to vomit up every mandrake in creation into our laps.’

Vect reached out to touch a series of gem-like points of brightness that hung within the topographical map of Commorrhagh with his long-nailed hands. Tiny strings of glyphs unrolled beneath his fingertips. ‘You exaggerate, of course,’ the supreme overlord said, ‘although I’ll grant you that

Aelindrach has grown prominent as a threat recently. In point of fact every mandrake in creation was certainly not in your lap, I'd say the vast bulk of them are in mine. Continue.'

'That's all there is to it,' Malys replied cautiously. 'I've done as you ordered and returned, also as ordered... You really believe the mandrakes are capable of anything?'

'Normally, no. But my beliefs don't come into it – they are a threat because they have come to believe in something else. The Fool was right about that.'

'The Harlequin? You sent him after me – was he trying to warn me? If so, then thank you, Asdrubael, I didn't think you still cared.'

Vect shot her a withering glance, his fingers still busy in the map. 'No, I didn't send him to warn you. Nor did I send him to cross blades with you, you undertook to do that on your own account.'

Malys realised that Vect was trying to keep her on the defensive, distracting her from... what? 'The Fool was following me,' she responded with a touch of outrage. 'I couldn't have that now, could I? I was protecting the security of my mission and by extension the security of your plans, supreme overlord.'

Vect shrugged disinterestedly and turned back to the points of light. Malys could see that perhaps twenty of them seemed to be the focus of the tyrant's interest. One by one the tiny lights were changing from being amber-coloured to pulsing blue. The lights flashed in unison so as more of them changed over it became increasingly obvious just how many of them there were, a cascade of nodal points in the three-dimensional space. Malys realised there were more than twenty lights; there were dozens, hundreds maybe, all the way from Corespur into the city depths beneath Low Commorrhagh.

'What are you doing, Asdrubael?' Malys asked with a trace of alarm creeping into her voice. 'You're not planning to destroy the city are you? The fight isn't over yet, so there's no need to be quite so drastic.'

Her protest actually drew a chuckle out of Vect. 'No there isn't,' he admitted, 'not yet. This is something marginally more targeted than demolishing all of Commorrhagh.'

The great tyrant stepped back out of the floating image of the city and swept an arm through it in a grandiose gesture. The flashing pills of light steadied into a uniform constellation of icy-blue sparks. As they did so Malys felt the floor begin to tremble beneath her feet.

'Marginally more targeted,' Vect reiterated with some relish, 'and considerably more efficacious.'

With Vect's gesture in Corespur hundreds of stasis-sealed vaults across the city responded to the final input of their fail-safe codes. Monolithic mag-locks that had not moved in centuries rotated in their housings before slamming open with a sound like the tolling of sombre bells. Metre-thick doors began to grind slowly open with a low, rolling thunder that reverberated from the heights of Corespur down into the depths of Low Commorrhagh. Within the vaults thousands of smooth-skinned war machines shook themselves into wakefulness. The tortured, insane ghosts inhabiting their shells awoke to the light of another dawn that was to be marked only by perfidy and horror.

Ancient heroes, ordinary citizens, traumatised veterans, innocents, criminals, the insane; all

became one inside the nightmarish mannequins they had been sealed into. As they were roused into wakefulness their composite personalities were goaded on by falsehoods and lies. The unending wars they fought were each their own version of reality. Some saw themselves emerging from their vaults into a shining city bathed in golden sunlight beset by nightmarish monstrosities. Others saw only a smoke-wreathed battlefield refilled with mortal enemies from the past. Some of the captive spirits believed that they fought to protect their long-dead loved ones, others that their opportunity for vengeance had come at last, for others unreasoning fear or rampant murder-lust were motivation enough to lash out at the living.

The gleaming constructs marched from their vaults and out into the city, their long limbs moving with the fluid assurance of living creatures. Resistance came immediately; diseased ur-ghuls, pitch-black mandrakes, rebel kabalites and escaped slaves instinctively turned their attacks against the new enemy rising amongst them. At first Vect's enemies fought and died without understanding what came against them.

On the docking ring the port of lost souls had been overrun by escaped slaves. Several barges full of them had been in the process of unloading as the Dysjunction struck, including thousands of trained fighters that had been captured expressly for use in the arena. These proved to be a formidable force when united by desperation, opportunity and their mutual hatred for the Commorrites. Opportunistic kabals looking to recapture the port for themselves made several probing attacks. Each was firmly rebuffed by masses of wild-eyed, half-naked primitives armed with rifles and blades torn from the dead hands of their captors.

Vect's Castigators seemed drawn to the port as if the unconscious pull of killing non-eldar foes governed their actions. The slaves' captured weapons could do little to harm the metal-skinned war machines, while the Castigators' own distortion whips and mono-claws tore easily through their ranks. Discipline, such as it was, broke and the slaves fled in all directions, some barricaded themselves inside the port, others split into bands to try and escape from it. A few attempted to surrender to the long-limbed, blood-slicked constructs. The Castigators hunted down and executed every one of them.

On Yolosc tier Archon Xhubael had declared her intention to follow Yllithian's leadership to her coterie of petty Archons. Not all had welcomed it and some had to be silenced because of that. A brief, vicious skirmish ensued through the chambers and corridors of Xhubael's demesne that left her warriors scattered and disorganised. Xhubael had never known that the foundations of her stronghold on Yolosc abutted a long-buried Castigator vault. Her walls shook and crumbled as the war machines blasted their way to the surface. Xhubael's last sight as she lay pinned beneath the fallen rubble was of steel warriors with arms and legs like knife blades climbing out of the pit to end her life.

In the shadowed depths claimed by Aelindrach, mandrakes and ur-ghuls pounced on the deadly automata from ambush again and again. Each outcome was the same – swarming shadow creatures cut down in droves, a desperate struggle in hand-to-hand combat with implacable, untiring enemies. Numbers alone brought some successes with individual Castigators dragged down and torn apart, but the price paid for each small victory was too horrible for even the ur-ghuls to bear. In the upper city the

lesser wardings erected by Vect kept the children of Aelindrach penned inside an invisible maze. The Castigators' remorseless assault drove them into the killing fields of the White Flames fortress and the blood-soaked foundation strata beneath it.

Everywhere the defeated fighters cursed the terrible weapons wielded by the new army, and their seemingly unstoppable resolve. Word soon began to spread that Vect had called upon the unquiet dead to become his foot soldiers against the living.

Bellathonis became instantly wary when the first vibrations from the vaults' opening reached him. He and Xagor were driving his grotesques towards the White Flames fortress, picking their way through the vastly complex interweaving of pipes, conduits, tunnels, tubes, channels, and cracks that made up the foundation strata. He had hopes of reaching not the fortress itself, but his temporary laboratory beneath it.

He'd told Xhakoruakh that he needed better equipment, and that until the shadow-king secured the facilities of the Black Descent there was little else he could usefully do. Unfortunately when Xhakoruakh agreed he also set one of his nightfiends and clutch of mandrakes to 'protect' the haemonculus while he was in Commorragh. Most of Bellathonis's thoughts had subsequently been occupied with just how he could rid himself of his troublesome and unwanted bodyguards.

The tunnel they were in shook for half a minute before falling ominously still again. Bellathonis glanced at Xagor for confirmation and saw the wrack nod. He'd felt it too. Time spent in Aelindrach had taught Bellathonis to rely on his non-visual perception overly much and now he was having trouble adjusting back to normality. By the disturbed flitting of the mandrakes they were also aware that something was amiss. The grotesques simply stood and drooled. Within the foundation strata, sound was a strange and inconstant mechanism; the weaving tunnels could carry noises from kilometres away or muffle ones from nearby so it became impossible to tell how close they were.

The unmistakable sound of metal striking stone filtered through the darkness, a beat repeated many times over. It was regular, unhurried and seemed to come from all directions. Bellathonis called back his grotesques and addressed the nameless nightfiend leading his guards.

'We need to get out of here right now,' Bellathonis said hurriedly, his voice a raw whisper. 'Xhakoruakh needs to hear about what's just happened.'

The nightfiend shrugged noncommittally at the notion, so Bellathonis tried pushing harder. 'Whatever we're hearing doesn't belong to Xhakoruakh, therefore we can assume that it's hostile to us!' the haemonculus hissed. 'Go back to the king and report. I will proceed to the laboratory with Xagor and the grotesques.'

The nightfiend shook his head and gestured down the tunnel with his saw-edged falchion for Bellathonis to keep moving. The haemonculus was drawing breath to argue further when he caught a gleam of light from ahead. The nightfiend noticed it, too, and sprang into the shadows. The regular ringing of metal on stone stopped abruptly and was replaced by a thin, high noise rapidly rising in

pitch. The mandrakes began flickering forwards from shadow to shadow, their weapons drawn.

‘Xagor!’ Bellathonis yelled as he ducked for cover. ‘Get down!’

A soundless impact rippled through the tunnel as several of the advancing mandrakes were instantaneously wiped from existence. Where they had been a perfectly spherical bite had appeared in the wall and floor, the material displaced out of the reality of Commorragh and sent... elsewhere. Bellathonis recognised it as the distinctive strike of a distortion weapon – a rare type in Commorragh but one with a dire reputation. Heedless, the surviving mandrakes surged forwards to come to grips with their assailants and quickly found themselves outmatched.

Bellathonis watched in fascination as a pair of Castigators advanced to meet the mandrakes’ rush. He could see at once that they were not purely machines like the Talos pain-engines, but rather housings for a living consciousness. The Castigators’ monomolecular claws pierced the pitch-black mandrakes like lightning bolts while the mandrakes’ own saws and sickles glanced from impervious metal. One of the war machines fired its distortion whip at point-blank range, a brief twist in reality pinching out its enemies so thoroughly that it was as if they had never existed at all. The other Castigator appeared to favour its claw-like blades more and sliced the last mandrake apart with the fluid grace of a knife-limbed dancer.

Xagor was already disappearing from sight back along the tunnel. Bellathonis realised the nightfiend was still lurking nearby, apparently too worldly-wise to charge forwards and share his minions’ fate. The grotesques were milling around in confusion making big, attractive targets. Bellathonis agonised for a second and then ordered the lumbering flesh-puppets to attack. If they were going to be destroyed they might as well do some good by buying him some time.

‘Now we go back and tell Xhakoruakh!’ Bellathonis hissed angrily to the nightfiend.

The nightfiend nodded rapidly in response.



## CHAPTER 20

### THE SIXTY-FOURTH INTERSTICE

Kharbyr watched with trepidation as Yllithian talked to the two haemonculi from the Black Descent. He hadn't thought that the flesh-sculptors would be willing to give in to Yllithian so easily, but here they were hemmed in by Yllithian's incubi and ready to sue for peace.

It meant that his own usefulness to the Archon of the White Flames was quite likely at an end. Angevere had been silent since the beginning of the ambush and for once he wished that she'd advise him on what to do. He stole a surreptitious glance at the canister he had slung over his shoulder, half expecting to see it had been pierced by some stray round intended for him. That would be how it would have played out in a story, after all, with the wicked witch unintentionally saving the hero.

+Don't be so stupid. Anything that hit me would have killed you, too. The psychic shock alone would do it, although a hit from the weapons Yllithian's troops have been using would likely annihilate us both... I've been silent because I'm trying to think of a way out of this. The possibilities have become a lot more complicated. There are new players entering the game.+

The idea that things had changed was already foremost in Kharbyr's mind, he didn't need someone with void-sight to tell him that. Some agreement seemed to be met between Yllithian and the haemonculi. The two of them took up position to lead the vanguard of the White Flames much as Kharbyr had been doing. Yllithian was making his way back through the trueborn warriors, but he stopped beside Kharbyr and looked at him speculatively.

'They might still try to betray you,' Kharbyr said, 'and you'll still need me to get out of the labyrinth afterwards. You can't trust them and your idea for getting out sounded a bit... drastic.'

Yllithian favoured him with a wintry smile before replying, 'Of course it did, Bellathonis, threats don't work if they seem mild and easily borne. You needn't worry. I'm not about to put my trust in the Black Descent and start narrowing my options. Stay at my side for a while, there's no need for you to keep leading us through the traps – although I believe that was really Angevere doing the work all along.'

+Say nothing!+ Angevere hissed in Kharbyr's mind. It was almost reassuring to find her back on form.

The column of trueborn started to move along the corridor in the direction it had been heading. It

stop-started every few paces as the warriors wove through the corpses and cratered stonework created by the battle. They went only a short distance before the haemonculi turned to lead them down a side passage where they all kept resolutely to the left-hand wall. Here they reached an archway and the haemonculi halted.

‘All right, come along, Bellathonis,’ Yllithian said as he made his way forwards again, ‘I want you close at hand for this.’

+Go with him,+ Angevere ordered. +Don’t be shocked by what you see beyond that arch.+

Kharbyr furrowed his brow. If Angevere’s warning was intended to set him at ease it was a colossal failure; instead he now felt more thoroughly unsettled than he was already. The two haemonculi standing by the arch watched him approaching beside Yllithian with ill-concealed contempt on their faces. The one in green-and-black robes looked ready to tear Kharbyr’s throat out with his teeth if he got a chance. The hatchet-faced one with flat, black crystals for eyes looked less vitriolic but far more dangerous.

+ The one in viridian and black is an Intimate Secretary, the other in the slate-grey robes is a Master Elect of Nine. Bellathonis knew the Master Elect personally, or at least had dealings with him. His name is Ekarynis. They are both mid-level functionaries, servants of the Patriarch Noctis. It seems the Black Descent’s leadership choose not to expose themselves to risk.+

‘The sixty-fourth interstice lies beyond this arch,’ the hatchet-faced Master Elect announced in a voice that seemed to scrape rusty knives across Kharbyr’s eardrums. ‘The chamber is not large enough to hold your entire force, or even a substantial fraction of it – we must proceed with only a handful.’

‘Go ahead, Bellathonis,’ Yllithian murmured, ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

+ Do as he says.+

Kharbyr felt an uncharacteristic weakness at the knees. He was no coward, he’d seen plenty, he’d seen Shaa-Dom and the broken world-shrine at Lileathanir... yet whatever lay beyond the arch evoked a wave of unreasoning dread in him. He had to force his legs to move, and even then it felt as if lead weights had been attached to his feet. The two Black Descent haemonculi glanced at each other and then passed through the archway. Taking a deep breath Kharbyr plunged after them.

The place they’d called the sixty-fourth interstice was a pentagonal room with an arch entering it through each wall. As Kharbyr stepped inside he could feel the rage inside the chamber like a red miasma clinging to the walls and hanging in the air. A sense of unrelenting fury pounded on his subconscious like an inaudible scream. Kharbyr gasped and almost stumbled.

+By the gods, she’s angry,+ Angevere hissed into his mind. The sibilant mind-voice of the witch was almost lost behind the roiling emotion saturating Kharbyr’s consciousness.

A glass-fronted sarcophagus stood upright in the exact centre of the chamber. A blood-red mist swirled behind the glass rendering its contents invisible. Five thick chains of dark metal were wrapped around the sarcophagus and connected to rings set into the floor, forming a pentacle around it. The precautions seemed extreme in view of the sturdy construction of the sarcophagus itself; a heavy, ugly lump of ochre-coloured stone crudely shaped like a person.



An incubus appeared at Kharbyr's elbow having silently followed him through the arch. The incubus's blank-faced helm scanned around the chamber before it turned and left. A moment later, much to Kharbyr's relief, it returned in the company of its brethren and Yllithian. The Archon took in the scene before him and cocked his head at the wash of raw hatred in the room. He looked over to Kharbyr and spoke, his voice sounding loud and unwelcome in the emotion-soaked chamber.

'They tell me that Xelian is within that sarcophagus. They also tell me that they have been keeping her on the knife's edge between life and death, all the while attempting to prevent her full resurrection.'

'Why?' Kharbyr asked incredulously.

Yllithian shrugged, 'They won't say. My thought is that El'Uriaq engaged the Black Descent to keep Xelian available but inactive while he used Aez'ashya to take control of the Blades of Desire. Doubtless if things didn't work out he planned to substitute Xelian as his cat's-paw if necessary.'

+ Entirely likely. El'Uriaq was never one to waste raw materials he could later re-forged to fulfil his needs.+

'That sounds like something El'Uriaq would do,' Kharbyr repeated distractedly, 'but... it feels almost like daemons have been loose in here, all that rage...'

'Since I can safely assume you're telling me what Angevere thinks that means I'm right in my assumption, which is most gratifying,' Yllithian said with insufferable smugness.

One of the haemonculi, the hatchet-faced Master Elect with the nerve-shredding voice, interrupted by speaking directly to Kharbyr for the first time. 'The psychic taint present in the chamber developed prior to the impact of the Dysjunction that you initiated. It is understood that the subject's close association with the event enabled it to draw upon its incipient energy as it approached.'

'None of that matters now,' Yllithian snapped impatiently. 'Release Xelian immediately. Your custody of her is at an end.'

The Master Elect stepped back and gestured to the sarcophagus. 'The subject is yours for the taking. Simply loosen the chains and Xelian will be free to rejoin you.' Yllithian looked over at Kharbyr expectantly.

+If you value your life do not touch those chains.+

'Loosen them yourself,' Kharbyr told the haemonculus. 'The Archon told you to release her, not me.'

Yllithian's dark, calculating eyes snapped back onto the hatchet-faced Master Elect. 'Do as Bellathonis says,' Yllithian ordered, 'or our agreement becomes null and void.'

The incubi took a step forwards to underline Yllithian's threat. The Master Elect looked at his compatriot significantly and spoke one word.

'Obey.'

The other haemonculus in green and black looked ready to argue. His green-tinted lips writhed as he tried to keep his outrage in check. The flat, crystalline gaze of the Master Elect bored into his face and the outrage melted away into fear and resignation. The Intimate Secretary's shoulders slumped and he moved to the ring bolt securing the closest chain, where he hesitated again.

'Do it,' the hatchet-faced haemonculus ordered in a voice that cut like a bone-saw.

The Intimate Secretary flinched and leaned down to release the first chain. He glanced across nervously at the crudely shaped sarcophagus, but there was no visible response. Kharbyr released a breath he had been unconsciously holding. Moving quickly now the Intimate Secretary rushed to a second ring, bent and loosened that chain also. He hurried over to the third ring...

Before he could reach it the glass front of the sarcophagus shattered. A hate-filled shriek assailed the minds of all present in the chamber. Through half-blinded eyes Kharbyr saw a hideous, blood-slick apparition leap out of the sarcophagus. It landed on the haemonculus's back and tore at his throat. The doomed haemonculus screamed and flailed helplessly as he was pushed down and mercilessly savaged. Yllithian's incubi moved forwards with their klaives at the ready.

'Stand back!' Yllithian commanded.

The creature had the appearance of something that had been flayed. Thick ropes of meat-red muscle and glistening yellow cartilage were visible on its crooked limbs. It tore at its prey with hooked claws and monstrous strength. It began pulling forth dripping organs to display in front of the haemonculus's horrified gaze before greedily devouring them one by one. It took his eyes last of all.

The haemonculus's thrashing subsided and his heels slowly stopped drumming on the stone floor. As the crouching monster feasted noisily on the remains it seemed to be changing before their eyes. Smooth skin now clothed the flayed musculature like a taut silk sheet, its crooked limbs straightened to become full and shapely, long, lustrous dark hair hung down over its face as it continued to slake its terrible thirst.

'Xelian,' Yllithian said distinctly. The creature paused and turned blazing eyes towards him. It flicked back its hair and wiped the back of one long-fingered hand across its mouth.

'Yllithian,' it replied in a low, feral growl, 'so much the gallant prince that he comes to save me. You must have been truly smitten by my beauty.'

Xelian stood up and despite the gore slicking her limbs she was indeed beautiful, youthful and bewitching in her nakedness. Feeding on the haemonculus's pain as his life was ripped from him had allowed her to renew herself fully – at least for the present. She tossed back her mane of raven hair again and laughed lustily.

'I've been waiting in breathless anticipation for release, my sweet prince, what took you so long?'

'You weren't easy to find,' Yllithian smiled back. 'The Black Descent kept your sarcophagus hidden from me.'

Xelian locked her still-hungry gaze with Kharbyr and then the hatchet-faced Master Elect in turn.

'Bellathonis I remember, this other one I saw beyond the glass when they held me prisoner,' Xelian said. She took a step towards the hatchet-faced haemonculus, her fingers hooking into claws once more.

'I made an agreement, Xelian,' Yllithian warned. 'I agreed that bygones would be bygones on their part as well as ours. Come, we can find you better things to feast on than this withered old piece of flotsam.'

Xelian stared at Yllithian for a long moment then shrugged and relaxed her hands. 'You're still the great schemer,' Xelian said. 'I should have expected as much. What's been happening? Where's that piece of filth El'Uriaq?'

'Destroyed, sent back to the pit he crawled out of,' Yllithian said coldly. 'El'Uriaq proved... unsuitable as a rallying point against Vect and became a threat in his own right.'

'Really,' Xelian arched her perfect brows in disbelief. 'So you dealt with him, then? After he took both myself and Kraillach down so adroitly. How did you defeat him?'

'That's for me to know and you to guess at, my dear Xelian,' Yllithian gently admonished.

+Tell Xelian that we destroyed El'Uriaq. Don't let Yllithian claim the credit.+

Kharbyr swallowed and tried to think of a way to say such a thing without offending Yllithian or calling him a liar. Xelian's eyes flicked across to him and he knew in that moment that she understood precisely what had happened – that Bellathonis was the one who had really dealt with El'Uriaq.

'Well then keep your secrets,' Xelian said dismissively to Yllithian. 'It's not like I really care. I need armour and weapons to be of any use. Tell me you brought something along with you.'

'There's plenty available on the dead trueborn outside,' Yllithian retorted. 'I'm afraid I had no time to swing by your boudoir at the Blades' fortress on the way to literally saving your skin. Other matters have been pressing for my attention.'

'It is time,' the Master Elect announced abruptly. 'The noble Archons will depart the labyrinth now as agreed.'

Xelian bared her teeth at the interruption but Yllithian waved away her ire. 'Yes, we need to move on. Affairs will have been moving rapidly in the city while we've been stuck in here. Lead on, Master Elect, and you'll have your dungeon back to call your own momentarily.'

The Master Elect moved quickly, seemingly anxious to be rid of Yllithian and his force of invaders. They moved swiftly along the smooth, identical corridors of the labyrinth, yet as they did so Yllithian perceived a change in their surroundings. It was getting darker.

His trueborn were well-equipped with both lights and their own excellent night vision but the darkness still seemed to ooze in closer with every step they took. In fact the shadows they cast became blacker and more hard-edged from moment to moment, with a hint of *otherness* about the shapes cast on the walls that seemed to suggest they were not their own shadows at all.

Yllithian brought the column to a halt and ordered that the Master Elect be brought before him. Now he was no longer walking he realised it was getting colder too, his breath steaming gently in the chill air. When the Master Elect arrived Yllithian rounded on him furiously.

'You seem to have forgotten that I hold the keys to the destruction of your entire coven!' Yllithian snarled. 'Should I be killed then the void mines I planted will tear this place apart, and yet I believe that you're leading us into another trap. Convince me otherwise or you will forfeit your life.'

The Hatchet-faced haemonculus showed no signs of fear. The flat crystals replacing his eyes

returned Yllithian's angry stare balefully. 'You must stay your hand. Affairs in the city have moved forward as you surmised they would,' the Master Elect confirmed. 'You are not the only invaders at large in the labyrinth. The children of Aelindrach have also turned against our coven...'

The words had barely escaped the Master Elect's lips when a sickle of yellowed bone sliced through his neck in a spray of arterial gore. The corridor erupted into pandemonium as countless mandrakes surged out of the shadows on the walls, ceiling and floor to attack the White Flames trueborn.

Yllithian felt icy claws clutching at his legs and whipped out his sword to split the skull of a mandrake unfolding from the shadows beneath his feet. Xelian was instantly at his side, chopping at others with her scavenged blade. She drove the pitch-skinned wretches back into the darkness with savage blows. The two Archons stood back to back against the deluge of mandrakes flooding into the corridor.

A quick glance showed Yllithian what he'd most feared was occurring. For all their superior firepower his trueborn were being overwhelmed at close quarters. Their fearsome shredders and blasters were useless against foes that could simply manifest within claw's-reach and attack. The trueborn were still seasoned warriors and they fought back bitterly against the nightmarish horde with blade and pistol. One by one, however, they were being dragged down.

Yllithian made a lightning-fast calculation in his mind and balked at the distasteful results. There was only one possible solution to the situation – to surrender before they were wiped out. The battle was being fought in an awful, eerie silence marred only by the clash of weapons and the curses of the trueborn. Yllithian lowered his blade and shouted out at the top of his voice.

'Wait! We are all enemies of Vect and the Black Descent. We should join our forces! Let me speak with your leader!'

It was a long shot. Other Commorrites might be relied on to at least consider such a proposition. This was how kabals were made stronger, more often than not, with an acknowledgement of superiority on the battlefield. But mandrakes were feral creatures and there was no guessing how they might react.

Yllithian's trueborn responded by breaking off from combat as best they could, backing warily together in clumps within the tight confines of the passageway. The mandrakes swirled among the shadows uncertainly, the walls seeming to ripple with stealthy shapes as they also paused in their attacks. A mandrake swirled into being directly in front of Yllithian with its featureless face only centimetres from his own. Invisible lips peeled apart to display blood-red fangs as it hissed at him.

'Take me to your leader,' Yllithian repeated calmly, 'and remember that if you kill me all of you and this entire labyrinth will be destroyed. I'm sure you overheard that much before you killed the Master Elect. It is no empty boast.'

'Are you mad, Yllithian?' Xelian snapped. 'I'll not sully my hands with the scum of the shadow-realm. You can't trust them for a moment.'

'Anyone can see that they've got bigger plans afoot, Xelian,' Yllithian replied smoothly. 'I can see, and I would speak with the one behind them. As I said before – our enemies are the same, it's foolhardy

for us to waste our energies fighting each other.'

The mandrake struck suddenly at Yllithian's lowered sword. He allowed the weapon to slip out of his grasp and raised his hands to show that they were empty.

'No reason for us to fight at all,' Yllithian said soothingly. 'Powerful kabals obey me in the city. Now take me to your master so that we can plan how to rule it... together.'

The mandrake raised its sickle and bared its fangs again in response, but Yllithian could tell it was an empty gesture, sheer bluster. He stood calmly and dared it to strike him. After a second the shadow creature lowered its crude weapon almost thoughtfully and then turned, beckoning for Yllithian to follow it.



## CHAPTER 21

### THE CHILDREN OF AELINDRACH

*In the spaces between worlds Kheradruakh lurked and waited for his chance to come. For the first time in as long as he could remember the Decapitator felt impatience. The desire to kill was building in him as it had seldom done before. The dark symmetry had to be completed and the pattern made whole; he fancied he could hear the heart of Aelindrach calling out to him for justice and vengeance. He had to fight back his eagerness to obey. There were always too many present, almost as if the shadow-king knew that he was marked for death.*

*The surviving brother had broken with the ancient pacts. He had used the font of ascension to vomit a great clot of deepest night into the roots of the old city where he now held court. The Decapitator had felt relief at Xhakoruakh's passage out of Aelindrach, but he also felt rage at his treatment of the shadow-skein. The corrupted king used the children and the realm as nothing more than tools for his ambition. For Kheradruakh the quintessence of Aelindrach was the lone hunter pitting itself against a hostile universe. Xhakoruakh acted like a bloated farmer tending a crop.*

*Kheradruakh gripped his long, straight blade and waited. An opportunity would come as it always did – vigilance would slip, watching eyes would tire. A day, a month, a year, the Decapitator would be ready and waiting when it did. Even now he could sense the approach of newcomers, more outsiders crashing into the pattern without subtlety or understanding. They formed a conflicting snarl of desires and motivations that held promise of distraction.*

*The Decapitator hovered close and watched their progress with sightless eyes.*

Xhakoruakh's new court was being held in what had once been the grand library of the coven of the Black Descent. It contained knowledge gathered from every corner of the known universe. Close-packed shelves stepped vertiginously upwards on walls that formed a teardrop-shaped space dominated by an ornate central cupola set with enormous lamps at its upper tip. Among all the dark places within the Black Descent's labyrinth the grand library was a unique point of brilliance. Clear, white light had bathed it continuously for centuries – not for the convenience of its users, but in the hopes it would hold back the children of Aelindrach.

Thousands of different forms of data storage were ranged on the steep shelves in the body of the

library, everything from clay tablets, scrolls of flayed skin and engraved bone steles to optiotronic pearls and crystalline wafers that could store more than the sum total of a hundred physical libraries. The subjects painstakingly collected by the coven ranged widely across arcane science and eldritch sorcery: hybridisation, eugenics, surgery, anatomy, bodily modification, dissection, vivisection, torture, the healing arts, biomechanics, toxins, pathogens...

The library represented a vast treasure trove of dusty learning that, for the most part, was left unread and forgotten about by the Black Descent. A pit at the base of the teardrop-shaped chamber acted as a direct gate to Aelindrach, a curiosity created by a haemonculus named Mhenthak millennia ago during a prior Dysjunction. Mhenthak was cast into the pit he'd made as punishment for his presumption, yet in later centuries the coven made frequent use of the access it granted to the denizens of Aelindrach. Agreements were made, slaves were traded and for untold thousands the brightly lit library became the last place in Commorragh they ever saw.

Khakoruakh's arrival had cracked the grand library like an egg. The great lamps mounted in the overhead cupola were all shattered, the splintered pieces of their lenses forming knee-deep drifts of broken crystal. The eyeless guardian creatures of the Black Descent were torn and scattered across the library stacks. Dense, black ganglia had erupted from the central pit like a monstrous fungus. Jagged strips of undulating shadow radiated from it in all directions to pierce the walls like bolts of dark lightning, thrusting deep into the guts of the city.

On every side beings of the shadow-realm lurked and cackled. They pawed through the forbidden knowledge without understanding, tore priceless volumes to shreds and flung illuminated leaves into the air like confetti. Tumbling books and scattered pages hung motionless overhead, caught in the radiant of dark channels like insects frozen in amber.

Bellathonis found the shadow-king enthroned on a mountainous pile of mouldering manuscripts, the charnel smell of his body mingling with the dusty scent of mildew. The rune-etched banners had been brought forth from his palace and planted around him like a forest of fast-growing weeds. The long silk banners rustled with otherworldly breezes and faint whispers as the haemonculus made his way through them with Xagor and the nightfiend at his side.

At times Bellathonis fancied he could hear not whispers, but faint, sibilant laughter from the fluttering silk. He could not shake the sensation of scrutiny, a feeling of being watched that had begun on the approach to his lab in the foundation strata and persisted ever since they had turned back. The haemonculus attempted to put it from his mind. He had returned to present bad news to the shadow-king so a sensation of paranoia was inevitable. Khakoruakh appeared deep in thought with his chin resting moodily on one fist, but as Bellathonis drew closer the shadow-king's featureless face turned towards him.

'Bellathonis,' Khakoruakh rumbled. 'Back so soon? Where are the others I sent with you?'

'Destroyed, along with my grotesques. We could not reach my laboratory,' Bellathonis began before Khakoruakh cut him off.

'A failure then. Another failure,' Khakoruakh said grimly before resting his chin back on his hulking

fist once more.

‘What’s important is *what* destroyed them,’ Bellathonis insisted. ‘There were Castigators in the tunnels, Vect’s creations – ghost warriors!’

‘This is known to me,’ the shadow-king grumbled morosely. ‘Reports flutter in with unwelcome candour to form a growing chorus. My followers are chased back into the deepest shadows, they are pursued like prey through the upper fastness...’

‘The Castigators’ perceptions can’t be easily blinded like a mortal’s,’ Bellathonis agreed hesitantly. ‘Their reputation of old depicts them as indefatigable hunters with sight so keen that they can see through lies and falsehoods.’

‘Then how can they be defeated,’ Xhakoruakh rumbled speculatively, ‘when their gaze pierces every shadow?’ Bellathonis decided to take the plunge and assume it wasn’t intended as a rhetorical question.

‘They are physical entities – heavily armed and armoured, certainly, but they can be defeated with conventional weaponry of the right sort – blasters, dark lances, disintegrators... I begin to see your problem, these are weapons you simply do not have. Perhaps we have to face up to the fact that your ambition exceeds your grasp at this time, Xhakoruakh, and concentrate on consolidating your gains. Let the kabalites worry about Vect’s Castigators–’

They were interrupted by the arrival of a mandrake. It slipped to the shadow-king’s side without so much as a sideways glance at Bellathonis, which came as an irritating but pertinent reminder of his status among Xhakoruakh’s followers. As the shadow-king listened to his minion’s whispers his lips peeled back to display a broad grin.

‘Good, bring them now,’ Xhakoruakh ordered and the mandrake retreated from his presence. The shadow-king rose from his rotting throne and flexed his corded arms so that the emerald runes inscribed on them seemed to crawl across his flesh.

‘You see?’ Xhakoruakh rumbled and pointed. ‘The all-father of the carved ones sends an answer to me in my time of need as he always does. Stay with me, haemonculus, and witness a dark miracle unfolding.’

Bellathonis and Xagor looked up expectantly and saw a small group of kabalites descending the ladders to the floor of the library. Bellathonis was shocked to recognise several of the individuals in the group, not least of all himself.

+Hello again, Bellathonis,+ Angevere whispered in his mind. +I am looking forward to hearing you try to worm your way out of this.+

Kharbyr had a bad feeling the moment they got to the library. The corridor they were following turned a corner and suddenly they were on the edge of a vast, dark chasm. The mandrakes wouldn’t allow White Flames warriors or the incubi to go any further so it was just the two Archons and him feeling their way forwards. He could hear stealthy movement all about him but he could barely see his hand in front of his face. There seemed to be racks or shelves to either side and a sloping ramp beneath their feet, but



what lay beyond only the Dark Muses knew. He shuffled along, trying to keep the vague smudge that he knew was Yllithian in sight. What made it especially difficult was that he was also trying to stay as far away from Xelian as possible.

The unmistakable taint of daemons hung about Xelian – a coppery taste of blood and gore, the electric sense of a caged beast ready to burst forth and wreak red ruin on everything around it. He wanted to warn Yllithian but he was too frightened to reveal what he knew. She would tear him apart just like the haemonculus she'd consumed at the sixty-fourth interstice.

+Don't think about that – keep your wits about you,+ Angevere whispered. +All our efforts are about to bear fruit, and for some it will be a bitter harvest.+

They climbed down ladders of twisted ironwork until they came to a floor that sloped very gently downwards. As they set foot on it the sense of dread that had been growing in Kharbyr's breast blossomed into cold certainty. They were in the presence of something otherworldly, a vast, monstrous entity that was alien and invisible but as real as the foetid breezes rippling against his cheek.

+Forward, child, your destiny awaits,+ Angevere whispered.

There was a sickly greenish glow nearby, a nest of pallid corpse-light that the mandrakes were leading them towards. As Kharbyr got closer he could see the luminescence came from long, tattered banners that seemed to have sprouted from the ground. Eye-twisting runes were emblazoned on them in strokes of emerald fire. A wash of fever-heat brushed Kharbyr's skin at the sight of them so that he quickly looked away again.

In the middle of the field of fluttering banners stood the biggest mandrake Kharbyr had ever seen. Mandrakes were normally waif-thin creatures with narrow shoulders and stooped backs, but this one was a hulking monstrosity on a par with the haemonculi's grotesques. It held a giant, rusty scythe and its skin writhed with the same twisted runes as were on the banners. The stink of daemons was everywhere; they were damned to die in that pit, Kharbyr was sure of it.

'I should have known,' Yllithian murmured to himself.

'Known what?' the shadowy giant boomed in a voice that seemed to roll up from unfathomable depths. 'That you would come beneath my heel? Kneel before XhakoruaKh, the true and only king of Aelindrach!'

'I think not,' Yllithian replied with breathtaking arrogance. 'You only give us audience because you need my help. Let's not waste our time playing games when we have a powerful mutual enemy – Asdrubael Vect – to contend with.'

'Bold words for a leader with so few followers,' XhakoruaKh grumbled.

'I am Archon Yllithian of the White Flames, and those few outside represent only a fraction of the numbers that pledge allegiance to me. Soon, with Archon Xelian's help, another one of the most powerful kabals in the city will be joining our fight against Vect. The days of Vect's tyranny are coming to an end, and all those who help to bring about his downfall will make their mark on this city as none have done in six thousand years!'

Even Kharbyr had to admit it was an impressive speech. XhakoruaKh, however, still seemed

sceptical. 'I have heard of the White Flames, but Commorrites are notorious for their lies and boasts,' the shadow-king grumbled. 'I'm fortunate to be blessed with minions who can tell me if you lie now. Bellathonis, do you know this individual to be Archon Yllithian?'

Kharbyr blinked in surprise at the giant mandrake addressing him. Then he realised that he wasn't the object of the shadow-king's query, the giant was addressing a shadowy figure standing half hidden behind the banners. Kharbyr recognised the silhouette immediately – it was his own.

'Bellathonis!' Kharbyr screamed, his legs already driving him forwards without conscious thought. 'Bellathonis, you bastard! Give me my body back!'

Angevere's insane laughter was echoing in his mind. The shadow-king turned and raised his scythe threateningly as Kharbyr dashed forwards. Xelian did nothing and Yllithian, after looking nonplussed for a second, simply watched him with hard, black eyes. Their faces and their actions were only a blur, a backdrop to the flapping banner and what was standing behind it. Kharbyr thrust the rotting silk aside and saw his own face – a visage that was pallid and strange yet still the same face he had seen every time he looked into a mirror.

Kharbyr reached out to grab his doppelgänger so that he could somehow pull himself back inside it where he belonged. He understood on some level that his mind was fracturing; the sight of his mirror-self was shattering him into a million shards of memory that tore at his soul. He screamed incoherently at the real Bellathonis, but the creature wearing his face slipped easily out of his grasp and pushed him away.

Suddenly there was a tearing sound in the air that evoked a frightful shard of memory in Kharbyr's tortured mind. From the corner of one eye he saw a blurred shape rushing towards him out of the dark, a smooth metallic form with a curving, scorpion-like tail. Flames jetted in front of Kharbyr's face, he spun and screamed again as he finally recognised the doom that was swooping down upon him.

The assassin-machine named 'Vhi' set its impellers to maximum for the final run in towards its target. The psychic traces had converged, they were strong and clear – almost boosted given the way that they resounded so firmly in Vhi's detection arrays. As it slid forwards Vhi experienced a rush of conflicting data that a mortal creature would have described as 'excitement'.

The prey had certainly been evasive, more tricky than anything contained in Vhi's memory engrams. The specialised Talos unit had used all of its patience and cunning to bring a positive conclusion to its primary directive. It had allowed a false-positive decoy to go free after the initial disappointment of first contact. It had waited at the target's primary habitat to reacquire it. Now that decision had been vindicated as it tracked a new trace through to a region of twisted extradimensional spaces where the paired psychic signals, false and true, were occupying virtually the same volume.

The hunt had been long and hard. Vhi's capacitor banks were virtually drained. Its compact internal power source was struggling to maintain all systems at full functionality, but there was no doubt that the target was now within range for termination. Vhi lavished the energy necessary into firing a bolt

from its heat lance to clear a wall in its way, bursting through it in a storm of molten shrapnel that had a high probability of inflicting collateral injury and inducing panic.

Vhi's sensors created a detailed snapshot of the space it had breached in less than a millisecond. It registered the teardrop-shaped space of the library, the stepped shelves and their contents, the cupola above and the forest of banners below in precise detail. The return for life forms present was less certain. Large numbers registered but the vast bulk of them were indistinct shadows caught in the act of recoiling from Vhi's entry.

Five life signs stood out distinctly near the bottom of the teardrop amidst the banners. Two of the life signs fulfilled the parameters for Vhi's primary target. Vhi had moved less than two metres into the library chamber in the time taken to detect them. It twisted sharply, lavishing more energy on its gravitic impellers as it dived. The air shrieked around its hull as Vhi dropped on its prey like a hawk.

The second it took to drop to the floor gave Vhi enough time to unleash another pulse from its heat lance. Thermal energy scoured a line across the location of the target traces and caused a momentary white-out in Vhi's sensor feed. By the time the glitch cleared Vhi was overrunning the target and close enough to lash out with its chainflails. The murder machine slewed sideways to skid over its victim, the high-speed flails ripping away chunks of flesh and extremities in an orgiastic welter of blood.

Vhi skidded to a halt with fires burning all around it, the forest of banners sprouting orange and yellow flowers as they were consumed. The Talos attempted to reacquire the psychic trace and for a frozen second found nothing but residuals. There were only two remaining detectable life signs and both were engaged in hostile activities. Vhi turned on them and made to lunge forwards but its dwindling reserves made the movement fatally sluggish. One of the life forms shot Vhi with a high-yield energy weapon at closer range, hitting the mid-dorsal carapace where its primary logic centres lay.

Cascade failure was almost instantaneous. Part of Vhi's consciousness was able to witness the rapid reduction in its faculties as the power spike burned its engrams into ash. Redundant fail-safes rerouted commands around the affected areas but it was fighting a losing battle. Self-destruct protocols went into effect, preparing Vhi's internal power source to detonate like a miniature sun.

The protocols were terminated abruptly by a large edged implement impacting directly on the damaged mid-dorsal carapace area. It struck with enough force to shear through Vhi entirely, instantly reducing its machine consciousness to a disparate shower of components. Vhi's last impressions were of a hulking yet still ill-defined life sign towering over it with a primitive agricultural implement in its hand. A virtually undetectable second entity, a shadow of a shadow, stood poised behind Vhi's slayer as if ready to strike. Vhi's final logic collapse came in a weltering of conflicting data that a mortal being might have felt as 'pride' and 'regret'.

*The outsiders had brought distraction and they had also brought death. The machine's sudden attack provided Kheradruakh with all the opening that he needed. He swarmed down from the dark spaces and dropped*

*behind Xhakoruaakh just as the shadow-king swung his scythe to cleave the machine in two. The Decapitator swung his own long, straight blade at the shadow-king's exposed neck with preternatural expertise...*



## CHAPTER 22

### NECESSARY ALLIES

Yllithian was startled for a second by Bellathonis's sudden fit of madness. Then, as he caught sight of Bellathonis's two agents lurking off to one side of the mandrake-king – Xagor and Kharbyr he recalled their names to be – all the pieces abruptly slid into place.

He had been played.

Bellathonis's whole scheme had been put in motion to bring him before this creature called Xhakoruakh. It all made sense now – Bellathonis had swapped bodies with one of his agents. The individual that had led Yllithian through the labyrinth was not the haemonculus at all but one of its hapless subordinates. Yllithian knew quite well that Bellathonis was capable of such miracles; he'd performed one for him, too, by transmigrating his soul so that he could escape the glass plague consuming his old body.

The plan seemed to have gone awry now that the false-Bellathonis was attacking his supposed minions. Xhakoruakh appeared to be just as bemused as he was by the turn of events and for a moment Yllithian felt a perverse twist of empathy for the hulking monstrosity. They were both leaders being beset by the machinations of their inferiors.

Yllithian laid a hand on the grip of his pistol instinctively. The mandrakes had taken his sword but left him with his far deadlier blast pistol still holstered in plain view. Yllithian was torn between a desire to eliminate Bellathonis and his minions for their presumption in manipulating him or enjoying a certain admiration for the nuances of the scheme. In either case the question remained – why had he done it?

The answer came with an explosion and the shriek of superheated air. Yllithian sprang to one side with his pistol drawn as a hurtling shape wreathed in flames erupted from a wall overhead and plummeted towards him. He fired a shot at it purely by instinct; it fired back at him in the same moment.

They both missed, a vivid line of fire flashing over Yllithian's head just as his blaster bolt careened past the thing's shining carapace. He tracked it trying to get another shot as it hurtled overhead, following the course of the flame etched by its fire lance before landing a few metres away. It skidded sideways into the individual that Yllithian had been thinking of as Bellathonis and ripped him to pieces

in the blink of an eye.

It was a Talos, much smaller than the one they'd encountered earlier but no less deadly. Its scorpion tail whipped around as Yllithian steadied his pistol in both hands and fired, hitting it squarely on its curved prow. The blaster bolt punched a fist-sized crater straight through the armour and into the machine's delicate innards. It seemed to stagger in the air and then dipped forwards to accelerate, gathering itself to lunge at Yllithian like a wounded animal.

The shadow giant, Xhakoruakh, appeared suddenly at the machine's flank. He seemed to simply ooze out of the air like a smoky cloud gathering out of nothing. The heavy, rusted scythe was still in the mandrake-king's hands and he swept it straight through the Talos, cutting it in two. The sundered components crashed to the ground with a despairing shriek of tortured metal.

Yllithian immediately pointed his pistol towards the roof to show he intended no harm to the king. As he did so Xelian sprinted past him with her blade drawn – running straight at Xhakoruakh. Yllithian opened his mouth to shout at her to stop, but in that moment he saw what she had already seen. A second shadowy shape was materialising *behind* Xhakoruakh. Xelian leapt forwards just as the apparition swung a long, straight blade at the mandrake-king's neck.

Xelian's outstretched blade could not possibly block the blow in time, but she did deflect it. Xhakoruakh, already twisting away from Xelian's apparent attack, was struck in the shoulder instead. The shadowy giant roared in pain and outrage as the sharp sword carved a deep furrow across its broad back, but he was alive to roar about it. Xelian rolled and came up on her feet ready to confront their new assailant – only to find that it had already vanished.

Silence fell across the scene save for the crackle of flames and the cursing of the mandrake-king. Beyond the circle lit by the fires Yllithian could sense the mandrakes were gathering, angry and confused by what had occurred. He was about to order Bellathonis to tend to the injured king when he realised the haemonculus's two minions – Xagor and Kharbyr – had both vanished.

'Yllithian, what the hell's going on here?' Xelian demanded, eyeing the circling mandrakes warily.

'Bellathonis manoeuvred us into a place to kill us, along with good king Xhakoruakh here,' Yllithian replied firmly. 'I trust you will have the good grace to live, Xhakoruakh, you seem like a sturdy sort.'

The giant mandrake shook himself like a dog and the drooling blackness that was spilling from his wounds lessened. 'Only a scratch,' Xhakoruakh rumbled in evident pain. 'Why would the haemonculus betray me? He has served faithfully.'

'That is his way,' Yllithian sighed bitterly. 'He will faithfully serve one master until he betrays them for another. Vect is behind this, I guarantee it – Bellathonis's most recent interaction with you will give a clue as to why.'

'He had just returned from the upper city with news that Vect has released his Castigators,' Xhakoruakh said uncertainly. 'He told me that we needed weapons, weapons we do not have, if we were to prevail.'

'You see – he had already taken the decision to betray you, he was citing your weakness,' Yllithian continued confidently. 'When the haemonculus learned you were meeting with myself and Xelian – the

ones who could supply the weapons you so badly need – he had to make his move, and is so often the case he fell victim to his own murderous schemes.’

Xelian had a look on her face that veered between incredulity and pride at Yllithian’s tale-spinning. XhakoruaKh was unreadable, his formless face a perfect mask, yet Yllithian felt that the king’s body language indicated he was being swayed. Further embroidering of the truth was interrupted by shouts and the clash of weapons from the tunnel mouth they had used to enter the library.

‘My followers are merely concerned for our safety,’ Yllithian explained. ‘I will go to them and explain what’s occurred. When I return we can talk in more detail about just how we can help one another, king XhakoruaKh.’

XhakoruaKh felt gingerly at his neck and slowly nodded.

Hours later Xelian was clinging to the underside of a bridge in High Commorrhagh. She relaxed one limb at a time to keep her long muscles limber as she waited. A swarm of mandrakes hung silently near her, clustering like bats on the ornately fashioned bridge supports.

She reflected on how fortunes could be changed so quickly. Her time in the labyrinth of the Black Descent was already fading from her mind. She had become a mindless thing living purely on rage and hate while she was trapped in there. The experience had been a crimson blur underscored by a growing sense of anticipation that she would one day be free. Now that she was free and whole again the memory of it was sloughing away like a discarded snakeskin.

Yllithian was always so hard at work trying to manipulate everything, while Xelian was more inclined to deal with one thing at a time. On this occasion, however, she had to admit that Yllithian’s constant scheming had borne some useful fruit over and above setting her free. A deal had been struck with the mandrakes; Yllithian would support them and they would join their forces with his to fight against Vect. Everyone present knew that the alliance would last for precisely as long as it took to defeat the supreme overlord and not a minute longer. Given the present alternatives that tacit act of betrayal seemed a positively desirable outcome to look forward to.

The bridge she clung to crossed between two closely set spires that were themselves merely finials on a greater, multi-tiered colossus. They were positioned not far from Xelian’s own fortress, or rather the fortress currently occupied by the usurper of her kabal, Aez’ashya. The two peaks formed a narrow canyon several hundred metres in length that passed beneath several other connecting bridges. Below them Xelian could see the curved terraces that were cut into the flanks of the spires stepping down into the gloom. Several of them had once been filled with water and walled with crystal. These had now all been shattered and their contents dumped out onto lower terraces where a few pools still gleamed in the wan light of the Ilmaea.

Movement on one of the lower terraces drew Xelian’s attention. Two Castigators were striding across it, their long metallic limbs catching the light as they searched for enemies. She found herself holding her breath until they stalked out of sight. The idea of them noticing her at such a distance was

ridiculous, but her subconscious self seemed to believe otherwise. The Castigators had barely left her field of vision when she caught another flicker of movement at the other end of the canyon. This was the one she'd been waiting for.

A single Venom grav slewed around the corner and dipped its nose to start a high-speed run along the canyon. The Venom was one of Yllithian's. He'd told her a handful of his craft had managed to escape the White Flames fortress before it was besieged. Now they were scattered in hiding around the city until they were needed in special tasks. Seconds behind the Venom a shoal of reaver jetbikes came screaming around the corner in hot pursuit. Splinter rifles flashed beneath the reavers' curving prows as they looped wildly to make attacks on the fleeing Venom. Xelian could recognise the insignia on the jetbikes and even some of their riders – they were hers, reavers from the Blades of Desire.

The Venom had got a head start accelerating down the straight, so its larger engines were already pouring out maximum thrust before the reavers came around the corner. Even so, once the reavers hit their turbo-boosters the larger craft was being rapidly overhauled. Xelian counted six reavers in total all spread out in a loose line. They'd abandoned using their guns in favour of milking every ounce of speed possible out of their bikes. Xelian knew what they were thinking – now it was a race between themselves to see who could overtake the Venom first and bring it down with a well-placed sideswipe using their wickedly hooked bladevanes. With the Venom boxed in by the vertical spire walls on either side it had no chance of escape.

The Venom flashed past just metres beneath Xelian. She caught a glimpse of the pilot's face twisting up to look at her with wide eyes full of fear and elation. Then the wedge-shape of the Venom was gone only for the space to be instantly filled by the wasp-like hull of one of the reavers in pursuit.

Xelian leapt.

She was aware of the mandrakes jumping too, a curious sort of folding then reappearing like wings opening and closing. It reminded her of bats again. The wych on the reaver below saw her coming and tried to twist aside. He was too slow. Xelian crashed into his shoulder feet-first, her armoured sabatons breaking the wych's arm and collarbone with a sickening crunch. The wych's scream was lost in the howl of the jetbike's engines.

The momentum of the jetbike spun Xelian aside as it carried on careering forwards. She turned the motion into a back flip as she lashed out at the rider with a razor-flail. The jointed blade of the flail wrapped around the wych's neck, half decapitating him. It also anchored itself deeply enough to drag Xelian in the jetbike's wake as it nosed over into a death-dive.

The white-hot jets of the reaver's drive unit blazed only centimetres from her face as she struggled to pull herself aboard. She grabbed for a bladevane and felt it cut through her gauntlets as she used it to lever herself forwards against the mounting g-forces. The curving terraces of the spire's flank were sweeping past almost within touching distance by the time she kicked the wych's body out of the seat and grabbed the controls. She cut the power and fought to drag the machine out of its dive, hauling it up just short of disaster.

It was so much fun being alive again. She owed Yllithian for that if nothing else.



The mandrakes had killed all of the other reavers by the time she got back up to them. At least that's what she guessed from the five fresh, smoking holes in the canyon walls. Of the mandrakes themselves and Yllithian's Venom there was no sign. Xelian shrugged to herself. The plan assumed she would be on her own from this moment forward. The truth was she preferred it that way. She twisted the throttle on the jetbike and it shot away, taking her home.

Aez'ashya, Archon of the Blades of Desire, strode rapidly down a ramp in her fortress towards another disturbance in the reaver bays. She tried to think of it as her fortress, her domain, even though it didn't really feel like it belonged to her at all. There were always furtive eyes watching her from corners, or whispering groups of kabalites falling silent at her approach. No one had plucked up the courage to challenge her for the place of Archon yet, but it was coming.

In the mid-tier kabals of Commorragh a change of Archon was commonplace, the kabals themselves morphing and combining with dizzying regularity. In High Commorragh things were more static. The changeover in leadership for a kabal as large as the Blades of Desire should have been momentous, a major power shift. Instead it felt as if none of the kabalites really believed they had a new Archon and still thought of Aez'ashya only as a glorified caretaker.

She'd done what she could; she'd defeated all of her challengers and led the kabal to war. She'd even been to Corespur and met with Vect when he assembled his High Archons after the Dysjunction. It hadn't been enough. Yllithian had survived her betrayal in the battle over Gorath, which put Aez'ashya out of favour with Vect. The kabal had taken heavy losses between fighting minions of Chaos and White Flames on top of those already incurred in the Dysjunction itself. None of her efforts had been enough, all because of Xelian.

Xelian remained undefeated. Her body had been spirited away after what looked like a botched assassination attempt. Aez'ashya had found herself propelled into the vacant position of Archon as if by an invisible hand. She had seized the opportunity and fought successfully to keep that position. Even after her secret patron had abruptly stopped helping her she kept fighting, but it felt like it was a losing battle. With the final fate of Xelian still uncertain it was impossible to entirely escape from beneath her shadow.

She could hear a gabble of raised voices from further down the ramp. One of the reaver gangs had probably come back with more hair-raising stories: ghost warriors on the streets, the White Flames' rebellion and mandrakes invading from Aelindrach. The agitation to get back out and participate in the fighting would already be starting. That meant Aez'ashya would be spilling more blood just to keep the kabalites in line.

As she approached there was a sudden change in the timbre of the noise. Instead of many voices talking over each other they were all speaking as one. Aez'ashya broke into a run, sprinting down the ramp with a small part of her wondering if she was heading the wrong way.

They were chanting Xelian's name.

Aez'ashya clattered into the reaver bay to find dozens of wyches, hellions, scourges and beastmasters already there. Others were arriving by the minute through other entrances so for the moment Aez'ashya's arrival went unnoticed. In the middle of the bay there was a damaged jetbike trailing a thin plume of smoke, scrape marks showed where it had careened into the open bay before skidding to a halt.

Xelian was standing on top of the long, curved prow of the jetbike with one arm raised in acknowledgement of her crowd of cheering celebrants. She was tall and regal-looking despite being dressed in patchwork armour that looked like it had been looted from the dead. Xelian seemed to sense Aez'ashya's eyes on her and turned towards her, smiling.

Aez'ashya didn't wait for Xelian to make her whole I-have-returned speech. Instead she whipped out her pistol and started shooting, reasoning that giving Xelian any time to prepare for some formal duel would give away an advantage. As quick as Aez'ashya was Xelian saw the move coming and dived into the crowd to avoid it before anyone else realised what was happening. Aez'ashya's splinter rounds ploughed into a hellion and a wych standing behind the jetbike instead of her intended target. Both targets folded up with surprised grunts that alerted the crowd.

Before the bodies even hit the floor the shooting triggered unforeseen consequences. The different gangs in the bay each assumed the others were trying to kill Xelian. Weapons were drawn and fighting erupted immediately as each faction turned on another group of supposed traitors. Aez'ashya laughed to see the kabal start tearing itself apart so readily. Some of the Blades of Desire were apparently so dedicated to the idea of their dead Archon that they would turn on each other like rabid dogs in her presence.

'Enough!' Xelian's voice rang out over the conflict and suddenly every hand was stilled. Aez'ashya couldn't believe what she was seeing. The normally raucous, unruly wyches and hellions ceased fighting as promptly as cadets receiving an order. Xelian broke cover, sprinting towards Aez'ashya with a razor-flail whirling in one hand. The surviving Blades of Desire scattered into the far corners of the bay to watch avidly as the duel unfolded.

Aez'ashya abandoned her pistol immediately – if she missed her one shot as Xelian closed in she would never get a second one. Instead she sprang back and drew her own twin knives in readiness for close combat.

The razor-flail was a Commorrite weapon that ably demonstrated its origins both in its multifaceted fighting style and its inherent dangerousness to its wielder. In essence it was a segmented sword with a flexible core. That allowed it to be wielded like a whip or, as the name suggested, a razor-edged flail. However, the segments could be brought together and locked with a mere flick of the wrist, instantly transforming the flexible razor-edged flail into a rigid, saw-toothed sword or vice versa.

Aez'ashya ducked under Xelian's opening swing with the razor-flail. She came up fast with her knives ready for when Xelian locked the segments of the flail and made a blindingly quick reverse cut with the sword she now held. Aez'ashya knew the fighting style, a complex weaving of feints and

counters using the weapon's chimeric capabilities to best effect. She pressed in closer where her knives would have the advantage, forcing Xelian to keep the razor-flail rigid to parry a storm of successive stabs and cuts.

Xelian gave ground coolly, swaying aside from thrusts and blocking slashes with infuriating self-confidence. Aez'ashya started to deliberately drive her towards the open side of the bay where there was a drop of hundreds of metres down onto the flank of the fortress. Xelian moved readily in front of her attacks, so much so that Aez'ashya had to hurry to keep up.

She clung grimly to her opponent, matching moves step for step as the edge of the bay got closer. If Xelian opened the distance she could take the offensive again, shake out her flail and weave a web of razor-edged doom in an instant. Instead Xelian stepped aside and made an almost languid counterattack. As Aez'ashya parried it Xelian loosened the segments of the flail, allowing it to swing flexibly around the blocking blade and bury itself in Aez'ashya's upper arm.

Aez'ashya hissed and thrust out wildly with her other blade. Xelian simply stepped back, whipping the flail back to lacerate Aez'ashya's bicep in the process. Aez'ashya dropped immediately into a defensive stance in anticipation of Xelian continuing her attack, but her opponent simply stood her ground and smiled.

'First blood,' Xelian purred. 'You're mine now.'

Xelian sprang, her limbs blurring as she charged. Her attack broke on Aez'ashya like a furious whirlwind, the flail whipping in from every angle so fast it seemed to be in two places at once. For Aez'ashya, already weakening from the blood leaking from her lacerated arm, it was all she could do to stay alive. The sharp hooks on the flail scratched at her arms and legs, lashed at her face.

It was Aez'ashya's turn to be driven back. Xelian circled her back towards the damaged jetbike in the centre of the bay. There seemed to be an almost solid ring of kabalites forming around them as more and more Blades of Desire arrived to see the battle. It was turning into an arena in miniature with the vicarious anticipation of the crowd building higher with each caress of steel on flesh. Aez'ashya gasped as she realised that Xelian was toying with her, arousing her followers' bloodlust with a martial display before slaking it as she went in for the kill.

Aez'ashya refused to die like an arena slave being slowly slaughtered for entertainment. She hurled herself bodily at Xelian, her knives arrowing straight for the bitch's heart. Xelian darted aside from her rush, looping the razor-flail around her ankle as she stumbled. Xelian pulled and sent Aez'ashya crashing to the floor of the bay with her foot all but severed.

The knives went flying from her hands as she fell, so she crawled after them, ignoring the furnace blast of pain from her legs. Xelian's next strikes took her hands at the wrists and then more blows sent bolts of agony through her dimming consciousness. Before long everything was a red haze overlaid by the chanting of a name. A name that Aez'ashya had never been able to escape.

Xelian.



## CHAPTER 23

### THE ICONOCLAST

*The Decapitator seethed with black rage in the angles between Commorrhagh and Aelindrach. He had been denied his prey. Long ages of the universe had passed since the last time that had occurred. He blamed himself for his impatience, his recklessness. The window of opportunity had been too narrow to strike, just as he'd known it was, but his eagerness to slay Xhakoruakh had driven him into the fray anyway.*

*The outsiders had been his undoing. Seeing Xhakoruakh's original allies flee before the killing machine gave the illusion of opportunity. He had ignored the presence of the newcomers and focused on a speedy execution. Foolish pride. Shameful failure. The swirl of negative outcomes threatened to drown him in unwanted possibilities.*

*In the midst of it all Kheradruakh found a place of inner calm. It was as if the abyssal sea of Aelindrach reached out to gather him to its dark, cold bosom. He floated there at peace for a time, far from the storm-wracked surface world with its outsiders and apostates. He soothed himself with the thought of caressing Xhakoruakh's neck with his blade once more.*

*The moment would come again.*

*Just as it always did.*

'Why?'

'The Talos would have killed me first otherwise.'

'...'

'Xagor, I think you're just getting confused. Kharbyr was the one killed back there buying us time to escape, not me. I'm right here just as I have been all along.'

'No more mandrakes?'

'No. Xhakoruakh's cause is lost. Even with Yllithian's help he can't beat the Castigators and the Black Heart kabal combined. Anyway, if he won it would mean plague and a slow death for the city and we don't want that, do we? This is the only sensible course of action.'

'This one understands,' Xagor said morosely as they hurried on their way. The wrack had a curiously shifty look about him that had been absent prior to their close call in the library. Xagor's loyalty had

been tested on numerous previous occasions, but this time the results were unacceptably opaque.

+Why won't you have the good grace to just roll over and die?+ Angevere sneered in the back of his mind. Sneering at him was the most harm she could do at the moment, so she was doing it constantly. Bellathonis, on the other hand, was growing accustomed to ignoring her.

They were still somewhere in Low Commorragh – of that much Bellathonis was certain. The shadowy conduit they'd fled down out of the library had dumped them a good distance away from the labyrinth of the Black Descent. Possibly they were somewhere on the top of Nightsound Ghulen if the reedy fens were anything to go by.

'Come on, Xagor, here – you can carry Angevere for a while to keep you company.' Bellathonis tried to sound cheery, but he had a suspicion that it just sounded patronising when he did so. Xagor sullenly took the cylinder containing Angevere's head from him and they continued to travel, wordlessly for a time, across the boggy ground towards an immense, baroquely inscribed slope in the distance. The gloom of Aelindrach afflicted the place such that they moved in perpetual twilight, although the slope ahead gleamed golden as if it were being lit from above.

They were travelling swiftly using the same kind of shadow-walking they'd learned in Aelindrach, slipping in and out of the angles between the dimensions. Packs of ur-ghuls lurked in the distance, but none of them interfered with their rapid progress. Banks of black muck and narrow streams drifted past them like insubstantial clouds blowing in the wind. Even so it was going to be a long climb up to Corespur.

+You're insane. If you go to Corespur Vect will do things to you that even you will find distressing. I'm sure he's had cause to punish haemonculi before. There will be ways.+

Bellathonis stifled an inner sigh. There had been a time when just moving out of arm's reach was enough to escape Angevere's mind-speech. Unfortunately the crone was becoming stronger or more skilled with practice. He answered her directly to keep her engaged while he locked away his own thoughts deep inside his mind.

'Boredom, primarily, is the best way to inflict suffering on a haemonculus,' Bellathonis opined airily. 'Oh, some have addictions to tinctures and potions they make for themselves, or for the suffering of amazingly obscure and irrelevant races of particular profiles. You can make them squeal just by taking their favourite toys away. For most haemonculi, however, a simple absence of stimulus has them screaming and crying in no time.'

+How dull. Well at least I now know what Vect will do with you – he'll wall you up somewhere and leave you to die of starvation. I've heard that's a horrible, excruciating death so there'll be some 'stimulus' for you in that, I suppose.+

'Oh Angevere, if only I'd known how deeply you cared for my well-being I wouldn't have allowed us to be parted for so long,' Bellathonis replied sweetly. 'I swear I'll never let you out of my sight again.'

That prospect seemed to quieten the crone down for a while. For all her bluster and hate she still feared Bellathonis. The haemonculus made a mental note to reacquaint her with the exact reasons why at the first opportunity.

The slope swelled up before them, becoming ever more complex and granular the closer they got to it. Finally they were climbing a dust dune that had accumulated at the foot of the incline. Large pieces of statuary projected from the dust at random intervals. Some were identifiable – a foot, an eye, a hand – others were seemingly random textures on ragged chunks of stone. The diversity of styles and materials present would have seemed remarkable if it were not completely overwhelmed by the constituents of the slope itself.

The slope stretching above them was entirely composed of similar pieces both larger and smaller than the mere fragments that had fallen into the dust dune below. Bits and pieces of crowned heads, sceptres, angelic wings, rune-carved tablets, rods, chains, clocks, icons, swords, torches, plants and animals were jumbled together. There were untold thousands of broken sculptures, pictures and objects in the mound, of all shapes and sizes, from hand-sized statuettes to oversized idols with hints of a few truly titanic-sized pieces deeper inside. Nearly all of it was either made of gold or covered in it, the acres of peeling gold leaf seeming to shimmer with an inner light all of their own.

There were empty sockets showing where gems had been inlaid in some pieces, evidence that scavengers had been hard at work. Even priceless stones from the outer worlds were mere baubles in Commorrhagh, where only psychically imbued spirit stones held the value of true treasures. The lowliest beggars – the lame and the parched – must have picked over this pile of discarded plunder but they had been too frightened to touch the gold.

‘What place is this? Xagor does not know it,’ Xagor asked.

‘I recognise it. It’s called the Iconoclast’s mound,’ Bellathonis replied. ‘Raiding parties coming in through Port Carmine used to dump religious artefacts they’d taken – objects of faith, relics, icons – off the high roadway when they re-entered the city. It started as a joke, so I hear, but over time it became something of a tradition.’

High above, at the fringe of perception there was a dark line where the slope terminated against one of the armoured eaves of Port Carmine. Higher still the protruding spires of High Commorrhagh could be seen and somewhere above them, invisible from so far down in the city, Sorrow Fell and Corespur.

The shadow-skein of Aelindrach terminated at the foot of the slope and climbed no higher, seemingly repelled by its presence. Bellathonis consoled himself that it was probably best to stay out of the dark angles for the remainder of their journey anyway – Xhakoruakh’s minions would be looking for him.

‘That isn’t really why it’s called the Iconoclast’s mound, you know,’ a cheery voice called from above them. Bellathonis snapped his gaze to the source and saw a slight figure in grey emerging from between two broken halves of an immense face.

‘Motley!’ Xagor bleated in shock. The figure bowed extravagantly before springing lightly down the jumbled slope towards them.

+Beware! This one serves She Who Thirsts!+ Angevere hissed. Bellathonis blinked in surprise. The

smiling Harlequin, for it was certainly one of those strange nomads approaching them, certainly didn't look possessed – but you never could tell.

'Oh! Fie on you, head-in-a-tube!' Motley cried in mock outrage while wagging a finger in admonishment. 'My first and only master is the Laughing God, arrangements with the doom of our kind notwithstanding, as you must well know. I think you're trying to turn Bellathonis against me when we've only just met!'

'You have... the advantage of me, Motley,' Bellathonis said cautiously. 'You appear to know of me and I don't know you, other than via Xagor's rather sketchy description of his encounter with you in the webway. Based on that I'm to understand that I owe you my thanks for his safe return.'

'Oh, no need to thank me, you old monster!' Motley grinned and clapped him on the shoulder with surprising strength. 'I didn't really have much choice. Things were already in motion at that point and leaving your little group to die in the webway would have made it all so, so much worse. It was all damage control by that stage.'

'You mean on Lileathanir?'

'I mean the Dysjunction in general.'

'Ah,' Bellathonis replied with a sudden qualm. This smiling, friendly little fellow had the look of a killer about him. He spread his hands in a gesture that encompassed the whole city as he replied with spiteful honesty, 'I regret that your efforts have not been more successful.'

Motley smiled again, more grimly this time. 'Just think how much worse it could have been – but I'm not here for recriminations, not this time. I'd actually just come here for quiet to have a bit of a think, and then you – the answer to my problem – just walk straight up to me! How fantastic is that?'

'Enough to give one a belief in divine intervention,' Bellathonis responded warily, 'which is ironic given our surroundings.'

Motley's laughter was clear and genuine, ringing blasphemously across the broken icons. 'Oh! My! Yes, yes it is, my dear haemonculus, and in ways you cannot imagine. You see the origins of the Iconoclast's mound go way, way back – all the way back to before The Fall. When the people found they had become gods themselves they had no further use for graven images and imaginary friends. They threw them in the rubbish: Asuryan, Lileath, Isha, Kurnous, Khaine and all the rest...

'Later, when they stole similar artefacts from other races, they did the same thing. They threw such plunder down among their own broken gods to show that there was no higher power, no saviour, no immortal plan. Everything was damned for all eternity. So they wanted to believe because it made their own damnation easier to bear – and do you want to know the even greater irony? The bits and pieces of the eldar gods are still down there, broken and forgotten at the bottom of the pile, buried under a spoil heap being made ever higher by hatred and hubris. Now how's *that* for a metaphor?'

Motley laughed again with more than a touch of madness. Bellathonis looked at Xagor and the wrack shrugged helplessly back at him. 'Was like this before,' Xagor said, 'but laughed less at own jokes.'

Bellathonis nodded and casually laid a hand on his pistol. 'I think I'm going to have to insist on you

telling me what your intentions are,' Bellathonis said reasonably over Motley's maniacal peals of merriment. 'We have a long way to go and we can afford no additional impediments, however entertaining they may purport to be.'

Motley wiped tears from his eyes and calmed himself. 'Ah, excuse me for that, things had been getting so grim lately that I'd almost forgotten why I came... and it's almost here – the big show! No time for you to reach your seats now without a little help. Luckily for you helping is my business.'

+He will swallow your soul, Bellathonis. You're damned by even talking to him. Accept no help from this creature and move on.+

Reverse psychology? It seemed so crude on Angevere's part that it gave Bellathonis pause for thought. 'Tell me your intentions more plainly,' he told the chuckling Harlequin. 'What do you mean by "the big show"? Why are you saying we're too late?'

Motley pointed up into the skies high above the Iconoclast's mound, up past Port Carmine to the spiretops of High Commorragh where the *Ilmaea* shone clearly. There was turmoil in the upper air, vast numbers of objects swirling and crackling with distant lightning.

'The overture is beginning,' Motley said, suddenly serious. 'I'll help you to reach Corespur in the blink of an eye – it's dangerous, but what isn't right now? I'll even make sure you can meet with Vect and explain yourself to him, cut a deal, fall on his non-existent mercy – whatever it is you hope to do.'

'Why?' Bellathonis's question was flat and suspicious-sounding. Motley's lips quirked into a smile before he answered.

'Because I'm Vect's agent!' Motley cried pompously. 'Or so some would have me believe, but mostly because if the supreme overlord has you to focus on then maybe, just maybe, he might relent and stop the slaughter.'

'Hmm, so what you are really saying is that you intend to take me before Vect whether I like it or not,' Bellathonis said and gripped his pistol more tightly.

It was a futile gesture, he knew; everything he'd ever read about Harlequins emphasised how dangerous they were beneath their exterior projection of fun and frivolity. Coming from scholars with a fine interest in dangerous psychopaths such conclusions could not be dismissed lightly.

'Am I?' Motley pondered the notion for a moment and then looked back at Bellathonis without any trace of humour in his eyes.

'I am,' the Harlequin announced firmly.





## CHAPTER 24

### WHITE FLAMES, BLACK HEART

Valossian Sythrac gazed hatefully across the smoking plain at the shimmering walls and high-peaked roofs of the White Flames fortress. All efforts to take the place had been suspended on the supreme overlord's orders, the latest in a stream of nonsensical and seemingly contradictory instructions coming down from Vect's ziggurat. Frustrated, Sythrac was reduced to drifting slowly around the perimeter of the siege in a Raider in the hopes that Yllithian and his lackeys would seize the opportunity to sally out and attack him. His menagerie of captured souls babbled and shifted restlessly on the edge of his consciousness, seeming to feed on his discontent.

Sythrac still had faith in Vect – no doubt the supreme overlord was preparing something he simply did not need to know about in order to perform his function. He told himself he accepted that blindness being imposed on him as necessary to enact Vect's will, but a small part of him questioned that necessity.

The ravaged plain around the White Flames fortress had become a killing field for both sides. The surrounding spires had all fallen, the foundation strata was full of rents and gouges so deep that in five spots they went all the way through to the lower city. Despite all the violence the White Flames fortress still stood proud and defiant behind fields of seemingly impenetrable force. Anything moving in the open plain was annihilated by the emplaced weapons of the fortress or by the surrounding Black Heart forces hovering just beyond the fortress's range. They were deadlocked.

As a result the fighting had become desultory, limited to squads picking their way through the tunnels in the foundation strata or attempting to dig new ones. Desperate, frenzied battles between groups of mandrakes, Castigators, kabalites and ur-ghuls were taking place just a few metres beneath the surface in spaces barely big enough to swing a weapon. The mandrakes and ur-ghuls were still massing, their numbers increasing by the hour. The arrival of the Castigators had acted to stabilise the situation but had done nothing to alleviate it.

Sieges, stalemate, tunnelling, stagnation – none of it was the Commorrite way. Sythrac's early successes had given his force momentum and instilled a sense of purpose. The longer they sat still besieging the White Flames the more that energy drained away and left them vulnerable. Every kabal in the city was watching the siege and in their eyes the mere fact that Vect was not winning it meant

that he was losing it.

The ghosts swirled again, unable to conceal their awareness of a new development. A flicker of movement near the base of the fortress caught Sythrac's attention. A moment later his warriors on the Raider saw it too, pointing and crying the alarm. Lines of tiny figures were debouching from gates in the fortress that were level with the blasted plain. As Sythrac watched docks in the upper towers opened up too. The lean bodies of Raiders and Ravagers began to slide out of them with their aethersails spread for combat.

The White Flames forces began forming up in the plain. They were careful to remain safely under the protection of the fortress guns and out of range, but otherwise they were clear in their intent to offer battle. Sythrac wondered what sort of madness had gripped Yllithian. As impressive as the White Flames numbers looked the Black Heart kabal easily outnumbered them by five to one. A feint then, an attempt to draw Sythrac in just as he had hoped to draw Yllithian out.

The ghost of Daryvitch Helstrab, who had once been the grand marshal of a sixty-year campaign across the Platea Rift, whispered of an alternative scenario to Sythrac. A relief force was coming. Sythrac dragged his attention away from the White Flames' distracting little parade out on the plain and squinted towards Ashkeri Talon and the docking ring. Sure enough a swarm of distant specks was coming into view and becoming denser by the second. The disembodied voices of his spies whispered in his ear describing the approach of multiple grav-craft with no positive identification displayed as yet.

Sythrac cursed and sent word of his intentions to Vect's floating citadel. He also requested the help of the Castigators, but he did not wait for a response. He divided his forces, one part moving to intercept the relieving force while the greater part remained to guard the fortress and prepare to meet any sally by its defenders. The odds were shifting in Yllithian's favour. The situation was still far from being critical but the trend was a disturbing one. Sythrac felt eager to rectify that fact.

Xelian felt the wind whipping through her hair and laughed as they plunged towards the White Flames fortress. Her personal Venom transport clove through the air eagerly, bucking beneath her feet as the pilot sent it hurtling through the thin air of High Commorrhagh towards her date with destiny. Around her packs of reavers and hellions raced to overtake one another (although they never, ever passed her, she would have killed them if they tried). Behind her the sky was dark with more Venoms plus Raiders full of wyches and beastmasters with their savage pets. Razorwings and Voidravens circled overhead giving them top cover.

It was an impressive showing, better than she'd hoped for. Every member of the Blades of Desire that could walk or hold a weapon was crammed onboard the transports or piloting one of the craft within the swarm. Xelian had left her fortress empty and virtually unguarded to bring everything to the fight. Leaving forces behind to keep an open line of retreat would only signal weakness to her followers. This was the point of decision, all or nothing.

They had swung out high and wide around the docking ring to avoid attention until they turned in

towards their objective. Xelian led the swarm in a sweeping turn to place the city squarely in front of them. The stacked tiers of foundation strata and spires expanded before them, revealing a circular gap in the spire tops with the ivory spike of the White Flames fortress at its centre. Smoke and flames wreathed the fortress but it still stood unbroken. Around it a slowly rotating storm cell of grav-craft and scourges wheeled endlessly at a safe distance, too cowardly to take on Yllithian's guns – just as he'd said they would be.

They swooped in towards the battleground, the Razorwings and Voidravens surging ahead to begin their complex dance with their opposite numbers in Vect's forces. Missiles rippled from the flyers' wings as the two sides closed in. A chain of brief flashes marked the deaths of pilots and machines just before the survivors converged into an inextricable, constantly twisting knot of hunters and hunted.

Xelian's remaining forces slipped beneath the airborne melee without slowing. Her own pilots could only keep Vect's busy for so long before numbers began to tell and she intended to capitalise fully on that time. Part of the outer ring of Vect's besiegers was peeling off to meet her. They were ragged and slow but evidently determined to make Xelian fight before she could gain the support of her allies inside the fortress. Again, just as Yllithian had predicted.

There was barely time to identify the enemies rising to meet them. Distant Raiders and Ravagers swelled rapidly. In the course of a few seconds they grew from miniscule dark scratches outlined against the battle plain into baroquely bladed swords aiming straight for the heart of Xelian's swarm. A lethal web of darklight beams, disintegrator pulses and hyper-velocity splinters criss-crossed between the two forces in the instant before impact. Reavers exploded, Raiders gouted flames and fell away before Xelian's force smashed into their challengers with a physical shock that resounded throughout the spires of High Commorragh.

Reaver bladevanes tore through metal and flesh as they careened through the enemy ranks close enough to touch. Wyches dived from their hurtling Venoms onto the pitching decks of enemy craft as they swept past. Hellions slashed at warriors and were blasted from their skyboards in return. The aerial battle rapidly devolved into a swirling mass of attacking craft, falling bodies and flaming debris.

At her command Xelian's Venom dived into the fray and grazed past the prow of a Ravager that was firing furiously in all directions. She leapt off into the midst of the Ravager's startled crew with two short, straight swords in her hands. This was butcher's work, close and deadly with no time for finesse, so she had armed herself accordingly. Within seconds the Ravager was awash with blood and piled corpses, wallowing helplessly with its guns silent. Xelian snatched a second to look around for her next victims.

Her own Raiders, being slightly slower than the vanguard of Venoms and reavers, were just now entering the battle. The lean grav-craft grappled with those of the enemy to drag themselves together into temporary, shifting battlegrounds where warriors and wyches slaughtered one another with glorious abandon. Khymerae and clawed fiends were urged into battle by the beastmasters, sweeping across the interlocked islands of craft like a tide of nightmares.

Their victories proved short-lived as the foe turned their guns against the captured craft to send

them and their captors plummeting in flames. Far below on the ravaged plain around Yllithian's fortress Xelian could see that the White Flames forces were on the move. A wedge was forming to thrust against the encircling ring where it would break through to link up with her own forces. The Black Heart kabalites were responding as they must – by tightening the ring to threaten the fortress and the sallying force with their whole weight. Even Vect's darkly gleaming ziggurat was closing in on the fortress at the head of a mass of Ravagers.

Xelian's Venom returned and she leapt easily across to its rear deck as it passed. She directed her pilot to a substantial tangle of interlocked Raiders nearby, where combatants were still struggling hand to hand. There was time to wet her blades perhaps once or twice more before it was time to withdraw. Xelian and her Blades of Desire had done their part, now it was down to Yllithian and his shadowy allies to do the rest.

Vect watched the battle develop, ignoring the pleas and entreaties of the Archons to take action. The battlefield appeared as a roiling cauldron of violence: frothing and bubbling, with black and red jets flaring between a thousand chained lightnings. Hundreds of predatory machines dived to their doom carrying their fragile cargoes of flesh with them. Energies were unleashed that atomised metal and burned the air itself. Brave warriors and cowards alike were blasted, stabbed and shredded out of existence in their thousands by the impartial whims of fate. Vect smiled to see it all, a fitting final act.

Sythrac had moved to intercept the rebels that were attempting to break the siege and now the traitor Yllithian moved his troops to intercede in that fight. Move and counter-move. The fools had matched themselves against a master and already they had shown their hand. Every rebellious kabalite that Yllithian could call into play was here, drawn in by the inescapable gravity of the siege. They had all come to fight on the game board Yllithian and Vect had created between them. Move and countermove. But Yllithian and his rebels had made a fatal error by moving too soon – they were not strong enough to prevail.

Vect gave an order. The Kabal of the Black Heart and its allies – Malys's Poisoned Tongue, Malixian's Ninth Raptrex, Khromys's Obsidian Rose, Xerathis's Broken Sigil, entire regiments of Castigators – swept into the fortress's killing field to come to grips with Yllithian's White Flames.

They were greeted by a storm of fire that dwarfed anything seen in the battle so far. The White Flames fortress blazed like a false sun, momentarily outshining the *Ilmaea* with its fatal corona. Spears of all-destroying plasma and massed darklight beams slashed through the air to tear smouldering gaps in Vect's forces. Again and again the gaps were closed in the ranks as Vect's kabals plunged onwards in an unstoppable wave.

Vect laughed at the destruction. It mattered not to him how many lived or died on the field of battle, only that the bloodied survivors pledged fealty to him alone.

The wave crashed upon the fortress and the troops isolated outside it in a shuddering foam of violence. Raiders and Venoms disgorged squads of kabalites and Castigators onto the ravaged

foundation strata to take on Yllithian's warriors. Others surged onwards to assault the shot-starred walls of the White Flames fortress itself. A blistering firefight encompassed the scene, the energy flashes and explosions merging into a continuous howl as if a legion of mad gods had been set loose upon the city.

Eager to witness the carnage, Vect ordered his mobile fortress closer. The multi-tiered ziggurat of darkly gleaming metal drifted slowly towards the fighting under the watchful protection of a squadron of a hundred Ravagers. As they began to move reports reached Vect of kabals approaching from the mid and lower tiers of the city. Tiny, desperate knots of Commorrites had heard about the battle and were coming to make their own marks on the city's future. Their true allegiance was anyone's guess, some motivated by opportunism or greed, some by idealism. Most would be driven by an inflated idea of their own importance. Vect ordered some of his Castigators and Ravagers to keep them back. This struggle would be decided without their last-minute interference.

Yllithian's forces were failing, the White Flames warriors outside the fortress cut off and surrounded by a fast flowing whirlpool of Vect's kabalites. Those of his minions assaulting the walls, however, were failing in their attempts. Every slit and cupola in the high white walls flared with violent energies that were exacting a dreadful toll from the attackers. Vect ordered his ziggurat closer still with the intention of employing its formidable firepower to force a breach. Yllithian's fortress was mighty, but the fury of Vect was mightier still.

The fortress gunners recognised the threat, shifting their aim to engulf the ziggurat in a storm of fire as it came within range. Rippling shields of pure energy shrugged off the shower of blasts and bolts as if it were only a light summer rain. Vect's escorting squadron of open-decked Ravagers fared worse in the firestorm but doggedly maintained station with their supreme overlord. As the ziggurat began to cross the ravaged plain its shadow fell across the deep pits in the foundation strata. A change occurred, a roiling in the darkness itself as though it had suddenly gained substance. Crooked, pitch-black figures with bone-white blades in hand began pouring out onto the plain like ants boiling from a nest.

The Ravager escort was rapidly overwhelmed, the long-bodied gunships sinking beneath the weight of struggling mandrakes and crew. Vect's ziggurat seemed to stagger in the air as scores of shadow-stepping mandrakes swarmed aboard it. They were led by a giant figure armed with a rusted scythe that it wielded with unstoppable strength. Blood flowed freely in the ziggurat's narrow, armoured corridors as the Black Heart kabalites fought desperately to keep the mandrakes from their prize.

They failed.

Yllithian watched the battle develop from afar, drifting inconspicuously aboard a commandeered Raider and surrounded by a small escort. The sight of the White Flames fortress still glittering and defiant provoked an almost sentimental mood in him. Of all the things he had gambled in his pursuit of power his ancestral fortress was the most precious. To see it still unbroken after he had emerged from

the labyrinth was a source of indescribable relief.

Bereft of any superior means of observation on this occasion Yllithian had to rely on boosted optics in the shape of a small hand-held telescope to observe what he could of the fighting. He watched Xelian's Blades of Desire appear over the rim of High Commorrhagh and race into battle, drawing off a sizeable contingent of besiegers. He saw his own warriors struggling to link up with her and becoming cut off outside the fortress.

In that moment Yllithian wished he could have been closer to the forefront of the action, waiting with Xhakoruakh in the pits beneath the plain or standing on the walls surrounded by his troops so that he could watch the trap unfold. Vect's Castigators had driven the mandrake-king's forces back into the shadows and culled their numbers significantly, but, as the stinking giant had revealed, they still did not understand how numerous their enemies remained.

Yllithian's plan was simply to lure Vect's forces into an open battle where the sudden appearance of mandrakes could inflict the greatest possible toll. Despite what he'd told Xhakoruakh he had little hope of the children of Aelindrach winning the day. Most likely the horde of mandrakes and ur-ghuls would be massacred once out in the open, but in the course of their destruction they would drag Vect's forces down with them. Yllithian and Xelian did not need to break the siege in order to score a victory against Vect. All they had to do was give battle, withdraw and leave Vect's kabals to count the cost. Defections would soon follow.

Yllithian's heart leapt as he saw Vect's ziggurat begin to move. He had never dared to hope that Vect would allow himself to become directly embroiled in the fighting. Entering any combat bore a risk no matter how infinitesimally small the combatant attempted to make it. Chance could always take its toll, Fate might rear its ugly head and bring down the highest as easily as the lowest in the anarchy of war. Yllithian gripped his scope and watched, unable to take his eyes off the ziggurat's stately progress. If Xhakoruakh saw and understood well enough to wait he could have a chance to strike at Vect himself.

The battle swirled and flamed as if a million daemons beat upon the anvils of war, yet Yllithian had eyes only for Vect's progress. It seemed so painfully slow that he began to wonder if Vect were taunting him somehow, aware of Yllithian's watching eyes and his all-too-obvious plan. No, the shadow of the ziggurat still crept forwards, inching across the war-torn foundation strata. It began to cross one of the ubiquitous yawning pits, the shadows merging...

The trap was sprung.

Yllithian's pulse hammered so hard he found it difficult to keep the scope steady. He glimpsed crowds of pitch-black shapes swarming over the stepped ziggurat, saw it lurch in the air and slide sideways to impact on the surface with deceptive gentleness. Armoured plates bowed and ruptured, flames spurted from splits in the tortured metal as the angular shape crumpled. It was the most orgasmic sight Yllithian had ever witnessed.

He lowered the scope and issued orders to his helmsman to get him to the fortress as quickly as possible. A thousand possibilities raced through his mind. It could all still be a trick, a counterfeint of Vect's to draw him in to his doom. He raised the scope again as his Raider began to move. The dark ring

formed by Vect's forces was dissipating like smoke, the kabals breaking away from the equally shocked White Flames to race away into High Commorragh in shameful defeat. He had won.

*Trapped in a place of fire and burning metal, Xhakoruaakh strove to free himself from the pillar pinning his lower body. The shadows were close, all he needed to do was stretch far enough and he could slip into the angles between worlds and escape. The shadows were close... but jealous flames kept them at bay. Fire, the old enemy, might yet become his doom.*

*The shadow-king cursed his weak minions for fleeing when the tyrant's palace fell. The eviscerated body of Vect lay among a dozen slain warriors nearby, but none of Xhakoruaakh's own people had been there to witness him deliver the killing blow.*

*The shadows, so tantalisingly close, rippled. Someone had returned for him. Xhakoruaakh began to call out, but then recognised the shape poised in the darkness with its long, straight blade.*

*'It's you,' Xhakoruaakh rumbled. 'I knew that you would come back for me.'*

*Kheradruakh's slash took the shadow-king's head from his shoulders in a single, clean cut.*



## CHAPTER 25

### CORESPUR

They were treated as prisoners, stripped, searched and brought to the scrying chamber atop Corespur, all without comment. The onyx-armoured guards escorting them had a swagger about them as if they were big game hunters bringing in a particularly valuable kill. Motley found the behaviour a little unwarranted considering that he had literally delivered himself and Bellathonis to the front door.

In the chamber, surrounded by rings of polished crystal, they found Vect himself seated on an ugly metal throne. The great tyrant appeared to be in rare humour, positively overflowing with malicious glee as he watched the scenes displayed in the crystal panes. The inner ring had been entirely dedicated to a single, vast battle involving multiple kabals clashing around a white-walled spire. Vect spared them a glance and a mischievous grin before raising his hand for silence as he stared intently at a single crystal. The viewpoint it showed was a distance from the towering spire, looking up from a low angle as the battle swept around it.

It was hard not to be distracted by the kaleidoscopic images of closer violence in the other panes. In each one fantastic machines and warriors fought to the death in lightning-fast combats, the barbed, weaponed masses of the opposed kabals grappling like amorphous monsters with ever-shifting limbs of fire and steel. Vect glanced at Motley again and grinned as if reading his thoughts.

‘All of the battles are of vital importance to their participants,’ Asdrubael Vect mocked, ‘but only one is relevant now. The others have played out their parts in my design. I see you were thoughtful enough to bring me a gift from your sojourn in my city, Fool. Tell me what it is you think you have brought me.’

Motley was, rarely for him, nervous as he replied. Vect remained an enigma, there was no telling how he might react. The Harlequin chose his words carefully. ‘This is Bellathonis, a haemonculus who assisted a certain Archon Yllithian in a certain endeavour that eventually led to... well, the Dysjunction happening. You wanted vengeance on the ones responsible – here is one who witnessed everything and can point you to all of the others.’

Vect laughed, maniacal peals of evil merriment that rebounded from the upright crystal panes and winged their way into the shadowed eaves above. ‘Priceless!’ Vect chuckled. ‘You still believe that some judicial process will be applied, that the guilty will be separated from your precious innocents and *justice* will be done.’



‘Not at all,’ Motley responded. ‘It is simply my earnest hope that with those responsible in hand you can cease punishing the entire city for the actions of a few individuals.’

Vect smirked and looked at the crystal once more. ‘Again, you make the mistake of believing I do not wish to harm my citizens,’ the supreme overlord said carelessly, ‘that all I do is a matter of sad necessity instead of the exercise of my will. As I recall you also believed servants of the Chaos gods to be loose within my city – tell me what you have found.’

‘Many things,’ Motley sighed uncomfortably. ‘From what Bellathonis has told me and what I’ve seen for myself the main threat comes from a sub-realm called Aelindrach. The Architect of Fate and the Plague Lord had found living champions in that place, and after their clash Nurgle’s champion became ascendant. That is the source of the shadows and invasion of Commorragh in the aftermath of the Dysjunction.’

‘Fascinating,’ Vect murmured condescendingly before issuing a whispered command. The viewpoint that was absorbing all of the tyrant’s attention began to move, sliding slowly forwards across the ruined plain towards the fortress.

‘Supreme overlord, may I interject?’ Bellathonis asked with unctuous humbleness.

‘It speaks!’ Vect mocked with his attention still on the crystal. ‘Very well. Just do not tell me you have come to throw yourself on my mercy. I have none.’

‘Of course, supreme overlord, that is well documented and attested to. Contrary to the Harlequin’s beliefs I have not given myself over to your authority in order to bring your attention to the threat from Aelindrach. Firstly, as a citizen of Commorragh I have always been under your authority and from gestation to dissolution I always will be...’

Vect smirked, but kept watching the crystal, circling one finger indicating Bellathonis needed to speed up. The haemonculus hurried.

‘...but like many others I accept only you as my true master. Yllithian made great promises and I chose to follow him – in doing so I accepted his objectives as my own, and also his failures. In exchange for my continued existence I can offer his life for mine, and in a fashion I think you will find pleasing.’

Vect’s brows arched and he broke from watching the crystal for long enough to give Bellathonis a penetrating look. ‘You have no conception of what pleases me, haemonculus, although I accept your tribute in the spirit it is offered,’ Vect said before nodding towards where Xagor was quailing as he held out Angevere’s head like an offering. ‘I see you’ve brought me the crone – that was wise too. Now be silent, the final act is beginning – you’re just in time to see it.’

An eruption of darkness was obscuring the view in the crystal, drowning it beneath what proved to be the shadow-skinned bodies of countless mandrakes. The nightmarish killers vanished from sight just as the whole viewpoint tilted sideways and slid towards the ground. The pane went dark. The scenes in the other crystals changed in a ripple effect, the combatants in one fight after another separating and one side immediately fleeing the battlefield.

‘What just happened?’ Motley asked impertinently. Vect shot him a scathing look. Bellathonis cleared his throat, taking his life in his hands.

‘Supreme overlord, if I might hazard a guess?’ the haemonculus wheedled. Vect nodded.

‘Our supreme overlord has manufactured an event whereby he appears to have fallen on the field of battle, and upon seeing this disaster his loyal kabals are fleeing... or at least the ones that are truly loyal are fleeing... The rebels will now take heart and consolidate at the scene of their victory along with whatever turncoats flock to join their cause.’

Vect nodded again and smiled approvingly at Bellathonis. ‘Close enough, but you are missing the vital ingredient of what happens next.’

‘What happens next?’ Motley asked in mystification. Heartening your enemies and adding to their numbers sounded like a remarkably poor plan to him.

‘You almost fatally unhinged affairs without ever knowing it, Fool,’ Vect remarked venomously. ‘It gave me great cause to regret keeping an eye on you. Fortunately you’ve brought me something to make up for it, so I may be able to forgive your transgression.’

‘You’re referring to the lady I danced with by the firefalls,’ Motley said contritely, ‘or perhaps the fellow at the Castigator vault? My regrets for the inconvenience in either case.’

‘Lady Malys, whom you so inconvenienced that she simply had to run off and duel with you, was supposed to bring back the occupants of Valzho Sinister. In the event she brought back only a handful of survivors, but fortunately for you both they are sufficient for my needs. They have just reached their positions – you are about to witness a miracle.’

Motley glanced over at Bellathonis to see if the name meant anything to him. The haemonculus’s milk-white face betrayed nothing if it did. Animate shadows were running amok in the circle of crystal faces now, while the tall white spire stood unbroken with long processions of grav-craft passing into and out of it. Lots of new friends arriving, it seemed.

‘Valzho Sinister,’ Vect continued, unperturbed and evidently enjoying Motley’s ignorance, ‘contained the last beaten remnants of a cult from far, far back in Commorrhagh’s history. It was a time so long ago that I had not yet achieved the dominance that I so richly deserve. The cult attempted to seize power over the city, thinking that their eldritch knowledge would be sufficient to keep the noble houses cowed. They were wrong, of course, the nobles cared nothing for the suffering the cultists could inflict on the city, only that they were challenged.’

‘The most terrible weapon in the cult’s arsenal was prepared, a thing so terrible that it was encoded with safety measures that ensured it could only be activated by members of the cult’s leadership. Yet in the final test they feared to use it. The nobles overthrew the cult but kept the leaders alive and in torment in case they ever required the use of that weapon. They, too, feared to use it when the time came. I gained control of Valzho Sinister when I overthrew the nobles. I am Asdrubael Vect and I fear to use nothing to assert my will.’

‘What did the cultists worship?’ Motley whispered, terrified by what Vect’s answer might be. He had thought the supreme overlord too self-assured to resort to calling upon the fickle gods of Chaos. He had been wrong and now Commorrhagh was surely doomed; there would be an eternity of bondage in the grip of the new tide of unimaginable horrors that Chaos would unleash. Motley had seen it many times

over, desperate souls calling for help at any cost without understanding there were costs that no one should ever have to bear.

The scenes in the crystals were taking on a new aspect; the shadows were becoming hard-edged and blacker by the second, the lone white spire blazing with reflected light. The *Ilmaea*, usually wan and sickly-looking, had swelled in the sky over High Commorrhagh until they almost filled it. The light brightened impossibly until the crystal panes looked like sheets of white-hot metal.

‘They were the Solar Cultists,’ Vect smiled. ‘They worshipped, and tended to, the *Ilmaea*.’

In later times it would become known as ‘The Gaze of Vect’. All Commorrites would shudder to remember the day when Asdrubael Vect called down the *Ilmaea* to scour the darkness from High Commorrhagh. All the horrors of the Dysjunction came to be forgotten in the face of the retribution it incurred.

Around the White Flames fortress the air shimmered with heat haze under the focused glare of the *Ilmaea* as the temperatures skyrocketed. Within seconds mandrakes and ur-ghuls were physically shrivelled in the hideous blaze, their withered forms immolating like scraps of paper beneath a blowtorch. The great, seething mass of the shadow horde caught on the plain was utterly annihilated, torn apart and burned to ash by the unrelenting suns. The handful of survivors fled shrieking into the deepest darkness of Aelindrach to nurse burning scars that would never heal.

Yllithian’s followers fled for shelter inside the fortress as the plain smouldered and fires leapt up spontaneously on all sides. They were caught inside a ring of flames and as the heat mounted higher the plain itself ran molten. Still they thought themselves safe inside; the White Flames fortress was buttressed by more than metal and stone, impenetrable shields of force protected it on all sides, air and sustenance could be supplied indefinitely. They had only to wait, under siege once more even if it was by Vect’s stolen suns.

It was not to be. The ring of flames tightened inexorably around the lone white spire and the heat soared still higher. The super-heated air itself burned as the ring closed, a titanic vortex of fire grew, spinning faster and faster as it reached up into the heavens. The fortress shuddered and smouldered under the assault, but still stood defiant as the fiery pillar roiled higher still. Its head split to become hydra-like as it reached out to touch the face of the *Ilmaea* themselves...

Raw plasma siphoned into the spinning funnel directly from the bloated bodies of the caged suns. Their coronas were momentarily joined as they poured their fusing mass onto the fortress below. The White Flames fortress was engulfed in the living blood of the suns, pounded by unthinkable energies in the whirling atomic firestorm. No clever construct or adroit technology could keep such energy at bay for long.

Emitters failed and relays melted, the impenetrable shields of force protecting the fortress collapsed suddenly and catastrophically leaving the structure itself exposed. The inrush of elemental forces ate through stone and drank metal. Organics, the fragile inhabitants of the fortress, flashed into

expanding gas in a split second. The whole great edifice with its high white walls and sloping gables, its rooftop gardens and bladed oubliettes, vanished with an ear-splitting roar.

With their work of destruction complete the *Ilmaea* split their cyclopean gaze once more, the firestorm dissipating over a bubbling lake of molten metal and stone that slowly drizzled through gaps in the foundation strata to fall into Low Commorragh as a killing rain. The work was not over. The fiery presence of the *Ilmaea* rushed outwards again, expanding to burn back the encroaching shadows of Aelindrach from Commorragh.

The darkness that had spilled from the shadow-realm's boundaries recoiled like a living thing, fleeing before the unmasked faces of the captured stars. Flames and destruction followed in their wake as the guttering fires begun by the Dysjunction roared into fresh life. The city would suffer beneath the burning lash for many hours, but never again did the *Ilmaea* focus fully on a single stronghold as they had on the White Flames fortress.

Through the billowing smoke and livid flames came marching Vect's Castigators. Their metal hides were invulnerable to the heat, just as their insensate minds were immune to the pain. They set about completing Vect's reconquest of Commorragh with indefatigable determination and unshakeable purpose. They terrorised the populace and imposed Vect's rule of law with unimaginable cruelty – all while dreaming they stood as heroes on the battlefield once more.

Yllithian's small force was arrowing towards the fortress and within sight of it when the *Ilmaea* began to swell in the sky. Ever cautious, he had his helmsman circle for a moment while he determined what new devilry Vect might be brewing. Commorragh was usually a city of perpetual twilight; it was only among the heights of High Commorragh that the *Ilmaea* shone visible at all times and most often they seemed weak and distant. Recently, over Gorath and in the tortured skies around it, Yllithian had witnessed the potential power of the *Ilmaea* first-hand so he chose to wait. The suns became more bloated, the fractured light from a million barbs and steeples across the spiretops became blinding. Then it happened.

Flames rose. Flames higher than the spires themselves. Roaring, inchoate pillars of fire reaching into the heavens before smashing back down again like an enormous fist. The White Flames fortress (oh, the bitter irony of that name now!) seemed to leap upwards for an instant, the whole, vast bulk of it skipping impossibly into the air at the touch of the coruscating rivers of plasma from above.

Yllithian could not shake the image from his mind. Just for an instant the fortress seemed to hang there, frozen among the towering fires, and then it disintegrated into a billion flaming fragments. The solid-looking lines of alabaster walls and towers flew apart like sand before a hurricane. Yllithian's imagination was set reeling by the power displayed, for an entire spire-fortress – reinforced, armoured and shielded with the very best that Commorragh's artisans could fashion – to be wiped out in a single moment... and Yllithian's heart was broken in that same instant.

The Archon of the White Flames sagged, black depression gibbering in his tortured mind. With the

loss of the fortress he was bereft; thousands of years of accumulated wealth and history gone, his followers, his slaves... In an instant his strength had been reduced to that of a petty Archon from the mid-tiers, just the few warriors that were with him, his incubi bodyguards and a small legion of agents scattered around Commorrhagh who, by their nature, would turn traitor at the first opportunity.

A shouted warning brought Yllithian to his senses. His crew had spotted a swarm of grav-craft moving swiftly through the jagged spire-scape. Their course was parallel with Yllithian's, their objective unknown. He raised the scope once more in his trembling hand and looked for colours or insignia. A wave of relief washed over him as he identified them as Xelian's Blades of Desire – he even caught a glimpse of Xelian herself on the rear deck of a Venom.

He ordered his helmsman to set a converging course with the fast-moving Blades. He needn't have bothered, they were spotted immediately and the whole swarm altered course to intercept him. Within moments they were engulfed by a restless cloud of snarling reavers and hellions that circled menacingly just beyond pistol-shot. The Blades' battered collection of surviving Raiders and Venoms swept in close behind and joined the throng. A single Venom sped out of the mass and slewed to a halt beside Yllithian's craft. Xelian sprang lightly across from the Venom to his Raider.

She was, Yllithian noted, still covered in blood from fighting in the aerial battle over the fortress. Two short, wide-bladed swords hung negligently from Xelian's hands, also caked in gore. Yllithian moved to place himself out of easy striking distance while his three incubi quietly placed themselves in position to guard him. This was a delicate moment, as Xelian's force critically outnumbered Yllithian's handful of White Flames. She might decide that betrayal was the logical choice, that their attempts to unseat Vect were finished.

'We still have a choice,' Yllithian told her, confidently taking the initiative to head off any traitorous notions. 'We can flee the city in our remaining ships or take to Low Commorrhagh where we can evade Vect's kabalites successfully. In either case we'll need to regroup and rally our supporters.'

Xelian stared back at him with a calculating, hungry gaze like a hunting cat sizing up its next meal. 'You've failed, Yllithian,' she growled throatily. 'Your keenest supporters all just got immolated along with your entire kabal. You've got nothing left that's worth a damn.'

'But we're so close!' Yllithian cried passionately. 'Look around you. Vect has pulled every trick he could and left the city in ruins! He's crumbling, Xelian! His support is slipping away! One more push and we can take him down.'

'I don't think so. At the start of this you talked about Vect always using the best weapons he could get hold of. I think he's just proved that he can find bigger weapons than you. That isn't going to change.'

Yllithian opened his mouth to retort but Xelian was already moving, her limbs a blur. The two short swords thrust through the gorgets of the closest incubi, wedging the wide points firmly into their spinal columns. Xelian swung herself forwards, feet first, using the sword hilts for leverage as she delivered a double kick to the chest of the third incubus. The impact sent the heavily armoured guard sprawling over the railing of the Raider and plummeting to his death below.

Xelian's attack took only a split second, but Yllithian had his sword and pistol out before the last of his incubi fell. Around him he could hear crashes and screams as the Blades of Desire took apart the rest of his warriors. Despair burned hot in his mind, but there was defiance with it and a determination to make Xelian pay for her treachery.

She looked at him and smiled rapaciously. 'Just the way I've always wanted to see you, broken but still with a hint of defiance. This will be a pleasure.'

Yllithian was a highly trained swordsman, a fine fighter by even Commorragh's unforgiving standards. Xelian beat him as easily as she would have defeated a child.



## CHAPTER 26

### THE DEATH OF HOPE

When the Dysjunction first struck Commorragh, Asdrubael Vect had called together the High Archons, including Yllithian, to the supreme overlord's grand auditorium in Corespur. There Vect had flayed several dozen Archons and hung them from the roof in chains to emphasise the gravity of the situation to the rest. They took Yllithian back there for his final humiliation.

Xelian had kept him alive and delivered him unharmed directly to Vect. He had been stripped and imprisoned but his wait had been a short one – just long enough for the crushing gravity of the situation to set in. Yllithian could almost have forgiven Xelian for doing it – if the roles were reversed he would have done the same thing – almost, but not quite. He hoped that Vect would wreak his vengeance upon her too. Something every bit as dire as the fate the tyrant no doubt had planned for him.

Suicide whispered seductively at the edges of his consciousness, just as it had during his hopeless fight with Xelian. He still recoiled from it in horror, knowing it for the siren call of She Who Thirsts, ever hungry for his soul. No, he refused to give up his life when his one remaining dignity might be having it forcibly taken from him, with him biting and clawing to the last.

They dragged him to be displayed before Vect, stripped and in chains, and placed him between the horns of a half-moon of Archons arranged before the steps to Vect's throne. The dais itself was raised, a thick-bodied pillar of metal extending up to the ceiling.

Sitting directly in front of the dais, only a few metres from Yllithian, was a waist-high irregular-looking lump of something hidden beneath a black silk sheet. The sight of it gave Yllithian an ugly premonition it would be involved in whatever torment lay ahead, but its nature he could not even guess at. Moments passed with only the howl of distant winds for accompaniment as the Archons waited in silence.

A hundred Archons had been present at Vect's first audience; Yllithian noted that barely a score stood at the foot of the dais now. All of Vect's favoured were there, though: Sythrac, Malys, Khromys, Malixian and Xerathis. Treacherous Xelian was present too, although Yllithian did enjoy the fact that no other Archon would apparently stand close to her.

The light leaking into the auditorium through its high windows was wan and poisonous-looking, the

stolen suns once more sealed back into their sub-realm vessels and leaking the barest possible illumination across the eternal city. For a moment Yllithian wished he could cruise the upper air just once more with the city spread out beneath him, dreaming of days when he would dominate it.

The wait was ended abruptly by the tramp of Black Heart kabalite warriors filing into the auditorium and taking position around the dais or along the walls. A number of Vect's courtiers and playthings swept in to arrange themselves on the dais steps. Among them Yllithian saw Bellathonis's two minions, Kharbyr and Xagor, in the company of a capering, masked fellow dressed in grey. He wondered briefly which one of them was really Bellathonis before deciding he was too tired to really care.

A troupe of slaves was lined up to sing a passage of the *Maldhys Uzkch Vect* – the triumph of Vect – under the exacting ministrations of two haemonculi. As the slaves' voices reached a crescendo of pain the dais slid downwards as smoothly as a piston until it became level with the steps. A hemispherical shield of entropic energy atop the dais swirled and dissipated to reveal a dark, ugly throne occupied by Asdrubael Vect. The supreme overlord of Commorragh favoured the Archons with a broad, malevolent smile.

'Yllithian, I'm so glad you could join us,' Vect said with levity. 'I feel that today's lesson is going to be made invaluable by your presence.'

'The lesson is that you're vulnerable, Asdrubael Vect,' Yllithian replied, twisting to address the Archons too. 'You can kill me, but another will take my place. One day you'll fall and I've brought that day closer!'

Vect raised his brows quizzically and rose from his throne. 'Your defiance sounds weak and desperate, Yllithian,' the tyrant said as he descended to the cloth-covered lump before the dais. 'It would be more effective for you to beg me for your life – I'm inclined to grant it.'

Yllithian blinked with surprise. Even though he knew that Vect was toying with him he couldn't prevent a spark of hope kindling in his breast. The supreme overlord saw it and smirked.

'Your optimism is quite admirable, but I imagine that's what brought you to this point in the first place. Optimism and hubris – oh, and lots of luck, we shouldn't forget about that...'

Vect whipped away the silk sheet with a flourish. Under it was revealed a life-like statue of a crouching figure rendered in black glass. Yllithian recognised it instantly – it was his old body, discarded and forgotten since he had escaped from it and the vitrifying glass plague that was destroying it. The blood drained from his face and sweat sprang from every pore.

'You never asked me why I should want to spare your life,' Vect said. 'Ask me now.'

'Why...?' was all that Yllithian could manage to croak, his throat dry with fear.

'Because you've been touched by the gods, Yllithian,' Vect said with cruel mockery. 'There are powers with such investment in you that separating your soul from your body will have consequences best avoided... for now.'

'Powers?' Yllithian repeated in confusion.

Vect looked at Yllithian with his black, penetrating eyes, the twin orbs blazing with malicious



intent. 'That you do not even guess is the ultimate irony, I suppose,' Vect observed coldly. 'The Fool said it was so, yet I found it hard to credit. You have been made into a pawn, Yllithian, a servant of hidden masters. Your overweening ambition called forth the Architect of Fate and that fickle entity guided your quests for forbidden knowledge and ultimate power. Your strength, such as it is, has never been your own. It was granted to you from an arcane source, and for now that deity has abandoned you.'

Outrage surged through every fibre of Yllithian's being. He was no pawn of eldritch powers! His motivations were his own! Vect grinned openly as he drank in the anguish. Beneath the fierce twist of emotions Yllithian felt the first worms of doubt begin writhing. How often had a miraculous piece of luck furthered his plans? How often had his enemies looked the wrong way? The very possibility was soul-crushing.

Seeing that Yllithian had reached his nadir Vect appeared to tire of his plaything. The supreme overlord went back to his throne, turned to his courtiers and twitched a single, long finger to summon one of them forwards. It was the individual that Yllithian had known as Kharbyr, bony-looking and white-faced now – evidently this was the real Bellathonis, in the throes of transforming himself to show his old face. The haemonculus was carrying a silvery crown with tall points like horns at the brow. Yllithian recognised that, too. He shrieked and tried to flinch before he was restrained. Helpless, he could only watch and curse as Bellathonis jammed the crown firmly onto his head.

Crippling agony stabbed at Yllithian's temples, a searing hot pain that burned out all thought, all volition except for the need to scream. There was a wrenching sensation, deep rooted as though something at the very core of his being was twisted free. There was a sickening sense of transition and Yllithian found himself paralysed, blinded and nearly deaf save for the very faintest echoes of his own screams fading away in his vitrified ears.

Motley watched the gruesome theatre as the rebel Archon was publically tortured by Vect. As the tyrant had said, it was an object lesson, a demonstration to the other Archons of what lay in wait for them if they followed a similar course. The screams abruptly faded away as Yllithian's soul was migrated into the barely living receptacle of glass that had been his previous body. Motley shivered involuntarily at what was to come. The threat was not over yet.

Bellathonis stepped back as the process was completed and the two Yllithians, glass and flesh, were dragged away. One might become the new Archon of a re-forged White Flames kabal if any survived Vect's murderous pogrom. Equally he might be consigned to a horrible death at the tyrant's whim. The other, the true Yllithian, Motley hoped was destined for a long and fruitless existence extended for as long as possible by the haemonculi. He'd witnessed what could happen to a soul marked by the Chaos gods at the moment of death in the world-shrine of Lileathanir and it was not a pretty sight. The memory of it made what he had to do next all the harder.

'Motley. Xelian. Kneel before me,' Vect intoned from his dark throne. 'Come and beg my forgiveness. Your respective gifts were pleasing to me, but I still want to hear reasons to grant your

continued existence.'

Xelian strode out brazenly and knelt before Vect with her head bowed. Motley wandered forwards more hesitantly, keenly aware of the predatory gaze of the Commorrites fastened on him from every side. He got to his knees beside Xelian, acutely conscious of her almost animalistic presence so close, and a faint musk like the scent of blood...

Motley suddenly thrust his arm sideways with the speed of a striking snake, seeming barely to touch Xelian's throat with the heel of his palm. Xelian collapsed, her body instantly consumed from within by the writhing monofilaments of the harlequin's kiss that had been concealed at Motley's wrist.

Vect's courtiers cried out in dismay and scattered. Archons and guards surged forwards with weapons in hand. Vect merely held up a hand for silence and continued to watch the Harlequin from his throne with dark intensity. Motley ignored them all as he crouched over Xelian's rapidly liquefying remains with a small, dimly glowing gem in his hand. The gem swiftly brightened and gained a vivid, crimson hue. Motley stood and held up the ruddy jewel between his thumb and forefinger for Vect's appraisal.

'Forgive me, dreadful lord,' Motley began. 'Where one god comes the others will surely follow. That's what makes the power of Chaos so dangerous. We used to think we understood them, before The Fall. We used to laugh at how bombastic and primitive they were, but they know how to persist better than any mortal and how to take advantage of the smallest opening. Xelian was becoming a vessel for the blood god, her soul was tainted – the stone doesn't lie.'

Vect waved away Motley's explanation disinterestedly. 'If you're correct in your supposition that means there have been Chosen of three out of the four Chaos gods at work in my city. By your own admission where one comes the others will follow and yet we've seen no agent of She Who Thirsts. Interesting that you prosecute the others so readily but not those of our nemesis, the bane of our kind.'

The Harlequin pursed his lips, but did not answer until the spirit stone between his fingers had vanished with some adroit sleight of hand. 'One might argue,' Motley said cautiously, 'that we are all her agents – all the eldar who survived The Fall, I mean, and all the generations afterwards – we granted Her existence and now we are pledged to Her before we even take our first breath. On that basis my hands would be permanently crimson if I pursued them all.'

Vect laughed cynically. 'You're evading, Fool. Your recriminatory self-examinations are of no interest to me. There is a great deal of work still to be done and you're a dangerous distraction from that. Take your prize and get out of my sight. If you come before me again I will not be so gentle.'

Motley bowed low before the supreme overlord and hurried away from his dark, dire court before Vect could change his mind. It was a victory, of sorts, and Motley decided to be simply glad he'd had a part to play in it without paying the ultimate price.

*Deep within the shadow-realm of Aelindrach the Decapitator squats in his sanctum turning over the bulbous skull of Xhakoruakh in his hands. He minutely examines it with his twisted senses, tasting the shadow-skein*

*clinging to its calciferous ridges and bony orbits. At last he is satisfied and climbs the rows of skulls forming the inner wall of his dome-like sanctum. Kheradruakh feels his way to the correct niche and carefully pushes the shadow-king's skull into position. It comes as no surprise that the appointed spot for Xhakoruaakh's skull is directly opposite that of his twin brother, Azoruakh, their opposing hatreds balanced perfectly.*

*Kheradruakh returns to his dais and squats again, his sightless eyes gazing at the hole being worn in reality by the dead gaze of his amassed victims. The eye has closed again, the false-conduit is no more and yet the Decapitator believes he senses a stirring at the place between worlds. He waits and dreams of dark days yet to come.*



## EPILOGUE

*So, dear companion, we come to the end of my tale, the termination of a journey through three stories of the eternal city woven around the advent of the Dysjunction and its aftermath. As narrator I stand revealed as the Harlequin, with small parts to play in the first, a starring role for the second and stumbling through increasingly reckless improvisations for the third.*

*In the passage of this adventure, the Path of the Archon, I learned something from Commorragh. It was a pearl of wisdom I had often witnessed but never truly grasped until I fell under the tutelage of Asdrubael Vect. Simply put it is this: to become the leader of many is to become something other, a being both greater and lesser than the ordinary mortals they rule over. Like the gods of Chaos our leaders are constrained to fulfil the roles we imagine for them. Our leaders, our tyrants, our overlords, our despots, call them what you will – they impose their will with the force that we grant them in the mortal realm just as daemons do in the immortal realm of the warp.*

*Constrained? I hear you cry, what constrains the gods of Chaos except one another? The answer, enquiring reader, is in their natures. They are what they are, they are defined by their natures and could not change them even if they wanted to – which they don't, of course, as those elemental natures are what grants them existence. So it is with mortal leaders, they become what we want them to be, what we desire them to be and what we allow them to be. Those failing in our expectations are dispensed with and replaced with something more congruent with the popular zeitgeist.*

*In the case of Commorragh this demands a being of pure terror. A creature so dark and vengeful that it can hold a gigantic city in thrall through the mere threat of its intercession. An entity so malevolent that it will hold the all-destroying power of Chaos at bay without regard to the cost. The Commorrites, the unrepentant survivors of The Fall, strive endlessly towards anarchy, but deep down in their black hearts they acknowledge their need for the most autocratically mandated order possible to survive as a species.*

*Perforce all Archons, the leaders and exemplars of Commorragh, have become lesser reflections of Asdrubael Vect: violent, brilliant, manipulative and ambitious. Beneath Vect's rule they can be nothing less than absolutes that have burned away all other considerations other than their lust for power. They are dark flames beside the black conflagration of Vect's wickedness. One day any of them might kindle sufficiently to outshine his brilliance as Yllithian so very nearly did, but that day has not yet dawned. No one has proved to be as ultimately grasping and selfish as Vect, not yet.*

*Such is the Path of the Archon.*

Now I would ask you to take a moment and recall the three tales I've told. In the Path of the Renegade we followed several very different renegades rebelling against very different things. There was the young pathfinder Sindiel trying to escape his stifling existence aboard the craftworlds, there was the haemonculus Bellathonis rebelling against the strictures of his coven and there was Archon Yllithian seeking to overthrow the tyranny of Vect.

All three reacted violently against the self-rule called for by their respective societies and all three came to know dire consequences of that action as events spiralled beyond their control. To their credit Sindiel and Bellathonis both acted to try to rectify the situation as best they could. Yllithian escaped only by the intervention of Fate, and found himself serving an uncertain master. The desire for freedom brings with it great peril from those who would exploit it. Let us call these the Exodites.

In the Path of the Incubus we saw those who tread the straight and narrow by obeying the word of their masters, the scions of discipline, convention, honour, duty and order. The titular incubus Morr stood first and foremost in the tale, but also there was Cereis, the doomed warlock of the craftworlds at the head of a squad of Dire Avengers.

This seer and the aspect warriors were trained to be so narrow-minded that they regarded Morr as being ill-disciplined and dishonourable even when he offered his own soul to save the souls of billions. All of them suffered for their unquestioning loyalty and struggled to find new purpose under the bitter lash of failure. The acceptance of duty calls for self-sacrifice in pursuit of an ever-distant goal. For some the goal is forgotten and self-sacrifice becomes an end in its own right. Call these, then, the craftworlds.

With the Path of the Archon we have witnessed the machinations of the high lords of Commorragh bearing bitter fruit. We have seen their ambitions turn their home into a battleground teetering on the brink of annihilation. We have borne witness to how, after planting the seeds of their own ruin, they made others pay the price for as long as they could. We may think, then, of these being the dark eldar.

Three tales interweaving, each representing a facet of our fractured racial psyche. Each bears a warning but also a kernel of hope. Long have the eldar dwelled in isolation from themselves and one another, denying parts of their existence in the name of survival. Yet the boundaries are far from impenetrable when they exist only within our own minds.

Hence the role of humble players such as myself. It falls to us to tweak the nose of Fate by crossing boundaries, defying convention and mocking the absurdities of existence. Among our divided folk it's the only way we have to show that in this grim, dark universe there is always something to be learned from that which you most despise.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANDY CHAMBERS is a veteran writer for the Warhammer 40,000 universe with more than twenty years experience creating worlds dominated by giant robots, spaceships and dangerous aliens. He worked at Games Workshop as lead designer of the Warhammer 40,000 miniatures game for three editions before moving to the PC gaming market to work on the hit real time strategy game *Starcraft2* by Blizzard Entertainment. Andy has written several short stories and four novels for Black Library, *Survival Instinct*, *Path of the Renegade*, *Path of the Incubus* and *Path of the Archon*. Andy has recently returned to the UK and is living in Nottingham.