

WARHAMMER

BOOK THREE IN THE VON CARSTEIN TRILOGY

Retribution

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AS THE ARMIES OF THE UNDEAD MARCH TO HEL FENN,
THE FATE OF THE OLD WORLD HANGS IN THE BALANCE

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

RETRIBUTION

Von Carstein - 03

Steven Savile

**This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons
and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the
world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury
it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds
and great courage.**

**At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the
largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for
its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is
a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests
and vast cities. It is a land riven by uncertainty, as three
pretenders all vie for control of the Imperial throne.**

**But these are far from civilised times. Across the length
and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces
of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come
rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains,
the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and
renegades harry the wild southern lands of
the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the
skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the
land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the
ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen
corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods.**

As the time of battle draws ever near.

**the Empire needs heroes
like never before.**

CHAPTER ONE

Stranger in a Strange Land

The Lands of the Dead Before

The man cast a terrified glance over his shoulder as he ran.

He couldn't *see* anything, but that didn't matter.

He could *feel* it getting closer.

He fled across the desert, staggering up banked dunes and lurching down them again, his legs buckling as the wind buffeted him. Sand burned the soles of his feet. He ran. He fell. He forced himself back to his feet. He ran again. He stumbled. Fell.

It followed.

It was there—no matter how far he ran, how fast—it was always there.

It was relentless.

He clutched the bundle of rags tightly to his chest. The thing wrapped within the rags was repulsive. It reeked of corruption; stank of the dead wind. Paradoxically, it was alive in his arms. He felt it, a pulse beating through the layers of cloth. It craved, hungered. He felt its presence inside his head, the insidious whisper of its need. One word: release. It ached to be free, to be loosed upon the world now that it had stirred.

"Not yet," he managed, through cracked lips. His voice was raw, thick with grit and sand. The desert heat burned in his lungs. His skin crawled, as though the heat of the sun ate away at his flesh. Blisters chafed against the coarse weave of his robes. It was an exquisite form of torture. He clung to the pain. He couldn't remember a time without pain. It was the one constant of his world. As long as there was pain, he was alive.

Long thin tendrils of shadow swelled up around him, like some giant hand snatching him from the desert sands. He spun around, stumbling backwards with the momentum of fear. There was nothing behind him—nothing that could have cast that shadow. He turned away quickly. He fixed his gaze on the heat-shimmer of the horizon.

The sun blazed in the sky, flensing him of all sense of self.

His robes, a dirty-white robe worn threadbare in places, whipped around his legs. He was covered from head to toe. Only his eyes were exposed to the elements. Still the sand bit at them, stung them into tears. The world blurred.

The sand shifted beneath his feet as he staggered on, desperate to be free of this dead place. Dust devils churned around him, surging up from the ground like mystical djinn only to be blown away on the wind, no more threatening than the grains of sand they were.

The tendrils of shadow thickened. The man ran for his life. He didn't dare look back. He didn't need to.

He knew what the shadow was. He had always known.

The claws of the dark lord, reaching out, reaching...

No, that was impossible.

That was the voice of his fear speaking to him, a malaise that had haunted him ever since he had entered this forsaken land. It was paranoia worthy of Konrad.

Konrad.

The name bubbled up inside his head.

He tried to focus on it, to recall the face behind the name, but there was nothing.

Shadows coiled around his blistered feet.

Reaching out from his slumber, woken by your own stupidity, fool.

Your power.

At the back of his mind, the mocking whisper:

Your arrogance.

He clutched the bundle tight to his chest. It weighed heavy in his arms.

Dark shapes began to solidify on the horizon. His mind painted them as daemons come to claim his soul and drag him down to Morr's Underworld. A moment later they coalesced into trees. Oasis or mirage, it mattered little to him. He staggered on, his feet dragging one after the other. He tried to imagine the cool trickle of water down his throat, quenching the fire inside him: the need.

Laughter rang in his ears: hysterical, spiralling, mocking.

The ring on his left hand, a plain unassuming adornment, caught the glare of the scouring sun, dispelling the dark shadows for a moment. His determination to survive grew with each unsteady step. The ring was important to him, but he had no idea why.

His thoughts swam in and out of focus. He tried to focus on the oasis. He walked on. It never appeared to get any closer.

"You're not real," he croaked, knowing even as he said it that his mind was playing tricks on him.

He walked on.

The world tilted, blurred.

He heard the caw of birds, but saw nothing in the sky, straining to make sense of it as blood came sliding down from the sun, burning the desert red before it faded into the black of night.

Darkness hid the shadows—it didn't banish them. The twin moons of Morrslieb and Mannslieb appeared low in the sky, rising. The desert air grew cold. He stumbled on, staring at the ground as it fell away beneath his feet until he splashed over the water's edge. He fell to his knees, setting aside the bundle, and reached down to scoop up mouthful after mouthful of sun-warmed water.

It did nothing to slake his thirst.

It was an unquenchable fire inside him.

He was burning up from the inside out. It was consuming him and there was nothing he could do to quell it.

A black bird had settled on one of the branches around the oasis. The beady-eyed scavenger had obviously come to feed on his corpse. He looked up at the creature, defying it, defying the fire, the hunger, the all-consuming need inside him. "I will not die here," he told the bird, and he meant it.

His defiance didn't impress the bird. Its harsh *caw caw caw* mocked him.

He threw back his head, tore away the wrapping of his headscarf, and screamed, startling the bird into flight. It swooped down out of the tree, clawed feet looking to pluck out his eyes as its wings beat and battered at his face.

The man's hand snaked out with eldritch grace, taking the bird out of the air. He held it for a moment, cradling the creature in his hands. The bird's wings flapped desperately as the force of his grip intensified, crushing its delicate ribcage as though crumpling vellum. He tore the bird's head from its body with a savage twist and raised the still flapping carcass to his lips, sucking greedily at the blood and flesh, feeding.

It tasted *good*.

This was what his body had hungered for.

This was the need driving the maddening cravings he felt tearing at him: Blood.

He savoured the flavours, the thickness of the liquid as it ran down his throat.

The taste stirred a dark memory.

He had tasted blood before.

He tore at the bird with his teeth, spitting out blood-clotted feathers. It wasn't enough. Now that the need had been awoken it demanded sating. He tried to stand, but he lacked the strength.

The world swam out of focus and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

There was blood on his hands when he came to.

The blood was rust-coloured and caked hard, but it was undeniably blood. He *had* killed the bird. It hadn't been some weird fever dream. He had torn the head off the animal and sucked greedily at the gaping hole, draining the pitiful creature of every precious ounce of blood.

And he had *enjoyed* it.

But rather than quell the pain, the blood only served to intensify it, reminding his body of what it craved.

He looked up.

Where the land and sky met, a swarm of black specks had begun to gather. He watched them solidify, a murder of black-winged birds taking shape out of the dark sky, hundreds of them. They seemed out of place in this wilderness of sand. They took on individual forms as they neared.

He didn't move.

He couldn't.

He lacked the strength even to hold his head up.

The first birds roosted in the branches around the oasis, but soon others settled on his legs and in his lap, crowding around him, their black bodies a bloated swarm. He could *feel* them—not just their nearness. He could feel their pulses: faint, ephemeral beats tripping out the erratic skips of fearful life. He reached down and took one of the birds from his lap, cradling it in his hands.

"It doesn't end here," he promised the bird. The raven cawed raucously as though it understood. He smiled as he pressed down with his thumbs, splitting the bird's breastbone and pulling the creature open. He raised it to his lips and drank greedily. Draining it, he cast it aside and scooped up another.

He feasted on the ravens and crows, and countless other carrion creatures that had flocked to him.

It wasn't human blood—but it was blood.

It was revitalising.

It gave him strength.

And with the blood came memories of self—a name.

He tore into another and then another, sucking at the wounds. Ribbons of blood trickled down his chin. He tossed his head back and roared his defiance. It was a primal sound, animalistic. The birds cawed and crowed as panic spread through them. A few scattered, taking flight only to be brought down by others in a flurry of wings and violence. They flocked to him, drawn to the bittersweet tang of blood. It was in their nature. They were scavengers, carrion eaters.

He tore into the frail bodies, milking them. It was wanton gluttony. He ripped at the soft meat, splitting open the underbellies and gorging himself on the birds until hundreds became a few. He stopped himself from destroying them all. He took one in his hands, lifted it to his lips and opened his mouth—but instead of feeding, he whispered into the bird's ear. The creature answered with a shrill caw.

Around him the remaining birds echoed the raven in his hands, their caws spiralling into a hysterical chorus—a threat, a promise, the truth.

“Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming!”

Their words reverberated through him.

“Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming!”

They shrieked through every raven and carrion crow across the Old World.

Mannfred: that was his name.

But it was more than merely his name that had been returned to him. The birds' sacrifice had bought his salvation. He would not perish in the sand and the dirt. He would not be buried beneath the dunes in the Land of the Dead. He would escape. He gathered the bundle into his arms, cradling it close to his chest. The half-life the rag wrapped treasure possessed no longer felt threatening. He welcomed it.

The last of the dread vampire counts of Sylvania surged to his feet and scattered the few remaining birds to the four winds. Their caws rose hysterically as they burst into flight.

“Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming!”

The birds would carry word to his most loyal followers. They would prepare for his return.

A lone rook circled above him, its cry a deep-throated rumble.

“Mannfred is coming!”

Mannfred smiled coldly, renewed by the blood of the birds flowing in his veins, and took the first step on the long walk home.

THE BLACK SHIP

I

Navigating the Reik

The black ship ghosted downriver, cutting silently through the heart of the Empire.

Those that knew ships marvelled at the lines of the three-masted barque. She was a spectre on the brackish water. She drew frightened eyes. How could she not? The barque was unlike any ship seen on the Reik in that she appeared to have no crew. The superstitious called the black ship a ghost and whispered that she was crewed by the revenant shades of sailors whose mortal remains had sunk to a watery grave. The ship herself, they breathed, refused to fail them. She would bring the dead home.

Those superstitious fools were almost right.

The Vampire Count stood alone on the deck, enjoying the twin moonlight of Morrslieb and Mannslieb. Ravens circled overhead. He was growing accustomed to the birds. He took a peculiar sort of comfort from their nearness. The black ship sailed on, deeper into the heart of civilisation. The signs of habitation grew more frequent: washed clothing hung out to dry, goats left to graze near the water's edge. At first the homesteads were little more than wooden shacks, but as the black ship sailed deeper into the heart of the old world the buildings grew more sophisticated, built of both wood and stone.

Coils of fog clung to the riverbank. Oil lanterns burned, barely penetrating the fog. Greasy black smears of smoke curled up lazily into the night.

The first chill of winter was in the air.

He savoured it. This was his time. He was the winter of mankind.

The riverbanks reeked of mortality, petty lives and petty squalors crushed together to offer the illusion of safety. Humanity echoed the rats of the bilge tanks, swarming all over each other, revelling in filth and decay, spreading disease.

He turned his back on it, content to let their unseeing eyes look on while the ghost ship sailed past their wretched strip of life as it clung to the riverbank.

He lifted the hatch set into the deck and descended into the belly of the black ship. The crew—for the ship wasn't manned by ghosts or anything quite so fanciful—avoided their peculiar passenger. He knew what they called him: *Allogenes*. In their tongue it meant, literally, “the stranger”. He enjoyed the epithet. It was fitting. That was, after all, who and what he had always been.

He paused mid-step.

He heard something: grave dirt grinding under the boot of a crewman.

The dirt of unnamed graves had been scattered all across the lower decks. It went some small way to negating the vile pull of the sea on his body. He listened, seeking out the enticing *dub-dub* of the man's heartbeat and the blood flowing in his veins. It was a delicious tattoo. His nostrils flared. He could smell the fool. Living in these cramped confines left no room for hygiene. Every one of them stank, the stench made so much worse, more pungent, by their fear, and those smells were unique in their odour.

He waited for the man to show himself.

The crewman tried to back away into the shadows at his approach, but there was no hiding from Mannfred.

“Come to me, sailor,” he said, gesturing the frightened man forwards. The man’s face, trapped in shadow, twisted, betraying the agony he felt trying to control his own limbs. The crewman stumbled forwards against his will and debased himself at the vampire’s feet. “Better. You would do well to remember your place, human.”

The storm lamp hanging from the wall by a rusty nail guttered and died.

“I am hungry.”

The sailor looked up, the veins in his neck protruding as he fought against the vampire’s will. Mannfred sneered. Even token resistance was futile. He curled his index finger, beckoning the man to his feet, and tilted his head, lips parting slightly in anticipation of blood. Fear blanched the sailor’s face. His entire body shivered violently. Mannfred enjoyed the delicious tang of terror that seeped into the man’s stink. He drew him closer and opened his mouth wider, poised to sink his teeth into the soft white flesh of the sailor’s throat, only to push him away with a careless wave of the hand.

He sniffed the air, breathing in all the rancid scents of the ship. The hold was alive with the rich heady tang of blood. He closed his eyes, enjoying the lure of the flesh.

“Bring me a body. Make it young, ripe. I don’t care for old meat.”

The sailor nodded sickly and scrambled back, feet scuffing at the planking. He shook his head, “Please don’t make me choose.”

“Go before I change my mind and feed on you, man.”

The sailor looked up, eyes wide, black holes of shadow in his fear-blانched face, and scuttled off towards the deeper darkness of the hold.

The barque’s timbers groaned as the black ship rode the tide, the hulk shifting and settling around them. Mannfred smiled. It was a cold, pleasureless expression. He waited until there was only the lulling, hypnotic rhythm of the river lapping up against the barque’s sides before he retreated into the sanctity of his chamber to wait for his meal. He enjoyed pretending there was some kind of grandeur about the black ship. There wasn’t. His chamber was nothing more than a belly hall, stripped bare of ornamentation. It would have been used in the past to store grain and other comestibles on long voyages. Now it housed a makeshift coffin. The bottom of the coffin had been lined with a fine sprinkling of grave dirt gathered from one of the many ports of call along the way. No doubt they regretted fishing him from the sea. Mannfred’s nostrils flared as he breathed deeply. Traces of his homeland still clung to the dark loam, though they were barely perceptible beneath the rank odour of the hold.

Rats infested his quarters, fat, bloated, slick furred vermin.

There was a timid knock on the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened slowly. The crewman dragged a young girl in by the hair, pushing her to the floor at the vampire’s feet. Her loose cotton shift was torn across the shoulder and down the front, the flesh beneath grey with grime. She hadn’t just been plucked off the streets for his delectation, she’d been brought up from down below. The bruises from the chains were still livid, fresh. She’d never stopped fighting, hoping to be free. He wondered, idly, what fate the wretched girl thought lay in store for her. She couldn’t possibly have imagined the truth when the sailors of the black ship had snatched her away from her home all those weeks or months ago. Her eyes fixed on the coffin. She opened her mouth to scream. Mannfred back-handed her hard, delivering a stinging blow across the mouth. His hand silenced her. He nodded approvingly.

“Good, good. My dear, it is so good of you to join me for dinner.” He turned to the sailor, mildly amused by the eagerness in the man’s jaundiced eyes. “You can leave us now, man, unless, of course you would prefer to stay, join in the feast?”

The girl whimpered, turning to plead with the sailor, to beg for her life. The sailor shook his head. Instinctively, his hand closed around Manann's talisman, a small black iron trident he wore at his throat. The old wives' tales amused Mannfred. The cattle were so sure that they understood his nature. They clutched their white roses, garlic cloves, Sigmarite hammers and other gewgaws meant to scare him off, took refuge in sunlight and hid behind other seedless superstitions, such as vampires not being able to cross fast-flowing water. They seemed to forget that his kind had minds and were capable of applying them. They were not so easily tied to their domains as they had once been—grave dirt could be moved, the sun could be resisted. It took strength, but he was strong. The notion that the dead must retreat to their coffins come sun-up was quaint but stupid. No such stricture bound him so long as he carried with him a handful of dirt from the site where he had been reborn into the world of the dead. And blood of course. He needed blood.

"Get out," he told the sailor. The man didn't need to be told a third time. The door grated back into place. Mannfred circled the girl slowly, twice around. He knelt beside her, taking her chin in his hand, gripping it hard enough to make her wince as he forced her to look him in the eye.

"What is your name, girl?" He didn't need to know, didn't care. It was a gesture, a courtesy. She wouldn't thank him for it, but while she spoke it focused her mind, making it easier for him to impose his will on her. It was a simple conjurer's trick. She opened her mouth, and then shook her head as though her name had been there on the tip of her tongue only to escape her. He smiled. "Don't be shy, my dear. In a moment we shall know each other quite intimately, I promise you."

"Margarete."

"Such a sweet name: are you a sweet girl, Margarete?"

"I... I..."

"I am sure you are, come here, let me taste you." He laid a hand gently on her shoulder. He wanted to enjoy this moment, so he let his hold on her slip, allowing her to feel the agony of his touch as his fingers sank into her shoulder. She screamed and blood followed. Still he forced his fingers in deeper, to the bone. He hauled her up until her feet were three inches above the floor. Her dress, slick with blood across the shoulder and red down the back, fell open on her nakedness. He studied her for a moment, the rapid shallow rise and fall of her breasts, the sudden rash of goose bumps that prickled her otherwise flawless skin, the dark shadows around the curves of flesh.

"Exquisite," he sighed. With his free hand Mannfred tipped her head back, baring the main artery in her neck, and sank his teeth into her throat. Her legs kicked twice and then dangled lifelessly, the fight sucked out of her. He drank deeply, greedily. Her blood dribbled down his chin as he dropped her corpse. He ran the back of his hand across his lips.

It wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

He turned his back on her, leaving the corpse for the rats. It didn't take them long to come scurrying out of the woodwork. They chittered and squeaked as they burrowed into her body, teeth tearing through her sodden shift to get at the feast. The sound of them eating provided an eerie counterpoint to the constant ebb and flow of the Reik against the barque's hull.

Mannfred lowered himself into the coffin, allowing himself a moment's respite, the calm before the coming storm, while the black ship sailed on, deeper into the heart of the Old World.

CHAPTER TWO

Bridge over the River Aver

The Plains of Stirland, North of the River Aver

Even an idiot like Dietrich Jaeger had to be aware that the triangulation of land between Brandstadt, Eschendorf and Furtzhausen was strategically important for one reason and one reason alone: bricks and mortar. Not the scattering of houses that were home to the fishermen, farmers and ferrymen, but something else entirely.

Even an idiot...

Vorster Schlagener stopped thinking about it and counted out thirty steps, pushing through the thick grasses along the riverbank. He turned and counted out thirty more, returning to his mark.

It was a lonely duty for his last night. Vorster shook his head. He was calm. He had expected to be frightened, but he wasn't. He had had plenty of time to wonder why the fear wasn't more intense, more paralysing. The truth was black—fear came when the possibility of death neared. Vorster had long since faced up to the grim reality of his plight: come the morning he *would* die. It would take a miracle for the events of the coming day to play out any other way. That was why he wasn't afraid. He had accepted it. Good men sat huddled around the campfires. Their conversation was muted, their spirits low as they too came to terms with the stark reality of their situation.

They would be dead before sundown on the morrow.

And yet, none of them ran.

They sat, warming themselves by the flames, looking over the river at the curls of smoke rising up from the enemy's fires. There were so many fires littering the field. They were outnumbered almost ten to one judging by the campfires. Worse, Ackim Brandt led the Talabeclanders.

Brandt was everything Jaeger wasn't.

War might well have been a collective punishment, but the fate of a battle could still be tied to individuals.

Brandt was a soldier forged in battle, fiercely loyal to his command, blessed with a quick mind and a gift for strategy. He was able to read a battlefield and make split-second decisions capable of turning the tide of any given combat. He was a soldier's soldier.

Yet, the common soldiers like Vorster had to follow the whims of fops like Jaeger, because their families had enough money to buy their commissions. This kind of nepotism was all too common in the new armies. They called them organisations of opportunity, because with so many young men dying so senselessly there was always the chance of advancement for those lucky enough to survive a campaign or two.

Dietrich Jaeger was just one of many, no better or worse than the rest. He lacked the experience to carry out the task he was charged with and worried too much about his own reputation. That, alone, had proved enough to damn those under his command—like Vorster's younger brother, Isidor.

Vorster picked up a small stone and cast it out across the river. It fell short, splashing and disappearing. For a moment, he wished he could have been that stone; that the water could just close over his head...

He turned to look at the bridge.

There was a reason the dwarfs had chosen to build the only stone bridge on the Aver on this strip of land—outside of the cities of Averheim and Nuln—and join Stirland and Averland. It was pivotal to the defence of the entire region. This meant that it was pivotal to any attempted conquest of the region. It wasn't just the only stone bridge, it was the *only* bridge. There were ferries and punts dotted up and down the river, of course, but for an army the bridge at Legenfeld was the only way to cross the Aver in numbers and at speed. Lose the bridge and surely everything else would follow. That was the way of war—one defeat led to another, the enemy gaining momentum day by day, mile by mile of conquered ground, until their forces swept down like a giant wave, relentless and irresistible.

That was the nature of war—the strong came crashing down on the weak.

The fact that pretender had turned upon pretender and the Empire was being ripped apart from the inside out mattered nothing to any of those who would be emperor. With no great evil from the east to keep them occupied it hadn't taken humanity long before, like the great wyrm, it had coiled around to consume its own tail. Treachery and betrayal were the two great constants of mankind. Vorster had joked with his brother, Isidor, that, as a soldier he would never find himself without work—there was always someone to fight even if it was his own mother. Powerful men would always find a way to make normal folk like him die to settle their arguments.

Isidor had died three weeks later, gutted by a marlin pike on a faraway field. He had been running at a blackpowder cannon emplacement with eight other men, ordered to charge by an idiot of a man who was determined to sacrifice them to feed his own vanity. He wanted the cannon. He would have it, at any cost.

That idiot was Dietrich Jaeger.

Vorster hadn't forgiven the man for surviving when better men had fallen to sate his ego.

That, too, was the nature of war.

Idiots and cowards had a tendency to live.

Vorster turned his back on his comrades. He gazed along the river, first towards Nuln, though of course he couldn't see anything but water skaters and the occasional ripple where a vole or water snake slipped into the river, and then back towards Averheim.

The bridge was too wide to be properly defensible with so few men. When Brandt came they would be overwhelmed relatively quickly. Holding the line would be flat out impossible. It wouldn't take more than a handful of riders to cut through their ranks like a knife through rancid butter. With the defenders scattered, the cavalry would swing back and come at them from the behind, causing havoc. Then, and only then, the footmen would come surging in to finish the job. Pandemonium and death would reign. It would be brutal and it would be bloody.

But it would be over quickly.

That was the only mercy to be had from the coming day.

The senseless nature of Jaeger's orders betrayed the fact that the man didn't have so much as the faintest inkling what he was doing. He lacked confidence in his judgement, though he would never own up to it. He covered his doubts with bluster and arrogance. Even now, on the verge of battle, he set himself alone, aloof from the men under his command. He had left Vorster with one instruction: the bridge must be held at all costs.

That was it.

Exactly how the men were to achieve that miracle he didn't share with them. Jaeger made it sound so simple, where in truth that lack of confidence gnawed away at him, creating great holes of doubt. He was constantly second-guessing himself, trying to anticipate where the attack might come from. The man didn't have the common sense to listen to better men when they offered wisdom hard won on the battlefields of the Old World facing the Sylvanian vampires. It didn't matter to him that they were more experienced soldiers. Instead of listening he insisted on posturing and posing and pretending to be a strategic genius.

Well, Vorster thought bitterly, come the morrow that lie will be well and truly put paid to.

It all came down to this: a bridge. They couldn't afford to give the bridge up and they didn't have the strength of numbers to prevent it from being taken from them.

Vorster knew what the orders really meant: buy time and hold the bridge until the reinforcements from Brandstadt and Furtzhausen arrive. Failure would mean that Averland had a precious foothold in their homeland. One they wouldn't give up cheaply. If they failed, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, would die unnecessarily. That was the weight Vorster felt, not his own mortality but theirs, all the other nameless men, women and children of the soon to be dead.

The road to Wollestadt, a few miles to the south of Legenfeld, was a major trade route from the Black Fire Pass to Nuln. It came close to the river in a few places, but none closer than this. The territory on the border was the location of frequent skirmishes, advantage changing hands regularly. It wasn't so long ago that the forces from Stirland had been on the offensive, threatening Averland's trade roads. The trade roads were like arteries all across the Old World. Thanks to them, an army could plunge deep into the heart of Stirland, Talabecland and Middenheim, to Marienburg, Erengard and as far north as Praag—as far as Pfeildorf, Grenzstadt and Meissen southwards—west to Delberz, Bögenhafen and Carroberg, and east across the Worlds Edge Mountains to places he could barely imagine beyond their strange sounding, exotic names. They were all joined.

For all that, the trade roads were the last place a reasonable man would have expected Averland's forces to attack from. Certainly they were a goal that Averland would strive to achieve if they wanted to push on to the north, consolidating their territorial gain. Jaeger argued passionately with his number two that that was the precise reason the road needed guarding. No man in his right mind would expect an attack from there, so that was where the enemy would strike first. He was prepared to stake his life on it, his life and more importantly, the lives of his men. They would, he reasoned, traverse the river upstream on one of the ferries and seek to work their way around behind his army; not the full force of course, just enough troops to guarantee success for the main body of the army.

It didn't matter for a moment that there was no legitimate reason for Dietrich Jaeger to divide his forces, which was precisely what he had decided to do.

No legitimate reason...

Dietrich Jaeger himself led the thirty riders patrolling the Wollestadt road. The man was a coward; that was the only thing Vorster could think.

He had deliberately placed himself as far away from danger as was humanly possible. It was, to all intents and purposes, desertion, only the idiot was too much of a coward to actually run away. Instead, he'd crawl back to the elector count with some cock and bull story of how he had done his very best, of how valiant he had been. Yet, it had broken his heart because it still wasn't enough. Good men died and they would forever stain his conscience. Jaeger was an inveterate liar, capable of spinning the most self-serving yarns and making them sound convincing. Vorster had heard a few, and even when he had known better, he had found himself *almost* wanting to believe Dietrich Jaeger... almost.

It was hard to feel anything other than loathing when the man's lies condemned ordinary decent soldiers.

A coward was a coward no matter how he chose to dress up his spinelessness. The irony in Stirland's banner, the skeleton wrapped in the proclamation "Victory or Death", had never been more apparent to Vorster.

And so they were alone, a few good men left to hold the Legenfeld Bridge, come hell or high water.

Of course water was the least of Vorster's problems.

The bridge itself was majestic. Not some low span of stone, its span had a high parabolic camber, the elaborately carved arch tall enough to allow the brisk river traffic to pass easily beneath. It was a wonder: the intricacy of the carvings, the sheer magnitude of the construction and the

agelessness of it. Vorster looked at the stones. They had been there before him and would be there long after he was gone. He was in no doubt about that. Vorster couldn't begin to imagine how old the bridge actually was. It was certainly more substantial than any of the houses in the vicinity. Vorster knew the lie of the land better than most of the defenders because he had been born and raised in the village of Furtzhausen, which stood only a few miles down the river from the bridge. He certainly knew it better than their erstwhile commander.

Vorster Schlagener scratched at his head where the chiggers had taken chunks out of his shaved scalp. It itched worse than a dose of the clap. The tiny red insects had had a field day, but only on him. No one else sported so much as a rash. As his old ma always used to say, they went for the bad meat first. He had already picked bloody six of the more livid bites along his forearm. The chiggers thrived in the combination of the heat and humidity, congregating in the tall grasses close to the water. It was typical, he thought bitterly, that Jaeger had chosen him to stand sentry on the riverbank. The man was spiteful. Vorster picked away at the bite behind his left ear, burrowing into the irritation with his grubby fingernails.

The fact that across the river Ackim Brandt and his men made their final preparations for his death while he worried about insect bites was mildly ironic.

There was nothing personal about it. It was war. Lives were reduced to acceptable losses and collateral damage. They stopped being human. The dehumanisation of the enemy was a sad necessity. To think of them in human terms, to give them names and faces and lives, well that way lay madness. Still, for all the hopelessness of his situation, Vorster promised himself, for his wife and his family, that Ackim Brandt would pay for the bridge. Vorster had no intention of dying cheaply. Women he had never met and had no argument with would wake up widows because of him. There was a simplistic eye-for-an-eye kind of justice to it. His wife would be a widow, his son, barely a summer old, would grow up never knowing his father. It wasn't fair and it wasn't a comfortable thought to live with, but then his life was measured out in minutes, so he could bear it for as long as he had to.

He took the top off a chigger bite, scratching so hard he drew blood.

"Damn it," he muttered, bending down to tear off a handful of grass to staunch the blood. He caught something, a smell on the wind, and then a scurry and a splash as dirt and pebbles spilled back down into the river. He saw the fleeting shape of a shadow loom over him and threw himself to the left, hitting the ground hard.

Brandt's man, soaked from head to toe from the river, carried a wickedly curved dagger.

Vorster saw three more dark shapes emerging from the water: assassins.

He screamed as he hurled himself forwards. The assassin's blade sliced into his shirt, cutting into his left arm. Ignoring the pain, he rammed his own dagger into the man's throat. It was a brutally efficient kill. The assassin clutched at his neck, gargling blood as he tried to hold back the inevitable. Vorster didn't give the man a second thought—he was dead. The others weren't. He drew his sword and charged along the riverbank, yelling himself hoarse as he charged the nearest of the men coming out of the water.

He splashed into the river, slashing at the man's gut. His opponent hissed in pain and countered, a wicked backhand cut that took a chunk out of Vorster's cheek as he reeled away from the blow. He was bleeding but he didn't have time to worry about it. The ground beneath his feet shifted. He slipped. His ankle turned as the riverbed of stones betrayed him and dumped him on his backside. Moving silently, his opponent leaned in for the kill. A black rag covered the man's face. Vorster rolled away, scrabbling back through the long grass. The blade flashed down. He managed to deflect it with the side of his own blade. Before the assassin could finish him he jerked back, a black-fletched shaft protruding from his shoulder. That moment of pained surprise gave Vorster the chance he needed. He rammed his sword straight up between the assassin's legs and buried the blade deep in his gut. The dead man's weight tore the blade from Vorster's hands as he fell across him.

Vorster wriggled out from beneath the corpse in time to see two more assassins taken down by crossbow bolts. The metal tip of one bolt burst out through the back of the first assassin in a spray of arterial blood. The second bolt took its target in the cheek, piercing the man's mouth and burrowing deep into his brain. Both died silently.

Vorster pulled his sword out of the dead man. A horn sounded behind him. He knew what it signified—the oncoming storm. Brandt's main force was gathering. The assassins had been sent to weaken them, paving the way for a quick confrontation. Brandt, like any good leader, obviously hoped to minimise the losses among his men. Chance put paid to that.

A flaming arrow lit up the sky, blazing a trail like a comet.

It was obvious they weren't waiting for sunrise. A second arrow and a third arced high, lighting up the bridge. Dark shadows moved, the men of Averland, creeping up on the stoneworks. Swords danced in the moonlight. They came in a silent rush.

The men of Stirland met them head on in a clash of steel and blood. The first flush of the conflict was savage. Two men fell, three more spilled in through the gap they left. The defenders drove Brandt's men back with brutal efficiency, the first rank of spearmen holding their line against the dirt-smeared black clad warriors, while behind them five crossbowmen ratcheted volley after volley of bolts into the front ranks of their opponents.

It wasn't enough.

Vorster rushed to join his comrades on the bridge. They were outnumbered and it was only going to be a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

Vorster was not a devout man but he prayed for a miracle. Without one, the battle for Legenfeld Bridge would almost certainly be over before dawn.

His cries were echoed by the defenders.

More flaming arrows lit the sky, streaking down far behind their lines. He saw the blue and red banner of Averland, snapping on a high pole, jostling in the midst of the oncoming tide of men, its once golden sun blanched of all colour by the moon.

Vorster breathed deeply, drawing on the calm centre of his being.

"It begins," he muttered to himself.

The old soldier beside him hawked and spat a wad of yellow mucus and backhanded his mouth clean. "Let's hope it ends, too. I'd hate it to go on forever."

Three men came at him.

One took a crossbow bolt in the groin and fell before he had even taken four paces. He lay convulsing as the remaining two stepped over him.

"Well that evens it up," the old soldier grinned. "Let's see if we can't help these boys find their way to Morr, shall we?" The expression was horribly out of place, but if they were going to survive the day it was exactly the kind of black humour that would see them through.

He was a tempest of blind fury as he threw himself into the fight, crying: "For Stirland! For liberty! For honour! For Martin!"

Vorster fought like a cornered beast, lashing out reflexively. His sword bit into flesh and bone. His injuries burned. He lost his sense of self. Around him steel clashed, people—friends—screamed and fell. The old man fought beside him, matching him blow for blow. He talked incessantly, urging Vorster on, yelling when it looked as though a blow might slip through his guard, cackling when one of their enemies fell. It was desperate, and yet Vorster was dislocated from it, cocooned in the anger he felt at Dietrich Jaeger's abandonment. A commander went down with his men. That was the way of it. He didn't run like a coward.

Time stretched out like molasses. The sun was high in the sky before he realised it had even risen.

The dead lay in pools of blood at his feet.

“What price victory?” he muttered bleakly, taking advantage of a lull in the fighting to catch his breath. As he looked up a blow cuffed him around the ear, staggering him back. He barely deflected a second, more ferocious attack, parrying the blade even as it lunged towards his heart. It was instinctive. Any level of thought between eye and hand would have been a death sentence. Where his enemy would have expected him to remain on the back foot Vorster twisted to the left and lunged forwards, impaling the surprised man. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, sucking air as Vorster wrenched his blade clear. The man’s legs buckled and he fell to his knees.

Vorster stepped back and swung, bringing the blade around in a savage arc. It cleaved through the man’s neck, severing his head. It hit the floor and rolled to his feet, eyes still wide with shock and fear. Vorster had heard stories from people who had been to beheadings—supposedly the severed head could still think and feel for up to a minute and a half. He looked down at the accusing eyes and kicked the head away. He didn’t want to know what the dead man was thinking *after* he had killed him.

There was space around him for the first time in what felt like an age.

A horn sounded, blowing three times, sharply, recalling the attackers and offering Vorster and the others a moment’s respite.

He looked around. Where there had been friends there were corpses. Forty-five men had guarded the bridge. He counted ten still standing. They had given a good account of themselves. Averheim had lost as many again and would lose more before the day was out.

But the bridge would fall. It was inevitable.

It seemed like an odd thing to die for: bricks and mortar. It wasn’t heroic. It wasn’t something to inspire a balladeer. No one would sing songs of their last stand. Now, had it been a woman, a great beauty, the daughter of a nobleman they had been fighting so desperately to save, that would have been different. But it wasn’t a beauty. It wasn’t anything of real value. It was a damned bridge in the middle of nowhere.

Bitterness clogged his throat.

He had never imagined his life would be traded for a bridge on the hinterlands between Stirland and Averheim.

It felt so utterly pointless, ludicrous really.

That, too, was the nature of war. There was no art or artifice to it. It was kill or be killed, die or die trying and all of those useless clichés. It was a senseless waste.

When the next charge came it would be the end.

“Why are they letting us rest?” It was one of the younger men, blooded for the first time.

“No need for ‘em to rush it, lad. We ain’t going nowhere and they know it. Ten of us against four hundred of them: it don’t matter how narrow the bridge is, we ain’t gonna hold ‘em up for more than a few minutes, if we’re lucky.”

The young soldier said nothing.

Vorster took pity on him. “What say you and me stand at the front, eh? Meet them head on and make the bastards pay a hefty bleedin’ toll to cross our bridge?” He smiled, but even as he did he knew he probably looked manic.

“I’ll be right beside you,” the old soldier said, coming up to stand next to him. He spat on his palm and held it out for the younger man to shake. “Last one to ten gets the beers in when we get back to Wurtbad, deal?”

“Deal,” Vorster agreed, spitting on his own palm and shaking. “Anyone else want in on this, Elias is throwing his money away.”

“The old fool hasn’t got two beans to rub together,” Klemens, a bear of a man, said, coming up behind them. “I wouldn’t trust him to buy the lad’s beer. Reckon I better stick close to the boy to make sure Elias coughs up what he owes, come the end of the day.”

Vorster smiled. "You keep one eye on him and I'll keep another on him. That ought to be enough."

"You think? Last time Elias promised to get a round in, Sigmar was wet behind the ears."

"Knowing my bloody luck the old git will get himself killed right as he's about to dip his hand into his pocket," Ueli said, joining them.

"I'm surprised he's wearing trousers with pockets!" Klemens grunted, laughing at his own joke.

The moment passed quickly. They all knew what this was: the calm before the storm.

The horn would sound again and...

Vorster saw him first—a lone rider under the white flag of truce. The horseman rode into the centre of the great stone bridge and reigned in his mount, waiting.

"Who speaks for you?" the rider called. Vorster knew the man immediately. It was Ackim Brandt himself. He was tempted to order the commander's execution. It would have been an easy thing to do, but he refused to lower himself to that.

"I do," Vorster said. Klemens nodded, as did Ueli.

He walked out to meet the rider halfway across the bridge.

Brandt dismounted. He teased off his metal gauntlet and offered Vorster his hand. Vorster hesitated a moment before he took it, expecting treachery. It took him a second to remember that Ackim Brandt was not Dietrich Jaeger.

"You have fought well today," Brandt said.

"For all the good it has done us."

"By my count enough people have died here today to satisfy Morr for a month. Now I would bury my dead."

"It would take you a quarter of an hour, less, to finish us off. There are ten of us to your hundreds"

"Will you lay down your swords? I am a civilised man. You will be given a head start to return to your loved ones."

Vorster shook his head. "As much as I am tempted, no; we are all men here and we know what we face. When it comes down to it, we face it with pride. Despite your numbers, you have yet to cross our bridge. We are the reason for that."

"Indeed you are, soldier. Indeed you are. You have done yourselves proud here. There is honour in that. I have to admit I admire your tenacity. In different circumstances I would have been proud to fight at your side. As it is we find ourselves on different sides of this battle, but that does not mean we have to be barbarians. If you will not surrender, consider this: with your permission, I would collect our dead. In return, I offer you and your men one more night of life in honour of your stand here. You will not be forgotten, soldier. On your word we will stand down 'til dawn."

"And we live to fight another day."

"It is a fair offer. As you say, the dead aren't going anywhere. I could easily have you put out of your misery. Instead, one more night with friends, one more sunrise. You deserve that."

"Another night of dread expectancy? Another night of gnawing fear?"

"One more night to listen to the beauty of the world, to feel cold water on your face, to wake up to bird song," Brandt countered.

"Another night to make peace with Morr?"

"Indeed, but who couldn't use another night?"

Vorster looked back at his rag-tag group of survivors. How could he deny them one more night of life? He looked at Elias, standing with his arm around the youngster, Zechariah. "Until sunrise?"

"You have my word."

"Thank you, commander," Vorster said.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider surrender? You seem like a good man, I would hate to kill you for nothing."

Vorster smiled, an echo of Elias' black humour sneaking into his voice as he said, "Well, just between us, Brandt, I hate to die, but it won't be for nothing. I will promise you that. Victory or death," he said, nodding back towards the Stirland standard, the flag rippling lazily in the slow breeze.

The Averlander nodded, understanding. "What is your name, man?"

"Vorster Schlagener."

"Well, Vorster," Brandt said, "fare thee well, soldier. I will say a prayer for you tonight. Let Morr know that you are a good man, and that you and your friends deserve honour in death. May Sigmar have mercy on your soul."

A flurry of black wings caught Vorster's eye. Three ravens had settled on the stone abutment behind Brandt. It was not unusual, considering the blood spilled already. What was unusual was that these three were the only carrion eaters that had begun to gather.

"And on yours, Brandt. The birds are gathering. Best have your men recover the fallen before they decide to feast."

The Averlander nodded, spurred his mount around, and cantered away, back towards his waiting army, leaving Vorster alone on the bridge.

He walked back to the others.

"Well, what did he want?" Klemens called before he was even halfway.

"He wants to gather their dead, and in return offered us respite."

"Taal's teeth!" Elias exclaimed.

"Don't get too excited old man; it's only one more night."

"Aye, but that might be all we need."

Vorster had tried not to think about it when Ackim Brandt had made the offer, but Elias was right. One more night could be exactly what they needed for salvation. Reinforcements were on the way from Brandstadt and Furtzhausen.

"Zechariah, I have a job for you. I want you to run like the wind, find Jaeger on the Wollestadt road and get him back here before sunrise. Our lives depend on it lad."

The young soldier nodded earnestly, not understanding that Vorster was sending him away so that he might live. "I'll bring him back, sir."

"No need to call me sir, lad. Now go."

Zechariah turned and ran, sprinting away towards the trees.

"That was a good thing you just did," Elias said, resting his hand on Vorster's shoulder.

"Let's hope it helps us."

"You know that's not what I meant, Vorster."

"I know," he shrugged. "He's just a boy. I couldn't very well damn him."

"No," Klemens agreed, "but you were quite capable of damning the rest of us, eh?" The big man chuckled to show there was no malice in his words.

"Oh, we were damned a long time ago, my friend," Vorster said, picking away at one of the chigger bites on his arm.

The bonfires burned on both sides of the river for the best part of the night. Five huge fires lit up the sky turning night into day. The stink of burning flesh filled the air.

Vorster knelt as close to the flames as the heat would allow. The fire stung his eyes, but it gave him an excuse for the tears of grief he shed. Body by body, they threw old friends onto the fire.

It was hard, harder than dying.

That too was the nature of war, being left behind to mourn.

He didn't hear them at first, because of the snap and crackle of the fire. Klemens came up behind him, dapping his hands vigorously. He looked up from the bodies still lined up, waiting to burn.

Riders.

Five of them.

They had obviously ridden hard. Their mounts looked dead on their feet and the men didn't look much better.

"What's going on?"

"If I was a religious man, I'd say a miracle," Klemens said, grinning. His grin was infectious. They're outriders. Martin's army is less than five hours away."

"Five hours is after dawn, my friend. Still plenty of time for us to die."

"Oh it gets better," Klemens said, obviously enjoying himself. They encountered Jaeger prancing around on the road. Let's just say they... *ahem... convinced* him to return. They've made camp just beyond the tree line. No campfires, no noise, but believe me, they're there, waiting. When Brandt comes to take on us few he is going to be in for a hell of a surprise when Jaeger's cavalry come crashing down on his head. While they are still reeling from that, Martin's army is going to stride onto the battlefield. Two thousand men, Vorster. Talk about a morale breaker. I'd love to see Brandt's face when it happens. We did it, my friend, we held the bridge."

Vorster wanted to smile but couldn't because he was all too aware of the cost of the miracle: the bodies at his feet and those being charred to ash in the fire.

He felt hollow.

That too was the nature of war.

THE BLACK SHIP

II

Navigating the Reik

They said that to see the black ship was to foretell your own death, such was the thrill of fear the barque sparked among the living.

They said it was an omen.

They pointed at the carrion birds following in its wake and muttered oaths and curses as readily as they uttered prayers and begged boons.

No one could deny that death followed the black ship.

In Marienburg three merchants in gaudy silks were left to rend their garments and weep like babes on the waterfront as their women walked willingly onto the black ship, mesmerised by the tall, gaunt figure of Mannfred, on the prow, wind streaming through his long luxurious locks as he beckoned them forwards. Their husbands tried to stop them of course. Their deaths were unpleasant.

He did not consume the women at once. They were taken down to the cages in the hold, to be brought up when the hunger was at its height. Their screams as they were forced below decks sent a thrill of pleasure coursing through the Vampire Count. There was nothing like fear. It was intoxicating.

In Altdorf, under the noses of the holy men, Mannfred disembarked to hunt.

The Shade of Death still hung from the towers around the city wall. He remembered when the citizens of the capital had adopted the mocking banner and the rage it had inspired in his sire. Vlad had not taken resistance well. Neither, it seemed, had the city. Much had changed since Mannfred had last walked her cobbled streets, little of it for the better. There was an air of poverty and desperation about the city. Even the great spires seemed somehow less than they had been before Vlad's reign.

A fool tried to extract a pfennig toll from him to cross a narrow footbridge. Mannfred rummaged in his pocket and pulled out something that flashed silver. The fool leaned in closer, to see better, and wound up clutching the slick ropes of his intestines in his hands as he toppled sideways into the Reik. Mannfred crossed the bridge, moving to one of the older parts of the city. Crossing the river he noticed the shift in smell. The dock side of the city reeked of rotten fish and the sewers where they washed out into the river, whereas this side of the bridge had a more distinct odour, or odours—the mix of sweat and vomit from drunken sailors trying to make their way back to their berths was overlapped by the rich leather tang of the tanneries. There was a marked contrast between the buildings as well. The architecture this side of the river was eclectic to say the least. Adjacent buildings mimicked exotic building styles, Tilean columns supported Kislevite domes. They were tall, at least four storeys, the upper levels hanging out over the streets, throwing the alleyways and streets below into deep shadow. They made it easy for Mannfred to move through the capital. He drew his cloak up over his head, fusing with the darkness and becoming, like the black ship, a ghost.

As with the barque, to catch a glimpse of his black shape was to foretell one's own demise.

He tilted his head slightly to the side, catching the faint whiff of humanity on the wind. He listened, pressed up against the wall, blending almost perfectly into the shadows: voices. They came

grubbing down the curb, five children ranging from five years up to a more worldly teenage girl. They were emaciated, slack skin draped over sharp bones. He thought they would pass him by until the girl froze mid-step and turned to look directly at him, as though she knew full well what kind of monster he was.

"Please mister, can you spare us a coin or two? We're starving." He had no doubt she was telling the truth. She came towards him, holding out a hand thick with a cake of grime.

Mannfred didn't move. He breathed deeply. It was her time; he could smell the blood on her. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes, yes, yes."

Her face lit up. "Megan, you look after your brothers for a few minutes. I'll catch up with you by the stage door of Zeigmuller's theatre. We'll eat well tonight, I promise."

She planted a kiss on her younger sister's forehead and skipped—almost running in her eagerness—across the street to him.

Mannfred opened his arms and folded her into an embrace.

She didn't resist.

Instead she gave herself to him, bringing her hands up to trace the line of his ribs and breathing into his ear: "Take me somewhere nice mister, two new pennies and you can do whatever you want, but not here, please."

His smile widened. "Oh, I don't need to *pay* you, my dear."

He touched a finger to her ear, craning her neck to the side with the slightest pressure from a nail.

"Please," she breathed, looking into his hungry eyes. "You promised."

"I don't think I did."

He leaned in, teeth and tongue touching her porcelain flesh. He breathed deeply, letting the breath leak out slowly over her skin. She sighed. It didn't bother him in the slightest that she was faking pleasure at his nearness. He bit. Not hard enough to pierce the skin, but enough to cause her breath to catch in her throat. His hand pressed hard against the small of her back, drawing her to him. He bit a slow teasing path up to her ear. "Follow me," he breathed, pulling away.

He knew she would, and not just for want of the coins.

He led her through the narrower streets on to Templestrasse, towards a richer district, letting her think he was some local merchant wandered too far from home. He paused outside the Vargr Breughel Memorial Playhouse, smiling at the artist's rendition of the haunting thespian currently performing the female lead in *Genevieve & Vukotich*. Before them the rooftops of Altdorf rose in tiers, seven and eight high, towards the richest homes of the city, the walled estates of the gentiles. "Not far now," he promised. Her hand slipped into his. It was a cruel parody of some lover's intimacy.

He led her towards the gates of Salzbrunnen Park, and through into the confusion of the trees and shrubberies run wild. He paused under the dark shadow of a weeping willow, the long trailing leaves casting daggers against the moonlight. He drew her close. He felt her heart beating hard against his chest. It was... seductive.

"Give yourself to me, dear. It hurts less that way," he promised.

She touched his face.

Her breathing was shallow, fast, urgent.

"Two pfennigs, mister."

He smiled indulgently at her. "Yes, of course." he took two silver coins and pressed them into her palm. "There, my dear, happy now?"

She looked down at the coins. She had been expecting brass pennies, not silver coins. Her hand closed quickly around them and secreted them away inside the folds of her frock before he could change his mind and take them back.

"Come to me."

She hiked up her skirts around her thighs and pressed herself up against Mannfred.

This time he bit her hard, sinking his teeth deep into her sweat-salted skin and sucking greedily at her lifeblood as it pulsed down his throat. She shuddered in his arms but he didn't let her fall, even as the strength drained out of her limbs. He drank, emptying her. Her blood invigorated him. A low sigh escaped her ruined throat, like the wet collapse of a blacksmith's bellows. It dwindled into a blood-clogged gargle and then nothing as the last breath left her. She died in his arms, feeding him.

He lay the girl down tenderly beneath the willow, rummaging within the folds of her frock to find the two silver coins he had given her. He straightened her dress and closed her eyes. It looked for all the world as though a pretty little maid had fallen asleep beneath the tree, until he knelt and placed a silver coin on each eye. Then it looked as though a pretty little maid had died beneath the sad tree.

He left her, knowing there were four more unsuspecting souls waiting for him outside the stage door of Zeigmuller's theatre.

He would feed well as the black ship continued its ghostly passage on to Nuln and beyond.

CHAPTER THREE

Schönheit und das Tier

Nuln, Imperial City on the Reik

Jon Skellan was at play.

The city was his for the taking.

He had shaken off the disguise of a cripple that he had worn in his final days with Konrad, and had come some small way towards recapturing his strength—at least in part. The disguise had served him well, both on the battlefield, and later in retreat, but it felt good to be *powerful* once more.

His face still bore the disfigurements of Jerek's beating. The lacerations around his cheek and eye-socket were still livid. He wore a black leather patch over his ruined right eye, enjoying the look of sinister menace it afforded him as he prowled. He knew he would heal even more, given time, though time was something he felt he had precious little of. It was a curious dichotomy for an immortal, to have all the time in the world and yet to be pressed by such urgency. He could feel it, the oncoming storm, as though the pressures in the air changed to accommodate the coming of Mannfred von Carstein. He had become curiously aware of it since Grim Moor. At first he had put it down to the regeneration his body was undergoing, but it wasn't that. It was true his kind had phenomenal regenerative powers. The scars around his cheek had already hardened and begun the process of re-knitting. The eye itself would take longer, though he was unsure he would ever regain sight in it; but it wasn't that. It was something else: a prescience, his hyper acute senses sparking off at some unseen threat, an awareness, a feeling deep down in his craw. He couldn't explain it.

He stalked the fog-bound streets of Nuln, slaking his thirst for blood on the ample supply of prostitutes and vagrants in the Alt Stadt district. The place was wretched, hidden away behind a high wall, out of sight and mind from the rest of the wealthy city. Skellan enjoyed the anonymity the place offered. Only the sick, the cast out and the homeless resided in the Alt Stadt, and it was a place where the Watch feared to tread, making it the perfect haunt for him to take refuge in while his wounds healed. The food was plentiful, if emaciated and diseased. He hungered for the vitality of youth, a fresh-faced girl in the throes of puberty or a boy in his teens, bursting with hormones and untapped strength, instead of the varicose veined whores and the slack-jowled tramps.

The pure white walls of the great Temple of Shallya seemed to mock the grimy desperation of the city. It stood; pure, commanding, a thing of beauty surrounded by decay and hardship. It was a beacon of hope. Skellan lurked in a recessed doorway across the street from the temple doors, watching the anonymous guards in their rags change shifts. Despite what he hoped, the Sisters of the Dove were not alone. A shame, Skellan mused, as he had a hankering for a fresh, healthy, woman; one that would put up a fight, kick and scream a bit, and make a game of it.

The area around the temple was a maze of shanties. They were hovels. There was no other word for them. He had seen poverty before, but these hastily erected slums went so much beyond poor housing; they were lawless holes where hope was beaten out by desperation and hunger was king. Life was cheap. It was nothing to find a corpse slumped in a gutter, come dawn, beaten to death or having simply given up fighting for life against the adversities of the city.

It was the perfect place for him.

He had spent a month in Nuln, never once venturing out of the Alt Stadt.

For a while, when he had first arrived he had feared discovery. He had clung to the dark spaces, skulked like some rat, picking through the gutter for scraps. That had all changed when he had found the stairwells. They were dotted throughout the Alt Stadt: crooked stairways, narrow twisting flights of cracked and broken stones leading down far below the surface. They clung to the sides of the shanties, existing in the tight crevices between crumbling walls. At first he wasn't sure exactly what he had found, but curiosity led him deeper.

Some of the stairs went far below the street level—one hundred, two hundred feet, leading to layer upon layer of tunnels and dark passages linked and woven one on top of the other in a honeycomb of possibilities. The longest of the tunnels meandered indefinitely, curling up towards the surface and the river. It ended in a tight metal staircase that came out in what looked to be a natural cavity in the side of the Reik, forming a wide stone quay far out of sight of the City Watch. The weed-choked opening was, no doubt, favoured by river pirates and smugglers. Skellan used it several times for mischief-making on nocturnal missions. The secret passages became a second home to him.

They called this *Unterbaunch*—underbelly—of the city the *Zufluchtsort*, a sanctuary, and that was exactly what it was for Jon Skellan. He had crawled down those stairs, the blood of Grim Moor still fresh on his hands, a wretched, contorted half-man, and had dragged himself into a corner amid the dregs of society. Down there he was anonymous, left alone like any other leper, to lick his wounds and fester—only Skellan was healing, getting stronger.

The severity of his wounds was such that it would be a long slow process, and it would *hurt*.

He dragged himself beneath the crypts of an abandoned temple, taking refuge in what had once been the grave dirt of the quarter. It offered some small respite, but even here the pain was unbearable. He would cry out, sleeping only fitfully, his dreams tortured by memories he thought long gone—abandoned along with his mortality. He found the ghost of Lizbet's face returning in the delirium tremens that plagued him. At first his anger ripped through her smile, tearing away to the ephemeral nothing that was the substance of dream, but later, as he succumbed to the tortuous healing process of his kind, Skellan welcomed thoughts of her. They were so much better than the other thoughts he tortured himself with.

When at last he was strong enough to emerge he succumbed to a feeding frenzy. Six women in as many hours found their way into his arms and then fell away into the gutter.

The worst of the Alt Stadt was hidden below the ground, the thieves highways or rather lowways, offering access to the richer areas of Nuln: the Meer district, Gerechtstadt and the Justice Palace with its warren of scribes and petty bureaucrats at work, the Sonder district with its nautical trade, and of course, the Unterhaltungsstadt, the entertainment district with its bordellos and a constant supply of ale from the tap houses along the Drog Strasse.

He turned his back on the temple.

It was time to venture deeper into the city, somewhere his hungers could be sated, while others sought to sate their own: Drog Strasse.

* * * * *

The Unterhaltungsstadt was an exercise in overindulgence. It reeked of oversweet perfumes used to mask the sour stench of humanity. Scratch beneath the surface, Skellan thought, and you'd be able to see the worms.

Two women of the night stood side-by-side at the mouth of the street, cheeks rouged and temples powdered white. They were squeezed into their bustiers, laces drawn so tightly the ripples of fat spilled over them. The doxies called him over, but then stopped, mid-beckon, sensing something wrong with him. They backed up physically, pressing themselves into the dark shadows of a recessed doorway, praying fervently that their would-be mark would pass them by.

Skellan savoured their fear.

It didn't matter that they had no idea who or what he was—their most primal urges drove them to hide from him. That was power unlike anything he had tasted in life. It was intoxicating.

Oil lamps flickered as he passed them by, their blue flames guttering. Black horse-drawn carriages rolled down the cobbles of Drog Strasse, their drivers cracking the whip to spur them on. A gaggle of voices laughed, enjoying some private joke as the press of theatregoers came streaming out of the Herrscahft Theatre's side doors. Skellan stopped fifty feet away, stepping back into the door of a red-velvet bordello. He felt a hand on his shoulder, the gentle touch of fine delicate fingers, and snarled. He didn't turn to see the effect it had on the woman. The hand withdrew, that was enough.

Two figures emerged from the theatre.

The man was obviously a fop, worried only about surrounding himself with pretty things. Every gesture and movement was effeminate. His powdered face made him look like a porcelain figurine, something a child could easily break.

Now the woman, she was *mesmerising*.

She had vitality.

She radiated raw sensuality.

She was, Skellan reflected, numinous.

Even from fifty feet away Skellan felt the pull of her presence, and the awe she inspired in passers-by as they moved in and out of her orbit.

She was almost certainly a courtesan, the fop's paid companion for the evening.

Skellan watched, reminded strangely of Vlad von Carstein's brooding charisma. Hers was different. Von Carstein's draw was darker, more nihilistic in nature. The woman was dark, certainly; her hair was a curling cascade of black that spilled halfway down her back. Moonlight froze within the pearls braided into her lush curls, each one no doubt worth a pretender's ransom, but her darkness was physical, not spiritual. For all of von Carstein's brooding intensity she offered the kind of frisson that caused grown men to act like slobbering idiots around her, and she was well aware of her power. In that way the courtesan and the vampire were not so different after all.

Skellan studied her as she moved; it was almost luxurious. Where men of steel prided themselves on economy of movement and effort, this she-devil was extravagant with her gestures. She loved the world around her and lavished it with her attention. There were no half-measures, no incomplete or distracted shrugs. She was a lady of committed passions, passionately committed. He envied her that. He envied her a life outside of the gutters and the shadows.

She passed him in a hush of linen and silks. The cloths rubbed against one another to conjure a sussurant river of sound. She had one hand in the fop's. The other held a delicate peacock feather fan that was little more than an artifice. It was useless for cooling her face. The white ruff of her collar gathered around her throat. Her delicate skin was pearlescent in the lamp light, but it was her eyes—strangely knowing in a face so young—that snared him.

He stepped out in front of them, causing the fop to start. The she-devil didn't miss a beat. She lowered her eyes coyly and smiled.

"Sigmar's hairy backside! You scared half the life out of me," the fop exclaimed. It was such a ridiculous thing to say that Skellan couldn't help but chuckle. No doubt the Man-God did have a few hairs back in his day, but it wasn't an epithet he would have been proud of. It certainly wasn't an all-conquering appellation. "Are you mocking me, sir?" Then he stopped, seeing Skellan's wounds in the lambent glow of the oil lamp.

Skellan touched his scars, his fingers finding the leather eye patch. "Ah, this..." he said. "Got it at Grim Moor," he dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "fighting a vampire."

His words had the desired effect on the effeminate young man. He backed away a step, his lack of gallantry putting the woman between him and Skellan. Skellan took the opportunity to move in

close to the woman. She didn't shy away from him, which intrigued the vampire. On the contrary, she withdrew her hand from her companion's and offered it to Skellan. He took it and kneeling, raised it to his lips. "Guten abend."

"Good evening," she said, smiling slightly at the sight of the scarred, one-eyed man on his bended knee playing the chevalier.

"Das einzige Schöne ist eine bezaubernde Frau," Skellan said, smoothly. *The only beauty is an enchanting woman.*

"And who are you, flatterer?"

"Skellan, Jon Skellan."

"Well Jon Skellan, you are quite the charmed one, fighting vampires and living to tell the tale."

"I like to think of myself as the hero of my own life story," Skellan said.

"What is this fool blathering on about?" The fop virtually hissed, recovering his courage and trying to push between them.

Skellan ignored him. "And you are?"

"Narcisa da Vries. My rude companion is Niculai Gaspard. He is, as I am sure you know, an actor of no small repute."

"Currently treading the boards in Vitas Mortis, a piece I penned myself," he said with such utter disdain for the other man that Skellan couldn't help but smile. The man was a blowhard *and* a hack.

"Indeed," Skellan said, never breaking eye contact with Narcisa. "I shall have to drag myself out of the slums more often if it means I get to rub shoulders with the beautiful and the famous."

"You should," she said.

Skellan's smile broadened as her fingers moved, apparently of their own accord, to touch the vein at her throat.

"May the night be kind to you, flatterer." It was her eyes, Skellan thought again. They were so much older than her face. Narcisa da Vries fascinated him—well fascinated him as much as any prospective meal ever had.

"And to you both. What was your play again, Gaspard? Schönheit und das Tier?" Skellan smirked and walked away before the fop could get his dander up sufficiently to actually say something back to him.

Thirty feet down the cobbled street Skellan turned to see Narcisa da Vries looking back over her shoulder directly at him. He couldn't see her expression, but her body language was invitation aplenty.

She knew exactly what he was, and she welcomed it.

He had always imagined there would be those who craved what his kind had to offer—those who hungered for the immortality of the blood kiss. He could not deny that she was enchanting, but that made her more dangerous than any plain beauty. Even as a mortal her numina blazed. What would come of her should she be born again into the unlife? He breathed deeply, trying to recall her scent. Dare he turn her into Schönetod? La Bella Morte? The Beautiful Death? Dare he not? She was mesmerising, he thought again, and yes, he knew he wanted her. He was sick of all the rancid meat, the washed out wretched corpses of the homeless, the starving and the diseased. She was fresh. Vitas Mortis indeed: vitality and death. She promised far more than any dried-up matron from the Sisterhood of the Dove. He licked at the air, wetting his lips. Yes, perhaps he would sire her, perhaps. She would be a trophy, of that there was no doubt.

Schönetod: The Beautiful Death.

With that delicious thought firmly in mind, he followed them.

Narcisa walked slowly, lingering over inviting shop windows where the merchants had displayed their wares, pointing and laughing. Skellan imagined her talking in sweet whispers to her beau. In every way, the fop, Gaspard, seemed to fill her up. Skellan moved behind them, never

allowing them out of his sight. To anyone else they probably looked like perfect lovers as they moved arm in arm down the cobbled streets. Skellan's face twisted bitterly. He would feed, he promised himself. Let those same people who smiled and nodded now be the ones that found their corpses in the river come sunrise. The actor and the courtesan, bled dry and bloated by the Reik. Let them cling to their dead smiles then. Let their ghosts talk in sweet whispers until the end of time.

By the river, she tossed her head back and laughed. Her laughter's melodic thrill, like a bird speaking in a language only he understood, reached Skellan. The laughter wasn't for the fop. It was for him. She wanted him to understand how superior to Gaspard she truly was.

He followed the pair from district to district all the way back to their lodging rooms across from the statue of a long-dead noble with a chipped and weathered profile. He settled himself down on the statue's plinth and waited, watching the windows to see which, if any, lit up on their homecoming. There was a bakery near by. The air was filled with the rich scent of freshly baked bread and the more delicate aromas of pastries, cinnamon and chocolate.

He didn't have to wait long before he saw Narcisa, backlit in a sheer linen gown, laces undone on her ample curves. He stared at her in the window on the fourth storey. She knew he was down there, watching. She wanted him to see. It didn't matter that it was a fleeting glimpse. It was enough. He knew what he had to do. Skellan rose to his feet. Heavy vines of ivy, interwoven with clematis crept up the wall to her wrought-iron balcony. He tested them, pulling hard to see how deep their roots had burrowed into the brick wall. Satisfied, he climbed.

Skellan rose, hand over hand.

The stone was coarse beneath his fingers.

Midway up the mortar crumbled and a handful of clematis came away from the ivy with a sickening tear, leaving him dangling precariously over the city street. He hung there for a second, expecting more of the plant to wrench free under the force of his sudden drop. Tendrils of greenery and flowers wrapped themselves around him, the syrupy fragrance of the clematis overpowering. He kicked at the wall, scrabbling around for a toehold to support his weight before gravity undid whatever was holding the last of the clematis to the ivy in the wall. The toe of his shoe scraped over the stone, sticking on the slimmest edge, but it was enough. He shifted his weight and leaned back slightly, looking for a handhold above him. There weren't any. He dragged his fingers down the stone, searching out a weakness. The mortar, undermined where the ivy had rooted, crumbled. It was enough. He forced his fingers into the crack and hauled himself up another foot. He took his time, scaling the wall foot by foot, making handholds where there were none.

Skellan reached out and grabbed the black iron balcony railing and pushed himself away from the wall, hauling himself up onto the balcony. He hunkered down beside a planter overflowing with a riot of night-blooming jasmine and pressed his face up against the window.

The room beyond was opulent: regency stripe on the walls broken up by cameos and oils. An extravagant golden fire dragon had been woven into the huge rug; the workmanship was, even from afar, exquisite. The carpet had almost certainly been imported from some far eastern land at no little expense. A huge four-poster bed dominated the room. Veils of lace were cinched to the elaborately carved posts. Storm lanterns bathed the room in a lush, warm glow. A seven-tier crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, each of the tiny perfect facets of glass catching the light and scattering it across the enormous bedroom in a kaleidoscope of colour.

And yet Skellan barely registered the finery, because Narcisa lay naked on the bed, more lush and opulent than any mere trinket or tapestry.

The fop lay beside her, his hair matted with sweat, his prissy shirt and waistcoat cast aside in his ardour. Skellan touched the glass. She reached up for Niculai Gaspard, but at the last moment, as she drew him down onto her, her eyes shifted and her smile widened as she met Skellan's gaze. Her face distorted as though a veil passed across it, the hunger rising as her nails dug bloody runnels into the actor's back. She raised her fingers to her lips, one by one licking them clean.

A shiver of delight traced down Skellan's spine as she tangled her hand in the fop's bedraggled locks and drew his head down until his lips brushed her collarbone as though it were the most sacred inch of skin on her body, worshipping her inch by perfect inch.

Then she bit him.

She came up bloody, her teeth ruby. She wiped the back of her hand across her face, smearing the blood across her cheek in the parody of a smile. The beast finally found its way out through her face; her cheeks narrowed, jaw distended, brow planed, as every contour of her grew harsher, more defined, and yet still held to that core of physical beauty. It was not a full transmogrification; she did not fully become the beast in the way that Skellan did when he loosed the animal inside him. She maintained the illusion of humanity even as she fed on the cattle, but she was a kindred beast, of that he was certain. He met her gaze, saw the predatory cunning there and rejoiced in it. Then she lowered her head again, feeding.

It was different though, controlled. She wasn't draining the life out of her lover; she was decanting him, like a fine brandy, just a mouthful of blood and then breaking the contact. Her discipline was extraordinary.

The fop rolled over in her arms, languid in the afterglow of their coupling.

Skellan moved away from the window, spilling the jasmine planter. The sudden flurry of noise betrayed him. He scrambled around, trying to prevent the clay pot from shattering on the balcony floor. It slipped through his fingers and hit the floor hard, shattering. Skellan winced. He pushed himself to his feet and was halfway over the railing when, still bleeding, Niculai Gaspard threw open the glass double doors and stood, naked, on the threshold. Gaspard levelled the percussion pistol in his right hand at the centre of Skellan's forehead.

"I know you, sir. Don't think I don't. With a face like that how could I not? Now I suggest you stay right where you are," Gaspard said, thumbing back the black iron hammer until it *snicked* into place. "Believe me when I say I won't hesitate in pulling the trigger."

Skellan didn't move, didn't take his good eye from the black bore of the pistol.

Narcisa da Vries moved in close behind her lover, one arm sliding around his waist. Her fingers traced the lines of his ribs as they caressed his skin.

"My, my, I do believe it is Herr Skellan from Drog Strasse. How peculiar," the woman said, obviously enjoying the moment. "One might wonder what you are doing on my balcony in the dead of night."

"Up to no good, surely," Gaspard rasped. The pistol wavered in his hand. His free hand covered his genitals. The man had remembered his nakedness and was uncomfortable, and not surprisingly. His nudity left him psychologically vulnerable despite the weapon in his hand. "No better than a common peeping torn. I should shoot you on the spot, villain; put you out of your misery."

"And out of my bedroom," Narcisa said.

Skellan waited, knowing there would be no sudden sunburst of agony in his skull from the shot tearing into him. Gaspard was a windbag. He wasn't man enough to pull the trigger. No, he would pump himself up and preen and bluster but he wouldn't bring an end to it. Few could. It took a special kind of man to kill. Knowing this gave Skellan the upper hand, despite the bizarre nature of the situation. Of course, there was always the possibility that the fool's violent trembling would cause the gun to go off accidentally. More pointless things had happened, to be sure.

Skellan tensed, ready to spring. The pain of the fall would be welcome compared to suffering the black iron shot through the skull.

"What did you intend? To wait for us to sleep and then rob us blind? Murder us in our beds? You cowardly cur! I should wipe the floor with you. You are less than a man!"

"Oh, just shoot me and be done with it, you pompous blowhard," Skellan muttered. Instead of dropping down he swung his leg over the iron railing and began to lower himself back off the balcony.

“Stay where you are or I’ll shoot,” Gaspard said. His nakedness undermined the venom in his voice, making him appear quite ludicrous as he stood there waving the pistol around.

Narcisa leaned in, drawing her arm tighter around his chest, pinning him as she bit into the soft flesh of his neck just hard enough to draw blood. Gaspard let out the smallest of whimpers. The pistol jerked dangerously in his hand as his body convulsed, pleasure coursing through him.

“We should settle this like men,” Skellan said, still half-on, half-off the balcony.

“Like men?” Gaspard said with disbelief. You break into my house and expect some kind of leniency? You propose what? Fisticuffs? You deserve nothing short of death, sir!”

“Then,” Skellan said, slapping the fop across the face with the flat of his hand. “Pistols at dawn, you want satisfaction, I want your woman. That should satisfy your sense of honour.”

“I... I...”

“You ought to kill me, I know, you already said that. Perhaps you will manage it come morning.”

The woman’s smile was only enhanced by the small ribbon of the actor’s blood that had dribbled down her chin.

They met beside the river before first light.

Gaspard picked the spot and waited beneath one of the many mournful willows. A small dinghy was moored on the riverbank. As with the day before, he was dressed in an elegant coat of red silk and dark flowing breeches that ballooned over the top of knee-length leather boots. His shirt of ivory silk was open. At his throat he wore a silver hammer of Sig-mar, for all the good it would do him from twenty paces.

Skellan smiled grimly, the fop had obviously raided the theatre’s wardrobe to best look the part.

Beside him, Narcisa looked exquisite in a long flowing skirt of the subtlest blue and a simple white blouse. She curtsied to Skellan as he approached. He responded with a slight inclination of the head.

Gaspard didn’t so much as acknowledge his presence.

Skellan stretched, rolling his shoulders to work the ache out of them. It had been a long night. After the encounter on the balcony he had been forced to retreat to the Alt Stadt empty handed. Luckily, as dawn crept in he had found a baker’s boy running errands. The boy tasted sweeter than his pastries smelled.

Skellan picked a strip of gristle from between his teeth.

He saw that the fool had set up a small table and a stool. There was a glass tumbler and a decanter containing amber liqueur on the table.

The actor had gone to great lengths to set the scene. It was a shame his theatrics lacked an audience.

Niculai Gaspard’s second walked slowly towards him. Gaspard’s man carried a small case fashioned from the finest walnut, lacquered and polished. The case bore the crest of some petty noble long since stamped out by the greed of the ever-expanding Empire. It was fastened with twin gold hasps. The man nodded to Skellan as he approached. Skellan watched as he broke the hasps and opened the velvet-lined case on two identical double-barrelled percussion pistols. The weapons had Tilean curved grips and steel end-caps that were carved with the same crest as the walnut case. The barrels themselves were seven inches long with swivel ramrods. They were beautiful pieces.

Skellan took one, making no effort to mask his smirk, as he knew it would rankle the fop no end. He looked across the field of honour to where the fop was stretching and loosening his muscles up as though he expected the duel to degenerate into a brawl. There was a nervous energy about Gaspard. Skellan supposed it was some form of pent up righteous fury. The pistol was heavy in his hand. He wasn’t used to such cowardly tools. He liked his killing intimate, close. Still, he sighted down the barrels. The aim appeared true.

“You have made your decision, sir?” the second asked deferentially.

Skellan nodded.

He knelt, resting the barrel beside a fallen leaf. Pulling the hammer into full-cock he dry fired the pistol into the grass. The leaf moved an inch as the wind from the barrel got beneath it. Skellan nodded appreciatively. It was a well-made piece.

Beside the pistols was a powder flask. Skellan took what he needed, pouring a small measure of the black powder down the muzzle of the pistol. He made a show of checking the pistol to see that everything appeared to be in working order—no obvious blockages that might cause the gun to backfire or the shot to ricochet. He took two of the lead balls from the purse of shot and depressed them into the cylinders one at a time. They fit snugly into the chamber. So exact was the fit that a small ring of lead sheered from each ball as they were tamped down until they sat perfectly beside the black powder. Finally, he greased the inside of the barrels with what smelled like duck fat. He half-cocked the pistol and nodded.

“If you would be so kind as to stand on your mark, sir, I will see to Herr Gaspard’s pistol.”

Skellan walked slowly to a point midway between the weeping willow and an imperious royal oak. Gaspard’s man had planted a small red flag in the dirt to signify the mark.

Skellan watched the fop go through the same elaborate routine, taking his pistol, loading it, and greasing the barrels to avoid chain fire from the second barrel. Gaspard laboured over it, doing everything as slowly as humanly possible. It was gamesmanship. It was also a ham actor overacting. He wanted to give Skellan time to get nervous, for doubt to worm its way into his mind and undermine his aim when the time came for them to face each other.

The fop walked slowly towards the mark, his man one pace behind him.

“Prepare to die, Herr Skellan,” Gaspard said, coming to stand beside him. The man was sweating profusely despite the relative chill of the morning.

Skellan smiled coldly.

“Oh, I am long since past preparing, little man. Come, I grow weary of waiting to kill you. I want to taste your woman.”

The second coughed politely into his gloved fist. “The rules of engagement are simple. It is a duel of honour. You each have two shots, to be fired alternately. You will stand back to back, and on my word take ten paces, turn, take aim and fire. Should one or both of you die in this duel, may Morr have mercy upon your soul even as your death proves the right of the other.”

“May the black birds carry your soul swiftly to Morr,” Gaspard said.

Skellan saw then that a handful of crows and a single large raven had settled down on the thin drooping branches of the willow above Narcisa da Vries. The sight of the carrion eaters chilled him to the marrow. More birds settled on the riverbank, another huge raven landing on one of the dinghy’s oarlocks.

“On my word... begin!” The second cried.

Skellan counted off six paces, deliberately walking half a step slower than Niculai Gaspard. On the seventh he drew the hammer back to full-cock. On the eighth he vented a primal roar, scattering the birds for a moment. On the ninth he listened for the telltale snick of Gaspard thumbing back the hammer on his own percussion pistol. On the tenth he turned to face down the barrel of the fop’s gun. Gaspard drew aim first, levelling his gun. Skellan could hear his breathing, fast and shallow, and could see the muzzle wavering unsteadily. There was a crisp detonation and pain exploded within Skellan’s chest. The lead ball had taken him clean between the third and fourth ribs. He looked down at the powder burn where it had torn through his shirt. He dug a finger into the hole, rooting around until he picked the hot lead out of his chest with a grubby fingernail. He dropped it on the ground, shaking his head.

“I’m sure those damnable birds would, if I still possessed a soul,” Skellan said, levelling his own pistol.

Before he could squeeze off his first shot Gaspard triggered his second. Skellan felt the sting of lead as it tore away part of his left ear.

“Well now, that was hardly in the spirit of things, was it?” He said as he squeezed off a single shot, blowing away the lower part of Niculai Gaspard’s face and jaw. The man staggered back pitifully, the pistol spilling from his grip as his body slowly began to register the fact that it was dead. Gaspard lurched one step to the side and fell.

Narcisa applauded mockingly. “You owe me dinner, Herr Skellan,” she said walking towards him.

The birds swooped down, settling on the corpse. They picked away at it even before the man’s nerves had ceased their spasms. The raven came to rest on his upturned hand. It tilted its head curiously, beady yellow eyes boring into Skellan.

“Speak then, bird,” Skellan said, knowing this was no ordinary spectator.

“Mannfred is coming!” The raven cawed, its beak stretching hideously wide. “Mannfred is coming! Prepare for the Count! Mannfred is coming home!”

“Do birds always talk to you?” Narcisa asked, fascinated by the winged messenger. She reached out to stroke its ruffled feathers, but the bird took flight before she could touch it.

“More and more of late,” Skellan confessed.

“And do you always listen?”

“Without question.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Heart of Darkness

Nuln, Imperial City on the Reik

Jerek refused to feed.

The Wolf had been plagued by birds for months. The black, slick-feathered carrion eaters were drawn to him. They spoke to him with the voice of madness. He had heard that withdrawal from blood could have that effect. By not feeding he was driving himself to the point of insanity. The madness was incipient. It crawled around inside his head before coming to life in the strangest of ways. It was so specific. The ravens and crows would settle on his lap, their yellow eyes looking up at him as they delivered their message: *Mannfred is coming*. It was always the same message. *Mannfred is coming*. The birds urged him to return to Drakenhof to prepare for the new count's coming. He broke their necks and discarded their convulsing bodies along the roadside, without feeding upon them. They were his madness. Over and over cawing the same message: *Mannfred is coming*. *Mannfred is coming*.

The more he denied them the more frequently they came.

He had fled Grim Moor, taking the form of the great white wolf, running for days before collapsing with exhaustion. He wandered, lost. The cravings plagued him, but he would not feed. He walked barefoot, wrapped in a blanket he had stolen from a clothes line on the edge of a small hamlet in the middle of nowhere. He slept huddled against the boles of trees and in the dark corners of farmers'

barns. Despite his immense will, the old wolf could not completely deny the need for blood. He subsisted on rats and field mice, water voles and once, a fourteen pointed stag that, in wolf form, he had brought down with his teeth. The meat was good; the blood was better, but it wasn't pure. His kind needed more to survive; their cravings sang for the blood of humanity. It was so rich and full of vitality and each body held so much of it. To drink was to sate one's appetite completely.

He had been lying at the roadside, naked and tired in his blanket, when a line of Strigany caravans had slowed to offer him a ride. He had been hesitant at first, expecting a trap, until the leader had introduced himself as Vedas, Guardian of the Old Ways, and offered his hand. The tattoo on his forearm was curiously similar to the von Carstein wolf's head. The feral-faced Vedas had smiled reassuringly and said, "You are safe now, mulo." It was an odd word, an old word meaning, literally, dead person. Jerek took his hand and hauled himself up into the wagon. They clothed him and offered sustenance, knowing full well what he was.

Vedas was an entertainer, a mountebank and a tinker of sorts, his vardo caravan filled with pots and pans in need of repair, old boots and other oddities. He liked to talk, as Jerek came to learn over the coming days. He was an endless font of gossip, though with no way to verify the veracity of his wild stories it was impossible to separate fact from fancy.

Still, a lot of what he said supported things that Jerek had witnessed in the months since Grim Moor. The Empire was tearing itself apart, but that was the stupidity of mankind. Such was their blind arrogance that they believed themselves superior to every other creature, including their fellow man. The Strigany caravans skirted minor battlefields and killing grounds still fresh with carrion. The story was always the same. One petty noble with pretensions had thrown away the lives of his

subjects, sending them up against another equally petty aristocrat with grand delusions. The play of life was ever the same.

The punishments for the conquered were harsh. Corpses were nailed to stakes as a message to the living: to resist is to die. It had taken years for this to become commonplace once more after the fear of the risen dead. The living had grown bolder, though whether it was through arrogance or stupidity he did not know.

There was a bitter irony to the slaughter. What the cattle did to their own was worse by far than anything Vlad von Carstein could have conceived for them. So they had liberated themselves from the tyranny of the night only to set themselves up as the darkest, most brutal, of all tyrants. He wondered if they would have appreciated the irony in the hallowed halls of Altdorf.

As the Strigany caravans travelled they picked up other whispers. One recurred more and more the closer they ventured to the Reik: a black ship sailed her waters, and where she came death surely followed. Hamlets and towns were alive with gossip. The black ship had been sighted and soon after there had been a spate of disappearances. Few dared give voice to their fears as though by simply naming the black ship they would bring its curse down upon their heads.

They travelled on towards Nuln.

The Strigany caravan was made up of actors, tumblers, acrobats, jugglers and other physical entertainers. They travelled from place to place performing their plays across the old world.

They revered Jerek, or mulo, as they called him because of his nature. They were guardians, living protectors of the dead. They brought him gifts: the electrum figurine of a jaguar, a black obsidian brooch that had once belonged to a lady of wealth and means, a jade funeral mask from Cathay, so exquisitely carved it that appeared almost alive, and so much more. The jaguar fascinated him. It was so detailed, utterly accurate in every way as though the beast had somehow been miniaturised by the craftsman. Its perfection was unnerving.

They also brought him food.

Their proximity, though taunting because of the strength of their pulses, was a blessing for they kept the birds at bay.

They made camp outside the walls of Nuln.

They were not the only ones. The city gates were closed and would remain so until first light. Merchants and travellers alike were forced to wait.

Before they entered the big city Jerek decided he would break away from the caravan, he was uncomfortable with this nearness to humanity. It was tempting fate, asking to be discovered and slain. He moved carefully, leaving the moon as little of himself to illumine as he could. He touched a finger to his tongue, the memory of blood still lingering there, its tang strong enough to taste.

He turned his gaze back to the city with its high, defensive walls patrolled by weary bowmen. Behind the walls, rooftops rose in a clutter of slate. A city was a city was a city—narrow streets of cobblestone and filth crowded by buildings carved from the same dull grey stone as the city wall, the high domes of the citadel with its weather-beaten gargoyles, and the masts of the few tall ships and cutters down in the harbour, cluttered by dingy dockside taverns, whorehouses and warehouses: Nuln.

A raven cawed a mournful, haunting cry.

Jerek studied the harbinger as it settled in the branches above his head. A half-smile touched his lips. *An ill-omened bird come to watch over me*, he thought, barely sparing the raven a second glance, even as it shrieked, *Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming!*

It had been a long time since he had first heard the bird's message, back on the battlefield of Grim Moor, though he had heard it too often since. The animal blood the gypsies fed him had kept the incipient touch of madness away long enough for him to know that the birds were no figment of his broken mind. That was a small mercy.

A second city of canvas was being hastily erected on the plains to either side of the Kemperbad Road. Amid the tents, the garish swirls and flashes of colour marked the Strigany caravans. Jerek closed his eyes, and abandoned himself to the emptiness curdling inside him.

The bird loosed another cry and took flight, Jerek's gaze followed the harbinger until it was a black spot in the eye of the moon.

"Go tell your master I refuse to bend the knee, little wing. Go warn him that death walks his way... he will not win."

Jerek moved with deceptive grace, steps sure on the treacherous shale, a fleeting shadow within the dark, ghosting across the plains. He paused again, listening this time to the silken rush of the river, the crackle of the campfires, the lulls in the droning conversations. He slipped his hand inside the folds of his cloak, feeling the reassuringly familiar weight of the old hammer at his hip. The hammer was the last relic of his life as Jerek Kruger, White Wolf of Middenheim. It marked him for what he was. It was a simple double-headed hammer with a worn leather-wrapped hilt, impossibly woven into the fabric of his soul from the moment he had accepted it and joined the ranks of the wolves of Ulric all those lifetimes ago.

Jerek took pains to ensure that the iron head was covered before he set off again, breaking into a steady lope that ate the grass in long, easy, strides. Slowly at first but with steadily more insistency it began to rain. The thin veil of rain stung his face. The elements were a mental rather than physical discomfort. He was always cold. Cold was death.

He skirted the ring of campfires, keeping the shadow's edge between him and the light. The voices were louder here, and the conversations almost understandable. A second-rate minstrel was butchering a commoner's ballad on his mandolin. His voice was weak, the intonations and resonance noticeably off-key and lacking even the simplest melody. For all that, there was a simple magic in the minstrel's tale that captivated his audience, sang to the shadows of their dark souls, their rapt faces dancing in the firelight. Or perhaps it was the fire's warmth that held them still and not the minstrel's song at all.

Jerek moved on, stepping around the back of a tent, careful to avoid tripping over the trailing guide ropes as he edged out of sight. From within he could hear the murmur of voices, more campfire gossip, the grunting of one-night lovers coming to grips. He slipped away from the tent, creeping along the side of a high-wheeled Strigany caravan with gaudy side panels.

The calls from the crowd sparked another song from the minstrel, Jerek waited, loitering on the edge of the gathering until Veda came up beside him. The gypsy drew on a briarwood pipe, exhaling deeply. Pungent smoke rafted up in front of his face.

"What troubles you, mulo?"

Jerek didn't answer, not at first.

"Spirits are high. They appear happy, no? Yet it is a rare thing for our people to be anything other, no? They are always happy as they tread the unending road. Not so. Strigany do not show their true feelings. Where you see singing and laughter there is sadness and despair. Listen closer to the lyrics of the singer, the shifting chords of his instrument, those low mournful notes he intersperses amid the joyous salutations of the melody. It is all a lie, mulo. Scratch beneath the surface."

Jerek listened. Veda was right. There was an air of melancholy to the song that he hadn't appreciated until the Strigany had pointed it out to him.

"We are guardians of the old ways. That is no easy burden. We bear the secrets of our people, and the secrets of those long forgotten. We nurture their wisdom. The world was not always so old, mulo. Once it was young and men were rash. They did things without thinking. They traded on their mortality for gratification. They were hedonistic in their pursuit of pleasure. We are the last keepers of their rituals, the last beneficiaries of their wisdom. They live on through us, and when they return we will be there, waiting."

Jerek knew who those hedonistic old ones were; his immortality was, after all, the legacy of their blood curse.

“Inside me lie secrets that would break a weaker man. The same, I am sure could be said of you, mulo, no? Come, Chovihani would see you.”

Chovihani, the crone, was the caravan’s grandmother. She was a seer, gifted with second-sight. It was traditional for all Strigany caravans to travel with a grandmother, one familiar with the old ways. She was the most pure. Chovihani was a pox-riddled hag. Her face was a rash of warts and wiry black hairs and her eyes without irises were pure white save for the small black pupils in their centres. Vedas led Jerek to the old woman’s campfire.

“Little mother? May we join you?” Vedas asked politely.

Jerek had expected a little more reverence for the hag. Vedas, though, treated her as family, no more, no less.

The hag craned her neck, peering up into the darkness beyond the circle of firelight. “Is that you little Vedas?”

“It is, mother.”

“And you’ve brought the dead man to me.” Her face broke into something approximating a smile. She rubbed her wizened old hands together briskly. “Good, good. Yes. Sit, sit awhile. Join me.”

There was a canopy between the tent and one side of the fire, offering shelter from the downpour.

Jerek sat cross-legged across the fire, Vedas beside him. The gypsy took a tin cup from beside the fire and filled it from the pan heating over the flames. He passed it to Jerek. The liquid was tart. It tasted vinegary. Vedas poured himself a cup and drank deeply, swallowing the entire contents of the cup in a single mouthful. He smacked his lips appreciatively. “Arafulo: few can make it today. The secret of the infusion is lost to all but a few. We are lucky, Chovihani knows her herbs. It is said to heighten the mystical aura of the drinker. Indeed, our spiritwalkers drink Arafulo prior to entering their trance state.” He turned to the witch. “It is good, little mother.”

“The dead man doesn’t agree with you, Vedas.”

Jerek laughed. “She doesn’t miss a thing, does she?”

The old woman pricked her finger and put three drops of her blood into the liquid. Her blood altered the flavour only subtly, but the difference was enough for Jerek to think it tasted like ambrosia.

“She doesn’t,” the crone rasped, cackling delightedly, “but she’s not so far into her dotage that you need to talk about her as though she were some feeble-minded cretin.” she tapped her temple with a crooked finger, “Sharp as a tack, my mind.”

“I am quite sure it is,” Jerek said.

The crone leaned across, taking his hand in hers. “Oh,” she said. “Such sorrow, in you, such sorrow. Dark, not dead. Dark, not dead. Such sorrow in the dark. Eternity, surrounded by the dark, not dead. Dark as a crow’s wing.”

Jerek pulled his hand away sharply, breaking whatever trance the old woman had slipped into.

Her white eyes turned on him. “Let me tell you a story, dead man, of Hajnalka and her brother Anaztaz for they are in many ways kin to you.” Jerek began to rise, but Vedas urged him to remain seated. Jerek shifted uncomfortably. He had never been fond of soothsayers or seers. It all smacked of a human need to map out the unknown. He had been around them long enough to know that men made their own destinies. No matter how sage, soothsayers were rarely right. Their prophecies were translated and twisted to match the future the listener wanted. Few were ever able to hear the original prophecies and live long enough to see how the foretold future differed from the days they lived. Jerek had lived his life happily ignorant. He saw no reason for his death to be any different.

“Sweet Anaztaz, nothing more than a boy who failed his sovereign, fell on the field of battle to a bitter blow, his body cleaved in two. His father, his lord, decreed that the boy was not to be buried for he had disgraced the family with his failure. “None shall grace him with sepulchre or lament, but leave him unburied, a corpse for birds and dogs to eat, a ghastly sight of shame,” proclaimed his father. It was a curse beyond fathoming. Hajnalka though, pretty Hajnalka, a loving sister, had pity in her heart. She gathered all of her courage and defied their father the king, standing proud. “I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide for ever,” she whispered, sprinkling grave dirt over her brother’s broken corpse. Livid, her father, the lord, walled her up in his castle for he was a vengeful soul that did not like being shamed in any way. He was mighty. He was king. He was conceited and vain and his vanity incurred the wrath of the gods twofold—one, for trapping the dead amongst the living, refusing the burial of his son, and two for keeping the living, his own daughter, trapped among the dead.

“This is your curse,” Chovihani rasped, “to be trapped between both worlds: the dead and the living. Listen well, mulo. You must give in to your nature. You are a beast, the man you were is no more. You are a predator, a vampire. You must feed or lose yourself.”

“You don’t know me, witch,” Jerek growled as he shrugged off her hand and rose angrily.

“We are your people, mulo. We know you better than you know yourself. Bring him the girl, Vedas. Slit her throat in front of him. The blood will answer everything. Mulo will feed the beast within. He won’t be able to resist that hot sweet liquid as it flows. It is his nature. He is a beast.”

“I am not the beast here, witch.”

Jerek stalked away from the campfire.

He loathed himself for the monster he was. He loathed the Strigany more for reminding him of it.

Moroi and Arminus Vamburg were both a long way from home.

The witch hunter and his companion walked the dusk streets of Nuln. Moroi drew the collar of his greatcoat up around his throat and the wide brim of his felt hat down low over his eyes. He had a vile headache. The pressure of the blood against the bones of his skull was intense. His vision blurred as he walked, the rain-slicked cobbles pitching and rolling like the deck of a ship beneath his feet.

Vamburg walked silently beside him. His eyes scanned the rooftops for the slightest untoward movement. The rain made it difficult to see much of anything and it showed no sign of slackening before dawn.

The storm had nothing to do with Moroi’s pain.

There was trouble coming. He could feel it in his bones.

The black ship haunted Moroi even as it haunted Nuln, spreading disease and discord through her fusty streets. It was as though a plague had taken root within his mind. Whispers came to him, men’s tongues loosened by fear. A weaker man could easily have believed that dead men cursed to sail on black seas for eternity were pacing her decks, but Moroi was cynical. Flesh-and-blood zombie pirates were little more than bogeymen invoked to frighten children.

He knew enough, however, to trust his instincts. Whatever it was, it was close. His prescience was a gift, or a curse, of his profession. Hunting those corrupted by the winds of magic, twisted by the taint of Chaos or defiled by the canker of evil changed a man. To fight evil, one needed weapons. His hand sought the reassuring presence of the repeating six-shot crossbow clipped to his leather belt. The pair of them had been through a lot together. Not every creature earned the right to a trial, sentencing and hanging. More often than not circumstance demanded that Sigmar’s justice be dispensed ruthlessly.

He had thought, a few years ago, of replacing the weapon with a percussion pistol but when it came to it he preferred the crossbow. There was something satisfying about its weight and heft.

With his back in a corner, he knew he could trust it not to let him down. So the notion of a pistol had been discarded.

The blue-oil lamp on the street corner had burned out, leaving the night darker there. He stepped into the shadow and froze. He had heard something. A single sound: the slow sigh of a breath leaking out. Moroi turned slowly in a full circle, looking for the source of the sound.

He saw someone, the indistinct outline of a man.

“You sir! Hold!” Moroi cried as the man turned and fled. He set off after the panicked stranger, Arminus Vamburg on his heels.

The harsh slap of their footsteps echoed along the street.

Moroi skidded on the rain-slick cobbles, losing his balance. He hit the floor hard but was up and running again without missing a step.

What he saw beggared understanding. The man—for man it most certainly *had* been—dropped to all fours but didn’t slow. His spine arched, tearing through the shirt on his back and bursting the waist of his trousers as he tossed his head back and howled at the moon. Before his eyes the man shifted into the form of a great dire wolf, leaving a trail of ruined clothing in its wake.

Moroi dropped to a crouch and unclipped the crossbow, levelling it and sighting down the short stock. He breathed deeply, once, twice, and on the third exhalation squeezed down on the trigger, loosing the bolt. It flew true, taking the werebeast in the hindquarters. The creature howled its agony but didn’t slow. Moroi loosed a second bolt but it flew wide, the wolf bucking and thrashing as it sought to dislodge the shaft buried deep in its flesh.

Then it disappeared around a narrow corner, squeezing through little more than a crack between two buildings.

Vamburg charged past Moroi, skidding around the corner after the creature. Moroi rose and gave chase. Coming around the corner the werebeast was nowhere in sight. There was blood though, a telltale drip leading to a crooked spiral staircase that descended into the bones of the Alt Stadt. He knew that the stairwells led down to the Unterbauch, the underbelly of the city, providing a haven for thieves, murderers, vagabonds and the whole gamut of undesirables. It was ironic that, by most people, the witch hunter would have been judged among that group. The werebeast was wounded, but short of tearing the miles and miles of catacombs and tunnels apart inch by inch there was nothing they could do.

“Do we follow it down there?” Vamburg asked, looking pointedly at the blood. His accent was thick, the words coming between ragged gasps of breath. He had a short silver dirk in his hand. He didn’t need to say what he was thinking: it’s wounded, it can’t get far.

Moroi looked to the moon. It was, as he thought, a gibbous moon. “That thing was no lycanthrope, my friend. The moon is a week from full.”

“A vampire?”

“Almost certainly.”

“A renegade, then. One of the last.”

“Stop thinking like a true son of the Empire, Arminus. What is the evidence of our eyes? Tell me that which we know and no more.”

Clarity was a good exercise for Arminus. If the apprentice were to become the master he would need to think with logical precision.

“There is a vampire in Nuln.”

“Exactly. And what do we know of the beasts?” Moroi smiled. His friend was learning. The secret was to follow the evidence, not invent it.

“Vampires must feed on the blood of the living.”

“Good. He was undoubtedly out tonight in search of succour. We disturbed him. That means he is hungry and wounded. That in turn means that he is weakened.”

“So we go down then?”

Moroi shook his head. "We would be fools to walk into the unknown. There could be a nest down there. We have no proof that the creature is alone. No, we use our heads, Arminus. We out-think the beast. We do not rush headlong into the heart of darkness. We bide our time, wait for day when the beast is at its weakest and then we flush it out from its sanctuary and kill it. Now I have a job for you my friend. Go rouse the Burgomeister. I would have a crew of navvies here within the hour. We might not be able to enter the sewers, but we can most assuredly make it difficult for the beast to evade us in the meantime. I want to seal off as many of these stairways as possible. There are eight I know of in this quarter, but I have no idea how many are spread across the entire district. It doesn't matter, we can't hope to block them all up, but the fewer exits the beast has, the better our chance of snaring him on our terms. It is, as ever, about dictating the manner of engagement. We do not allow our enemy to take us by surprise."

But take them by surprise the beast did.

The navvies, under Vamburg's supervision, worked through until dawn and deep into the heat of the following day sealing thirty-six stairwells down into the Unterbaunch. For all their toil there were countless other entrances that were overlooked. They bricked up the narrower of the openings and nailed thick wooden planks across the mouths of wider ones.

Moroi did not contradict his companion as he gave his orders. To have done so would have undermined his authority with the city watch. Moroi judged it better to allow his man to learn from his mistakes. They would inevitably come at a price, but lessons paid for were ones remembered.

The watch posted guards, two to a stairwell, although as the day wore on complacency crept in and they grew lax with their patrols. In a moment of sublime stupidity the Burgomeister ordered their recall three hours before dusk, deeming the threat to have been extinguished by the valiant witch hunter and his companion. Only then did Moroi intervene. He argued hard against this idiocy but, mind made up, there was nothing he could do to dissuade the Burgomeister from his withdrawal.

Four hours later they were counting the cost.

Vamburg knelt down beside the splintered beams scattered across the mouth of the same stairwell they had chased the werebeast down the night before.

"It took a shocking amount of force to break this," Arminus Vamburg said, turning the timber over and over in his hands. Moroi agreed. He refrained from the obvious retort. Vamburg was doing exactly as he had been taught, quantifying the known. It had taken a shocking amount of force to splinter the beam. It was three inches thick, solid oak, and it was shredded apart as though it were nothing more substantial than a page of vellum.

"The beast is out there and it is that idiot bureaucrat's fault." Moroi felt a gnawing sickness in his gut. It was always the same when he was near an abomination. It was a physical reaction to the wrongness of the entity. He felt it now. The blood in his skull pounded against the bone plates. He rubbed at his eyes.

Vamburg saw his friend's distress. "It's near isn't it?"

Moroi nodded, a pained breath leaking slowly between his lips. "Close enough."

He scanned the rows of blind windows and then raised his gaze to the gables and eaves of the crowded houses, looking for the beast. "It's watching us."

Vamburg followed the direction of his gaze.

Nothing.

"Sir! Sir! Come quick sir!" A young lad charged up to the witch hunter, grabbing his hand and trying to drag him away.

"What is it, boy?"

"It's my ma, sir. Please come quick."

“Show me,” Moroi said, that cold stone of certainty sinking sickly to the pit of his stomach. He knew they were too late even before he pushed open the door to the hovel. The cramped room reeked of it, the filth of death. The woman lay in the centre of the floor, her throat torn out. The man at her side wept. Moroi felt wretched as he crossed the threshold. All he could think was that it was yet another death that could have been prevented had the bureaucrat simply listened to him. But then, men in power weren’t famous for listening to underlings and outsiders.

The man looked up. Even in the dim light of the foetid room Moroi could see that his eyes were rimmed red with tears. “My wife...”

“When did you find her?” Moroi asked, ignoring the man’s grief. There were facts he needed. The time for mourning would come. He had spoken with widows and widowers too many times to feel pity for their plight. If they had information locked up within them he wanted to prise it out of them. That was the extent of their relationship.

“When I came home... I don’t know...”

“Think man, whatever you can tell us could well be the difference between life and death for someone else’s wife.”

The man sniffed, snot dribbling down his face. He wiped it away with the back of his hand, succeeding only in smearing it across his cheek. “I don’t know. Thirty minutes, maybe more. I don’t know.”

“Thirty minutes is long enough for him to be anywhere in this damned city by now,” Vamburg said, hitting the doorframe in his frustration.

“No,” Moroi said, “I can feel him. He isn’t far away. He’s watching, and now he knows we have found her. It is all a part of his game.”

“You give the beast too much credit.”

“And you, my friend, do not give it enough.”

“Beast?” The man asked. He touched the ruin of his wife’s throat and held his bloody fingers up for Moroi to see. “What sort of beast is capable of such...?” He stopped mid-sentence. “A vampire. Does that mean she...?”

Arminus Vamburg laid a comforting hand on the bereaved man’s shoulder. There was nothing either of them could say to ease his pain. Death was no respecter of love or happiness. It didn’t care if the deceased was a mother or a wife. It didn’t matter if those left behind would never be the same again.

A fly moved sluggishly around the open wound, its presence the most natural and repugnant thing in the world.

Moroi saw it first—the wound on the man’s arm. Some of the blood on the woman was his. “Did you see the murderer? Speak the truth man. Did you see him?”

The man nodded and held out his wrist where he had been cut during his struggle with the vampire. “She’s infected isn’t she?” He pushed at the cut, trying to close it, as though by doing so he could undo what had been done to him. “So am I, aren’t I? Don’t lie to me. He killed me as well didn’t he?”

“No,” the witch hunter said shortly, “but your woman... I am sorry; there is no way of knowing, so we must perform the ritual for her own sake, lest she be born again into the unlife for our impropriety.”

“Ritual?”

“Arminus, take him outside. Prepare a grave for this poor woman. There are things a husband should not have to see. I will need the roses from the bed beneath the window.”

Vamburg nodded. “It will be done.” He handed Moroi the canvas satchel that he carried slung across his shoulders. Moroi took it, and began rifling through the bag looking for the instruments he would need to complete the ritual. “Come with me,” Vamburg said, seeing the witch hunter draw the wooden stake and iron hammer from the satchel. He held out a hand for the man to take.

“I should be here...”

“No, you will be of more use to her and to us preparing a place for burial. Do not remember her this way. You do not need to see more. It will never leave you. Every time you close your eyes and see her face, you will remember the blood instead of the smile. Is that what you want?”

The man shook his head. “No.”

“No,” Moroi agreed.

Vamburg led the man by the arm.

“Go with them, boy. This is no place for you.”

Vamburg returned a moment later with the heads of fifteen white roses. He closed the door to the hovel, leaving Moroi alone in the charnel house with the dead woman. He walked around her corpse three times, slowly, counter-clockwise, looking at the mess the beast had made. She might have been pretty before, it was impossible to tell. He knelt, gripping her jaw to open her mouth. He filled it with the heads of the white roses and pressed her jaw shut. He had no reason to believe that the beast had given her his blood curse, but unlike the bureaucrat he wasn't about to risk the lives of others by being anything less than meticulous. He had a duty to the living. He had, for that matter, a duty to the dead.

He withdrew a wooden stake, fashioned from the trunk of a hundred year old ash tree, and hammered it through her breastbone, piercing her heart.

His head pounded. The ache had faded for a while but it had returned with savage vengeance. He couldn't allow the beast to undermine his resolve. He rooted around in the satchel for the small diamond-toothed saw he needed to decapitate the woman. It was an ugly business. He looked around the room for a blanket to use as a shroud. Moroi wrapped the corpse in the coarse blanket he found on the pallet that the couple had obviously shared as a bed. He had known too many distraught husbands return, curious, sad or just numb in the head from grief. No man needed to see his wife laid out like a slab of dead meat.

He stuffed her neck with more petals.

She would not rise again.

The pain in his head intensified. The beast was close, arrogantly so. It was mocking him with its nearness and there was nothing he could do.

He pushed himself to his feet and staggered back to the door. His head swam dizzily. He opened the door. Vamburg and the husband had dug a shallow grave where the roses had grown. Moroi nodded to his companion. Together they laid the woman to rest beneath the window, face down. They covered her, replanting the denuded roses above where she lay.

The man knelt in the dirt. “Would you say something? I want to send her to Sigmar, but I don't know what to say?”

Moroi knelt beside the man. “What was her name?”

“Kathe.”

Moroi took the silver hammer from around his neck and pressed it into the dirt at the foot of the tallest rose bush. “Sigmar will know her with this, my friend. He needs no pretty words to find his own. Her flesh is part of nature now, joined in the cycle of life. Her soul though is unfettered. She flies with the gods. She would not want you or me to grieve for her. She knows that one day you will be together again. That is the beauty of love. It is eternal, unending.” Thank you,” the man said. Thank you for everything.” Again, a fierce stabbing pain lanced through the witch hunter's skull. He couldn't keep the pain from registering on his face. Vamburg put a steadying hand on his friend's shoulder.

The pain came again, brutal this time. Needles of fire speared into his brain, the lancing pain so hot it was blinding. Despite Vamburg's hand, Moroi convulsed and slumped forwards face first into the dirt. His cry died on his lips. The last thing he saw as he fell were the garish colours of a Strigany caravan crossing the mouth of the street not fifty feet away.

The air was thick, the night without a sound.

They had gathered outside the Sigmarite temple, firebrands blazing, torches held high, armed with pitchforks and hoes and other makeshift weapons. They wanted blood. There was a beast within the walls of the city. It had slain one of their own.

Moroi stood on a wooden crate.

He had their attention.

It was always difficult to judge the animal that the crowd became, to know when tempers would rise, how quickly and when finally they would go on a rampage.

He held up his right hand for silence.

“It is true,” he said, and then waited for the murmur to subside. There is a killer in the city.”

“A vampire!” someone shouted.

Moroi turned on the heckler. “A killer,” he said coldly. “I make no claims to its origins.”

“Don’t lie to us, witch hunter!” someone else called, disgustedly. “We aren’t children!”

With so few immortal dead still plaguing the living it had been a long time since Moroi had gathered a vampire hunt. He was ashamed to admit that he had missed the thrill. The hunt itself was a familiar thing, but the old passions that accompanied it were addictive. He had forgotten just how much so. Moroi waited out the shouts. “The creature has a lair beneath the Alt Stadt, though I believe the Strigany are protecting it.”

“Then we make them surrender the beast!”

“And if they don’t?” Moroi asked, barely above a whisper. He didn’t need to shout. His words carried to every man and woman in the crowd. “What are we prepared to do?”

“Burn them!”

“Kill them all!”

Moroi shook his head. “No, for then you would become worse than the beast. It kills to live whereas you would be killing out of retribution.”

“Smoke it out!”

“Make them surrender the beast!”

“Are you prepared to die?” Moroi asked. That silenced them. He looked at them, studying the rows of faces, the hunger in them and the potential for hurt. The difference between the savage and the civilised was whisper thin. It sickened him, and yet he needed them fired up, righteous and angry. Anything else and they would die before nightfall.

A low susurrus of fear whispered through them.

“Good,” Moroi said. “You should be frightened. This is no game. There is no guarantee that the man beside you will be there tomorrow. You might be faced with a friend, tainted by the beast, forced to ram a stake through his heart and cut his head from his shoulders. Will you be capable of doing that? He won’t be your friend anymore. Your friend will be long gone, but the beast will wear his skin. It is unnerving, but the daemons ever were creatures for turning our worst fears in upon us, were they not?”

Feet shuffled uncomfortably. The witch hunter knew he was losing them. They didn’t want to hear about mortality. They wanted rousing words to fire their blood along with promises of glory and a great story to tell around the fire in the taproom, of the day they hunted and slew a vampire in their home town. He could not give that to them. He couldn’t feed them full of lies and send them unprepared into a fight that could well spell their deaths. He wanted them to know that it wasn’t glamorous. He wanted them to know that heroes died as easily as villains outside of the storybooks.

“So if you can live with the truth, that should we fail, your friend could rise again as your mortal enemy, corrupted in death, then stand with me. We hunt the beast at its strongest, at night. Why? For fear that if we don’t more good people will die. I cannot have another woman like Kathe stain my conscience, because now, by acting, by standing up, I could stop it. So I will hunt the beast at night.

I will bring it down when it is at its strongest. I will, because in this I am the hammer of Sigmar made flesh. If I walk alone, so be it. If you stand at my side, do so knowing the truth: the beast is lethal, a killer. What we are about to do out of need, it does because of its nature. Ten of us alone might not be sufficient to restrain the beast. It is strong, and it is cunning. It is old—who knows how old—for it has outlived others of its kind, those that fell with the von Carstein hordes. It is a survivor, and that makes it all the more dangerous. But we must try, or else tomorrow it could be your wife, your daughter that we are burying beneath your rose garden. Or worse, you might wake in the morning to a loving kiss mere moments before the beast that was your lover tears your throat out with her teeth. Is that a kiss you would have?”

He stepped down from the crate.

There were no cheers. His words had subdued them, and had thinned their number by half, as those not prepared to die had moved away unnoticed. This did not surprise him. Few would willingly risk death, but it was those few who remained, resolute.

He stepped aside, nodding to Vamburg. This was where his companion excelled, whipping up the crowd with rousing words after he had delivered his dire warnings.

Arminus Vamburg stepped up onto the crate and raised his arms for silence. The gesture was redundant. No one was talking. We know little of the beast itself save that it is wounded. We know nothing of its origins or bloodline. This means we know nothing of its strengths. What we do know is that the creature walks as a man though it is capable of shifting form. Last night we witnessed its metamorphosis into a dire wolf Moroi nodded.

“It is, without doubt, deadly in both forms. But we are not helpless. Moroi has a gift, a boon from Sigmar himself. Such evil as this is repugnant to his blood. His body rebels at the presence of the abomination. What this means is that he can sense its approach. It cannot sense his. This is our advantage.

“We can lay a trap for the beast. It can be caged. It can be wounded, but most importantly it can be killed. It is not immortal. Anything that died once can die twice. It has had practice,” he said wryly. “Last night Moroi put a crossbow bolt in the fiend’s hide, but that does not mean it will be weakened. They have remarkable regenerative qualities. For all we know it could be healed already.

“When you encounter the beast, do not look it in the eye; it has the power to turn your mind against you, leaving you powerless to resist. Do not for a minute doubt me. I have seen grown men overpowered, turned into thralls to these fiends. No man deserves that fate.

“There are several ways it can die. Mark these well. If you get close enough, a stake of wood through the heart, or decapitating the beast will end its life. Dismemberment will slow if not outright kill the vampire. Fire will shield you. A vampire, even the strongest of its kind, fears the destructive power of flame.” Vamburg lapsed into silence. He had warned them, there was nothing else he could do.

He stepped down from the crate and stood beside Moroi. Together, they marched through the dark streets in search of the Strigany caravan, fifty men of Nuln following in their wake, torches blazing, makeshift weapons burnished in their light.

They walked silently, determined.

The beast sheltered by the Strigany would die.

THE BLACK SHIP

III

Landfall

The black ship made landfall deep in the blighted heart of Sylvania, resting finally in the shadow of the Vampire Count's castle: Drakenhof.

The taint of its past was almost tangible.

Mannfred stood on the deck and breathed deeply of it, savouring the not so sweet air of home.

Home. It was an alien concept but, of all the places in the world, the old castle was as much a part of who he was and his heritage as anywhere else in the world. To look at it, the fortress was like some huge leering gargoyle perched high on the mountaintop. Black specks swarmed around the highest tower, circling ceaselessly. Vlad's precious birds: the same birds that had helped drive Konrad insane. From here the windows in the towers and turrets were blind and the rooftops indistinguishable from level to level, all save one: the Raven Tower, by far the highest point of Drakenhof. Clouds thickened overhead, obscuring the waxing moon. Mannfred watched awhile as the shapes lost definition, coalescing into one giant shadow daemon. It was a fitting image.

There were, he saw, after a moment, lamps burning in some of the castle's higher windows. No doubt his servants were making ready for his return. A black brougham coach waited by the jetty, the von Carstein family crest emblazoned on its door. Four horses, splendid beasts, coal black, steam curling from their nostrils, drew the coach. The coachman sat unmoving, cloak drawn up over his head so that his face was lost completely in black shadow. The man was utterly still.

"Denn die todten reiten schnell," the steerman beside him said, and it was obviously the truth: the dead did travel fast.

Mannfred waited as the crew lowered the boarding ramps, heaving the huge baseboards into place. They settled with a resounding thunk. Black birds circled overhead, cawing and crowing as four pale-skinned and slack-faced sailors unloaded his coffin. They carried it between them, loading it onto the brougham. More listless sailors dragged the prisoners down the gangplank. Their chains rattled as they shuffled forwards. Mannfred pointed at one of the men, curling his finger in summons. Two sailors pulled him out of the line and dragged him over to the vampire. The man's hair was a mess of grease and knots, his beard grown through in patches, but his eyes retained the vitality Mannfred liked so much. The man was still very much alive. He looked up at the Vampire Count, opening his mouth to beg. Mannfred silenced him with a back handed slap that snapped his neck back, broken.

"Very good."

The sailors held the man, his head lolling uselessly on his neck, while Mannfred slipped the small black iron razor-cuff over his right thumb. He drew the blade across the man's throat, opening the jugular in a bubble of arterial blood, but with the heart stilled there was no spray. He drank until sated, and then disposed of the corpse over the side.

The dead man floated.

Mannfred watched as the first raven settled on the corpse. A second and third joined it.

In the shade beyond the brougham coach he saw the hulking forms of three dire wolves—his welcoming party from the castle, no doubt. He had expected more, as was fitting for a lord's return.

He was in no hurry to go down to join them.

It was enough that he was coming home.

Gathering the oilskin-wrapped bundle, Mannfred disembarked. At the bottom of the gangplank he turned to the captain. "My thanks," Mannfred said. "Your ship and crew are returned to you, as promised."

The old sailor didn't say a word. He couldn't. Mannfred had cut his tongue out six days into their journey together.

Mannfred strode over to the coach. The driver dismounted, coming around to open the door. He held a storm lantern in his hand.

Mannfred reached inside and laid the bundle on the red leather banquette. He turned, sensing the approach of the wolves. All three lay supine at his feet. He smiled at their subservience and gestured curtly for them to rise. They bowed their heads to him, noses pressed into the dirt, and turned, loping away. A moment later the night filled with the mournful sound of a wolf howling at the moon.

The last of the black ship's crewmen moved quickly up the gangplank. In a matter of moments the deck became a swarm of movement. One man spider-climbed the rigging as another hoisted the main brace while two more tied off guide ropes. The captain stood at the wheel. Mannfred fancied he could see the hate burning in the man's eyes.

Mannfred held out his hand for the lantern, but instead of taking it he allowed it to fall to the floor, glass shattering, flames rising as the air rushed in to feed them.

He lowered his hand into the heart of the fire, and uttered four short words never intended for human tongues.

The flames appeared to meld with his skin, not burning him, but somehow becoming a part of him. He held his hand before his face, marvelling at the chaotic dance of the fire. A fire sprite arced from his fingertips, crackling through the air until it touched the black cloth of the main sail, burning it. Around Mannfred the air reeked of ozone. Around the sailors on the black ship the air stank of charcoal and burning cloth as first the main sail and then the mast ignited.

Cries went up.

The crewmen ran for pails of water to douse the blaze. Mannfred placed his hands together, allowing the flame from one to consume the other. The fire grew in intensity and purpose. Scarcely audible, he repeated the incantation with a vehemence that was staggering. As the last word tripped off his tongue he drew his hands apart, creating twin balls of flame. Both quickly gathered size and substance until he cast them off, two great balls of fire hurled at the belly of the black ship. The air snapped and cackled around his head as the flames streaked like a twin-tailed comet across the night sky.

They hit the barque in a deafening roar. The beams and decking of the black ship buckled, timber splintered away from the seams, and the very belly of the barque collapsed beneath the explosive force of the detonation. Flames engulfed the ship.

The heat from the conflagration was awesome.

A sailor fell from the rigging, dead before he hit the deck. Another threw himself into the Reik, falling ablaze. His arms windmilled frantically. His screams didn't stop as he hit the water. The captain clasped the wheel, unmoving even as the flames crawled up his legs. He was the one person who couldn't scream.

The lantern burned itself out, but the ship burned on.

Satisfied there would be no survivors, Mannfred turned his back on the burning ship and climbed into the brougham. He rapped on the ceiling and the carriage lurched forwards.

The black coach's departure for Drakenhof was heralded by the shrieks and caws of carrion crows.

Finally he was going home to claim what was rightfully his by birthright, by strength, by cunning and by grand design: his inheritance, his dominion.

Mannfred interlaced his fingers behind his head, and leaned back. He listened to the birds. They were calling his name. Over and over: *Mannfred is coming! Mannfred is coming!*

His choice of messenger amused him. The ravens were thought by the superstitious to be psychopomps, conductors of souls into Morr's Underworld—birds of ill omen, most certainly. It entertained him to imagine the birds being responsible for guiding him home, warning the living of his return and summoning the dead to fight by his side.

Mannfred reached down for the rag-wrapped bundle on the seat beside him. He felt its pulse through the oilskin as he laid his hand flat on it. The sheer power of the binding coursed the length of his arm as his fingertips felt out the embossed mark on its skin. The thing possessed a repulsive life of its own. He smiled coldly. He knew the origins of the mark without needing to see it. It was the sigil of the greatest of the liche lords—Nagash.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle soothing motion of the coach on the road. The coach rolled on into the night, through the valleys of shadow and despair.

Shadows coiled around the brougham's wheels, reaching out to snare the coach, but the wheels rolled on and the shadows blew away to nothing.

Mannfred dreamed of the dead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Black Isabella

Drakenhof, The Dark Heart of the Kingdom of the Dead

The brougham coach slowed to a standstill.

The castle was a dark god on the horizon, a sanctuary for mourning souls. Its broken battlements showed a jagged line against the backdrop of the night sky. Mannfred stared. There was a forest where once there had been an empty plain, though there were no ordinary trees in this forest. Mannfred opened the door and climbed out of the coach. He walked slowly towards the first of the “trees”. It was a man, or had been. Most of its flesh had been picked clean by Vlad’s ravens. The corpse had been impaled on a huge stake, driven up from below and long enough to pierce the dead man’s jaw, pinning him upright in death like some macabre scarecrow. It was a forest of the impaled. The bone trees were planted thickly, no more than six feet between them. There must have been five hundred, more.

The ravens settled on the yellowed skulls, picking away at worms of flesh they had yet to strip.

Mannfred walked through the bone forest. His fingers trailed across the corpses, brushing up against the dead. There were women and children amongst them. Death was indiscriminate. That, and the lights burning in the castle windows, angered the vampire. He hadn’t sanctioned the slaughter of his cattle.

He took the skull of one of the impaled in his hands, leaning forwards to press his forehead against it. He closed his eyes and began to whisper, breathing the words of invocation, pressing the bones harder until they buckled and snapped, demanding the spirit of the dead man return to face him, to explain. The vanquished had no wish to return. The spirit resisted his summons, fighting, but Mannfred was strong, stronger than the dead. He tore down the veil between the two realms, drawing the man back until his lifeforce was trapped once more within his bones. His screams as the pain returned were terrible to behold. Mannfred refused to release him despite his pleading.

“Speak to me,” Mannfred commanded.

The skull shivered in his hands, the jaw working, grinding on the gristle where the flesh and muscle had been rendered down to fat. No sounds emerged.

“I said speak!”

Black Isabella, the dead sighed: a name, an explanation.

“More. What happened here? You will not know rest and there will be no surcease, until you explain.”

A woman... they call her Nadasdy... she is mistress of the castle. She bathes in the blood of the young... she feeds... we came against her... we few... from the city below... we came at night, fools that we were... when her kind is strongest... we came with torches and pitchforks to fight a daemon... we failed... this is our punishment... our reward... I know no rest. I hurt!

“She did this to you? A woman? There are hundreds of you.”

It was... slaughter... she fed on us... drank our blood... I... I... watched my son... die... watched them drive the stake into him... Was forced to hear his screams because he would not die... I tore

my own ears off... in desperation...but still I heard him... His screams... Hers was the last name on his lips...Nadasdy... not his mother's name... not his god's... the bitch who took... his life.

Mannfred released his hold on the bones, in turn relinquishing his grip on the man's spirit. The dead man's jaw hung slackly, the wooden spike the only thing preventing it from coming away from the rest of the skull. The spirit was gone, fled back to the comfort of death.

Nadasdy; he did not know the name, but that meant nothing. It could easily be a bastard child of Konrad, a get left to rule the roost when her sire was slain. He was not his companion's keeper. He did not know every wench he had suckled on in his madness. It mattered little. This Black Isabella would learn what it meant to cross him.

He returned to the brougham.

"To the castle," he told the coachman, closing the door and leaning back out through the open window. "It is time this Nadasdy learned who is the true heir of Drakenhof."

The coachman inclined his cloaked head, no expression or emotion in the movement, and yet it reeked of approval. His leather whip cracked in the air, and the horses broke into a gallop.

* * * * *

Mannfred emerged from the black coach, his hood pulled up over his head so that his face fell in shadow.

He swept up to the huge oak and iron-bound doors of the castle. Little had changed since he had last stood before the great door, little that was except for him. He was changed utterly. He reached out for the huge black iron wolf's head knocker on the door and hammered on it three times. The sound reverberated throughout the courtyard and deep inside the castle.

The reek of death still clung to the air, but that was ever the case with killing grounds. The blood could be scrubbed, the bodies buried or burned, it mattered little. The stink permeated the stone and soil and clung stubbornly to the place. It was a physical thing, more real to many than ghosts or revenant shades. It was something they could understand. Mannfred touched the wall of the old place, feeling its grief. The castle had seen much suffering, had witnessed the brutal slaughter of the Totentanz of Geheimnisnacht all those years ago, when Vlad had revealed himself to the world, and before that the casual cruelties of Otto van Drak's capricious reign. Konrad's madness was a blessing beside that, he was sure. It was no surprise that trace elements of it, like memory, had imprinted themselves on the very walls of Drakenhof. The building sorrowed. He felt it all through the stone.

"I am here," Mannfred said, softly, as though reassuring the great castle.

He heard the massive bolts being drawn back. A moment later the door opened a crack. Musty air leaked out, and on it he smelled the servant's fear as the cadaverous little man peered out through the narrow opening.

"Who is the master of this fortress?" Mannfred's voice was horribly calm as he spoke.

"Nadasdy, lord, and she is mistress of Drakenhof, not master," the little man wheedled, rubbing his hands together obsequiously. His bald pate beaded with sweat.

"Indeed. Please inform your mistress that I would speak with her."

"Yes, yes, of course, sir, of course. Though it is late and she will not be happy. I will convey your request, yes, though she may not see you. The mistress is whimsical, her humours change and I cannot predict them."

"She will see me," Mannfred said.

"Yes, of course, yes." The servant scraped his feet, bowing low and backing up, allowing the door to groan open on its rusted hinges. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

Mannfred said nothing. He pushed back his hood, gratified to see the shock of recognition on the servant's face as he caught sight of the plain bronze ring on his hand. The man bowed even lower.

When he straightened, his manner had visibly changed. The weaselly toadying of moments before had been replaced with cunning. The man seemed to grow in stature.

“Welcome home, master. The woman is in your sire’s chamber in the Raven Tower. I shall make preparations for her disposal.”

“No. I shall see to her myself.”

“Very good, master.”

Mannfred took a moment to adjust his collar and cuffs, and then moved past the servant. It was a bittersweet homecoming. He savoured the ambience of the old castle for a moment before sweeping through the lower levels, cloak swirling behind him. His footfalls echoed through the halls. There was an air of decadent decay about his ancestral home. The air was rank with the musk of rotting tapestries. A low keening moan whispered in his wake, along with other noises, including the scratch and skitters of rats. How could the heart of Vlad’s kingdom have fallen into such disrepair? It would not, Mannfred vowed silently, remain so. He would restore the great castle to its former glory. In the great hall the obsidian throne, the mark of Vlad’s dominion, lay on its side, toppled. Mannfred righted it. He turned slowly, surveying the fallen grandeur of the hall. It had been more than a century since he had last walked these hallowed halls—one hundred years of solitude, laying the foundations of his Kingdom of the Damned.

He lingered a while with the ghosts of that Geheimnisnacht, remembering the feeding frenzy that had been the slaughter of the aristocracy. It had been a night unlike any other. It had hinted at the power of his sire, that he dared invite his enemies into his home and had the strength to cull them. It was audacious, brutal, and quite, quite brilliant. The unveiling had sent tremors throughout humanity that were still being felt today. The fear of the black ship was more to do with the fear of that night, the possibility that it might be returning and that such evil might have found a way into their simple lives.

He wandered through many of the old rooms, trying to recall their purpose. He stepped into what had obviously been the library at one time. So much had been destroyed. The vellum had decayed, the skin—not the best thing to bind a book with—crumbled. So much had been lost.

The flash of a silver head caught his eye amid the detritus of life. He crossed the room to investigate. He picked through the rubbish, moving a shredded tome and scrolls where the ink had long since perished. He toed aside a rotten canvas to reveal a cane with a silver wolf’s head for a handle.

He stared at it for a full minute before stooping to pick it up.

He had never thought to see this again, and could not begin to imagine how it had ended up here, amid the ruin of this room.

Vlad had carried the wolf cane with him when playing the aristocrat. Mannfred leant on the cane, affecting the pose of the gentleman, and then hefted it, lashing out with the silver head. It swung sweetly, though it stung to grasp. He remembered that Vlad had had a penchant for wearing gloves, all part of the guise of the wealthy man. Mannfred walked back through the library, across decomposed books and blind scrolls, twirling the cane in his hand as he went. It felt natural, adding a certain symmetry to his return.

He took the stone steps of the winding staircase three at a time, the silver head of the cane tapping against the stone wall in time with his steps. The picking and snickering of the rats faded away, the vermin fleeing at his approach.

He crossed the portrait gallery, where a single portrait was left hanging. It was a curious piece, Konrad in the centre, arms wide, decanting the blood of a naked girl—though it could well have been a boy, the artist had given the victim’s sexuality a curious ambiguity—into an earthenware chalice. Konrad, messianic in the centre, was surrounded by his loyal disciples, his Hamaya, all twelve of them sharing his feast of blood. It was curious that there was only one cup between them. It was, no doubt, how mad Konrad had seen himself, dispensing favours to his loyal few, a king at his own table. Mannfred recognised the face of Jerek von Carstein depicted at Konrad’s left, a

betrayers' dagger in his hand, his face twisted as he leaned in beneath the table towards Konrad. It was an amusing piece, and obviously the artist had intended some hidden meaning, including all sorts of symbolism in it that wasn't easily read. It was signed Cornelian Ovidad in a tight scrawl.

He climbed the stairs of the Raven Tower. He threw open the iron-banded door and ascended a second staircase. His sire's scent was long gone. He lifted the cane and rapped sharply three times on the chamber door. He didn't wait for the witch to open it for him. Mannfred tore the door from its huge hinges, the pins shearing off as they were wrenched free of the wooden frame.

He stood in the doorway.

The woman, Nadasdy, was sprawled out naked across the huge divan. The chamber was vulgar, an exercise in decadent excess totally at odds with the rest of the castle. It was lush, opulent. The air hung thick with aromatic spices, crimson shade and more exotic narcotics that overwhelmed the senses.

Mannfred stood in the doorway.

He looked at the woman.

There was something about her that was strangely familiar. She was an old soul though, he thought, so it was unsurprising if their paths had crossed at some time. She came to consciousness slowly, groggy from whatever intoxicant polluted her flesh and blood. Mannfred crossed the room, reaching the bed as she knuckled the sleep from her eyes. There was no anger in his movements, no emotion at all. Emotion was weakness. Mannfred was coldly methodical in the execution of his retribution.

"You are not wanted here, witch."

She rolled on the bed, lifting her head to look at him. There was something dreadfully familiar about her eyes.

"I waited for you," the woman crooned, obviously still caught in the failing edge of a dream and thinking he was some lover returned. She reached out to grab at his sleeve. "I knew you wouldn't leave me alone here. I always knew, so I prepared the way as you wanted."

She talked as though she knew him—though there was a rambling hallucinatory quality to her words—but he knew with growing certainty he had never met the woman. She was, he assumed, as mad as her sire, for surely she was Konrad's get, her mind addled by the narcotics she indulged in. She would not have been the only one driven insane by the blood kiss. She obviously thought he was his brother-in-death.

"I am not Konrad, woman. Your sire is dead," Mannfred said, slowly, belabouring the point. "Do you understand? You are alone."

"No! You are here!"

"You are all alone," Mannfred repeated, "and you have harmed me and mine. I do not look kindly upon your presence in my house, or on your treatment of my subjects. Your forest of the impaled is an abomination, Nadasdy. Our kind has more thought, more cunning, than that. You do not cull the cattle, you cultivate them. You owe me their blood, Nadasdy. I shall start by taking yours."

"No," she pleaded. "No, you don't understand! I did it for you! It was always for you!"

"Hush. Your lies make you ugly, woman."

"No! No! I am no woman! I am your servant! I prepared the way! I defied death for you! Do you not know me? It is—" Mannfred touched the witch on the forehead and whispered a single word of power. Nadasdy's jaw locked mid-word, her desperate plea silenced. Mannfred stared down at her, enjoying the look of abject fear frozen on her face. He did not care who she claimed to be.

"I am master of Drakenhof, Nadasdy. This is my birthright. You tried to steal from me. I am glad. It gives me an excuse to make a lesson out of your corpse."

He sat on the edge of the divan beside her, running the edge of the razor-cuff slowly from her throat all the way down to her pubis, paring the flesh. As the blood began to well from the wound he

whispered the words, calling her flesh from her bones. The incantation was a cruel one. She could not move, could not scream or whimper, even as the pain grew so severe that she lost consciousness. Mannfred slapped her back awake. He wanted her to feel everything.

He flayed every inch of skin from her corpse, and then pared the muscle and tendon, drawing the bones out. He performed the act slowly, and with surgical precision.

It was a wretched death that took far longer than it had a right to because he held her soul, refusing to let her die until he was done punishing her.

The warren of subterranean catacombs beneath Drakenhof was Konrad's legacy. The Blood Count had been obsessed with his grand design, digging deep beneath the old castle, and expanding into the mountain range and inevitably into the ancient labyrinth of warrens beneath the old world. The enormity of it was staggering. Mannfred stood alone in the centre of the great subterranean cathedral where Konrad had ruled his empire. It engulfed him. The silence was perfect. There was a quality to the air that made it quite different to the world above. It was purer, unbreathed.

The high vaulted ceiling dripped with long gnarled and gangrenous stalactites. The lichen clinging to the rock shed a repulsive luminescence, lending the subterranean chamber an unearthly quality.

A huge basalt altar commanded the central dais. Twin runnels had been carved along the outer rim of the stone altar. They bore the dark stains of blood where victims had been sacrificed to Konrad's madness.

Blood. Such an amazing thing, blood, that exquisite taste, its perfect colour, that viscous consistency. Everything about it was remarkable, right down to the fact that the trace elements of life itself were there in that thick fluid. It was a living liquid. Even when spilled across the sacrificial altar it would live on, for a while.

He had things to do before he allowed himself the luxury of feeding again.

Behind the altar was the greatest mockery of all, the remains of the facade of a Sigmarite temple. Jagged pieces of stained glass images of the man-god and his miracles remained in the broken windows.

Konrad's vanity was incredible.

Mannfred circled the altar.

Row upon row of tiered benches and walkways had been carved into the hemispherical wall, creating a great stone amphitheatre. It was all pomp and pageantry. A great leader did not need to fall back on such tricks.

Coming full circle Mannfred braced himself against the altar, allowing the trace memories to wash over him. He could see, in his mind's eye, Konrad commanding his army from this very room. He could hear the ghosts of his tirades, the words seared into the memory of the place. It was Konrad's great and secret show. Mannfred felt the echoes of his loathing even now, trapped within this vast room. The stir of echoes was haunting. It would have been easy to lose his sense of self beneath the tide of the past, but Mannfred was strong. He drew what he needed from it and broke contact with the stone before it could in turn begin feeding off him.

"As it is below, so shall it be above," Mannfred said, stalking out of the cathedral. He swept through the old cages, row after row of prison cells, empty save for a few bones, through into the true library of Drakenhof.

The stacks were immaculately tended, unlike anything else in the old stronghold. Mannfred ran his fingertips over the spines of the old tomes, reading the names off one by one, amazed at the wealth of arcana buried beneath the castle. More so because of the loving care that had obviously gone into maintaining the collection. He walked along aisles of glass cabinets full to bursting with fetishes and gewgaws of faith, fragments of scrolls, shrunken heads, talons of rare birds, onyx and ruby dust, reliquaries and bones of every shape and size from every creature imaginable, seeds, withered husks and shells, pickled faggots of brain in a demijohn, black tulips and black lotus petals,

mandrake roots, the wizened heart of a child, dead eyes, bloodstone, a splinter of what looked to be warp stone and cocoons of butterflies along with a colourful spread of wings from the same insects. They were veritable cabinets of curiosities and he knew that each one was in some way vital to a ritual.

Despite his impotence Konrad had chosen to surround himself with all of the accoutrements of magic. For once Mannfred admired his brother-in-death's single-minded obsession.

He wasn't alone.

He paused before the end of the last bookcase in the line, listening intently for the slightest sound out of place. He heard it then, though it was hardly out of place: the slow rustle of a page turning. He waited, listening. He pulled a thick tome from the shelf, dislodging an ungodly amount of dust that billowed up into the musty air. The book was entitled *Die Göttliche Komödie, a Treatise on Morr's Underworld*. He wasn't the least bit interested in the book. It was what lay behind the book that mattered.

A small man sat huddled in the corner of the stacks, a sheaf of vellum on his knee, scratching out words with a quill. A stub of candle burned beside him. His complexion was waxy his hair matted and lank. He wore a simple scholar's habit. Ink smeared his fingers and the side of his face where he had obviously touched it without thinking.

"It's not ready yet. Soon, I promise. Just a little while longer. It needs to be perfect. So much to write," the little scholar said without looking up. He scratched out another word, painstakingly re-inking it in a moment later. He looked up from what he was doing, brow furrowing. "Oh, you're not Konrad. You shouldn't be here."

Mannfred crouched down beside the scholar. "Who are you?"

"Constantin."

"Well, Constantin, what are you doing in my library?"

"Working," the scholar said earnestly. He clutched the sheets of vellum to his chest. "But this isn't your library... it is Konrad's."

"Konrad isn't here any more. That makes this my library and, by extension, whatever you are working on, mine. Let me see."

Constantin shook his head. "Where is Konrad? Is this a trick? Are you going to report to him? Tell him that I am loyal, that I will complete my task, that all he needs is a little patience." At that the little scholar laughed, a bitter barking laugh. "Patience, does he even know the word? No, no, don't say that!"

"I am master of this castle, Constantin, not my brother."

"But Konrad is coming back?"

"No, Konrad is not coming back. Konrad is dust and ashes, Constantin."

"Dust and ashes," the scholar echoed. "Is this a joke? Are you trying to trick me into revealing my true feelings? Do you want me to say my master is a mad man? I will. I do not fear him anymore. I am master of my library."

"When did you last feed, Constantin?"

"I... I don't recall," the scholar admitted, scratching his head. "Days, weeks? They have no meaning in the dark."

Mannfred understood then what had happened to the scholar. Fear had kept him down here working on whatever task Konrad had charged him with, and rather than resurface to feed he had hidden away in the dark and dusty stacks, slowly starving himself into insanity.

Mannfred pried one of the vellum sheets from Constantin's hands, much to the scholar's chagrin. "Give it back! Mine! That's not for your eyes! No! Not finished."

Mannfred saw what it was immediately—a ballad, though it made precious little sense, for all of the crossings out and recrossings out. It was about—or seemed to be about—his brother, though it

bore no resemblance to the mad one's real life. "He had you rewriting history? Glorifying his reign?"

"That is my charge... to sow the seed... for he is Vashanesh reborn. He told me so himself."

"He wasn't, Constantin. He was a miserable paranoid creature unworthy of our sire, and most certainly unworthy of one such as Vashanesh."

"He could come back... he could be..."

"No," Mannfred shook his head. "You are free, Constantin. He is dead, truly dead."

"Free?" The scholar breathed, as though unfamiliar with the concept.

Mannfred nodded.

He held out a hand for the scholar to take, helping him stand. Constantin was unsteady on his feet. He reeled like a drunk. Flecks of spittle gathered in the corners of his mouth.

"Where are we going? I don't want to see Konrad. I haven't finished. He has a temper. I don't want to anger him."

"Konrad is dead," Mannfred said again, as though simple repetition would drum it into the scholar's broken mind. It wouldn't. Not even blood could save him now.

Mannfred wrapped a protective arm around Constantin's shoulder. "Come, walk with me, I have something wonderful I want to show you."

"Really?" Constantin asked, his voice full of hope.

"Yes," Mannfred said, his right hand forcing a way through the scholar's chest and bone, breaking a hole all the way through to his withered heart. For a moment, his hand wrapped around Constantin's ruined heart, Mannfred saw the innocence and openness in the scholar's face, and then it died as he wrenched the organ free, putting the addled vampire out of his misery.

As it is below, so shall it be above.

The process of restoring the old castle was monumental. Where Konrad had hidden in the shadows, delving deeper, Mannfred made his own shadows. He was that kind of monster.

Peasants were brought up from the town to toil, serving as hod carriers, bringing the stones to the masons. There was a rhythm to it. They moved like ants marching up and down the ramps to the cries of the overseers. There were casualties, unbalanced by the weight of the stones as they traversed the wooden scaffold to the stonemason. Exhausted men fell. Their stones were collected by other thralls and delivered to the master masons high up on the scaffolds.

As the season turned, the old castle gradually metamorphosed into a thing of majesty spanning the peaks above the city—in effect becoming a city above the city below. Mannfred's Drakenhof was a massive citadel of dark splendour.

Nine towers were added, one a dazzling minaret that speared the sky, three stunted beside the others, flat-topped. Invisible to the world below, Mannfred would retreat to these lower tower tops, where he would drive himself through a series of punishing routines, apparently fighting an invisible opponent. Sometimes he fought open-handed, other times he used weapons, most often swords, though occasionally he trained with a staff carved from black ash.

The work on rebuilding was agonisingly slow. Mannfred chafed at the bit. He wanted the castle restored *beyond* its former glory. It stretched his endurance, but the new count was a patient creature. He could wait, allowing things around him to come to a natural fruition. The rigorous exercise regime was little more than a discipline. He gave himself to it completely, entrusting his chamberlain, Ebrahim, with the day-to-day running of the restoration. The man's understanding of the mathematics of building and the angles of construction was impressive. He was able to predict the curvature of arches, the loads capable of being borne by keystones and the strength of any given foundation based around complicated calculations. He murmured about the sacred geometry underpinning the building—how all the angles came together in a pattern most pleasing to the eye, as though one were looking upon a creation of the divine. Mannfred had to agree there was

something awe-inspiring about the castle. It looked less like a gargoyle and more like a majestic black dragon perched upon the mountainside.

The new count was a reclusive beast. He did not impose himself upon his subjects. Runners came with news of strife in neighbouring provinces, the Empire at war, determined to tear itself apart from the inside out. He listened, accumulating knowledge. Knowledge was at the core of everything the new count did. There was no excuse for ignorance. Often he sat alone, poring over obscure arcana in the subterranean library, fathoming another aspect of the esoteric world. He breathed deeply of the wind of magic, savouring the nearness of Shyish in this place. For all his madness Konrad had chosen wisely in bringing his library down here. The old rock was stained with more than just bloodshed. It had an essence of something else, something more. Shyish: the amethyst wind, sixth wind of magic, so dark it appeared almost black as he unravelled it to get at its core. His fascination with the wind was complete. It offered power unlike anything else. To be able to draw from it, weave it into the threads of his desire and create magic was true power.

The two were inextricably joined. One could not draw on the winds without tasting power. One fed the other in an addictive spiral.

Then there was the living book that had escaped with him from the lands of the Dead. It was unlike anything in the library. He had unwrapped it lovingly, hesitant to touch its corrupt skin, but even as he laid his hand on it he knew, inside, with calm certainty that it was right—that it was his. It always had been, whispered the seductive voice in the back of his mind. As he cracked open the spine a shadow, almost enough to be called a shape of substance, ghosted free, drifting across the wall, though there was no source of light to birth it. Mannfred knew it for what it was. He rose to dose the thick velvet drapes and extinguished the single stub of candle that burned, throwing the room into complete darkness. The darkness was no more reassuring. He felt the shadow coil around him seductively. He refused to flinch or recoil. He was stronger than that—he did not jump at shadows.

“Be gone,” he said with such calm authority that the darkness drew away from him with a hiss. A breeze from out of nowhere rifled the vellum pages, turning them quickly. The ambient temperature of the room had dropped considerably. “I will not repeat myself.” The cover of the living book slammed closed, and he knew, instinctively that he was alone in the room once more.

He kept the living book in the room that Vlad had once shared with his bride Isabella.

It contained such knowledge.

He caressed the binding, turning the page. The words were in no language he could understand, though as he traced his fingers across them he found them making sense, the words awakening some forgotten corner of his brain that linked them all, all of his kind, back to their father Vashanesh. Such was the power of the living book.

It promised such dark delights.

As the castle grew so too did the town below as people were brought in by Ebrahim to serve the new site, and to feed the new count. There was no indiscriminate bloodshed. They came to him willingly, offering their blood, and he drank, though never to the point of death. He cultivated his livestock, leaving them with enough strength to work on the restoration. The needs of Drakenhof came before gluttony.

For when the hunger would not die there was a windowless room, on the seventh floor, where those who would willingly feed the beast lay in narcotic slumber awaiting the return of their master.

Mannfred sat alone, a raven in his fine-boned hands. The winds were picking up, winter drawing in. There was a chill that hadn't been there even a few weeks before. He sat on the battlements of the Raven Tower overlooking what had been the forest of the impaled. The plain had been turned into a shantytown of lean-to's and shabby tents for the itinerant workers. From his perch the patterns within their movement were all the more obvious.

A distant scream cut off abruptly. He could barely make out the corpse at the foot of the minaret. It lay broken, arms and legs bent in ways their joints were not supposed to allow. He lost interest in the corpse as the birds circled. They would descend, finally, when the corpse was nice and ripe. He was not eager to see it. He took no delight in the savagery of their feeding. Where Vlad had seen a beautifully choreographed dance, Mannfred saw bedlam, every carrion bird prepared to tear the food from the mouth of another should it save them foraging the corpse.

He turned his attention back to the raven in his hands.

The bird was dead, but that was as it had to be for it to work as a conduit. He smoothed back the feathers on its tiny head with his fingers and lifted it so he could see into its dead eyes. He exhaled, his breath ruffling the bird's plumage.

"A woman you say?" he demanded of the dead bird. His words carried halfway around the old world to emerge from the mouth of another dead raven in the hands of Ion Skellan.

"She fed on him, Mannfred," the bird's beak hung open slackly as the words came out. "She is one of our kind, but I felt nothing. I stood less than an arm's length from her, and I felt nothing. How can that be?"

"She is not of our blood," Mannfred told the bird.

"Not of our blood?"

"There are other bloodlines, other families. It was a dark time, the Diaspora, Abhorash, Neferata, Ushoran, Vashanesh, Harakhte, Maatmeses and W'soran all fled the fall of Lahmia, each one seeking safety at the far ends of the world where none might recognise the curse of our kind on them: the stigma. Each one, in time, was progenitor of his own bloodline: Blood Dragon, Lahmian, Strigoi, von Carstein and Necrarch. There are more. It matters little. Some allowed their evil to overwhelm their physical form and are more beast-like than human. Ushoran's Strigoi root around in the dirt of the grave, drinking the turned blood of the long dead. They are quite savage and quite, quite mad. Others, those descended from Neferata, are creatures of exquisite beauty. They cling to what they once were and still call themselves Lahmians. Was she a creature of uncommon beauty this woman of yours?"

"Yes."

"And she is walking freely through the city?" He marvelled at the thought. They do not hunt her?"

"No."

Mannfred thought about it, about what it meant for a Lahmian to be able to move at will through human society. The possibilities it offered were endless. The temptations...

"I should very much like to meet this woman and her dark mistress."

"You do not think she is alone?"

"They seldom are. The Lahmians are pack creatures. They congregate. Alone they are weak, but together, together they are strong. There is more to this than meets the eye, my friend. Another piece is in play. I do not like it when I am not in control of the board. It makes me uncomfortable. Things become unpredictable."

"Well that certainly stops them from becoming boring," Skellan said through the dead bird. Mannfred did not appreciate the gallows humour.

"There are worse things than facing a predictable enemy, Skellan. Make arrangements. There will be a meeting between our bloodlines. There are things that must be done. Do not fail me." It was said casually but the threat was implicit. *Do not fail me.*

The bird shuddered once, a final dying breath escaping its fragile corpse, and went still, the communication broken. Mannfred tossed the bird aside.

There were preparations to be made, foundations to be laid. He looked up at the sky. The first tentative snowflakes of winter turned in the air, melting before they reached the ground.

He opened the door on the seventh floor.

Three women and a man lay on the blood-red divan, the sheets wrapped around their flesh. The man's eyes were glazed, his skin waxen. They were exquisite mortals, all four. The women looked up expectancy. He shook his head slowly, holding out a hand for the man. The man rolled over, still lost in the languid torpor that comes out of the heat of passion. He saw his master in the doorway and rose. Mannfred was selective with those he chose to feed from. There was an intimacy to the act of feeding. It was something to be savoured. The flesh he chose was beautiful. There was no room for ugliness in his menagerie. Why drink from the hag when you can sup on the virgin? Why swallow old, tired blood, when you can get drunk on the innocence of the young?

It reflected his vanity.

The man stood naked before him.

"Come, Rasul," Mannfred commanded, turning his back on the women's disappointment. All wanted to be favoured by the new count. All were eager to please. He led the man to his own chamber. Neither exchanged a word on the long walk. To those who saw them together, it was curious how one mirrored the other's movements almost perfectly, like a skilled mimic, but it was not just in movement that the two were similar. The man bore an uncanny resemblance to the new count. They were by no means identical, but they were undeniably alike. For that reason and that reason alone, Mannfred tolerated his rudeness.

Mannfred closed the door behind them, and walked over to the window. He looked out over the growing city, amazed once again at the transformation being wrought on his ancestral home. It was his in a way it had never been Vlad or Konrad's. He had stamped his ambition on the very masonry, shaping it in his image.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

The man nodded. It was, though to his eye it looked as though the architects of need and desire had gone to war creating a monstrosity.

"There is so much that still needs to be done, but that is the way of all things. You begin, and it seems from that moment forth you never reach the end. I pity the cattle their short lives at times. How must it feel to never see the completion of one's dreams? Ah, but you would know, Rasul. So tell me, do you ever yearn for time? Do you have dreams of dominion over your own flesh?"

"I do," the man nodded. We all do, I think, at times. We look at our daughters growing up too fast and wish time would stand still for them, holding the moment of their innocence a little longer. Some learn to appreciate the fleeting nature of life, others hunger for more."

"And you?"

"I hunger for more."

"Good. That is what I am offering you: more. I will be leaving soon and I would have you look after my interests here, Rasul. I need to have faith that my will shall be done."

"You have servants my lord, an army who would die for you," the man grunted, something approaching a laugh. "They have died for you already, actually. Your will is what binds them to this realm, and you worry that your will shall be done? Have faith."

Mannfred turned away from the window. He reached out for Rasul, drawing him close. The man came to him willingly, tilting his neck to offer up the vein. A maze of scar tissue had hardened around his throat: puncture wounds that had healed over with time. It was not the first time Mannfred had retreated to this room with the young man, but it had been a while. Of late, Mannfred's tastes had gravitated towards the fulsome young women sprawled naked across the divan, but Rasul was special. There was something almost narcissistic about feeding on the man.

Mannfred ran his tongue across the hard scar tissue before sinking his teeth into Rasul's neck. The blood came into his mouth in a rush. He savoured the delicious shiver that chased through his body and didn't stop. He continued drinking even as the convulsions wracked Rasul's body. Rasul reached up, his hand falling on Mannfred's cheek. A moan of pleasure escaped his lips, as, at the point of death, Mannfred opened his wrist with the razor-cuff and forced the wound into Rasul's

mouth. The young man drank greedily. The sharing of blood was exhilarating. Mannfred had to wrench his wrist free of Rasul's suckling. Rasul stared at him, wounded, ragged strips of flesh clogged between his teeth. He licked at his lips, desperate to swallow every last drop of the vampire's astringent blood.

"You will be me," Mannfred whispered, sinking his teeth back into the young man's throat. "For all the world you will be me."

"I will be anything you want me to be," Rasul breathed, the words leaking out with his last mortal breath.

He died in his sire's arms and was reborn into the world of blood.

CHAPTER SIX

In the Shadow of the Valley of Death

Talabecland, Obelheim in the Färlic Hills

Fate came in the form of a swirling dust devil.

A tiny wisp of smoke like burning parchment appeared on the horizon less than a mile away, the bastard child of a horse and rider rolling like thunder across the dry plain.

They all knew what the rising dust meant. The orders were coming.

Vorster Schlagener pushed back the tent-flap and emerged into the morning. He joined the others watching the rider's approach. Conversations were muted. Silent trepidation rippled through the camp. It was time. There was an air of disbelief. No one breathed a word. No one dared.

Vorster tried to busy himself with some mindless task. Taking out his sword he thought about sharpening it against the whetstone, but he had done exactly that the night before, before turning in for sleep. The blade was as sharp as it had ever been. Instead he oiled his chain-mail.

He looked up from the laborious task as the glistening black mare arrived. The rider had almost run the animal into the ground. Foam bubbled from the corners of its mouth and its coat dripped with sweat. Most of the men turned away, unable to watch the rider bring the beast under control and trot up to Vorster. They had been waiting for what felt like forever, but come the hour they were unable to face the course their lives would be forced to take.

The rider was young and surly. He reached into his saddlebag and handed Vorster a sealed dispatch contemptuously. "You advance to the front," he said, and jerked on the reins to gather his mare for the return trip. The exhausted horse wheeled around.

"Wait!" Vorster bellowed, tearing off the wax seal and finding nothing of value within.

All too conscious of the fact that the men were looking to him for leadership, Vorster pushed himself to his feet and approached the rider. He lowered his voice, moving close so that his doubt wouldn't carry to them and become contagious. He held up the orders, crushing them in his hand. The details were worryingly thin: *The cavalry to advance rapidly to the front—prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Talabecland cavalry is on your left. Immediate.* "Which guns? Where?"

The dispatch rider was derisive. "What does it matter?" he asked. He waved a dismissive hand at the mouth of the valley. "There is your enemy. Are you a coward, man? Fight for your master, and do not question him."

With that he spurred the horse's flanks and rode away.

Dietrich Jaeger threw up his hands in sheer delight. At last we do *something!*" he said. Vorster did not share his enthusiasm for suicide. "Too many days sitting on their hands drive the rank and file crazy. Better to keep in the thick of it. Glory, my young friend; that is what it is all about, the glory of war."

Vorster stood stock still, barely able to keep his temper in check. He felt bitterly aggrieved by the blatant disregard the high command had shown for the lives of his men. He braced his hands on the war table and waited for his superior officer's dresser to finish fumbling about trying to put the preening fop's boots on. The dresser buffed the leather with a rag. He wanted to stuff the idiot's

words down his throat so that he choked on them. There was no glory in war. The longer he served men like Dietrich Jaeger the more he realised that their idea of honour was an outmoded concept. What it really meant was dying spectacularly and stupidly.

"Now we'll show those infantry swine a thing or two. They can be the butt of *our* jokes for a change."

Vorster bit his tongue. He wanted to say something. He wanted to point out the idiocy of the orders, but he knew that Jaeger wouldn't care one whit. The man was a buffoon. He looked at the map of the battlefield. It was an unmitigated mess and the orders that went with it were suicidal. He looked up from the map, straight at Jaeger. "Show them what, exactly, sir? That we place no value on human life? Well we could show them that, most certainly. You know as well as I do that no cavalry should ever charge blackpowder gun emplacements. Even just a few cannons and a line of flintlocks are enough to wreak havoc among the horses."

Jaeger got to his feet dismissively. "Nonsense! You fuss like an old woman. Just imagine! It will be glorious!"

"I am imagining, sir. It will be slaughter. The horses panic and we're cut off and the entire field becomes pandemonium. Not to mention that we have a weakness on our left flank."

Jaeger snapped his fingers for a goblet of wine. His dresser moved up smoothly to his side with a fine glass and a decanter filled with ruby red liquid. He poured the officer a glass and then melted back into the shadows in the corner of the command tent. "What weakness?" Jaeger quipped sauntering over to join Vorster. "What are you talking about, man? Really, Vorster, you asked for more horses and I found a way to give you horses."

"I did not ask for stallions, sir, and for good reason."

Jaeger sighed elaborately, and raised his hands to the heavens as though beseeching Sigmar to intervene on his behalf. You really are an impudent son of a bitch, you know that? Let me remind you that you are a junior officer! *My* junior officer. Now, where is Lord Ignatz?" Jaeger sipped his wine, rich, like a goblet of blood. He glanced at his dresser. This really is very good, Fredrich. Where did we get this one?"

"Sir, with respect—"

Jaeger slammed his goblet down on the table slopping a deep red stain right across the map of the valley, a foreshadowing of the slaughter to come if the idiots were allowed to run the asylum. "Good God, Vorster! What does it matter?"

Vorster spoke slowly and carefully, enunciating every word perfectly as though he were talking to a simpleton. "Because, commander, cavalry horses are either geldings or mares. *Ours* are mares, and our mares are *in heat*."

Jaeger clapped an amused hand over his mouth and laughed from his belly. "So we'll breed ourselves a new division!" he chortled, tickled at the notion of his junior's prudishness. "Let the stallions have their heads, and see the enemy tremble."

"The strength of our plan is in our swiftness, and surprise," Lord Ignatz declared melodramatically as he swept into the tent unannounced. "Mark my words, boys, we'll be on top of them before they can get off their first shot. What good are their cannons then, eh?"

Vorster seized on the glimmer of hope. "Did the scouts return? I didn't see them."

Ignatz seemed bemused by the question. "I can see the range from my tent flap perfectly well. If we pass through the valley here, at Ramius Point," he said, driving his knife into the map with cold arrogance, "we ride up over the ridge, and they'll never see us coming."

The knife was buried right in the darkest part of the spilled wine.

"There!" Jaeger said excitedly, jabbing a finger at Ignatz's chest for Vorster's benefit. There is a man who understands strategy."

Vorster felt the blood drain from his face. Since the battle had begun Dietrich Jaeger had taken no steps to find out what was happening beyond the mounds, hillocks and ridges that cut off their view of the ground that had fallen into the hands of the enemy, none at all.

The worst tactical mistake a commander could make was to assume that the battlefield remained static, that all the pieces of the enemy's forces had remained exactly where they were at their last encounter. The battlefield was dynamic, constantly shifting.

Vorster cast a desperate eye over the battle plans laid out on the table. There was no guarantee that the Talabeclanders were in any of the positions Jaeger had assigned to them. Any idiot ought to know enough to wait for the latest scout reports, but no, not this idiot.

Dietrich Jaeger was determined they should go in blind and no matter what Vorster said he couldn't make the man see that it was suicide. The fool was blinded by promises of glory. No doubt he had already begun drafting something to say when the elector count himself came to laud him with praise for his unsurpassed heroism—arrogant, ignorant fool.

Vorster quietly made his way towards the exit. "I'll tell the men to get a good night's rest," he said. "I assume we go at dawn?"

Jaeger shook his head. "Oh I don't think so, young man. I didn't put my boots on to go to sleep. Tell them to saddle up. We go in an hour."

When the time came, three hundred and sixty-five men and bristling horses made a gleaming display spread out across the dead earth of the Hardamin Flats.

It had threatened snow earlier in the day, but the wind had picked up, blowing the clouds through. The afternoon sky was clear—a glorious day, as Jaeger had said, emerging from the command tent. The sun, past its zenith, was still high in the sky and there wasn't a cloud to be seen.

Vorster eyed the afternoon sky with unease, hoping in vain that Jaeger would see sense. By the time they reached the valley floor the sun would be low and in their eyes.

Of course, Dietrich Jaeger was more concerned with clambering up onto an old wooden chest so that he could deliver his little speech, exhorting the men to valour in the name of Martin and freedom. He really was an odious little toad. He didn't care for a minute that the charge represented the single biggest stroke of insanity ever perpetrated on the field of battle, because it, like his stallions, would be glorious.

Vorster let the words wash over him, filling his senses instead with the strong smell of oiled leather, polished steel and anxious horses. He went inside himself, centering his spirit around a calm core. He had no god to pray to, none that he believed capable of intervening as he plunged headlong into the mouth of madness, at any rate.

It wasn't that he was afraid to die; he had made his peace with whatever deity had spawned him a long time ago. Dying on some foreign field was not what worried him, either. It wasn't that he was filled with sudden regrets for the things he hadn't done. It wasn't even that there were so many beautiful and ugly women he had yet to make the acquaintance of. None of that mattered. He would die willingly for freedom. He believed in what Martin of Stirland asked his men to do, and admired the fact that Martin could be seen on the battlefield, not hiding away behind the command line. The man was a natural leader. Unfortunately he was surrounded by a few too many fools, and Vorster didn't suffer fools gladly.

He snapped out of his introspection as the roar went up, the men vaunting their leader. Jaeger and Ignatz thrived on this rubbish; it pandered to their egos.

They moved into position.

When the final command was given, field commander Lord Ignatz dropped his sword in a flashing—and yet cold—salute and the cavalry rode out as one.

The ground trembled under hoof, the advance sending ripples through the earth.

The riders moved across the plain, stalking beasts, the scent of blood in the air, eager to chase the jackals of Talabecland from their turf.

They rode, triumphant, into the mouth of the valley, the banner of Stirland snapping in the breeze. Vorster surveyed the terrain from his mount. The first three quarters of a mile was a gentle descent into a narrow pass between cliffs that rose up like gnashing teeth ready to crush them. It was here that the first sign of trouble came, from the left flank as stallions and mares became pressed together, intoxicated by each other's heady scents. The proximity was too much for one powerful horse and the stallion reared up, attempting to mount the mare before it, throwing the rider from his saddle and smashing another man with its flailing hooves.

A wave of panic rippled out from the chaos.

Vorster rode forwards. There was no time for doubt or hesitation. Panic was a rare beast. Once it took hold in one mount it would spread like wildfire through the others. He steered his own stallion through the press of horses until he was close enough to take charge.

He drew his sword and slit the throat of the frisky stallion. The beast screamed and rolled onto its side causing two more riders to guide their mounts away from the bright red spray of blood that gouted out across parched soil and men alike.

It did not slow their advance even a hoof beat.

As the valley opened out before them the arrowhead shaped tip of the imposing Ramius Point ridge loomed ever closer. Vorster spurred his horse forwards, coming up level with Ignatz. He saw a flash of uncertainty in the man's eyes. The fool had not thought to take the fork into account.

"Which track, sir?" Vorster asked earnestly. "Left or right?"

Ignatz ignored him, straightening up in the saddle. He rode forwards as if nothing was wrong. "Left or right, sir?"

The decision was vital. Vorster mapped the battlefield out mentally, placing the landmarks according to what he remembered seeing on the map. The reality was nothing like the map though. Left or right? One track gave limited cover. The other did not. The time for sending out scouts to check the lie of the land was long passed. Ignatz ought to have known immediately which tine of the fork they should take. He could see the conflict in the officer's eyes. He was clueless.

Vorster pressed the point. "Which track, sir? Left or right?"

Ignatz fumbled with his sword, the sweat from his palm loosening his grip. "The left—no! The right!"

"Surely the left offers more cover, sir."

"I said the *right*!" And with that Ignatz spurred his mount hard and surged ahead to lead the way, brandishing his sword above his head and shouting, "Canter!"

The cavalry upped its pace and followed him into the corner.

The hot, sweaty muscle of the warhorses beat out the faster rhythm of their advance. The dust from so many angry hooves, thrown up into the air like a ghostly shroud, announced their approach to all.

The lip of the ridge came into view.

The bowl of the Färlic Hills lay beyond the ridge.

Horses and riders streamed up the incline. It was too late to turn back. They rode out into no-man's land.

From their vantage point on the Obelheim Plateau, high above the bowl, the Stirland command watched Lord Ignatz's advance with increasing alarm. It was lunacy in the extreme. They couldn't—in all honesty—believe what they were seeing. Their orders had been simple enough, deliberately so, to avoid the chance of mistakes like this.

It was suicide, nothing more and nothing less.

"Where in Sigmar's name does he think he is going?" Martin breathed in disbelief.

Junior officers scrambled to make sense of Ignatz's manoeuvres as they compared them to the battle plans laid out before them and the orders they had given him, but it was quite impossible to enforce any kind of logic onto the charge. The idiot was taking them the wrong way!

Flustered, Oskar Zenzi, one of Martin's more trusted Kompmeister's hurried over to his marshal's side. "We've checked the maps, double checked them, sir, and well, we believe he's going the wrong way, sir."

"I can see the fool is going the wrong way, man! I am not blind! My orders were explicit. He was to outflank the enemy!" The Marshall's voice dropped an octave as the gravity of Ignatz's mistake began to settle in. "Where does that path lead him?"

Zenzi rubbed at his face. He had gone very pale. "Right across the enemy cannons, sir, and well within their range."

The command post descended into bedlam. The chaos was mirrored on the field of battle below. Shouts rang out, officers desperate to apportion and deflect blame for the fiasco. They tripped over themselves in a hurry to address the Marshall's rage until finally one of them had the presence of mind to roar at the dispatch rider.

"Get your arse down there and tell him to pull back, man! Tell him to pull back!"

It was a desperate gallop, the messenger driving his horse into the ground, and even as the beast gave up the ghost and collapsed beneath him he saw it was for nothing.

The cavalry had been engaged.

They were as good as dead.

The first blasts were deafening. They shook the ground with a jarring ferocity, but mercifully they were off target.

Vorster knew they were nothing more than probing round shots to enable the Talabecland gunners to judge their distances. The second volley would be lethal.

Iron cannonballs hit the ground obliquely, skipping over the cavalrymen's heads. The air grew thick with churning dust making it difficult to see where they were going, and in the process transforming the pockmarked soil into a silent death trap. One hit its mark, bringing horse and rider down in a spray of blood and bone. His screams were hideous.

"Listen to me! It's not too late to turn back! There's no cowardice in it!" Vorster pleaded, but Ignatz was having none of it. He held his sword arm firmly aloft, keeping the men at canter and crying, "Steady...! *Steady...*!"

"We're too exposed, sir! This is insane! Get your head out of your arse and think for once, sir!"

"Damn you, man, we ride!" Ignatz bellowed.

More cannon fire came spewing down upon them, a barrage from somewhere ahead and to the left. It was a brutal mixture this time that was far more accurate in finding targets. Explosive shells, cannon balls filled with black powder, began the volley and grapeshot ended it, canvas bags stuffed with clusters of small iron shot that mowed the nearest horses down as if taking a saw to their flesh. It was ruthlessly efficient in decimating the ranks of the Stirland riders.

Small pockets of fire pocked the front and rear lines. The air stank of burned horseflesh. The cries of the fallen beasts were pitiful. The stink in turn made the remaining horses skittish.

Clouds of smoke rafted up from the smouldering earth. Many of the riders that had escaped the onslaught found themselves disorientated by smoke and noise, their mounts turning frantically on themselves, bucking and shying blindly. Too many of the frightened beasts stumbled into the craters, falling badly and breaking their necks and legs.

Despite the brutal efficacy of the bombardment it was merely the opening salvo in what was a massacre.

Vorster struggled with his stallion, exercising a heavy hand on the beast to keep it from bolting. He could see precisely where the Talabeclander emplacements were situated. The main range of

cannons was strung out in an arc across the top of the Farlic Hills, at the far end of the bowl, while flanking positions bore down on either side.

He spat and swore bitterly. Ignatz was every bit as big a fool as Jaeger. How could any commander not know that the Talabeclanders had a triangulated bead on anyone that entered the valley?

This head on assault was nothing short of madness. Vorster wheeled his horse around, looking down the ruined line. Another barrage would decimate their ranks, effectively rendering them impotent. Ignatz *had* to be able to see he had made a mistake, had to. He was just too pig-stubborn to order a retreat.

Vorster watched in horror as Ignatz lowered his sword arm, thrusting his blade forwards into the booming din ahead and gave one almighty cry, "*Charge!*" The cavalrymen spurred their horses into full gallop and into hell's chasm.

Within the blink of an eye the horse and rider alongside Vorster vanished from view as a cannonball ploughed into the mare's skull only to explode through its ribs, taking the rider's leg with it.

Vorster kept his hands on the reins, too afraid to wipe the kiss of warm scarlet from his face. He gritted his teeth and spurred his mount on, jumping it over the corpse of another fallen mare. Huge puffballs of smoke rose silently from the hills over to the right, followed seconds later by the roar of another barrage. Bone and horseflesh blossomed across the battlefield to the cacophony of shrill screaming.

Still the Stirlanders plunged forwards, closer to the ranks of the Talabeclanders and their guns, closer to their objectives, and right into the curtain fire from the Talabecland fusiliers.

The sudden furious pop, pop of muskets pierced the deep booming rumbles of cannon fire like dry twigs snapping on an open fire. One after the other, horses reared, and Stirlander cavalrymen were thrown back, their bodies riddled with bloody punctures.

Vorster quickly lost sight of Ignatz, and the other cavalry commanders in the thick blanket of smoke and dust that had descended upon the battlefield turning day into night. He orientated himself by the drum of thundering hooves until suddenly he was thrown from his horse.

Whether it had stumbled or had been hit he couldn't say. It was gone. Gunfire rifled the air, adding to the chaos of battle. He heard a brief whinny and then there was a moment of shocking silence. He tumbled through the dirt and staggered to his feet, drawing his sword. He stumbled forwards. His head reeled. Though the roar of battle was at hand, he could see none of it. Smoke rendered him utterly blind. Occasionally he heard the drumming hooves of a horseman galloping by, but he was gone again before he could call out, and just as quickly he was lost in the smoke again.

Then... then the tide of battle took another turn.

Vorster heard the clash of steel.

It was an unmistakable sound, and it meant only one thing: the Talabecland army was on the field!

Vorster raced blindly towards the din, his sword outstretched, thinking only to fight his way free of the slaughter. Twenty paces into the smoke he came face to face with a mighty Talabecland cavalryman bearing down on him, sabre raised.

Vorster stood his ground, braced for the blow to land. He struggled to regulate his breathing, slow it so that panic didn't overwhelm him. He waited, only to side step at the very last moment and ram the tip of his blade into the side of the charging animal. The gash was deep and bloody, cutting into the horse's stomach and spilling its guts. The horse bucked furiously, throwing its rider to the ground ten feet beyond Vorster.

The rider landed badly. His neck was obviously broken, but he was still alive and struggling to breathe. The fallen man's eyes bulged with fear as he watched his enemy approach, utterly helpless to do anything about it.

"Please..." the man begged, barely forming the word.

Vorster was merciful and quick.

He hoped, when it came to it, that some Talabeclander would do the same for him.

* * * * *

The end, when it came, was inevitable.

He fell beneath the swords of two men, beaten into the ground by the savagery of their blows.

He crawled in the dirt, but he would not beg.

His sword had fallen so far from his fingers. He did not want to die without it in his hand. He needed to reach it. He tried to move, but a fierce kick in the side of the ribs lifted him bodily from the mud and left him clutching at his gut in agony. He gasped but couldn't catch his breath. A second kick turned him over so that he lay face up, looking at the sneering face of his enemy.

Vorster, tried to breathe, but the heel of a well-placed boot came down to crush his windpipe.

He clawed at the leather, but was helpless against its force.

He gave up, waiting for the inevitable killing stroke, be it stamp or stab.

The cold tip of steel rested against his eye socket; the enemy was not ugly, not some monster. He could have been looking at himself. He felt a surge of sadness that it should come to this, here. The young Talabeclander officer leaned over him. "Why?" his voice shook with raw emotion.

Vorster struggled for air, aware that there were others surrounding him, but he would not answer.

"You knew it was madness.

Vorster felt the rage within. He could see his sword. The leather wrapped hilt was five feet away, no more, if he could just reach it...

The boot pressed down harder.

"For all your leader's folly, you showed great courage this day, soldier," the young Talabeclander said, admiration in his tone. "It would be a shame to kill you, so please do not give me the excuse. You will be our heroic guest. I cannot say whether it will be a long stay."

The last thing Vorster Schlagener heard as he slipped into unconsciousness was, "Dress his wounds. Then bind him and take him away."

Under flags of truce the dead and wounded were brought back from the silent valley.

There was an air of disbelief about the high command. Anger at the stupidity of one man grew into grief as they built huge pyres for their dead.

Of the 365 men who had charged down the valley less than sixty returned. Ignatz, the man responsible for the debacle, was not amongst them. Corpses littered the battlefield.

Horses streaming with blood and unable to get to their feet bit at the short grass with froth-covered teeth.

The occasional sharp, melancholy cry of a horse dying beneath the farriers' knives filled the air.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Lahmian Temple

Nuln, the Imperial City

The woman, Narcisa, fascinated Skellan.

She was an enigma.

She moved freely amongst the living while he was forced to hide in the gutters and the Unterbaunch beneath the Alt Stadt, eating off scraps while she played the social butterfly, moving from arm to arm of the rich and influential, laughing, charming and seductive. They loved her. Night after night he spied on her from the shadows, watching her nocturnal promenades with actors, merchants, aristocrats and men of undeniable power. She gravitated towards those who had power, or had some kind of influence over the power-mongers. No one seemed to notice her nature. Certainly there was none of the hysteria that would have accompanied Skellan revealing his presence to the cattle. They adored Narcisa. They flocked to her, feted her and pandered to her, all in the hope of getting closer to her flame that they might bask in her glory. Though of course if they succeeded in getting close enough, Skellan knew, they would get burned, but how many moths cared about that as they flocked to the flame?

She was clever, ruthlessly cunning and selective in her feeding pattern.

He quickly realised she was feeding off each and every one of the gentlemen callers he saw her with—a little here, a little there, a kiss turned overly playful, a cut tenderly administered. There were ways of drawing blood that they didn't even notice. Narcisa was tender, loving and amused by their jokes, and she made them all feel like fortunate fools. It amazed Skellan that none of them noticed just how “too good to be true” the Lahmian was. Still, the cattle were not the brightest of creatures.

Occasionally he followed her back to her chambers and would sit while she put on a show for him, seducing the bright young things, and then taking what she wanted in return for what they wanted. He appreciated her performances, but resisted the urge to take a lead role in her little tragedy of passion.

Over nights of watching, Skellan came to realise that she was not alone, far from it. When he knew what to look for it became easier to spot them. During his stalking of Narcisa she encountered perhaps fifteen more of her kind—blood-sucking females seducing their way into positions of influence in the hierarchy of Nuln.

Walking still pained him. The witch hunter's bolt had left its mark, the head buried deep in his arse. He had pulled it out, but the damned thing was tipped with silver so it had burned him deep inside and refused to heal. So he walked with a limp, dragging his left leg slightly. It added to the illusion though. Any who spotted him would have assumed, naturally, that he was some sort of cripple left to beg, following the mayhem of the civil war.

Some nights he followed Narcisa, other nights he followed one of the other girls. They were all curiously similar, beautiful, more beautiful than the courtesans and hangers on that had flocked to Konrad, most certainly, and easily as beautiful as Vlad's own Isabella who, in Skellan's memories of her, was an exquisite beauty. He had never thought to see such beauty in the flesh again.

The darkness held, refusing to give way to dawn.

It was cold. Winter was close.

A horse drawn carriage rumbled past his hiding place. The animal's hooves sparked on the cobbles and streamers of steam coiled out of its flared nostrils. It stamped hard on the ground, whinnying.

Skellan backed away into deeper shadow, willing the beast to walk on.

The horse shied, kicking out, and then came down, breaking into a canter. The carriage driver pulled back on the reins and cried, "Ho, girl!"

The horse didn't calm until it was well past Skellan's hiding place.

The clouds were thick, promising snow.

Skellan walked in the shadows, never far from the woman's side. She knew he was there. Still he refused to step out into the false glow of the streetlights. He felt uncomfortable, the beast stalking beauty. He had to remind himself that she was no damsel. The woman was every bit the predator he was. Moreso, perhaps, as she fed on countless men, keeping them alive as long as they furthered her ambitions. There was a callousness to it that was exciting to him.

He was moving into familiar territory.

It felt like an age since he had hunted these streets with Mannfred, but they had not changed so much. He remembered, with a sly smile, the various tastes of the Family Liebowitz as they had succumbed. That night of the long knives had been one like no other. He had revelled in the culling. They had died in so many inventive ways, defenestrated, despoiled and degraded, that the ingenuity of the murders challenged him even now. It sent a thrill of pleasure through Skellan just thinking about it.

Indeed, the city still reeled from it.

The influence of the family had been severely weakened—to the point that a splinter of the family had emerged with a variant pronunciation of their name: Liebewitz. It was a subtle difference in tonal delivery, but it set them apart from the tragedy. Rumour had it that it was a half-brother of one of the dead that had surfaced from somewhere to claim the family fortunes and with no one to stop him, he had succeeded. There were all sorts of suppositions about him having been drummed out of the family when they were still alive, but Skellan wasn't interested. The original pronunciation of the name had all but died out, it seemed. But then, few liked to be reminded of the horrors Skellan and von Carstein had visited upon the city. It was natural that the survivors would try to distance themselves from that dark time. It had been then that he had learned the truth about the stranger he travelled with and about his hungers—that it was Mannfred, Vlad's first born. Soon after that, Mannfred had left him to travel into the Lands of the Dead in search of the dark wisdom of the great necromancer, Nagash.

She led him through the Sonder district into the Smalz quarter. Businesses became few and far between and the houses grew gradually more impressive with colonnades and almost skeletal stone structures. A great many of the houses were dominated by sharply pointed ogive arches, ribbed vaults, clustered columns, sharply pointed spires, flying buttresses and decorative detail. On one such mansion, Skellan saw grim-faced gargoyles and on another what appeared to be butterflies attacking a terrified man. It was all an exercise in indulgence, a way of showing off the owner's wealth. It was gratuitous and ugly to his eye.

Further removed from the press of people it became colder, too. He drew his collar up, covering half of his face. The cold was no real discomfort; it was more the illusion of fitting in. One of the cattle seeing him wrapped up against the elements would think nothing of it, just another poor sod out in the cold, making him instantly forgettable. The alternative, Skellan standing on the corner in his shirt oblivious to the cold, would stick in the mind of any who happened to see him.

She stopped at a set of imposing iron gates, easing them open and slipping through. A serpent had been woven around the black iron bars of either gate, fangs bared in threat. Skellan didn't follow, at least not directly.

He waited across the street from the iron gates, watching. The mansion was walled off. The wall was nine feet high and topped with creepers and flowering vines. The trick was making it look as though he belonged. An interloper stood out a mile if he acted like one... Skellan was not by nature a patient man, though. Waiting went against the grain. He looked up and down the street for a good spot from which to carry out his surveillance. The street was empty save for two carriages. Lime trees lined the far side of the road. The lime was a fascinating species of tree, said to grow on unmarked graves. The wind dragged through the leaves, creating an unnerving susurrus that sighed through the trees.

He was grateful that there were no horses or dogs for him to concern himself with.

He walked slowly across the cobbled street, approaching the gate. The wall, he saw, was actually topped with shards of broken glass that were hidden beneath the flowering vines. A few of the broken pieces poked through the green.

The snake appeared to be made out of copper, the elements having oxidised it a bilious shade of green, and they were deceptively well crafted, cast from a single mould and used as a sheath on the iron bar. He touched one of the copper snake's teeth. It was sharp enough to draw a bead of blood with the least bit of pressure.

Skellan focused his senses, picking out the sweet fragrance of a woman's perfume and the damp of bark surrendering to mould, with the faint overlay of a more astringent musk. It took him a moment to isolate it: catsfoot, or cudweed as they called it back home. It was an aroma he hadn't smelled in the longest time. Lizbet had sworn by it as a cure-all, good for loosening bowels and efficacious against even the most potent snake bites. He heard the caw of a crow, the rustle of the wind through the lime leaves, and the more distant murmur of water.

He felt the first snowflake of the night on his upturned cheek.

Skellan looked at the sky. A storm was coming.

He eased open the iron gate, pushing it back on protesting hinges, and slipped into the grounds of the mansion house. The grounds were well tended, the rose bushes dead-headed, the japonicas cut back, even the vines dinging to the facade of the manse were well maintained in a careful state of managed disrepair, giving the old house an edge of wildness that Skellan found appealing. Left of the serpentine drive lay a small lake, frozen over, and behind it an architectural folly that acted as a small boathouse. On the right were more gardens, a grove of beech trees and a huge stone mausoleum.

He skirted the high wall, keeping to the fringe of the well-cultivated garden until he reached the mausoleum. A line of gravestones stood like broken teeth across the front of the building giving it something of a grim smile. Each of the tombstones was engraved with the mark of the snake. It was obviously some sort of family crest tied for who knows how long to the old house. The motto "Es liegt im Blut" was carved into the lintel above the mausoleum's door. "It runs in the blood." Skellan couldn't help but smile at the obvious irony of the words.

He tried the door. It was sealed.

Instead of forcing his way in, he sat with his back to one of the gravestones, watching the comings and goings of the house and its nocturnal visitors. They came and went in pairs and alone, the women of the night. It seemed they all returned to the manse after feeding, to share whatever they had learned with whoever dwelled there—almost certainly their hidden mistress, just as Mannfred had assumed.

The manse evidently served as the focus for their infiltration of the echelons of Nuln's society.

Again he was disturbed that the Lahmian's could live in such obvious opulence and not attract the wrath of witch hunters and bigots claiming the holy bloody right of Sigmar to crush anything they didn't understand. The depth of their deception was staggering.

Flakes of snow were drifting down, whipping up over the top of the gravestone and away, melting before they reached the ground. Skellan wrapped his cloak around him and pulled the hood

up over his head so that only the broken profile of his nose protruded. He itched at the leather patch across his eye. Judging by the moon's position it was well past the middle of the night.

Despite, or because of, the lateness of the hour, the manse was far from deserted. He watched as two young debutantes in high boots and long fur coats walked arm in arm out of the main house. They talked lightly, giggling as they walked around the rim of the lake. Together they slipped through the gate and back out into the city proper, destined, no doubt, for some aristocratic bed somewhere. The trailing edge of their laughter reached him as they passed by on the other side of the wall.

Still he waited.

More women came through the gate, more left.

The women frequently turned and seemed to stare right at him as though sensing his presence in the grounds, but none saw him.

Finally Narcisa emerged from the house.

Skellan detached himself from the shadows and moved up behind her, catching the Lahmian by the throat as he wrapped his other arm around her waist. He leaned in close, whispering in her ear: "My master would meet your mistress, Lahmian."

The woman didn't flinch. "Then perhaps he would care to ask instead of sending his brute in to force an invitation?"

Skellan added pressure to her throat, knowing even as he did so that she had no need of breath. Frustration caused him to squeeze savagely enough to crush her windpipe. He felt her stiffen against him, resisting. Beneath the pretty curves her musculature was a match for iron. He struggled to hold her.

"Make it happen."

"The Eternal does not see commoners, vampire," Narcisa said, sneering.

"Oh I think she will make an exception for this commoner."

"Do you think we don't know who you are? Who your uncommon master is? You really are a clueless brute, aren't you Jon Skellan?"

"How could you...?"

She twisted, so that her mouth was beside his ear, reversing their roles of captive and captor. Her eyes, he saw, were different: one glaucous blue, the other flecked with hazel. The imperfection only served to make her all the more appealing.

"We are observers. We watch; we listen. We do not bluster and preen, craving attention and approval for our wickedness. We simply observe. It is amazing what you can learn by paying attention to the world around you. Of course, you wouldn't know as you are too busy playing the thug for your master. Does he call you whelp?"

"I could end your life here, with my bare hands, woman. Do not push me into something you would not live long enough to regret," Skellan rasped.

"See? Bluster. You need my help to see to it that your master, the new Count of Drakenhof, if I am not mistaken, and I am seldom mistaken, meets with my mistress. Do you think ending my life would please either of them? One might go so far as to suggest it would bring a world of hurt down upon your head, vampire. So, why don't you try again? Tell me why I should help you?"

"You have a good thing here, you and your kind, but don't make the mistake of believing it will last forever, Narcisa. It won't, I promise you that."

"So you threaten me again in an attempt to earn my trust and win my support? You really are quite the animal, and I don't mean that as a compliment."

She turned easily in his arms, as he arched back, releasing the beast within. His face twisted as he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head back. He lunged forwards, sinking his teeth into her throat and tearing out a mouthful of her tainted flesh. He tasted her black blood, swallowed gluttonously and then pulled his head back. Skellan savoured the look of fear in her eyes. To be

feared was an intensely erotic feeling. “You taste... luxurious. Now,” he said, licking her blood from his lips. “My master will meet your mistress. You will make it happen.”

She nodded, all the fight gone from her body.

They were not equals. For all that she might have wanted to pretend otherwise, playing the aristocrat, Skellan had shown that the beast was more than a match for beauty. It had taken a single moment of blistering savagery to impose his will on her. She had buckled, leaving him dominant.

Beyond the city gates peasants fired up by the witch hunter Moroi stormed the Strigany caravans.

The winter night could not have been bleaker. A thin patina of snow had fallen, but instead of adding an edge of romance to the city streets it only served to drape a ghostly veil of despair over a world locked in winter. A bitter wind chased through the narrow streets, sending corkscrews of snow twisting across the frozen cobbles.

They ran through those narrow frozen streets, shouting and screaming, torches blazing. They swarmed over the Strigany camp, pulling caravan doors open and shattering windows. As the mob mentality gripped them, righteousness turned to fury. A thick muscled townsman threw his burning brand through the door he’d just yanked open. He stood there waiting for the fire to catch, blocking the exit. As the travellers emerged from their caravan, coughing and choking on the smoke, the townsman thrust another burning brand into their faces, blinding them with fire. As they backed away he tossed a second brand into their home while around him others followed suit, throwing open caravan doors and shattering windows, setting light to the caravans. The screams only served to ignite their anger, the mob feeding off the fear. They plunged into the burning caravans and dragged the Strigany out by the hair, kicking and screaming. One weasel of a man thrust his firebrand into the face of an old grey haired crone. The air quickly smelled of burned meat and brimstone as her hair charred away from her scalp.

“Is it here, Moroi? Can you feel its presence?” Arminus Vamburg whispered, his breath conjuring wraiths of mist to hang like a veil between the living and the dead. The violence of the mob frightened the man, but it was a necessary evil. They couldn’t hope to flush the beast out without it. The waning moon was a sickly silver eye barely floating above the rooftops. Vamburg ignored the icy chill worming its way into his heart, and wiped the sweat from his brow before it could freeze there. His lips were chapped from the wind’s perpetual kiss.

Moroi nodded once.

A cruel wind drove the clouds through the sky, continually masking and unmasking the moon, so that the trees lining the street appeared to shamble like rows of gnarled corpses.

“Bring out the beast!” Moroi cried.

Others took up the chant, banging on the sides of the caravans.

Snow began to fall thicker, a flurry blowing up into a storm. And from out of the centre of the storm came the beast.

It was not a giant and did not have two heads or blood-dripping fangs. It was a warrior with a huge double-headed warhammer in its meaty fists. It was not the wolf he had chased, but the sickness surging through his body told Moroi that the man walking towards him through the snow and fire was most assuredly a vampire.

The bravura leaked out of the living as they felt the power of the vampire, the dark aura of fear that the creature exuded. Some fell to their knees, while others scrambled back, trying to hide within the shadows, close to the walls. Only Moroi and Vamburg stood their ground, unflinching.

“Funny thing, death,” Jerek said, his voice bereft of inflection. “You would think it would hurt more.” Then, almost wistfully, he asked “Have you come to put me out of my misery? I should like that, but it isn’t time. There are still things I must do.”

“Your life is forfeit, vampire,” Moroi said.

“I have no life, *mortal!*” Jerek answered. His bitter smile widened, his thin bloodless lips peeling slowly back from the white of his carnivorous teeth. “Isn’t that why you are here? Don’t do this, please. Don’t. Just walk away from here. Let this be one of those rare occasions when all these others live.”

“You cannot live if you are not alive.”

“I meant you.”

Moroi raised his handheld crossbow and aimed it at the beast’s heart. He fired two bolts, less than a second apart, and he knew, even as he squeezed down on the trigger that his was aim true.

Jerek’s hand lashed out, deflecting the first bolt so that it spun harmlessly wide, and snatching the second out of the air. He snapped it derisively.

Vamburg pulled a flask of blessed water out of his leather satchel, unstopped it and hurled it into Jerek’s face, babbling a line of prayer. The beast’s skin hissed and steamed where the water hit, but it didn’t slow his advance. He came at Vamburg first, surging forwards, the monster tearing out from beneath his skin as he launched himself into a blistering attack the man had no earthly hope of fending off.

It was brutal, savage, ugly, and tragic.

The man threw up his hands desperately trying to deflect Jerek’s fury, but it was useless.

Jerek’s fingers sheered through half of Vamburg’s face, ripping his nose and half of his cheek away in a single bloody tear. The man’s screams were hideous to hear. His blood soaked the settling snow. The speed of the attack was dizzying, the ferocity nauseating. Crouching over him, Jerek grabbed both sides of his head in his hands and snapped his neck clean in two with a savage twist. He dropped the man and reared back and howled. He did not feed. Indeed, for the shocking nature of the attack, more shocking still was that the beast retreated from the spilled blood.

There was a second when the entire street was locked in shocked paralysis and then Moroi hurled himself at the beast, only to be battered back almost inconsequentially. He sprawled in the thin layer of snow, scuffing it up as he scrambled, trying to get back to his feet.

Jerek rose, standing over the witch hunter.

The crowd of vigilantes stared, torches spitting sparks that danced high into the air. The sparks conjured wraiths of steam that spun away in tight spirals. None dared move. Their pitchforks and makeshift spears hung slackly in their hands, their wooden stakes clattered to the floor as fear—real genuine terror—wormed its way into their hearts.

“Do not make me kill you, man. I have no taste for blood. There is something I must do. Then I will seek you out and you can end my life. If you try to stop me, I will kill you. I promise you that. You have my word, as a wolf of Ulric.”

“Your *word?*” Moroi spat, nursing his bruised and bloody chin. “You kill my friend and expect me to let you leave, on your *word?*”

“No, I expect you to come after me and die. I just don’t want to be forced to kill you. I have enough blood on my hands. I have no desire to add yours.” He turned his back on the witch hunter, as though goading him to try.

“You are an affront to nature,” Moroi swore. “And I will come after you beast. I will come after you and kill you. That I promise.” For a promise it sounded dreadfully hollow, even to the witch hunter’s ears.

None of the would-be vampire slayers stopped him as Jerek walked away into the darkness.

Skellan stared at the curious bird.

It was neither crow nor raven but some kind of unnatural blend between the carrion eaters and something else entirely. It was a strige, a hideous cross between bat, bird and wasp with four small, pincer-like legs. It was rusty-red with a dangling proboscis. The name meant owl in the old tongue, a nocturnal bird. In more modern parlance it meant witch, which was decidedly more fitting, Skellan

thought. He was uncomfortable around the strange bird, but Mannfred seemed to have taken a liking to communicating through it of late.

“Is it arranged?”

“The Lahmian has agreed to facilitate a meeting between you and one she calls the Eternal.”

“Good, good. You have done well, my friend. I am close. I should enter the city within the week.”

“I don’t know... There is a peculiar tension to the place these last few days, like something is primed to explode. It makes me uncomfortable. The humans are restless. No doubt it is some part of their never-ending quest to tear their civilisation apart, but be that as it may, I think we should exercise caution. For one, I would avoid coming in overland like the plague. Better, I think, to enter via the tunnels. There is a concealed jetty that disembarks directly into a vast underground labyrinth beneath the city.”

“Indeed,” Mannfred agreed thoughtfully.

“It would also serve us to be cautious around these Lahmian women. I do not trust them. They spend their lives lying and trading information for power. I would not put it past the bitches to sell you out to the Imperials in return for turning a blind eye to their presence in the city. They have the fools eating out of their hands while they eat out of their necks!”

“Then pity the fools who get in my way.” There was no arrogance to the statement. It was delivered flat, matter-of-fact and all the more chilling for it.

“Still, the less they know of your movements the better.”

“Agreed. Something is disturbing you, is it not?” The bird-thing craned its neck curiously, peering at Skellan. Its scrutiny made him uncomfortable.

“There was some kind of riot this past night. A Strigany caravan was burned to the ground, the gypsies run out of town. I believe someone told them I was sheltering with the Strigany and that is why the caravan burned.”

“They know you are in the city?”

“No... well, not exactly. A damned witch hunter put a silver arrow in my arse. I know he is looking for me.”

“That was... unfortunate.” Mannfred’s disappointment was palpable. “What do you intend to do?”

“Oh, I intend to string him up—dead of course.”

“Good. See that it is done before my arrival.”

Moroi could not find it in himself to mourn his friend.

Arminus Vamburg’s grave looked like a black wound in the earth, surrounded as it was by three inches of snow. Winter had taken a hold of Nuln. Vamburg’s coffin was a simple wooden box bare of any ornamentation. It rested beside the hole, on ropes that would be used to lower it into the ground. Moroi couldn’t take his gaze from the coffin. He couldn’t accept that his friend—his only friend—lay inside, waiting to be interred, dead. The beast had done this, murdered Vamburg without compunction or guilt. It was a stone cold killer—and yet it had promised to return, to find him in order to die at his hand when its work was done.

There was a surreal quality to the events of the last night that turned his thoughts inside out.

The priest of the Garden of Morr, an old man dressed in a long black robe of mourning, read words meant to comfort him, “Into thy hands, Oh Morr, we commend thy loyal servant Arminus, our dear brother, may he serve at your side in death as he did in life, steadfast and true. We beseech thee to protect his soul from the devilries of those who would extinguish his light like a candle that has burned out, rather than renew it like the blazing fire that is faith.”

A gust of wind churned through the garden, drowning out the priest’s frail voice.

Moroi helped the sexton lower the coffin into the grave. He bent low against the bitter wind. He told himself that the tears on his cheek were due to the stinging wind even though he knew they weren't. There was no comfort to be had in the ritual. He cast a handful of dirt over the coffin lid and left before the old priest had finished his supposedly soothing words.

He walked slowly back towards the temple. There were no temple guards, which he found curious, even for a small temple. It was uncommon in this uncertain time for the holy houses to be left undefended. To attack one's faith was an almost certain way to undermine a man's courage, and a fearful man died most easily. Moroi shrugged off his momentary unease and opened the door. As he stepped inside, the feeling of nausea was overwhelming.

He walked slowly through the narthex. There was an unnerving quality to the silence.

The old temple was half in shadow, the small windows not generous with the light. It was cold—as cold as it was outside. The chapel was austere. He bowed low to the marble statue of Morr as he passed by into the nave. The god turned a blind eye to his tears. Moroi rose and walked down the central aisle, listening. There was a sense of wrongness about the place. His eyes roved across the tiny chapel. With every step the pain in his skull increased, the blood swelling against the bone.

The air in the temple smelled of snow and something else, something more redolent and utterly out of place—decay.

Halfway between the altar and the door a man stepped out of the shadows. The man was tall and wiry, his thin-lipped face sharp and laced with scars. He moved with a pronounced limp. Moroi's heart skipped a beat as the man moved menacingly towards him. His features were bony, lending an angular quality to his face, and a black leather patch covered one eye. His presence was repulsive.

"No crossbow today, witch hunter?"

Moroi reached for where the crossbow ought to have been—only it wasn't there. It was back in his room. He hadn't wanted to attend the funeral of his friend armed. It had felt wrong, to honour death with the tools of killing so close at hand. So much for respect. Moroi cursed his stupidity as the beast came at him. He should have known the vampire would hunt him out at his weakest moment.

"You're not—"

"Not what?" the man interrupted.

"Not him... you're not the vampire... not the wolf."

"Oh, believe me, witch hunter, I am *all* the vampire you will ever need." A moment later the creature had him by the throat and leaned in close, the sickness of his foetid breath harsh on Moroi's face. The witch hunter struggled desperately to raise his arm, to push the beast away, but the vampire's grip was like iron. He held him close in a parody of a lover's embrace. Moroi kicked and writhed futilely in his grasp.

The beast shook his head, tutting slowly, and hurled Moroi back across the row of pews.

Moroi screamed in agony as he came down hard on the wooden backs of the pews, bones in his spine cracking.

"Oh don't die on me yet, little man. I have such pain to show you. For you I shall make death exquisite suffering. Morr will welcome you with open arms, overwhelmed by your agonies. They will be legendary even amongst the dead." The vampire stepped up close, leaning down to stare at the witch hunter, folded over the back of one of the overturned pews. He tutted again.

The agony was blinding. Moroi couldn't move his hands; they hung lifelessly at his side. He tried to concentrate on moving his fingers but had no control over them. The pain was savage. It blossomed out from the centre of his spine. He couldn't support his head. His back was broken.

The beast hauled Moroi up by the throat, choking him as it lifted him bodily off the floor. "I'm not letting you get away from me that easily."

Moroi couldn't speak. The force of the vampire's grip crushed his windpipe. Blackness swelled up, threatening to overwhelm him, but even as he tried to lose himself the beast denied him, hurling

him again. The witch hunter's head cracked sickeningly as he hit the foot of the stone altar. His vision blurred, failing completely in his left eye. He felt the warm stickiness of blood mat in his hair and spread slowly down his neck.

The last thing he saw was the beast grinning as it toyed with his throat, seconds before ripping it open.

Skellan stumbled towards the great iron-banded temple doors, but collapsed more than ten feet shy of them.

Revulsion tore at his body.

He had kept it at bay by sheer force of will, refusing to show weakness before his quarry. Finding Moroi had been easy; human weakness was the answer. His companion was dead and the witch hunter would inevitably be there for the internment. Now, with the deed done, the power of the holy place took its toll on him.

He forced himself back to his feet, screaming at the agony the defiance took out on his body.

The sanctity of the place tortured his perverted nature. He was sure he couldn't have survived if not for the fact that the Sigmarites had held him hostage in the Grand Cathedral for so long, fostering in him a tolerance for the excruciating agony that came along with his violation of such a holy temple. It inured him to the repellent "holy" places and that it was their doing was delicious irony that appealed to the darker side of Skellan's humour.

He was strong, stronger than he had a right to be, but then his sire had been potent—a rival to Vlad himself. It had been Posner who had risen up when first Vlad fell, not his whelps, Konrad, Fritz, Pieter or Hans. Even Mannfred had hidden himself away. Only Posner had had the strength to dare attempt to fill the vacuum that Vlad von Carstein's "death" had left—or was it greed, lust and all of those other base human emotions that had driven his sire?

Strength was the one thing Skellan admired above all.

A lesser vampire would have lay curled up on the floor of the aisle waiting to be put down by some holy fool with a wooden stake. Not him.

He was strong enough to rise.

Behind him the corpse of the witch hunter hung from chains looped around the timbers of the vaulted ceiling. His corpse was torn open, the white bone of his ribs cracked back and parted like a whalebone corset, his anatomy laid open for all to see.

The witch hunter's heart lay on the altar, and beside it a small pool of blood gathered where it dripped down from the ragged wounds.

He only wished he could have remained long enough to see the aberrant horror on their faces when they discovered the corpse. It was self-indulgent, of course, to want to savour the full extent of his brutality.

He didn't have the time for such idle fancies. Preparations needed to be made. The witch hunter had unwittingly given him something more urgent to worry about. He wasn't the vampire, that's what the fool had said. Skellan had dismissed it in his hunger to dispense pain, but the words returned in the calm after the blood-thirst. If *he* wasn't the vampire that could only mean one thing: the witch hunter had been on the trail of another rough beast. Not, surely, Narcisa or one of her breed...

So who then? Who was here?

And more pressing, what kind of threat did they pose?

He limped out of the temple.

And he knew.

You're not the wolf... But he knew who was.

Oh yes, he knew. The Strigany caravan had burned because it was sheltering the wolf, and that wolf was Jerek. It had to be. That meant Jerek was here, hiding somewhere in this stinking warren

of streets. But what was he doing here? Why Nuln? Why now? Did the old wolf know that he was here? Was he hunting Skellan with some stupidly noble idea about putting him out of his misery? He wouldn't put it past the insufferable buffoon.

Let him try, Skellan thought. Instinctively, his hand strayed to the eye patch, a bloody finger scratching beneath it at the mined flesh. It was a permanent reminder of the score he had to settle with the old wolf.

It would have to wait, for now.

He waited for Mannfred in the shadow of the mausoleum.

It was snowing again. The fat flakes swirled in the air, not thickly enough to hide the door of the manor house or the comings and goings of the dead girls, but enough to deaden the sounds of the world. It was winter; of that there could be no doubt, yet the women showed no signs of being affected by the cold. They walked and whispered and giggled, shawls drawn up to the pale blue blush of their throats. Skellan studied them. They were like birds, flocking, preening, primping and posing, craving the eye. The unnaturalness of their vanity still surprised him. Both dead, both monsters in the eyes of humanity, they lived in different worlds. It was as though death held no dominion for the Lahmians.

He had seen Narcisa twice already tonight. She refused to meet his eye, which pleased him. She knew her place now, recognising him as her superior. She moved coyly, giving him time to watch. He found himself remembering her scent and feel. He would have her, he decided, relishing the prospect. When the time came she would scream out his name. He smiled.

Narcisa had promised that the Eternal would give them an audience, as if she had a choice. He barked a short harsh laugh at the notion of a *woman* daring to laud it over him. *Oh sweet Narcisa you will beg and scream*, he decided, *and I will grow drunk on it*. He would have her on her knees pleading for mercy as he very slowly and very deliberately hurt her. He found himself imagining it, the images so real in his head that they could have been hallucinations.

He watched the peculiar dance of the snowflakes, the twist of light and shadow. He held out his hand, catching flakes. They didn't melt, so cold was his skin.

He turned, imagining he heard something behind him, a careless footfall crushing the fresh snow. He was alone in the ever-whitening graveyard, the flakes settling around him. He didn't feel the cold. His blood was far colder.

The solitary depression of a footstep in the otherwise virgin white didn't go unnoticed.

He wasn't alone.

He didn't move.

He listened, searching for the slightest sound out of place. The fine hairs on the nape of his neck prickled, as did those on his forearms.

Skellan had used Mannfred's strige, that vile undead creature that looked, in truth, like nothing more noisome than a cadaverous plucked chicken, to tell his master of the labyrinthine tunnels beneath the city, and the jetty hidden within the walls of the riverbank. He had suggested discretion. The Vampire Count had agreed it made sense to avoid the city proper. Only a fool revealed his hand so early in the game. He would enter the city from below, and move through it out of the sight of prying eyes, negotiating the old tunnels.

Skellan expected him to emerge from the mausoleum. The old tomb was almost certainly connected to the subterranean walkways.

He turned in a full circle, until he had *almost* succeeded in convincing himself he was alone.

He waited for the watcher to reveal himself. He studied the yellow of the lamps as they flickered in the windows of the manor house and the comings and goings of the elegant Lahmians. It was all he could do to remain hidden. Their carefree sashaying as they walked, arms linked, down the long gravel drive infuriated him. They knew he was there. They looked his way with a casual toss of the

head. The shadows masked their true expressions, but he knew they were sneering. Over the next few hours he would turn their comfortable little world on its head and strip them of their smugness. Then he would sneer at them.

“They are exquisite corpses, are they not?”

The sound of Mannfred’s voice startled him even though he had known all along that the Vampire Count was close by.

“I’ve tasted better,” Skellan said, even as he said it remembering the richness of Narcisa’s tainted blood as it trickled down his throat. It was a lie, he hadn’t.

“Somehow I doubt it,” Mannfred said, as though reading his mind.

Skellan turned to face his master, but found he was looking at shadows and the bare expanse of the white stone of the mausoleum wall. It took a moment to discern the vague blur around one of the carved columns where the air seemed agitated. He looked down and saw the lone footprint and looked back up studying the peculiar blur of the air intently. The more stubbornly he stared at the curiosity the more substantial the shape hidden within it became. Even knowing what was causing the peculiar displacement of the air it was difficult to focus on the blur for any sustained length of time, made more so by Skellan’s monocular vision.

Finally, the Vampire Count drew back his hood and emerged from the shadows. His expression was sardonic. He knelt, dusting his hands in the grave dirt, a curious mark of respect for the interred and rose again. “Shall we?” He set off without waiting for Skellan’s response, flinty chips of gravel crunching under his boots.

Skellan hurried after him.

A fair-haired beauty turned, shying away from them as they approached. Mannfred sketched an easy bow. Skellan ignored the woman. He caught up with the Vampire Count as he knocked twice with the huge snake-headed knocker on the iron-banded door. The door opened before the cries of the metal had fully faded. For a moment Skellan thought it was Narcisa who stood in the doorway, but he quickly realised it wasn’t her. The differences were subtle, cheekbones more aquiline, eyes ever so slightly more almond-shaped, lips fuller. She stepped aside to allow them to enter. She wore a silk ball gown of emerald green that clung perfectly to her body, accentuating every curve.

Skellan moved deliberately close to the Lahmian, causing her to back up another step.

The inside of the manor house was another world entirely. He wasn’t sure what he had expected from the brief glimpses he had managed, but on the evidence of the foyer alone this wasn’t it. Heavy velvet drapes the rich red of blood were cinched in place by golden snake heads. The serpentine emblem was repeated everywhere, in the gilding of the picture frames, in the weave of the carpet beneath their feet, in the metal casing of the crystal chandelier, coiled around the table lamps and the bole of the hat stand, and even carved into the door jambs. The foyer was dominated by a huge double-sided marble staircase. Its wrought black iron banisters were fashioned as rearing cobras. The jewelled eyes of dozens of snakes studied them, and amid the statues and carvings Skellan saw movement, the sinuous ripple of a living serpent. It came across the carpet, forked tongue flashing out. The woman knelt, holding out her arm for the serpent to coil itself around.

Stroking the reptile she bade them follow, and instead of climbing the stairs, led them through a narrow twisting corridor to a glass ceilinged arboretum filled with lush, green life. She ushered them towards a bench in the centre of the vast chamber. She raised her hand to an overhanging branch and whispered something, causing the snake to slither off her outstretched arm and curl itself around the branch. Skellan saw at least fifteen various species of snake draped on branches and more curled up at the bases of the exotic trees. He had no desire to wake any of them.

“The Eternal bids you wait a moment with her children while she readies herself for your visit.”

She turned to leave.

“Stay with us,” Mannfred said, touching her arm.

She glanced down at the hand resting on her arm and nodded, “As you wish.”

“Good, good. Now, tell me a little about your mistress. A good guest should always know something about his host.”

The girl smiled faintly. “It is not my place.”

“Don’t be coy, girl, it doesn’t suit you,” Skellan said, moving to stand a single step behind her and leaning in so that she would feel his breath on her skin.

“Very well,” the Lahmian said, stiffening visibly as Skellan laid his hand softly on the nape of her neck, fingers brushing her throat almost tenderly, almost.

A white mouse scurried across the stone floor. A viper fell from a branch directly above it and had swallowed the creature whole in the time it took to blink. Skellan watched the snake’s body distort as it digested the mouse. Satisfied, the snake slithered away into the shade.

“The Eternal is the oldest of our kind in these parts, and as such is our queen. She is as wise as she is beautiful. As—”

“On second thoughts, silence is a virtue,” Mannfred said, somewhat dismissively cutting across her. He ought to have noticed the signs. The woman was under some kind of thrall. He had no interest in hearing whatever lip service she had been programmed to puppet. Anger flared in the woman’s eyes but it never reached her lips. She curtsied, turned on her long stiletto heel, and walked back into the main body of the house, her skirts swishing around her as she went.

The Eternal made them wait.

Skellan knew he was not patient, but Mannfred seemed prepared to wait all eternity for the woman to dignify them with her presence. He walked around the stone dais that marked the centre of the arboretum, touching the leaves, feeling the varying consistencies. He pushed back a branch to reveal a huge elaborately carved stone head. It was an impish thing with a bulbous nose and cherubic cheeks, and a row of razor-sharp fangs. It was a quite repulsive little monstrosity. Mannfred let the branch fall back across the stone facing, hiding it once more. He moved three more steps and knelt. Skellan saw him pluck up the only red flower, a beautiful orchid with a yellow stamen. He plucked the petals away from the stem one at a time, denuding it slowly. He scattered the petals at his feet and then walked over them.

Skellan sat down on the bench content to let Mannfred explore. There was little in the curious indoor garden that interested him. He leaned back, allowing his head to tilt back so that he could see the ceiling. It was glass and metal, domed with huge windows allowing the moonlight in yet keeping the cold of winter out. The heat from the arboretum kept the snow from settling on the glass. It was a breathtaking construction. Ultimately, Skellan didn’t care what they did with their glass and steel and stone. It was all the same ephemera of life that slipped through time’s fingers like grains of sand.

He dosed his eyes, thoroughly bored.

He would find a way of making the arrogant bitch pay for the insult. He imagined, for a delicious moment, walking through the Eternal’s house, claiming her followers one by one, stripping them just as painstakingly as Mannfred had the orchid, and just as lethally. Instead of those gossamer fine petals he’d peel away tendon and muscle from bone, transmogrifying them into blood red roses of flesh. He licked his lips. He could taste their fear. It was intoxicating.

A rattle-tailed serpent brushed up against his foot. He watched it. For a moment it seemed as though the cold-blooded reptile had no interest in him, but then it reared back, fangs bared to strike. Before the snake could sink its teeth into him Skellan snatched it up. The creature hissed and squawked as he forced its jaws further apart until the bones started to crack and the skin split as he tore the snake in two savagely. He threw the remains at another reptile hoping to start a feeding frenzy with the blood.

He looked down at his hands. They, half of his arms and the left side of his shirt were covered in blood. He lifted his fingers to his lips and tasted it. The reptile’s blood had a peculiar tang to it. It was less iron-rich than its human counterpart, earthier.

The woman reappeared a moment later. She had changed. Instead of her silk dress she now wore a simpler shift of raw cotton. As with everything else in the manor it bore a serpent's crest. She looked, if anything, more doll-like and beautiful in the sackcloth, as if the richness of her dress had somehow detracted from her essential beauty. Free, now, she radiated poise and allure in equal measure. She inclined her neck, studying the blood on his hands. A smile flirted with her lips as she said, "The mistress will see you now."

Skellan stood, staring at her. All that time, and for what? A damned change of *clothing*? He struggled to remain calm, barely managing to bottle his anger. His lip curled into a snarl.

She pointedly ignored him.

"Do you think it was wise to bathe yourself in the blood of one of the woman's pets?" Mannfred asked.

"No, but it was satisfying."

"It will certainly give our host pause for thought, I'll grant you that."

They followed the woman out of the arboretum, but not the way they had come. She led them between dragging branches that scratched and snagged at their clothes and hair, behind the great stone head, to an opening concealed in the back of it. Fourteen steps led down. They descended slowly into darkness. At the bottom the woman struck a light and lit a taper. She pulled a reed-wrapped torch out of a black iron sconce and plunged into the darkness, leading them down, down, deeper and still down.

Their footsteps echoed in the cramped confines of the tunnels. The passageways were incredibly claustrophobic. The sheer weight of the earth pressed down on all sides threatening to transform the warren of tunnels into a barrow. Skellan touched the walls. They were cold, sheened with a fine coat of mucoid slime. His fingers came away slick and sticky. The temperature dropped steadily without falling below a pleasing chill.

Still they descended, the woman leading the way.

The quality of sound changed; the pressure of the earth above dampening it. Their footsteps became leaden. Water dripped tantalisingly somewhere away in the darkness beyond the edge of the torch's glare.

Skellan had a bad feeling about this latest turn of events. He didn't trust the woman, or any of her kind. He had observed them well enough to know that they were devious creatures capable of almost any treachery. He slowed, walking in the furthest part of his shadow. He watched her back, watched the arch of her spine, her musculature for some sense of tension, and beyond her watched the flicker and dance of the flame's caress as it turned the oppressively dark, dank passage into a place of light. The light, if anything, was less reassuring than the dancing shadows. He was at home in the shadows; they were his natural habitat. He was a hunter. He relied upon stealth. The light lied. It pretended to reveal all of its secrets, expose its dark places, but it never did, not fully.

The tunnel widened into a spectacularly gaudy antechamber painted in splashes of bright colour, greens and reds and foiled with gold. The room was dominated by two huge urns that stood either side of a door. Shadows clung stubbornly to the door, making the embossed relief figure of a jackal-headed man stand out in stark relief. The jackal man held a staff that appeared to be in the process of transforming into a snake. There was an iron ring in the creature's mouth. The Lahmian walked up to the door, grasped the ring and knocked three times, slowly, deliberately and loudly.

Beyond the door a woman's voice uttered a single word, "Come."

Their escort opened the door and stepped aside to allow them to enter the nave of a vast subterranean temple, although whatever gods it venerated, they were none that Jon Skellan was familiar with. The one they called the Eternal sat on a mighty snakeskin throne where in any other temple the altar would have stood.

She was not beautiful by any stretch of the imagination.

She was old and haggard, her skin so deeply lined that it was impossible to make out her eyes from the shadows they conjured. She wore a simple black shift and a tiara of gold and copper

hammered into a perfect circle. The serpent's head consumed its tail. The blood-rich rubies of the tiara's eyes glittered in the torchlight.

"It has been a long time, Kalada," Mannfred said, dropping smoothly to one knee. "I would say you haven't changed but I would be lying. The years have ceased being kind to you."

The Lahmian smiled. On her it was anything but a pleasant expression. "Flattery will get you nowhere, von Carstein. What gives you the right to enter my home?"

"You know her?" Skellan asked, still trying to take in the immensity of the subterranean temple with its unfamiliar fetishes and statues to gods he didn't recognise: figures with reptilian heads, huge distended jaws and jagged teeth, figures with avian features, owls and contemptuous birds, and others with the feral lines of cats and dogs. They were all painted with archaic symbols Skellan did not understand. He wasn't particularly fond of feeling like a simpleton. It rankled, like so much of the pomp and circumstance of the whole charade.

"From another life, one that was not kind to her," Mannfred turned his attention back to the woman on the throne. "I had thought you dead, Kalada."

"Death is no great mystery to us, is it, my dear? No, on the contrary, death is familiar, comfortable."

"Indeed. Circumstance has made you wise, I see."

"No, Mannfred. It was age that did that. Circumstance made me vengeful. Give me a reason, Mannfred, a single reason why I should not unleash a thousand agonies upon you and your manservant as retribution for violating my home, one reason."

Skellan bristled, ready to fight if the witch was intent on forcing their hand. It would be on his terms, not hers. He tensed, cracking the bones in his neck as he turned first left, then right. He breathed deeply, drawing upon the beast within, summoning it. His face contorted, the scar tissue of his cheeks tearing and changing as he growled.

Mannfred laid a hand on him, stilling him. "It is not time for brute force, my friend. There are other answers at our disposal." He turned to the woman, Kalada, the Eternal as she had mockingly dubbed herself. He held out his hand to her. She saw it immediately, the plain band amid the more elaborate rings. Her eyes widened. She looked up at his face as though seeing him properly for the first time. She held out her hand to him. He took it and raised it to his lips. She in turn took his and duplicated the kiss. Something had happened between the pair, but Skellan was baffled as to what exactly it was that had transpired.

"What do you want of me and mine?" The Lahmian asked bluntly.

"I would call on the old bonds, Kalada. I would, for a short while at least, offer truce between my blood and yours."

"Why do you think I, or my queen, would countenance such a thing?" Skellan could tell she was genuinely curious.

"To cause strife among the living."

"Again, why do you think we would seek such a thing? We are well situated here. We have influence, power: true power. We don't have to skulk in the shadows and hope the masters of this other world don't come looking to slay us. They crave our company. They dote on us. We are a status symbol, something to be associated with not shied away from. We have the ears and hearts of the aristocracy, the artists and artisans. We are the true rulers of the world above us, or at least this part of it. So why oh why would we want to meddle with what so obviously suits our purpose? We are not the fools who would kill the goose that lays our golden eggs. To put it simplistically for you, we like this city—our city—just the way it is."

"Think beyond a few streets woman. Imagine grand designs of power. Dare to dream what is possible."

"You make the mistake of assuming we want or need more than what we have, von Carstein. It was ever thus. You and your kind seek to impose your greed for glory and lust for power onto the rest of us, turning us into something you can understand."

“Not so.”

“Oh but it is, it is, painfully so.”

Something stirred in the darkness, deeper in the belly of the temple. Skellan spun around, fangs bared, ready to launch himself. He was jumping at shadows. There was nothing there.

And yet...

And yet he could smell something, something he couldn't see. Skellan's lips curled in a threatening snarl, a low growl percolating in his throat.

“Down boy,” the Eternal said, derisively. “Rein your beast in, Mannfred. I'll have no blood spilt in my home.”

“A little late for that,” Skellan said, grinning spitefully. “One of your little reptiles had an accident.”

“At ease, Skellan, we are guests here.”

“For now,” Skellan rumbled. He didn't trust the woman. Anyone who adopted a snake for a fetish was inherently conniving and mistrustful. She would reveal her hand eventually, and when she did he would bite it, tasting her old withered blood.

“We have a bond, Kalada, you and I, my people and yours. There are old ties between our bloodlines. Was Vashanesh not husband of Neferata? Did he not sup of the elixir at her side, sharing blood with your queen? Those ties, no matter how much we might profess otherwise in our anger and arrogance, cannot be broken. They are the ties that bind. They are the threads that make us who we are. It has always been so.”

“That was a long time ago,” the Eternal conceded grudgingly. “It is irrelevant now.”

“Not so. As ruler of my people I am, to put it rather simply, heir to the great one himself, and as such would invoke those old bonds, Kalada. I would have you and your people at my side, equals in the new Kingdom of the Dead.”

“Why?”

“You said it yourself. You can go places we cannot. Where we are forced to hide from humanity, you seduce it. Together we would pose a threat far greater than we do alone. Imagine. We would be irresistible, mighty. Join us, Kalada. Undermine the cursed Empire from within while we muster the dead and attack from without.”

“You assume again that we dream of conquest. What you offer is hypothetical. Your sire and your mad brother both failed, why should we believe that you are capable of anything other than the same miserable failure? You talk of dominion but offer no proof of your might, no proof that you are capable of matching your words with actual power. What we have now is concrete. You ask us to risk what we have, throw in our lot with a bloodline of failures, on the promise that you are different? Somehow more than your sire? More than your mad brother?”

“What would you have me do to prove myself, Kalada?”

“Show me your might. Show me your armies. Show me what makes you more than your kindred, von Carstein. Show me you have what it takes to back up your pretty words with actions. Show me you are more than just another failure. Then, and only then, I will consider your plea. Now leave me. Seeing you once more has not been a pleasant experience. Some corpses are best left dead.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

A World of Victims and Executioners

Obelheim, Talabecland

Ackim Brandt was true to his word. They had been treated well by the Obelheimers, though well was a relative term. They were prisoners of an opposing army. They were not the honoured guests of some sultan in a far-flung corner of Araby. They weren't beaten. They were fed and although the gruel was far from nutritious, the lumps of potato and occasional chunk of rancid pork and strips of gristle kept them alive.

That was what it was all about, keeping them alive.

Ackim Brandt was no fool. Living they had at least some basic economic value to the victors. They could be used to barter for concessions and the return of their own people from the Stirlanders. Martin, in turn, would be feeding the Talabeclanders he held captive. Anything else would have been inhuman. Both Brandt and Kristallbach understood the basic folly of war: that there was no more stupid a notion than the one that claims a man has the right to kill another simply because he lives on the other side of a river and their rulers have a quarrel. The men have no quarrel with each other, and yet they are supposed to do the dying.

Vorster Schlagener huddled up against the stockade wall, rough logs digging uncomfortably into his back. The weather had turned, finally. It was bitterly cold. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt warm. They each had a blanket, but the wind cut through them, rendering them useless. The others moaned. They were soldiers, it was what they did. If they weren't complaining they were most likely dead. He barked out a short bitter laugh at that.

Meinard stood guard with two other men, Jasper and Brannon, although they hardly "guarded" anymore. Tonight, as last night and the night before, the hours were being passed in a game of chance.

Meinard stank almost as badly as the men he tended.

It was no surprise.

When he wasn't playing gaoler he was tending the pigs, mulching the swill and mucking out the slop. Vorster could see the similarity in Meinard's dual responsibilities—they were all animals, after all.

The other two weren't much sweeter.

The guards were a lot friendlier towards him than he would have been in their place, but none of them were prepared to talk about the conflict. He had no news of home and no idea how the war was being played out. They could have been days away from rescue or hours from damnation and none of them knew either way. The world had stopped for them after Ignatz's bloody stupid charge.

Soldiers loved to talk, though, so they found other things to moan about. Days and weeks of captivity locked up in a rat infested, pigswill reeking pen gave them precious little else to do. During all that time Meinard had never come across as much of a liar. Vorster had slowly and carefully drawn him and his replacements, when they came to relieve him, into a conversation that went beyond the pillow virtues of women, the various flavours and tastes of beers brewed traditionally in oak vats in different regions and things of equally minor consequence. Still, even when they had

formed something approaching friendship, mere was no talk of the war or the bravura of comrades-in-arms marching out to face the world as he would have expected.

Brandt was a little more forthcoming about the things that really mattered. He visited Vorster after sundown on three consecutive nights, pulling him out of the stockade to question him about the Stirland command and what he knew of Martin von Kristallbach's plans. Brandt was no simpleton. He knew that Vorster was little more than a foot soldier, but he had taken a special interest in him. He had heard of the existence of tunnels within the mountains, some that might even stretch below the plains, though how far and how extensive they might be he had no clue. He was, he explained at great length one evening, acutely aware of the possibility of one or more of those tunnels being dwarfish in origin and going through the earth from the Worlds Edge Mountains, beneath cities like Eichenbrunn, Leicheberg, Langwald and perhaps beyond like some great subterranean road winding beneath the Empire leading who knew where. Halstedt? Julbach? Schollach? Kircham? Blutdorf? Ramsau? Further afield into Averland? Reikland?

It wasn't, Ackim Brandt assured Vorster, a major concern. The way in which he said it gave the lie to his words. It was a problem. It was precisely the sort of problem that would drive the soldier to distraction trying to puzzle through it. Brandt didn't like the fact that these supposed underground roads existed. They were unknown variables that impacted upon his carefully thought out strategies. Worrying about them drove Brandt to distraction. Did Martin know of these tunnels? Indeed, were there any tunnels at all or was it all just smoke and mirrors to distract the Talabeclanders?

It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that Martin was to blame for the disinformation, if it was disinformation. The man was nothing if not shrewd. He would have been well aware of the uncertainty such a rumour would spread in the enemy camps. No one wanted to fight an enemy he couldn't see. No one wanted to chase his own shadow across the battlefields. No one wanted to fight against an army of what might as well have been ghosts, able to disappear out of sight, beneath the ground, at will.

Vorster understood that these evenings together were intended to give him a unique insight into the mind of the enemy, but perhaps the most startling revelation of all had been how utterly normal Brandt's men, and Brandt himself for that matter, were. It was difficult to cast aside prejudices, but if he were to be truthful, Brandt was not so different from Vorster. They might have been cut from the same cloth.

Vorster was impressed with how Brandt looked out for the good of his men.

Vorster had been a soldier for a long time. He had served with good men, great men and fools. He had seen those good, great, and foolish men forced into making some tough decisions. They seldom flinched from those unsavoury choices and neither, he was sure, would Brandt if it meant the difference between one life or many.

In that way Vorster's captivity was an eye-opener.

Every day it became a little more difficult to think of them as the faceless enemy so full of evil, child killers and murderous swine, because every day he grew a little more familiar with their faces and their dreams, heard talk of their families and realised that in another time he would have been proud to call Meinard, Jasper and Brannon friends, and wouldn't have hesitated to serve in a battalion led by Brandt.

Does that make me a traitor, he wondered, and not for the first time? It didn't help matters knowing full well that he was their prisoner, alive still only because of Brandt's whim. The man had admired his courage in the face of stupidity. For that he had given him, and the others, their lives.

He couldn't decide if it was natural that he should feel some kind of bond being forged between him and his captors or if it was another layer of deceit in the enemy's game?

Their chosen games were knucklebones and five card blind, not that he had anything to lose. Jasper assured him they were happy to take his marker because, given the circumstances, it was the least they could do. Vorster lost a lot of money that he didn't have in the hope of loosening a tongue or two, but it was useless.

Jasper studied the five dog-eared cards in his hand and tossed a coin onto the makeshift table. "I'll take one blind," he said, laying the fifth card face down.

Brannon dealt Jasper a fresh card and turned to Meinard, "In or out, big man?"

"In," Meinard grinned, dropping his own coin onto the tabletop. "I'll take two, one for each eye." He discarded two of his cards.

Brannon turned to Vorster. "How about you? You want to gamble your life away on the turn of a card?"

Vorster smiled. "With sweet talk like that how could I resist? Give me two." Vorster took the cards and arranged them in to the familiar pattern of the Blind Man's Curse, a good hand. Not the best, but probably better than anything anyone else at the table was holding.

"So ladies, let's be seeing you, shall we?" Brannon laid his own pattern on the table with a cock-eyed grin. Beggar's Bluff, not worth the paper the cards were painted on.

"Not your day, is it sunshine?" Jasper remarked, arranging his own pattern on the table, the Penitent Vagabond. A fair hand and on another day it might have walked away with the pot, but not today. Jasper licked his lips nervously as he watched Meinard place his own cards down, the Blood of the Gypsies. No wonder Meinard was smiling. The Blood of the Gypsies was a very good hand. There was only one problem; to make the pattern he needed the Gypsy Child card, which was part of the Blind Man's Curse pattern. Meinard, Vorster realised, was cheating. He wondered how the man was doing it, but then thought of the unusual dexterity that Meinard had with ropes and assumed it was down to some form of palming. The others were looking at him expectantly.

"Ah... I think we are about to witness a miracle my friends," he said with a smile and laid his five cards down, one after the other, resting the Gypsy Child on the top of the pile and holding a finger over it.

"Why you no good son of a bitch," Jasper muttered, but he wasn't looking at Vorster, his eyes were firmly fixed on Meinard.

Meinard grinned and shrugged.

Brannon reached across the small table and grabbed Meinard by the wrists, triggering whatever mechanism Meinard had secreted up his sleeve and sending the hidden cards scudding across the table.

"I want my money back."

"Of course, of course," Meinard said placatingly, still pinned by Brannon. "It wasn't as if I was going to keep it."

"Of course you weren't," Jasper agreed amicably.

Vorster felt it first, the earth shivering beneath his feet. It was subtle but unmistakable. He stopped listening to the accusations and placed his hand flat against the dirt floor. The tremors were steady, rhythmical—marching feet. "Shut up," he hissed, dropping to his knees and pressing his ear to the ground. The others fell silent. Vorster listened. They were still a long way off, a league or more at least, but it was as though the very earth itself were protesting at their passing.

"Oh, Sweet Shallya, Mother of Mercy," Meinard said, his face grown suddenly pale.

"How far?" Brannon asked curtly. He had already begun packing the cards and the makeshift table away.

"Not far enough," Jasper answered for him.

They weren't the only ones who had heeded the signs. War was coming closer. Outside the tent the commotion mounted, and the horses whinnied and fought against their handlers as a palpable air of fear descended on the camp. The tent flaps were drawn aside and Brandt stepped through the gap. Instead of his usual implacable calm he wore a harried expression.

"Good news, boys," Ackim Brandt said. "Word's come from Martin. An exchange has been agreed. You're going home."

Vorster studied the man's face, looking for the lie. He had come to know Ackim Brandt well during their months of captivity.

"Up," he said. "Come on," he gestured for Vorster to stand. "Come with me, there is something you need to see. You three, escort our reckless hero." Brandt was breathing hard, Vorster realised. He was afraid. It was obvious. Martin had brought Stirland to their door. He had good reason to be afraid. Vorster got to his feet. Brandt turned and left. Jasper nodded for Vorster to do likewise.

Outside, the air had a real bite to it. He sucked it down in great mouthfuls, having not tasted fresh air for days. The camp was a hive of activity, soldiers moving purposefully about their business dousing campfires and ordering their possessions as though they expected the order to move out at any moment. Vorster looked up towards the many peaks of the Farlie Hills. Freedom was close enough for him to taste it.

"Thank you," he said to Brandt.

"Don't thank me soldier. You proved yourself more than merely a worthy adversary. Indeed, after that irrational charge your damned idiot of a leader Ignatz decided upon, you handled yourself well enough for me to wish you were one of my men. I do not say that lightly. In another time I like to think we could have..." He didn't finish the thought. "For all that though, the reality is that you were lucky. If it weren't for the fact that the day after that debacle Oskar Zenzi captured Jakob Schram you would all be dead by now." He paused, as though expecting Vorster to interrupt, question him. Vorster remained silent. "Schram is a runt of a man, for sure, but he is a well-connected runt of a man none the less, a distant relation of Ottilia herself, I believe. Your man has agreed to a trade, all of your lives for this one aristocratic buffoon. It speaks well of Kristallbach that he was determined to see you all returned. Indeed, it is the mark of the man that he values his men-at-arms as highly as another ruler values her family, no?"

Someone shoved him in the back and he stumbled forwards, following Brandt as he wove a path through the industrious soldiers until they came to a small rise on the outskirts of the encampment. They looked down across a much wider valley and a vast spreading plain below. Huge dust clouds churned up the horizon. The darkness was advancing, bringing on a premature night as the men of Stirland marched. Vorster's breath caught in his throat as the sheer magnitude of the force registered. It must have been four thousand men... more.

"They wrote in the old days that it was sweet and fitting to die for one's country," Ackim Brandt said, looking at the men he would have to fight all too soon. They understood nothing, did they? There is nothing sweet or fitting in your dying. In war, good men die like dogs for no good reason. Come, let's get you and your men home shall we?"

The exchange took place less than a quarter of a mile from Ignatz's Folly. That was how the survivors had come to think of the arrowhead tip of Ramius Point ridge.

They were going home, or rather returning to the front line with Stirland to fight anew so that more of them could die on the right side of the river.

None of them had dared dream of any sort of homecoming during their days of captivity. To dream of home was just another torment. It weakened the soul. It ate away at their strength more completely than hunger or fear ever could. They had no need of fresh agonies. But now, together, walking towards the ridgeline of Ramius Point they could begin to hope. They were going home.

Vorster led the survivors. They held their heads up high, walking towards Martin's army. They had not broken. They had not died. They were survivors. During their months within Brandt's camp the ghosts of battle had taunted them. Cannon fire, the cries of the horses, the screams of the men and ringing steel had been keeping them from sleeping and driving them beyond the point of exhaustion.

Now they were free. Well, almost. They were out of the godforsaken stockade and were going home, sixty of them, bound hand and foot, shuffling along in a winding column. It was a long walk, but Vorster welcomed the clear sky over his head and the wind in his hair. He swore he would never

complain about being stuck outside in the middle of nowhere again, knowing even as he made the vow that he would break it. He was a soldier. Complaining about the elements was his lot in life. The day he stopped complaining about the blasted snow or the blessed rain was the day he died. He looked at the rest of his men and smiled. He thought of them as his men now. They had made it.

Ackim Brant raised a hand, holding the line.

Across the field, Martin von Kristallbach walked forwards breaking the line of men, a trio of war hounds loping by his side. The man moved with the surety of a warrior not a woodsman. So changed was Martin by the conflict that Vorster would not have recognised him. He knew the look on his face. The man was haunted by daemons.

“But then who isn’t?” Vorster asked himself.

“Soldier?” Brandt queried.

“Just thinking aloud.”

Together they walked across the snow-covered field and met the man halfway. Vorster studied his liege as he approached. His hair and beard had grown almost wild. They lent him a terrifying aspect. He moved with the authority of someone used to being respected. With three war hounds running at his side, Vorster wasn’t surprised. The sight of the animals loping easily at his heels was enough to strike terror into the heart of even the stoutest soul. He was a born leader.

“Are you the Otilia’s man?” Martin asked, looking Brandt up and down.

“Aye, I am. You?” Brandt held out his hand for the man to take.

“Martin von Kristallbach.”

Brandt started visibly at the mention of the name but didn’t withdraw his hand. Kristallbach smiled slowly as they shook. Kristallbach wasn’t a man to let his lackeys do the unpleasanties while he hid in the command tent.

“So you know me?” Martin asked. “Well, my new found friend, shall we be about our business? We have Schram here, and I see a few familiar faces. I thank you for looking after my people.”

One man in return for sixty marked this Schram as important, Vorster realised. But then Dietrich Jaeger was important to someone.

“I would that the situation was different,” Brandt said, surprising Vorster with his candour.

“No one ever claimed there was a good war, soldier, nor that there was a bad peace.”

“Indeed,” Ackim Brandt agreed. “We shall grant you twenty-four hours with which to make your passage out of our lands, after that, we must begin the dance all over again.”

“Twenty-four hours is generous,” Martin said. He reached down absent-mindedly scratching one of the dogs hunkering at his feet. “Though I suspect not enough for these men, no matter how fair your treatment of them has been. I cannot put them through the march.”

Brandt craned his neck to look at the ragtag bunch of men he had escorted to the exchange. Vorster followed suit. Martin was right; they were in no shape for an extended march. He understood why Martin had brought the full force of his army down onto this foreign field. He was prepared to fight for the sixty-something men.

Brandt mulled the dilemma over for a moment and then nodded, satisfied. “Seventy-two hours, then we come after you. That should give you long enough to cross the river.” Vorster understood the reference; Brandt was giving them a chance to go home. He had no quarrel with these men, any of them. He was merely a man living on this side of the river doing his ruler’s bidding, and for a few hours at least, there would be no conflict between them.

Martin held out his hand. “You’re a good man, Ackim Brandt. If the Otilia ever tires of you I want you to know there is a place for you in Stirland.”

Brandt took Martin’s hand and shook it, once, firmly. “At the business end of someone’s sword, no doubt,” Brandt chuckled. He gestured to one of the guards who had accompanied him to loosen the prisoners chains, and it was over, as simply as that. The prisoners walked across the snow-covered field. They were greeted with huge grins, and hugs and slaps from comrades they thought

they would never see again. The mood was buoyant. It was a good moment. For that little while at least they could forget about the fact that tomorrow or the next day or the next they would be fighting again and the day after that some of them would be lying face down in the mud, food for crows. There were precious few good days in war.

One man came back the other way. The difference in his demeanour was remarkable. He looked like a whelp that had been whipped one too many times. He was broken. His hair ran wild and his beard was scraggy and untamed. He shuffled, Vorster realised. He didn't walk. His head was down, the fire in his eyes out. Jakob Schram hadn't enjoyed his captivity. Brandt's men seemed none too happy to see the young aristocrat returned to their ranks either. Schram was obviously their Dietrich Jaeger.

Speaking of Jaeger, Vorster saw the arrogant son of a bitch loitering behind Martin's back, close enough to bask in the Elector Count's aura and pretend familiarity. Vorster hawked and spat. The man made his skin crawl.

He waited until the last man had crossed over to the other side before he gripped forearms with the man who was his enemy, the man who had somehow become—if not his friend—someone he admired, liked even.

"Go with Sigmar, my friend," Brandt said.

Vorster nodded. He inclined his head to Meinard and the others in silent farewell, and turned back to Ackim Brandt.

"You know if you ever do decide to take him up on that offer I am expecting you to put in a request for Vorster Schlagener to be seconded to your regiment. I'd walk to the ends of the earth for a leader like you, my friend."

Brandt smiled. It was the most natural of gestures on his open face. "If I ever do find myself on the other side of the river I can't think of a soldier I would rather have at my side. Now go before I change my mind and keep you here. I have a feeling we're going to need a few more men like you if we want to whip that man of yours."

Vorster chuckled. "Ah neighbour, if only that were so."

"Isn't that always the way of things?" Ackim Brandt said, his gaze drifting towards Jakob Schram's back.

Vorster tried to bite his tongue, he really did, but face to face with that dimwit Jaeger there was nothing he could do. His anger had been simmering from the moment he'd seen Jaeger skulking behind Martin's shoulder. Half a minute in the man's company and it got the better of him. One look at Jaeger's smug expression was enough. The fop had the gall to expect thanks for saving them. His skull was so thick that the cost of his own actions hadn't penetrated the bone. He wilfully refused to understand that his arrogant stupidity had condemned hundreds of good men to needless deaths. Instead he chose to stand before the survivors and play the role of benefactor, the caring father with arms wide open to welcome the prodigal sons home.

Vorster wanted to smack him in the face and wipe that damned stupid grin off his fat lips.

The words just spilled out of his mouth.

"You!" Vorster bellowed, grabbing a horrified Dietrich Jaeger by the lapels and hauling him up so the fool's spluttering face was only inches from his own. "You sanctimonious son of a bitch! How *dare* you stand there like some bloody hero lording it over your minions! Do you have *any* idea what you did? Do you?" Spittle frothed at Vorster's mouth. He threw the officer backwards. Jaeger staggered and stumbled trying to keep his feet. Vorster slammed an open palm into his chest and sent him sprawling to the dirt. He stood over the man. "Did you stay long enough to watch your own men die? Did you? No, of course you didn't. You went back to your bloody pavilion for a nice goblet of mulled bloody wine, didn't you? Sigmar's balls, you disgust me, Jaeger. You're less than human. You're a fool and that wouldn't be so bad if you weren't so damned smug about your own stupidity. That man there," he turned to thrust an accusing finger at Ackim Brandt's retreating back,

“is a hundred times the man you are. He cares more about his prisoners than you do about your own men!”

“How... how... you... How dare you?” Jaeger gabbled incoherently, enraged.

“I dare because I watched friends split open by axes. I dare because I lay amid their corpses as the birds plucked at their eyes! I dare because *you* were too bloody stupid to know your arse from your elbow and sent me to die! You sent us running across their guns. It was suicide and you were too goddamned dense to realise it!”

“I’ll have your head!” Jaeger thundered, pushing himself up onto his elbows, his face purple as though he were in the grip of an apoplectic fit. “How dare you, you ungrateful whoreson? I’ll have satisfaction for your insults’

“Are you truly *that* stupid?” Vorster shook his head. “Of course you are. Very well.” Vorster reached instinctively for the sword that on any other day would have been at his hip.

“Oh no, you oaf,” Jaeger said, on his knees. “You’ll do this right. You’ll face me man to man. I will have satisfaction or an apology.”

He teased off his dirt-smeared glove and threw it in Vorster Schlagener’s face.

Vorster stared at it in disbelief. The glove lay in the mud. He stepped on it, grinding it under his foot. “You outrank me, *sir*. You are petty aristocracy and I am a non-commissioned officer. There’s no good reason for a duel.”

“There’s every damned good reason you egotistical pup. You need a lesson in manners and I am just the man to teach you.”

“In which case I shall very much enjoy killing you.”

Vorster half-expected someone to get between them and call an end to the nonsense, but no one interceded. Vultures gathered around to watch though. The spectacle was compelling.

Oskar Zenzi held out a hand to Jaeger, helping him to rise. “I will stand as your second, Dietrich. Who will stand as this blowhard’s man?” Zenzi turned around. “Anyone?”

“I will.”

The crowds parted to reveal Ackim Brandt standing in the middle of them. The commotion had obviously drawn his curiosity. Vorster started visibly. He had thought the enemy soldier had returned to the safety of his own ranks, as any wise man would have. To see him, coming through the press of people to support him was a sign of friendship beyond anything he could have imagined. It showed, more than anything, that they were all men divided by an enemy of their own making where not so long ago they had stood side-by-side against a common threat. Still, in this new political climate it was unusual to say the least.

He wasn’t alone. Meinard and the other guards had remained with him, or returned.

The sight of Brandt reduced Jaeger to apoplectic rage. “How dare he? How dare this scum walk amongst us so brazenly? Will you stand for it, Zenzi?”

“Oh, yes,” Zenzi mumbled, obviously flustered by this peculiar turn of events. An honour duel between unequals, the lesser man’s second none other than an enemy commander—it was unheard of in polite society.

They weren’t in polite society, they were on a battlefield. Manners and civility were for the dead, he decided, extending an unusual courtesy to the man they had come to parlay with. It was a rare moment of peace in what had been a long hard campaign.

“*We* are all men of honour,” Zenzi decreed. “It is our opinion that honour is best satisfied between equals. As men of the Empire we are all equals.”

“Though some are less equal than others,” Jaeger blustered. No one was listening to him.

“Are you prepared to apologise to this man, friend Vorster?” Brandt asked, ignoring the raging Jaeger.

“No. I am quite prepared to kill him though,” Vorster said, without a hint of mirth in his voice.

“Then it seems our course is set. As the challenger your man has the right to choose weapons. Let us not draw this out any more than we need to. I suggest these.” Brandt drew a twin pair of beautifully hand tooled pistols.

Seeing them, Jaeger’s eyes lit up. “Oh yes, quite fitting. They will do just splendidly.”

He held out a hand eagerly.

“Make your choice.”

“This one, no, no, this one. Yes.” Jaeger took the second of the two even though there was no visible difference between them. Brandt smiled and handed the first pistol to Vorster.

“A single cap. Kill or be killed. If you fall, your charge will be seen as unfit and your opponent exonerated of all wrong doing. This we swear before an audience of equals.” Both men nodded. Very well.” He removed a small blackpowder pouch and emptied just enough propellant for a single shot from each weapon, and handed both men a lead ball. “You will follow my mark. Stand back to back.”

They did. Vorster felt strangely calm. He pressed the powder and shot into the pistol, and kept the barrel held upright, resting beneath his chin.

“I will count out ten paces. On ten you will each turn and loose a single shot. That shot shall signify the validity of this fight and settle all needs for honour. Is that understood?”

“It is,” Dietrich Jaeger said solemnly.

“Understood.” Vorster said.

“One last chance, gentleman, are you quite sure you want to go through with this?” Brandt asked.

“Of course I am,” Jaeger said. “I am completely in the right. I have nothing to fear from this ruffian.”

“Very well, and you, Vorster? Do you wish to withdraw from this contest? There would be no shame in saving a life.” The way Brandt said it left the crowd in no doubt as to what he believed the outcome would be.

“This isn’t for me. This is for every one of the men that *Captain* Jaeger condemned to death with his orders. This is for my friends and my brothers. I will not sully their memory. In one shot I shall avenge them all.”

“There is no satisfaction in vengeance,” Brandt said almost too quietly to be heard.

“Perhaps not,” Vorster conceded, “but there is retribution.”

“Oskar Zenzi, do you wish to officiate? These are your men, after all.”

“Ah, no, I think perhaps given the irregularity of it all it is best that I defer to you.”

“Very well, then on my word! Gentlemen, begin! One!” He counted out the steps. “Two!” Eight seconds and he could be dead. The thought, rather surprisingly, didn’t disturb Vorster. Indeed he was curiously detached. His hands were steady. He took another step. The world came alive around him even as it slowed to a treacly crawl. Scents heightened, suddenly overpowering: grass and mud and sweat, piss and fear were all there in his nose, alive. The colours of the grass, the sky and the clouds intensified. The grass became greener, more verdant, the sky cerulean and the clouds purer. He was alive, experiencing these things for the first time despite the fact that he had lived with them all of his life. The sudden fear of their loss ought by rights to have undermined him. It didn’t. It invigorated him. This was his world, the living world, the world his men had been denied because of Jaeger. “Three! Four! Five!” Brandt cried out, marking time. Vorster walked resolutely on, keeping perfect time with Brandt’s count.

“Six!”

Vorster breathed deeply and held it.

He saw the implacable face of Martin, a silent spectator on the fringe of the crowd. Vorster chose to believe he saw something else in the Elector Count’s cold eye—a belief that justice was being served.

“Seven!”

He let the breath leak slowly out between his lips.

“Eight!”

He closed his eyes, focusing on the rhythm of his heart and the slight breeze on his face. He could picture the entire scene, down to the faces in the crowd: the men of Talabecland, Ackim Brandt facing the Stirlanders, the flustered supporters of Jaeger and unseen by all but a few, the unflappable count.

“Nine!”

The *dub-dub-dub* against his chest accelerated rapidly. His breathing grew erratic. Still his hand was steady, the tip of the pistol’s barrel unmoving against the underside of his chin.

“Ten!”

Still with his eyes closed, he exhaled, inhaled, exhaled.

“Turn!”

He opened his eyes, spun on his heel and levelled the pistol at Dietrich Jaeger’s face, but he didn’t squeeze the trigger.

Jaeger was marginally slower in the turn, but he brought the gun up quicker, snatching the shot.

Vorster felt a sudden burning in his left shoulder and saw the horror sweep across his opponent’s face. He’d hit, but in rushing the shot he had failed to make it count. Vorster had all the time in the world to take his aim and fire at the helpless Jaeger. They all knew it. It had ceased to be a duel and had become an execution.

All colour fled from Jaeger’s face. He threw up his hands and whimpered: “Please.”

Vorster waited, allowing the adrenaline to seep from his system, for his heart to slow to a regular beat, and for the breeze to still.

Jaeger staggered back a step. “No, man! Stand!” Brandt barked.

Vorster drew slow and careful aim. One shot. He didn’t need more.

He fired.

The lead shot took Dietrich Jaeger through the right wrist, shattering the bone into splinters. The man screamed and fell to his knees, clutching his ruined hand. He looked up at Vorster. He knew. It was in his eyes. “You could have killed me,” he rasped between clenched teeth, biting back on the pain. “You didn’t. Why?”

Vorster walked towards the fallen man. “I didn’t need to,” he said simply. You’re humiliated in front of these men. You panicked when it came to the moment of truth, just as you always panic. You couldn’t run away despite every nerve and fibre of your being screaming out for you to flee, and you would have if Brandt hadn’t chastised you. You would have run for the hills, no better than a common deserter. You are finished Jaeger. Everyone here has witnessed your fall. You’ll never hold a sword again. That is good enough for me. Hell, most likely the field surgeon will have to amputate. I did that, but I will not have your death on my conscience.”

Brandt came to stand beside him. He took the gun from him.

“Compassion isn’t weakness. Believe me it will cure more sins than condemnation, my friend.”

“There is wisdom in that,” Martin von Kristallbach said. Neither of them had heard the young Elector Count approach. “So, tell me soldier, have you decided to take me up on my offer? It would seem I have a vacancy for an experienced officer.” Martin looked down at Jaeger, his distaste all too apparent on his plain, open features. Before the shamed officer could object he told him, “You brought this on yourself Dietrich. Own your mistakes. Be a man. Now get up, there’s no need to add to your humiliation.”

Dietrich Jaeger struggled to his feet. He was bleeding quite badly, but Vorster’s shot hadn’t ruptured the main artery. He would live. Zenzi supported him.

“Go see the surgeon. A soldier who can’t hold a sword is no good to me,” Martin said. He turned to Vorster. “Now, tell me, soldier, what am I to do with you? Wilful disobedience, calling out

a superior officer, endangerment of life.” He looked squarely at Ackim Brandt as he said, “Consorting with the enemy. Your list of crimes is a lengthy one.”

“I will suffer whatever punishment you deem fit, my lord,” Vorster said solemnly.

“Indeed you will,” Martin agreed, “Sergeant Schlagener.”

It took a moment for Martin’s words to register. He thought for a second that he had misheard. “You’re not discharging me?”

“Why on earth would I do that? I am surrounded by fools. A rough diamond is far preferable to a lump of coal, sergeant,” he turned back to Brandt. “Now, about that offer—”

Before he could finish a murmur arose from the surrounding men. They turned to see a plume of snow-dust rising from one side of Ramius Point, and out of the mist came a rider, pushing his mount to the point of collapse. Ribbons of steam corkscrewed from the exhausted beast’s nose. The rider kicked hard, spurring the animal on. Unease spread quickly through the ranks. Whatever word the messenger carried it most certainly wasn’t good news.

“They’re coming! The vampires are coming!” the man yelled over the wind.

For the second time in as many minutes Vorster Schlagener didn’t trust his ears. Only this time, he prayed he had heard wrong. It was impossible, the threat was ended. There were no vampires. It had ended at Grim Moor. The dead did not rise, not now. They stayed dead. He wanted to ask if the man was sure. Then he saw the pure horror wrought across his pale face and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had all been idiots, tearing each other apart, while in the shadows the vampires had been watching, enjoying the savagery that only mankind was capable of.

Vorster knew fear.

CHAPTER NINE

A Band of Brothers

The Dwarf Stronghold of Karak Raziac Beneath the Worlds Edge Mountains

Kallad Stormwarden couldn't rest.

The dwarf dearly wanted to just close his eyes and have the world go away into dreams, but there was no hiding, even here, deep under the mountains.

He had hoped after Grim Moor that he would be able to find some kind of peace. He had faced his father's killer and watched the daemon struck down by Helmar and his Runefang, but there was no peace.

Peace, such a fleeting thing, even for one as long-lived as Kallad. When he closed his eyes he heard the raven's caw: *Mannfred!* And recalled the vampire, Skellan's words: *The greatest of all is coming. You do not want to be here when he returns.* It was impossible to shake the memory, to move on.

He had been content to pick up the hammer for more useful purposes, for a while. He had worked in the smithy with Keggit and his brother Rerle, but Kallad had had no great skill for it. Despite his brother's patient teaching, everything he turned his hand to ended up going back into the fire to be melted down again. He quickly tired of failure. Gegka Darkcutter offered him a place in his crew, mining the depths of the Underway. Kallad had no wish to go deeper; memories of the subterranean prisons of Drakenhof plagued him still. For a while he ran with Iori Slatebreaker's hunters, bringing down mountain game to feed the families of the Karak, but he tired of that, too.

Even in Karak Raziac, surrounded by his own kind, the dreams tormented him, making sleep impossible. He prowled the stone halls of the stronghold or went out beneath the sky and haunted the mountainside. He was a ghost, a shadow. He slowly came to understand the truth. He had died out there on that battlefield, not a physical death, but a death all the same. If his nocturnal perambulations disturbed the others they were loathe to say so, at least to his face. They knew his pain. Few he encountered spoke with him. He was, they whispered behind his back, cursed. He was the son of Kellus, the last child of Karak Sadra. He had fought the vampires, stood beside Grufbad at Grim Moor, and for that they welcomed him among them, but he was not one of them, and he never would be. Instead of friendship they offered pity.

He was disaffected.

He had had his reckoning, but rather than completing him revenge left him hollow.

He sat alone on the hillside, waiting for the spectre of death to come and claim him. He shouted a challenge to the mountain, his axe Ruinthorn above his head, shaking it at the thunderheads and the sky. He looked for ghosts coming over the peaks. He knew what it was: survivor's guilt, they called it. He lived where his family, his entire people, had died. He was the last of them. He carried all the guilt that went with outliving his clan, the guilt that went along with failing them.

"At least they died free," Kallad whispered, his breath conjuring wraiths of mist to hang like a veil between the living and the dead. The failing sun was a sickly yellow eye on the horizon. The snow was cold beneath him, but he wrapped himself in furs. It was true, though it was little consolation. His people had died free. They had marched to Grunberg and they had laid their lives

down in a fight that wasn't theirs. They had done it for the manlings. They hadn't run away, hadn't hidden in the mountains waiting for the evil to pass over them. They had stood up, and because of that they were heroes, each and every dwarf of Karak Sadra.

He was proud and sad.

He had to believe it had been worth it.

Mannfred is coming!

That one line undermined their sacrifice.

The ground beneath him was colder than death. His sweat had become a brittle frost that clung to his face like a second skin. A fine dusting of snow had settled on his jerkin and rough trousers. Kallad ignored the icy chill worming its way into his heart.

Behind and before him, the many ridges of the Worlds Edge Mountains and their snow-capped peaks reared, reaching into the sky. Beneath him lay Blutfurt, Nachtdorf and the forest between the two, her white-laced leaves rustling. The north wind whispered fragments of the wood's darkest secrets, hints of the hearts it had stilled and the dreams it had buried in its rich soil. Beyond that were the rolling hills that the manlings called the Unhiemlich Hügeltette, or Eerie Downs. Their name was apt. The nearness of the rolling hills was oppressive.

He shook off the uncomfortable sensation of eyes watching him and resumed his laborious trudge down the mountainside, the wind crying traitor in his ear. He ignored its mocking voice, knowing that the whispers would be endless and unforgiving. It was the burden of being a survivor. The ghosts he had left behind whispered and taunted him with the voice of his own guilt, ghosts that could never forgive him for being alive while they rotted in some unmarked grave.

Kallad pushed on until he came to the edge of a frozen tarn, his thoughts introspective, jagged memories weighted down with the sorrows of a dwarf who had turned his back on his friends when they had needed him most.

It didn't matter if it wasn't true. It didn't matter if he had carried the fight to von Carstein's aberrant army. It didn't matter that he had been with them at the end to slay the beast. His guilt didn't care for any of that.

"What good would it have done for me to die with 'em?" he yelled at the wind, finally sick of its taunting. His voice was thick, raw, strained.

It's not about dying, the wind whispered, it's about living. You've stopped living, Kallad Stormwarden. He might have stood there, frozen, for an hour or a day, listening to his guilt echo off the rocks; a dwarf on a mountain being judged and found unworthy by the ghosts inside him. Worse, you've stopped watching for the oncoming storm... and now it comes. Can't you feel it? Can't you feel it in the air? The presence of evil is building.

"I could lie down now." He barely breathed the words, taking their silence as judgement. "I could close my eyes and never wake up. The cold would take me before dawn."

To join them in death would have stopped the shades from being alone, but it was not them who were alone, it was Kallad. The wind knew that. It had stopped listening to the survivor's lies. It knew he could no more lie down and die than the sun could cease to shine or the seasons stop turning. It was a survivor's nature to survive, to go on living no matter the costs to those around him. A survivor would find a way.

He wiped the sweat from his brow before it could freeze there. His lips were chapped from the wind's perpetual kiss. Kallad hadn't realised just how thirsty he was until he knelt and brushed away the thin coating of snow from the surface of the frozen lake. Quickly, he used the wooden handle of his axe to chip a series of cracks in the ice, breaking a small slab free. He teased his gloves off and rubbed some life back into his hands before he pushed the ice under so he could scoop a handful of water to his lips. It tasted heavily of minerals and dirt, but it could have been wine to the lips of a drunkard. He drank deeply, wiping at his beard where the water ran down his chin, and scooped up another mouthful.

When he lowered his cupped hands from his face, Kallad faced a miracle reflected in the still water. Not one face but three looked back at him: his own drawn, exhausted reflection and two faces he knew better than his own, faces haunted by the death he had left them to back at Grim Moor. Skellan's ruined features showed a spider web of cuts and purple bruises that stood in stark contrast to the other man's: Jerek von Carstein.

Mannfred is coming!

No matter what he had told himself the beasts were far from slain. The storm had abated. It hadn't blown itself out. There was fighting, and dying, to be done. The vampires were out there, alive, as alive as those things could ever be. They were eternal. Their blades were like snakes of lightning on the battlefield, weaving a deadly magic as they danced. Kallad's fingers moved towards the illusion painted so thinly on the water. He wanted to reach out to banish the illusion, to drive the dead away.

Kallad plunged his fist into the icy water.

He swirled the water with his fist, dragging it around the small hole in the ice to drive the faces of the dead men away.

"It's the cold," he told himself even as his nostrils flared at the scent of death carried by the wind. "It's the cold making me jump at ghosts."

He felt unbearably old, despite the fact that he was a child beside others of his kind. Kallad had long since ceased counting years and instead racked up experiences. He had lived through more than almost every dwarf in Karak Raziac. There were a few of their number who had lived even half as much life, heroes like Grufbad, Goriki Earthrunner or even old Runik Greybeard, who was rapidly becoming Runik Whitebeard, though none dared tell the old curmudgeon. Kallad had seen more than anyone should have to.

He remembered his father giving him his full name, Stormwarden. It could have been yesterday. He had pledged to guard against the oncoming storm. Looking at the snow churning across the bleak mountainside, he couldn't decide if he had failed in that as well.

Mannfred is coming!

He made a decision. He would seek out King Razzak and explain that he couldn't simply wash his hands of it, not while he knew the vampire nation was growing once more. They were licking their wounds, they weren't banished. That was why peace eluded him.

He trudged back towards the stronghold.

It felt good to have made a decision.

For once his ghosts were silent.

His decision pleased them.

King Razzak's great hall was a monument to dwarf architecture and engineering. Eight giant foe-pillars supported the vaulted ceiling. They were three hundred feet high, carved with giant frescos of battle depicting great triumphs of the clan: scenes of death ranged back beyond the War of the Beard, ores blinded by crossbow bolts, trolls slain by axe and warhammer, the skulls of ratmen and goblins cleaved in two. Each foe-pillar held a thousand deaths.

Kallad looked up at the ceiling; it was impossible not to. The builders had designed the central hall as a spectacle to be entered from above and descended into, allowing their craft to be best displayed. The second and third tiers of the ceiling were threaded with gold and silver wires that caught and reflected the light from the torches blazing all the way down the winding staircase to the mosaic-tiled floor of the grand hall. A huge bas-relief of Grimnir dominated the centrepiece of the ceiling, the dwarf god clutching his fabled twin axes, one either side of the aisle carved through the heart of the mountain. More carvings showed the defeat of the dwarfs foes.

Hammers rang out, bellows hissed and huffed, the engineers hard at work developing, Kallad seemed to remember, a huge mechanical water pumping system to aid the excavations of the

Underway. Kallad walked slowly down the twisting stair, drinking in the grandeur of Karak Raziac. This was the artistry of his people at its finest. His fingers trailed along the outer wall. He imagined the memories locked within those old stones.

His footsteps echoed as he walked the length of the wide aisle. Midway down the aisle a huge iron fist, twice his height and more than four times his girth, dominated the floor. It was a symbol of the Karak's might. Kallad walked around it.

Razzak's throne was on the other side of the fist, on a raised dais of black stone. Like the dwarf lord himself it was a squat robust piece of furniture carved from the very rock of the mountain and set down in the middle of the great hall, as immovable as Razzak was when he put his mind to it.

The dwarf king was not on his throne. Razzak was a hands-on ruler. He didn't have his dwarfs do anything he wasn't prepared and capable of doing himself.

Kallad found him with the engineers, sleeves rolled up, getting his hands dirty, lifting and carrying immense cogs and wheel-gears for a huge water pump. They were in a vast chamber with a foundry at one end, steaming water vats and other curious devices churning out an infernal amount of heat. Hammers clanged and dwarfs grunted, and then the rhythm of the work broke down and one red-headed engineer cursed, sucking at his thumb where he'd hammered it solidly with the head of his tool. That shift in timing turned the regular clang-beat-clang into a discordant cacophony of hammering, cursing and beating that had Kallad covering his ears.

Thoken Kragbeard, one of Razzak's wreckers—engineers who specialised in demolition and destruction—looked up and saw Kallad standing in the doorway. He took his goggles off and wiped the sweat from his brow, smearing a great link of soot across his forehead. Thoken put his fingers to his lips and whistled sharply. The hammering stopped almost immediately.

Razzak looked up from the sharp-toothed cog he had been rolling across the floor as Kallad walked towards him. One look at the dwarfs face told the king all he needed to know. He passed the huge cog-wheel to another one of the crew and dusted his hands off on his bare chest.

"Can we talk, sire?"

"Aye, we can. It's one of the marvels of Grimnir. That an' opposable thumbs. You got something you need to get off yer chest?"

Kallad looked around the room. These people had done their best to make him feel a part of their clan, but he didn't. In that, he had failed them more than they had ever failed him. "Yes."

"Walk with me, lad."

Razzak untied his apron, rolled it into a ball and left it on one of the many work benches. "She's gonna be a beauty when she's up and running. You should hear the motor purr. Grakchi is a genius with this stuff. She ought to be able to pump three or four hundred buckets an hour. We'll have the deeps cleared in no time."

No time to a dwarf of course, was relative, a year being a blink of an eye.

Kallad nodded his appreciation.

"So you are leaving us?" Razzak asked, turning his back on the machine.

"Aye, I think I am."

Razzak studied him thoughtfully. Finally he asked, "Do you intend to tackle your monsters alone?"

The question threw Kallad. He didn't know what he had expected Razzak to say, a plea to stay, perhaps, but not this. He had become so accustomed to being alone while hunting his father's killer that the notion of doing it any other way had never occurred to him.

"You are not the only one alone now, Kallad. Look around this room. Five here lost their lifemates to the Vampire Counts. Three more have no family outside the clan itself. War is hard on everyone, but you need to remember that no matter what you feel, you are not alone. You are one of us."

"I don't understand."

“No, perhaps you don’t. It must be hard, having to carry the guilt of outliving your clan inside you. Look around, just in this room. Tell me what you see.”

Kallad did as he was asked. He turned slowly, taking in all of the hustle and flow. “You’re building a water pump,” he said finally, not sure what exactly he was supposed to be seeing.

Razzak smiled. “So you *do* see it even if you don’t understand exactly what it is you are seeing.”

“If you say so.”

“Let me explain,” Razzak put an arm around the younger dwarf and led him away. They talked as they walked through the vast network of tunnels and underways. “We are clan. It is more than just a concept, it is our identity. It defines us, and because of it we are never alone. Those who can do something do what they can, those who can’t find other ways to help, but every son and daughter of the clan is vital to the clan as a whole. Alone, no one, not even Grakchi, could assemble this monstrosity. He can imagine it, but he’s no smith. He couldn’t fashion the pieces needed for the complex mechanisms. Even then few of the foundry workers have the skill to fashion the intricate pieces, so these are hand-tooled separately. Do you see now? Ask yourself who is more valuable? If neither one can function without the other they are both essential. The clan is the same. You, my friend, are essential. Whatever you may think, you are a part of us.”

Kallad nodded, grudgingly. “Aye, but what’s that got to do with the price of fish?”

“Talk to Belamir, Cahgur and a few of the others. I don’t believe you have to do this alone. I think this is still something for the clan. Perhaps they would accompany you. After all, the world has changed for them almost as much as it has for you. Like you, they are refugees of the war. I think they would appreciate the chance to strike back. Otherwise, the vampires have taken all of your lives as effectively as if they had sunk their fangs into your necks.”

“Razzak told me you’d got some brainless plan about takin’ the fight to them pointy-toothed whoresons in Sylvania?” a bespectacled Cahgur laughed as Kallad outlined his plan to march into the darkest corners of Sylvania and root the undead out of their hiding places, not stopping until he had ended their threat once and for all. “All I got to say is you and whose army?”

Kallad grinned, the grin of a madman. He didn’t care. “You in?”

“I’d have to be a raving lunatic,” Cahgur said, shaking his head in wonderment.

“So are you in, laddie?”

Cahgur chuckled. “I must need my head read for sayin’ this, but aye, I’m in. Why the kruti not, eh?”

The response was much the same from the others he approached. They looked at Kallad as though he were some “zaki” dwarf wandering the mountains, but then the fire lit in their eyes and they held out their meaty hands, joining his band of brothers.

They were seven when they set out from Karak Raziac: Molagon Durmirason, Skalfkrag Gakragellason, Othtin Othdilason, Belamir Kadminasson, Cahgur Ullagundinasson, Valarik Darikson and Kallad Stormwarden. They made an unlikely brotherhood, but they all had something in common: they no longer fitted among their own people. The wars had affected them too personally, too deeply. They left without ceremony, just like any other mountain patrol going in search of greenskins, only their quarry was far more dangerous than an ore or goblin.

The mood was sombre.

Kallad walked, looking up at the sky, at the skeletal branches of the trees and the freshly fallen snow. Each place offered its own unique hint as to the enemy’s movements if you knew what to look for. He sought black crows and the paw prints of wolves in particular.

They walked along in silence for the better part of the day, each lost in his thoughts. They made camp in the shadow of the mountainside that first night.

“You’re all gonna think I am mad,” Kallad said, around the campfire.

“Most likely, aye,” Belamir agreed, warming his hands briskly over the fire pit. “But tell us anyway. It ain’t like we’re strangers to a bit of madness.”

Kallad scratched at his beard. “Right, well, I ain’t told you how I know the beasts ain’t dead, now have I?”

“Ooh sounds like a story, good, good,” Molagon said, biting off a hunk of stone bread and chewing loudly. Cahgur swallowed a chug of robust ale, preferring it to the dry bread. He was more than happy surviving on nothing but ale for a few days. Belamir clanked tankards with Cahgur.

“Well, depends on your disposition, I’d say, an” whether you are willing to believe in some weird stuff. See, I was there at the end, with Grufbad and Helmar when the lad stuck the sword in, finishing off the blood count. But it weren’t just us. In the middle of this hellish battle we had some help. Unlikely help, you might say. There were two other vampires there that helped bring down their leader. One calling himself Jerek von Carstein,” Kallad began, telling them the story. It was the first time he had spoken of his pact with the undead.

“He came to me in the dark, claiming to be a friend. I didn’t believe him. All he had to say was, “Then let’s hope that by the end of the night I am.”

“I heard him out, even though I didn’t trust him. My thought was to strike him down. He knew it, I knew it. Why should I trust him? His explanation? “Because of who I was,” he said. “Not who I am. Because as the White Wolf of Middenheim I gave my life trying to protect the same thing you are trying to protect, and because, for some reason, a spark of whatever it was that made me still burns inside here,” said Kallad. Jerek’s words were poignant. Kallad could not resist the opportunity to turn into a storyteller, mimicking the vampire’s grave voice as he leaned into the fire. “I was a ghost, trapped between the land of the living and the nations of rot and decay, and nothing in either world.”

“It was a grand speech boys, I’ll grant the beast that. His words stirred something in me. I mean, I believed him. I could just tell he was telling the truth and the strength it must have taken to hold back the beast inside him, well, I wasn’t dense enough to think I could fight my way into the heart of their army and take down the blood count by myself. So we made a deal. He told me how the first war with the Vampire Counts was won by guile, not force. He explained that von Carstein had a talisman of incredible power that enabled his dead form to regenerate, and that the talisman was stolen during the Siege of Altdorf. See, it was that theft that allowed the Sigmarite priest to slay him once and forever.”

Kallad leaned in over the fire pit, warming himself on the blaze. Licks of flame danced erratically, throwing shadows across his face. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance. It was a melancholy sound, answered a moment later by a lupine lament. There was no way of knowing if the beast was a true wolf or a were-creature. The howl sent a shiver of ice into his heart.

“We know the story,” Othtin said, impatient to get to whatever nugget of mystery Kallad had alluded to. The Vampire Count’s ring; the thief stole it and gave it to the priests’

Kallad looked at him across the fire. “You think you know the story. There’s a world of difference, Jerek shared a secret about the damnable count’s ring. This secret has robbed me of peace.”

“Go on,” Belamir urged, leaning forwards, sold on the tale.

Kallad waited, looking slowly around the circle of faces. “The ring wasn’t in the vampire’s grave.”

“So?”

“Think about it, you don’t need me to explain it all.”

None of them dared say a word.

“If that ring resurfaces, any beast wearing it, well he’d be like that scourge, Vlad, and damned hard t’kill. Jerek was looking for the ring.”

“He wanted its power?” Othtin asked, appalled at the thought of another dread beast rising to challenge the stability of the Old World.

“No, he said he wanted to make sure the damned thing was destroyed.”

He let that sink in.

“That was the pact we made. I told him what I knew, which was precious little. I tracked the thief down in Altdorf, where he’d been taken in by the Sigmarites. He lost his hands, and the ring, to one of the vampire’s kind. Jerek knew what I was, the last of my clan. He’d been there, seen my father fall. He understood the anger inside me, the need for vengeance, because, like me he said he bore a grudge against the monsters that had made him into what he was, a monster in their image.” Kallad lowered his voice, lending his words an ominous quality. “We were not so different, the beast and me. He told me, “I will not lie down and let them swallow my world whole. I will not stand by and watch it plunged into eternal night. I will not watch it become a place of blood and sorrow. That ring cannot be allowed to adorn the finger of a vampire. It cannot. The world cannot withstand another dread lord of my sire’s ilk.” And his words sent a chill to my core, brothers, because in them I heard the truth. He had me over a barrel. He had saved my life, see, from the other vampire, the one he called Skellan. I didn’t like it, but he was at pains to point out that I didn’t need to. All I had to do was accept that he was less than human, more than vampire, something else entirely and nothing completely. He claimed no loyalty to the dead and only wanted to do what he had always done, protect the living.”

“Are you tryin’ to tell me that the damned beastie didn’t want the ring for himself?” Cahgur asked in disbelief. “Do I look like I am still sucking at my ma’s teat?”

“Trust me,” Kallad said. “He didn’t claim the life debt I owed him, though he knew full well he could. He was aware what it means to save a dwarf from certain death. He didn’t care. He wanted my help given willingly or not at all. What he was asking for was nothing more than help preventing a dark and hungry god from arising. We sealed the pact, and he upheld his end, he helped me get close to the necromancers and kill the mad vampire. We never would have done it without him.”

There was a long moment of silence before Belamir asked, “What did you promise him?”

Kallad looked at his new comrade across the fire’s heart.

“I told him I’d aid his search for the damned ring.”

“And this is what you want us to do? To scour the earth for some magical ring? Why didn’t you say this when we set out? This ain’t exactly hunting the beasts in their stinking lair!”

“Would you have come, Othtin?” Kallad Stormwarden asked, bluntly.

The dwarf shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“This is not all the story is it?” Valarik Darikson asked, thoughtfully. “It don’t feel... What’s missing, Kallad? You’re dancing around something. Just come out with it. What aren’t you saying?”

Kallad picked up a stick and prodded at the embers. Sparks fizzled and hissed and ash fell lazily back down to the ground. They deserved to know.

“At the end, on the field surrounded by the dead, Morr’s birds carried a message for us, the living,” Kallad said. The stick snapped as he thrust one end into the dirt.

“What was it?”

“Mannfred is coming!”

Kallad threw the other end of the stick into the fire. The flame roared as the embers scattered, scaring the hell out of his new companions. He grinned.

“You whoreson!” Othtin grumbled, clutching at his chest. “You scared seven shades of crap out of me!”

“I need a bloody beer after that!” Cahgur said.

“Aye, but what does that mean?” Belamir asked, knowing that any chance of understanding the message lay in getting to the root of Kallad’s reluctance to explain it.

“Mannfred’s the worst of them, that’s what Skellan said.” Kallad shivered at the memory. He made a show of rubbing his arms briskly as though to massage the heat back into them. “He all but killed me when I faced him... and...” And this was the wisp of memory that plagued him. It was

like some perverse engineering puzzle all coming together layer by layer. “I killed him. I mean I split him in two with Ruinthorn here, but that bastard didn’t die.”

Skalfkrag Gakragellason, who hadn’t said a word during the telling of the tale, understood first. It came out of his mouth like a death sentence, “He has the ring.”

“He has the ring,” Kallad echoed.

“So we *are* hunting a creature then,” Othtin said. “I like that better than looking for some stupid trinket.”

A few of the others nodded as the true underlying nature of their quest became clear.

Kallad nodded. “Aye, we are.”

“But it’s like a vein in a mountain, you can dig and dig and dig and never strike it. How’d you propose we find this Mannfred?” Cahgur asked.

“I have been in his home,” Kallad said. “I have been imprisoned in the dungeons and the dark beneath his castle. They call it Drakenhof. It lies in the barren wilderness of Sylvania, out of reach of the Empire. It is a vile place, but I know a few of its secrets. I know a way back into the castle through the old underways from the Worlds Edge. Now, I’m gonna ask you fellas again. Who’s with me? Anyone wants to return to the stronghold, there won’t be no grudge here. This is above and beyond what I can ask of you. Chances are we won’t come out of that place alive.”

“My kind of odds,” Othtin said. “I’m in.”

“Aye,” Belamir chuckled, “why’d I want to be going home just when things are about to get interesting? You’re a strange lad, Kallad Stormwarden.”

“We’re brothers now and our bond is stronger than steel,” Molagon Durmirason said. “We’ve seen some of the worst the world has to show us. Alone, we are outsiders, but together, together we are clan.”

He held his hand out across the fire.

“It’s gromril at least.” Belamir reached out and placed his on top.

Othtin did likewise. One by one the others reached across the guttering fire as it failed, adding their hands to the pile, sealing the brotherhood.

They would return to the belly of the mountains, to the cells where Kallad had been held prisoner, to the soul cages where he had been forced to fight for his life for the entertainment of the blood count, back to the one place he had vowed he would never revisit: Drakenhof.

He pulled his hands away from the others.

He felt whole for the first time in as long as he could remember.

He would have been lying to himself if he tried to pretend it was the company of strangers that contented him.

He was finally fulfilling his promise to Jerek. He had decided to live the rest of his life and make it count. He was going after the beast. He would most likely die in the coming fight but that, didn’t matter. He had stopped running away. He had made a decision to stand and fight in the face of the oncoming storm. He picked up Ruinthorn and pushed himself to his feet. The old axe felt comfortingly familiar in his hands.

“Well, lads, what are we waiting for?”

CHAPTER TEN

The Mirror of his Dreams

Nuln, the Imperial City

Jerek von Carstein huddled in the shadowed doorway of a disused oast house. He could smell the last few kernels of hops and the mulch of rotten straw. The air reeked of disease. He hadn't fed on *real blood* in so long. He couldn't remember when he had last tasted it. No, he could. He didn't want to, but he could. Rats and cats, and dogs and birds were pale substitutes that barely sated the rising hunger in him.

His mind was useless. Words, random, disconnected words, floated through it. He grunted and moaned, drew his legs up to his chin and pressed back deeper into the doorway, wanting to disappear.

Passers-by flipped occasional coins at his feet, mistaking him for a vagabond unable to conquer his daemons. He left them. He remembered fragments of memory: the caravan, the old woman, the witch hunters, the bloodthirsty crowd, the dead man at his feet and his blood on Jerek's tongue. Oh yes, that he remembered. That taste he couldn't forget.

The guilt was killing him.

He had tried so hard not to kill. He had tortured himself with the hunger, grubbing around eating vermin, anything other than touch humans. He had wrestled his instincts, his needs, the drives that made him what he was and he had failed. They had corralled him into a corner of fire and hate, and he had lashed out, frightened. In that one moment of brutality it had all come undone.

He tortured himself with the face of the dead man.

Jerek closed his eyes.

He hadn't fed in so long.

He had tasted the blood on his teeth and tongue and lips as he had killed the man, but he hadn't fed. He hadn't suckled at the wounds gulping down that heady elixir.

But he had *wanted* to, and that shocked him. After everything he had done to bury his nature, the first whiff of blood and he had wanted to undo it all and feast on the damned human.

He hated himself for what he had become.

They had found the witch hunter strung up from the ceiling of the temple of Morr. He had been mutilated, laid open like a lesson in the secret of anatomy. The murder was the talk of the city. The watch had scoured the streets, dragging hundreds of vagrants and undesirables into custody. Jerek had been forced to flee below ground until even that sanctuary had become unsafe. They had descended with dogs, savage animals that they unleashed in the tunnels trying to cleanse them. Jerek had fled to the rooftops before being forced to move on by the agonies of the sun. So he had become one of the hundreds of beggars, faceless and unmemorable. It hadn't always been easy to hide. A wandering Shallyan had come to give benediction to the poor when she collapsed, suffering from a fit of hideous convulsions. She had fallen two buildings away from where the vampire hid. He had run before anyone could capture him.

That was his life now—he ran.

Jerek hunched up against the doorframe. His hands trembled, as if he was some addict coming down from a Crimson Shade high.

He shook with an undercurrent of violent seizures that wracked his corpse. He wanted nothing more than to cease to be, but he couldn't die, not while the fractured visions still mocked him.

And they did, day and night, night and day.

They refused to leave him be.

He killed rodents and birds when they dared come too close, and drank. They offered little more than a dribble of blood, but it staved off the fiercest of the madness, though day by day it was growing evermore difficult to resist the pull of delirium. He forgot who he was at times. His only anchor on sanity was an image: a white wolf. As long as he could recall the wolf he knew *what* he was. At the worst of times that was enough.

He opened his eyes at the sound of a carriage rolling by. There weren't many carriages in this part of the city. Those who could afford them had little business in the squalor of the Alt Stadt, little *respectable* business.

The beautiful, open-topped carriage, was pulled by a black mare. A woman of uncommon grace disembarked. The dress she wore would have paid for the entire street with its sequins and pearls alone. He was drawn to her face. It was haunting though not attractive in any traditional sense. She moved past the window of a thruppeny bazaar with all sorts of junk and curiosities on display through the glass. The place was a veritable cornucopia of enticements and behind it, Jerek knew there was a low-rent knocking shop aimed at satisfying all the other curiosities a body might have. There was something about the woman, not merely that she was out of place in the Alt Stadt's hovels, something more than that. It took a moment for him to see what it was.

Though she faced the sun, he saw that she cast no shadow.

He looked at the glass window as the shopkeeper dimmed the oil lamp. Her reflection wasn't caught by the window, but seeing and understanding were two completely different things. It took Jerek the longest time to realise *what* he was seeing, or what he wasn't.

She cast no reflection and no shadow.

He stared at the woman, praying fervently that she would not turn and see him. He struggled to his feet, needing the wall for support. His head swam dizzily. The woman was half way down the street before he managed a first unsteady step. Jerek lurched forwards. A rat scuttled over his foot. He twisted and saw that two more of the fat-bellied rodents had come out of the cracks and were sniffing around him in search of food. Without thinking he leaned down, almost falling, and scooped one of them up and crammed its wriggling body into his mouth. The rodent died in a shrill squeal. Its blood dribbled hot and thin across his tongue. Jerek swallowed, wishing even as he did that it was human. He fell to his knees and snatched up the second and third rats, draining them greedily.

When he looked up, momentarily lucid, the woman had gone.

He stumbled forwards, lurching down the street, looking left and right for any trace of her, but she had disappeared.

It didn't matter.

He knew that he had seen a female vampire walking through the slums of the old city, and that was just the beginning of the peculiarities he began to notice.

A few days later he saw a black bird perched on a blacksmith's sign. The bird took flight in a burst of feathers leaving the weather-beaten sign creaking in the wind. He turned away, thinking nothing of it until he saw a second black bird perched on a roadside marker, watching him, and a third on a fence post. Their scrutiny was unnaturally attentive. He ran at the birds, scattering them.

They didn't fly far, one coming to rest on the guttering of a nearby hovel, the two others landing on the top of a low broken wall. Jerek turned wildly and the nearest bird squawked, but it didn't fly away.

He walked towards it slowly, reaching out. The raven cawed harshly and sank its beak into the soft skin of his hand. Jerek wrenched his hand away and swore as the raven took flight. It circled his head three times before flying away over the rooftops. He turned on the two birds perched on the wall. They studied him with their yellow beady eyes, and as he reached towards it the nearest bird cawed, sounding for all the world as though it said, *Jerek?* He flinched, startling the birds.

They were gone a moment later—disappearing in a flurry of black wings.

He stood alone in the middle of the street, turning left and right.

The bird had known him. It had recognised him.

Was it part of the madness? Had he imagined it? Was he like Konrad now? Hearing voices and threats in all these unlikely places?

Three nights later he saw Jon Skellan.

He knew it was Skellan even though he never saw his face. Jerek followed him a while, long enough to see him slip into the grounds of a huge manor house on the outskirts of the city, in one of the more affluent districts. Jerek stayed back, following at a distance. His only thought was that if Skellan was there then his master couldn't be far away.

He saw women come and leave the house that Skellan had entered, hauntingly beautiful courtesans. Each one put him in mind of the woman he had seen leaving the carriage, the woman with no shadow or reflection. They were vampiric in nature. He sensed the blood curse on them. How pretty they were and yet how lethal. He mourned for the women they had once been before they had become these loveliest of the dead.

He slept in the old mausoleum within the grounds of the manor house. It was the first good day's sleep he had had in months and he was forced to take it amongst the dead. Come dusk he left the house of corpses in search of a man who could help him, not that he expected help. He skirted the better neighbourhoods, moving by rooftop until he found a staircase leading down into the Unterbaunch. He ran along the dark passages, more vital than he had felt in months. He ran up to the first man he saw and pressed him against the wall. "Do you know where I can find a hedge wizard?" Terrified, the man shook his head. Jerek dropped him and ran on, going from person to person asking them the same desperate question. Time and again he was greeted by fear and ignorance until he slammed a young woman up against the lichen-smeared wall of the tunnel and instead of collapsing in fear she nodded hurriedly, eager to please.

"Where?" Jerek rasped, not letting her go.

"I know some stuff, little tricks mainly," she said.

He grinned, and as his smile widened so too did her eyes as she saw his fangs and understood what he was.

"Please, no, mister. Don't kill me. I—"

"Can you change this?" He put his hand in front of his face to show her what he meant. "Can you make me look different? I need to look like someone else."

"I don't know," the girl said, "never tried to do stuff to someone else."

"Anyone else, please."

"And you won't kill me after, like? So I can't say what you look like to no one?"

"No," he promised.

"Why should I believe you? I mean you are... you are... you know."

"I know," Jerek said. "Please, do what you can. I need to be different. I need to get close to a man so that I can kill him."

"Oh, no, I can't do that I mean, no. I—"

"He's not a *living* man. He's a monster. I promise you."

Then his knees buckled. He could smell the heat of her pulse so close to his lips. He could hear the echo of the great song of her life that pumped in her veins. He could just lean in and taste her, take just a little of that vitality for his own. All he had to do was bite... He shook his head,

struggling to quell the blood lust. "It is the creature that killed the witch hunter in the temple of Morr."

He knew it was true. He knew that Skellan was the vampire the witch hunters had been tracking when they had raided the Strigany caravans. It made a sick sort of sense. Skellan had been dogging his trail every step of the way.

"You aren't lying to me are you? I mean..." she left her second question unasked.

Jerek trembled as he let go of her. "He is one of the beasts that served the mad count, and his sire before him. He is the worst sort of monster, this I swear. He is a killer to the core and his presence in your city augurs ill."

"And you can kill him?" the girl asked.

"I don't know," Jerek admitted. "I am not the man I was."

"But you are a vampire."

"I am, but I was a Knight of Ulric before I was damned to this unlife. I would rather be the man I was."

She looked at him and instead of fear he saw pity in her eyes. He hadn't expected that. She reached out and touched his cheek. "I will try," she promised.

It was all he could ask.

* * * * *

She laid her hands on his face.

There was an uncommon cold to the touch, but it quickly flowered into heat. Jerek felt it below the skin, rising to the surface. She whispered words of power as her hands moved, reshaping his face. Only he didn't feel different; his eyes, his nose, his cheeks, he felt like himself. Still she moved her hands, feeling out the contours of muscle and bone, re-imagining them in her mind, reconstructing them in the glamour she wove around his face.

She held a fragment of mirrored glass up for him to see when she was done. He had been about to knock it from her hand, determined not to see the emptiness, but he was there, trapped in the reflection. Only it wasn't him, it was some other, unlike him in almost every way. Fine narrow boned features, light blonde hair and eyes of pale midsummer blue looked back at him. The face she had given him was handsome, too handsome he feared for a moment. It would draw attention to him. People would remember seeing him, and then he realised it didn't matter because once the glamour fell he would be himself again. For a little while at least he could pretend to be human. "Thank you," he said, feeling out his new face.

"I don't know how long the glamour will last," the girl admitted. "I've never done it on someone else. A day? A month? An hour? I have no idea, but I hope it is long enough for you to do whatever you have to." she handed him a small clay disk. "If you need to be rid of it for any reason, break this. They're tied together. With the disk broken the illusion won't be able to sustain itself. I don't know how it works, only that it does. My father taught it to me. He liked his tricks."

Jerek smiled, trying out his new face. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't kill me," the girl said.

He touched her face, his fingers lingering on her rich red lips. She shivered beneath his touch. He felt her pulse, felt the lure of the blood, and rested his fingers to his own lips.

"You have my word," Jerek said.

Jerek left the Unterbaunch a new man.

The sun was low in the sky. He felt it sting his skin. He covered himself as best he could for fear that any exposed skin might suddenly ignite. He was weakened, but he didn't know how weak he was. He clung to the shadows, scant as they were.

He knew where he had to go. The manor house.

It was the only link to Skellan that he had, and that made it his only link to Skellan's master, Mannfred.

He had no thought other than to confront the Vampire Count and, if he could, to slay him. If he failed, well he would be dead, truly dead, and then he would know peace. Given the choices and the torments of his unlife Jerek knew he couldn't lose, no matter the outcome.

He walked the snow-covered streets, watching the early evening bustle as businesses closed for the night. It was too early for the city's other life to begin in earnest, though here and there as he crossed the entertainment district he saw the red glass oil lamps light up in the windows, welcoming business. Row upon row of ladies of every imaginable shape and size sat on their window ledges whistling and calling down to the wide-eyed young men on the street below. The street had its share of tenements with leaking gutters and grimy stoops as well as almost palatial buildings with mosaics and marbled pillars. "Eclectic" best summed up the contrary building styles in this modest district, but perhaps that shouldn't have been such a surprise, considering the variety of tastes the street hoped to cater to.

The first thick flakes of snow were in the air as Jerek hurried towards the manor house.

"Up here, handsome, you can shelter from the snow," one of the street's ruddy-faced matrons called from her window in a brownstone tenement. The years hadn't been kind to her.

For a moment Jerek didn't realise she was talking to him. "Ah, not tonight, gorgeous," Jerek said with a smile and a hand on his heart. "Tonight there is only one lady for me."

"Ah, then she's a lucky girl."

"Let's hope she sees things the same way, eh?"

A pair of young men staggered arm in arm out of a door across the street, nearly tripping as they navigated the short flight of stairs down to the icy cobbles. At the doorway an equally young girl with the feathered hair of a raven blew the boys a kiss.

"You could have left one for me," the old matron called to the girl from her window.

"Next time you can come over and join us, Esme," the girl called back. "Between us, we'll kill 'em."

"Aye, that we will, lassie, but at least they'll drop happy."

The banter continued as Jerek ducked around the corner into a side street. His thoughts ran wild. He could smell them all, the ripe flesh leaning out of the windows, the blood pumping through their breasts as they forced themselves into their corsets and cinnamon and strawberry coloured dresses. It would be easy to walk into one of the bordellos and take a girl. Her death wouldn't be noticed until morning and he would be long gone by then. Feeding would give him strength. He would need strength if he hoped to face Skellan and his master. That was how his mind worked when the hunger was upon him, it reasoned with him, showed him how he was weak and told him what he needed to be strong. It wheedled and pleaded, and finally cursed and kicked, and demanded to be fed.

It was growing more and more difficult to resist it.

He hurried away from the temptations of the street.

He found a stray dog four avenues down. The mutt was on its last legs. Jerek got down on his knees and whistled low and slow, calling the dog over. It came willingly enough until it was a little less than ten feet away and then its fur raised in a ridge along its back. Before the dog could bolt Jerek lunged forwards and grabbed it by the scruff of its scraggy neck. He dragged it close and even as it snapped and snarled, feral, he broke its neck and fed. The blood was sour. It barely touched the need inside him, but it was blood.

It would sustain him, keeping the fractured memories and the madness at bay a little while longer.

He left the dog's carcass at the side of the road, the snow stained red around it, and walked back to the black iron gates of the manor house.

He waited a while, watching from hiding. As on his last visit the courtesans came and went, always in pairs, giggling and preening as they walked out of the gates only to return hours later, their cheeks ruddy from their nocturnal jaunts. They had fed, he knew. He could smell the blood and the sex on them.

Jerek waited until the street was clear and eased open the gate. He slipped inside, moving quickly. He darted into the cover of the trees, using the shadows to edge closer and closer to the house. Oil lights burned in the lower windows. He watched as two courtesans closed the gate behind them and walked arm in arm up the drive to the door. He followed them, breaking into a run over the last few yards. By the time they realised danger was close it was too late. He caught up with them on the porch.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, leaning in close, an arm on each of their shoulders.

The women turned, pleasant smiles gone. They were neither frightened nor surprised. “You stink, but then your kind always does,” her voice was coldly mellifluous. “What does your master want with the mistress now?”

“Ahh, what doesn’t he want? You know how he is, after all,” Jerek said, imaging it was something Skellan might have said in similar circumstances. They obviously thought he was working with Mannfred, just another lackey, so he thought better of correcting their mistake and decided to play the part. Being taken for an ally would make things easier. “Better take me to her, wouldn’t want to keep the lady waiting would we?”

* * * * *

They led him through a hall dedicated to a vast array of serpents, and without preamble down into a vast subterranean labyrinth with countless tunnels feeding into one another. Somewhere, almost certainly, they linked into the warren beneath the Alt Stadt.

Jerek followed the women.

He followed them through a series of turns and twists and narrowing corridors into wider tunnels until they reached an antechamber, and beyond it a door that led into the nave of a vast subterranean temple. The mistress reclined lazily on a grotesque snakeskin throne.

She was ugly, though not merely physically. Her essence was ugly. Jerek walked into the grand chamber and felt it, a physical thing that had sickness clogging in his craw. He looked at the woman even as she looked at him. She was old, gaunt, her skin slack as though, like the reptiles she venerated, she was in the process of shedding it. She wore a simple black gown and a tiara of gold and copper hammered into a perfect circle. The serpent’s head, he saw, consumed its tail. The blood-rich rubies of the tiara’s eyes glittered in the torchlight.

“What does Mannfred want with me now?” the woman asked, cutting to the quick. “He has our aid; does he seek to bleed us dry?”

Jerek stood his ground, offering no hint of diffidence. He couldn’t imagine an arrogant whoreson like Skellan bowing and scraping before the old woman. “He sent me to the city above to deal with a problem, and then bade me visit the mistress to find his whereabouts. It is done, so I have come as I was told.”

Who does the vain Morr-loathed maggot think he is to use *me* as his messenger?” The woman leaned forwards in her throne, hatred blazing in the black pits that ought to have been eyes. “I am Kalada, I am the Eternal, beloved of Neferata. I am the true dark heart of this city. I am the black angel they pray to when the lights are out and the old superstitions grip them. I am the unseen threat lurking in the corner of the eye. I am *not* some worm he can order around as the whim strikes him.” Venom dripped from her words.

Jerek stood his ground, affecting a Skellanish swagger. “Not my problem, lady,” he said, hoping he sounded as egotistical and cocksure as Skellan would have in his place. “I don’t want to bring *his*

wrath down on my head. So do us both a favour, tell me where he is and I'll get out of your hair, and you can carry on playing the dark mistress to your heart's content."

She looked at him as though he were dirt beneath her fingernail, something to be rooted out and disposed of.

"Like the maggot he is, he's down below, crawling through the slime and putrescence of the old dwarf underways that the rat people have infested. He creeps and creeps, and squirms and creeps, inch by inch and out of sight, leading his damned army through into the heart of the Empire without ever being seen. One of my handmaidens will see you to the door, but from there you are on your own. If you try hard enough I am sure you will be able to smell his stench somewhere down there amid the filth."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Like a Wolf to the Slaughter

The Old Skaven Underways Beneath the World

The dead walked unseen.

They moved with grim determination, unhindered by hunger and other earthly concerns. They came on, a relentless tide beneath the earth, hundreds of them, thousands as they were drawn down through the dirt to be born again into the agony of unlife. Mile by mile more and more white bone and diseased flesh clawed their way into the tunnels, joining the subterranean dance macabre.

The underways were so vast and complex that it was impossible to map or indeed plot a path through them. Some were wide, others unbearably cramped and claustrophobic. In places methane-burning cressets lined the winding tunnels, hinting at some subterranean life, the glass spheres casting ghastly flickering light over everything. Other stretches of tunnel were a dark nightmare of squalor and filth as they rose nearer to the surface, moisture running down the walls and effluvia and human waste washing down from the city. The filth was knee-deep in places. The stench was overwhelming. The darkness was prowled endlessly by shadow-shapes that skittered and chittered before disappearing before the ceaseless advance of the dead.

Mist crept along the floor in places, coiling around the shuffling feet of the dead and the damned. The mist was clammy as it writhed sluggishly around them.

Mannfred von Carstein drove them on mercilessly, bending the shuffling corpses and shambling skeletons to his will. His hand closed around a talisman he had unearthed in the rubble of the old tombs at Khemri, in the baking deserts of the Lands of the Dead. It was a peculiar device of little worth; though he had found it deceptively powerful when it came to influencing the more mindless undead. It was an ugly trinket to the eye, a small oval shaped pendant carved from obsidian with a central eye surrounded by odd pictograms of what looked like animal-headed people. The jewel itself was gripped in a silver hand setting with pointed talons. He felt the Eye, hot against his skin, amplifying his will so that none raised by the necromantic arts or held together by the dark wind of Shyish, could resist him.

Here and there the dead were assailed by gouting spouts of flame from fissures in the earth, always accompanied by a deep rumbling tremble from down below. Noxious fumes hung in the air of the webway of tertiary tunnels.

Occasionally the rhythmic cadences of dull drums and hammering reached up from below.

Cracks and chasms in the labyrinth vented greyish plumes of steam, and the stink of sulphur along with the stench of matted fur and excrement was carried by the subterranean winds.

Patches of yellow oil corroded into raw iron ore set into the tunnel walls. It was slick to the touch and reeked like lamp oil. Occasional strings of long, thin, spiny, brown hair caught on jags of rock. The air smelled of festering wounds.

There were prints too, in the dust, like the treads of large hunting dogs, only narrower, with elongated claws that left scratches in the clay ground.

The deeper they went the more walls they passed that had been daubed with the mark of the Horned Rat.

By then they had gone too deep, but there was no turning back.

The ratmen came shrieking, chattering and squawking out of the darkness, ringing their plague bells and wielding swords and daggers of bone. If they were words, they were none the dread count could decipher. The sounds were a cacophony of rapid trills, short, clipped and they often sounded as though they were repeated several times. Beneath the chatter lay a low grating noise.

Vermin swarmed over and around them, scores of bloated rats and ferocious bug-eyed rodents. Their thick worm-like tails quivered excitedly as they sank their teeth into the front ranks of the dead and tore at the rancid meat. There were no screams from the dead and no cessation in their relentless march. They dragged the rats forwards even as the rodents devoured the flesh from the calcified bones of their undead enemy.

The ratmen held their ground, banging spears and swords against the clay floor and rock walls, raising a cacophony of sound that was deafening. It folded in and in, and in again on itself, intensifying and amplifying the din until it became a single wall of noise.

In the flickering light of the glass spheres the many and hideous wounds of the ratmen were visible. Their feral snouts were torn and gnarled, gangrenous, teeth broken, lips torn back, eyes missing, ears ripped off. Others showed signs of mutation, their claws twisted and warped so that they became weapons grafted into their virulent flesh, their musculature bloated and twisted so that their reach doubled, their legs double-jointed around the knees, enhancing their natural pounce.

The tunnels were cramped, claustrophobic, with the dead lurching and stumbling forwards into one another. Strips of flesh dung to bones, draping them like rags. There was no room for more than three or four of the small ratmen to come at the shuffling dead at a time. Even so there were hundreds of them spilling out of every crack and crevice, clothed in rags and scraps of armour marked with the triangle of the Horned Rat. Sheer force of numbers held the dead in a nexus of tunnels where fifteen passageways crossed one another. The dead air reeked of sulphur and brimstone. They came from all sides, dropping down from above and climbing out of fissures below, a swarm of vermin.

Noxious fumes filled the tunnels, choking cloying fumes that sapped the air from around the dead. It was a pity for the rats that the dead had no need of anything as prosaic as air. The battle was joined with a clash of bone and fur on rusty blades. A sleek black-furred rat-man swung the ball joint of a human leg embedded with a razor of saw-toothed bone into shambling zombie. The bone stuck in rancid flesh. Shrieking, the skaven warrior tore his makeshift weapon free of his dead foe and slammed it again and again into the dead man's rotten face. The bone razor made an ungodly mess, slicing through nose and cheek, opening an impossibly wide smile of flapping skin. Then the dead fell on the rat man and the shrieking turned to terrified screams as the zombie's chipped and broken finger bones clawed into its eyes and pulled at its skull, until it had opened the ratman's head and was feasting on the mulch of brain beneath.

Green ribbons of crackling light arced through the fumes, tearing the flesh from the bones of the front line of undead. The corpses staggered and twisted in the hideous parody of a dance, flesh flensed from bone. There were no cries. Agony was silent. Rats swarmed over the fallen meat, their teeth grinding and tearing at the rancid flesh as they chewed and swallowed, feasting ravenously.

Gnats and flies swarmed in behind the smoke, biting and stinging, a multitude of insects buzzing around the faces of the dead, into ears and mouths as they flapped, up noses, in eyes with such cohesion to their pestilential assault that they formed a solid veil of insects.

Mannfred moved effortlessly through the ranks of the dead, muttering an arcane curse beneath his breath. The flies swarmed around his face. The dead fell away from him as he walked slowly and deliberately to the front of their number. A foul stench of death arose, thickening into a cloud that gathered around his clenched fist. The flies fell, the sheer incessant buzz of their wings suddenly

silenced. With a horde of ratmen clamouring to reach him, fighting over one another, Mannfred raised his fist to his lips and opened his fingers. He blew once, sharply, sending a thick plume of smoke out over the fat-bellied ratmen. The stench of death clung to the living, fed on their fur, as dissolution set in wherever the smoke touched, the smell growing ever more sickening as the fur, hide and flesh rotted from their bones. They fell at his feet.

It was a cruel death, but the cloud dissipated before it could claim more than a third of the rodents. Their cries were wretched as they writhed on the ground. The vampire relished them. Beneath, behind and between the screams of the dying, Mannfred heard the drums.

Only they weren't drums.

The ground trembled beneath his feet. It was a small movement at first, a rumble, but it quickly grew in intensity until the dirt and clay of the ground buckled beneath him. He reached out as a section of the ceiling came crashing down, crushing a handful of rats beneath the rockfall.

All around the dead, the walls of the tunnel collapsed and the ceiling caved in. As the rock and dirt spilled into the passages the blighted skaven poured in after it, riding the wave of debris, talons bared, glittering with virulent poison. They fell upon the dead like a plague.

A hunchbacked ratman scuttled forwards, a crystal sphere in its grubby paw. Chittering and shrieking it lobbed the glass ball up at the ceiling above Mannfred's head, shattering it. A deleterious yellow-green choking gas billowed out. Mannfred breathed deeply of the poison wind, feeling its blistering bite at the back of his throat. Mannfred blew the vile gas from his lungs and levelled an accusing finger at the creature that had hurled the glass sphere. The gas ignited, an arc of flame billowing from his lips all the way to the ratman's furred face. The skaven writhed around on the floor as the fire ate into him.

Mannfred turned his back on the dying rodent.

A beast came to the fore with a glittering blade that pulsed a sickly green in the ghastly light, throwing its taint across the ranks of the dead. The skaven was a giant, more a rat fiend than a ratman. It swatted aside a corpse, smashing its skull against a huge boulder. The sword danced in the creature's hands, weaving a pattern of death in the air as it advanced on Mannfred. It was obviously a champion of its kind. It moved with the arrogant swagger of strength.

Mannfred touched the talisman, focusing on the image of his damned legion parting to allow this monstrosity through to face him. Before him, the shuffling dead mirrored the image in his mind, a path opening up through the heart of them.

Mannfred drew his blade and moved to meet it, ignoring the melee around him. Venom dripped from the ratman's fangs. Mannfred bared his own fangs, his lips curling back into a feral smile, every bit as predatory as the skaven's snarl.

He blocked the creature's first swing wordlessly. The blow sent shivers down his arm and a sunburst of pain up through his fingers as though the blade somehow contained lightning harnessed from the sky. His rage bellowed from his mouth as he threw his head back and screamed, launching a blistering series of cuts that the beast barely knocked aside as it stumbled backwards into the bodies of its fallen comrades.

Mannfred lunged forwards, refusing to allow a moment's respite.

He cut low, bringing his blade up in a vicious arc, the tip of the sword piercing the underside of the warped ratman's jaw, and up through its mouth and into its brain.

The giant ratman didn't fall.

It staggered back, massive convulsions wracking its body, and reared back on its hind legs, tearing the blade free of its skull. Ichor dripped down the front of its battered battle armour. Whatever maddening battle drugs fuelled its system, the creature refused to fall.

It lashed out with its loathsome blade, cutting deep into the Vampire Count's shoulder.

It was no ordinary sword.

Agony sang in his tainted blood.

Fire burned beneath his skin.

The blade was laced with some kind of corrosive mixture. On a living thing its kiss would no doubt prove fatal. As it was, Mannfred felt the sickness of the warped blade's bite, and the sting as its infection spread throughout his body. His back arched as his cadaver contorted, railing against the pain of the cut in his shoulder.

Even as he straightened, he felt his flesh knitting, the answering fire spreading up his arm from his fingertips.

His grin was ferocious.

Mannfred moved in close enough to breathe in the stink of the skaven's corrupt flesh. He hammered his fist into the ratman's snout, following the blow with a balletic sword-arm cross, his blade cutting deep into the bone of his opponent's neck.

He stepped back, admiring the efficacy of the blow.

The ratman remained on its feet for a moment, its head lolling on its neck, attached by a single tendon and a patch of fur. Then it fell.

He cut the beast's head from its shoulders and hurled it at the ravening horde of rats and mutant creatures from the deeps of the Old World.

Then, standing over the corpse, he bade it rise, not the valiant enemy it had been, but a headless warrior of darkness and spite. Around him more and more of the fallen ratmen rose, joining the ranks of his abominable army, turning on the rats in the tunnels with stunning savagery. The headless rat was lethal, its vile blade cleaving flesh from bone, the touch of its weeping shaft corroding fatally through fur and scraps of battle armour to still the rabid vermin hearts of those rash enough to get in its way.

Mannfred stood in their midst, silently watching.

Every ratman that fell rose again, joining silently with the ranks of the undead.

It was time, he knew, to lead his army to the surface.

Like the grand puppet-master he was, Mannfred drew the newly dead rats and skaven to the fore of his army. These creatures would come up from the underground to strike fear into the hearts of the living.

Winter would bring a war unlike any that humanity had ever witnessed.

Jerek walked in darkness.

He heard cries and other, stranger, sounds echoing up from the deeps. He ignored them. He wasn't here for whatever daemons lived this far down in the underways. He was hunting other game. Skellan had disappeared down this hole and he would find him.

The handmaiden, Narcisa, led Jerek deep into the tunnels beneath the subterranean temple. She didn't talk. In the occasional flickers of light from the oil lamp she carried, Jerek saw utter distaste in her expression. He didn't try to talk to her. He watched her as she walked. Everything about her bearing betrayed her profession. She was arrogant with her flesh, enjoying the attention of his eyes. She was barefoot, but not once did she so much as flinch as she walked over rock dust and chips of stone.

Eventually, she stopped at the mouth of what appeared to be a vast cavern.

"You aren't like him, are you?" she asked suddenly. "You're different. He talks and swaggers, and needs to be the big man, but you are different. You're quiet. That, back there, with the Eternal, was an act, wasn't it?" It was barely a question; she knew full well she was right.

Jerek nodded without saying anything.

"He is down here," she said, walking ahead slightly and pointing. The way she said *he* betrayed a surprising level of hatred. There is a shaft that plunges several hundreds of feet into the darkness, try not to fall down it."

"I'll do my best," Jerek said. "You've met him haven't you?"

She turned to face him, nostrils flaring. She wasn't pretty when angered. "Oh, I met him," she said. She pulled at a red silk kerchief she wore tied around her throat, baring two hard pink scars of puncture wounds. "He gave me these."

"He fed on you?" Jerek asked, horrified by the thought of tasting undead blood. Surely it was poison...

"He fed on me," she admitted, as though confessing the violation burnt her tongue.

"It's not... it's not *right*," said Jerek, still struggling to come to terms with the idea of a vampire feeding on a kindred creature. Why would he?"

"Potency, fool. Are all of von Carstein's gets so simple? To drink the blood of a vampire is to absorb some of its essence, its strength."

"But it is an abomination," Jerek said, aghast at the very notion of it. It was parasitic.

"Oh you truly are simple, aren't you?" the Lahmian handmaiden said, shaking her head in disbelief. "It is about the quest for domination. He seeks to imprint his power on me, cause me to bow to his will, to see him as my master." She laughed bitterly at the prospect.

Jerek struggled with the image. "Did you bow to him?"

"Never," Narcisa said vehemently.

"Good. Skellan doesn't deserve benediction. He is a monstrosity."

"And yet he is your kin?"

Jerek shook his head. "He is no kin of mine, woman. I intend to end his miserable existence here and now."

"Yet you serve the same master, curiouser and curiouser. This is something else you did not mention to the Eternal. I wonder, does that mean you are lying to me, or did you lie to her?"

"I have told no lies."

"Oh I think you have," Narcisa said. "I can read men. You lied like all men, to get what you want, only this time it wasn't soft legs around your head. You truly do intend to kill him, don't you?"

"I do. His head is yours, if you would have it, to appease his violation."

She laughed again, this time genuinely amused by his offer. "Oh, men have violated me in worse ways than his brutish assault. I live through their abuses day and night for my mistress. Do you think I lie with them for my own pleasure? A suitor would offer me his heart if he sought to impress me. Or are these pretty words nothing more than a tisane so that I will offer my throat to you as well?"

"I am not tempted by your blood, woman," said Jerek.

"Again, you lie. I can feel your hunger. You would take me in your arms and deliver the sweetest, tenderest bite, and then you would feed. You are starving. Do you think I cannot tell? You stink of vermin; the blood of rats and mice is on your breath. You are weak and yet you would go up against a monster. That makes you either a hero or a fool."

"Isn't foolishness the trademark of a hero?"

She ignored him. "I take you, at first glance, for a fool. You hunger for a taste of me and my blood would give you the strength you need to match the beast you hunt, yet if I offered my wrist you wouldn't bite, would you? That is why you stink of animal blood. You wouldn't give yourself an advantage because you hate what you are. You loathe yourself to the point that even if I offered myself willingly out of hatred for your enemy you would not drink."

"You have the right of it," said Jerek. He met her gaze with defiance. "I will not drink of you, woman. I come here to end things, not begin them anew. Blood solves nothing."

"You are a peculiar creature."

"I am a wolf," Jerek said, summoning the image of Ulric's blessed white wolf in his mind. For a moment he felt whole, strong. The feeling faded as the image dissolved.

“And I am a lamb,” the Lahmian said, with no hint of irony in her voice as she held out her wrist for him. “Feed on me. It is your nature, surrender to it. You must if you hope to defeat him. Alone you are not strong enough.”

Jerek found himself thinking about it, imagining lifting her wrist to his mouth. A heady rush of sensations washed over him. Even the awareness of the possibility was euphoric. He couldn’t begin to think what the effect of the actual blood would be.

Jerek pushed her hand away.

“No.” He shook his head, backing away from her.

Narcisa sighed. “Then you truly are a fool.”

“I’m not a fool,” Jerek said, “but more importantly, I am not a parasite.” Jerek clenched his fists in frustration. You don’t understand. I am damned already. I will not make matters worse.”

She laughed in his face. “You cannot make matters worse. You can only die. Your only option is oblivion. Is that what you want? It isn’t it? That’s what you want.”

“Not yet,” Jerek said. When this is over, perhaps, but there are things that must be done before I can rest.”

“You mean killing. There’s killing to be done before you can rest.”

“Yes.”

“Then you better hope he doesn’t kill you before you kill him.” Narcisa re-tied the silk scarf around her throat. “On the far side of the shaft lie three tunnels,” she said matter-of-factly, as though their conversation had never veered into the realm of murder. “One leads to the lair of the rats. One, eventually will take you to a dawī stronghold in the Worlds Edge Mountains if you walk to its end, and the other branches out into countless tributaries. You could walk them for a thousand years and not find your way back to the surface.”

“How will I know which to take?”

“You won’t.”

She left him there, alone, in the dark.

Time lost all meaning.

The dark was his lord and master.

He searched.

He walked.

He listened.

Every so often he made a mark on the floor with a fragment of stone he had found. It worked like chalk. He drew a crude sign of Ulric, hoping his god would lead him back home when he was done.

It could have been a day, a week or a year. He heard strange things, chitterings and skitterings, but stayed away from their source, respectful of whatever daemons lurked in the underways. Mostly the passages were silent but for the occasional drip of damp water from above and the scuff of his own feet. More than once he jumped at his own shadow, mistaking the shambling shape for something more fearful. He felt the touch of hunger returning, the seductive lure of those fragmented truths that heralded the onset of the depravation-madness. He tried to push them aside, focusing on the white wolf. It was a majestic creature.

Finally, he heard whistling.

It was faint at first, almost lost beneath the rush and swell of some louder sound.

It took him a moment to realise that he was hearing the crash of water. It was deafening in the confines of the underways. Rivers, he knew, ran underground as well as over land in places. The boom and crash was the cry of a subterranean waterfall. That he heard the whistling at all had to be the result of some freakish acoustics. Jerek said a silent thank you to the quirk of geology.

Jerek stopped. He closed his eyes, focusing purely on the sound. It barely carried to him, but he recognised the whistler's tune. He had heard it before: *The Lay of Fair Isabella*. The last time he had heard it was during the long siege of Altdorf all those years ago. Jon Skellan had been whistling it as he walked amongst the bones of the dead, picking a path back towards the Vampire Count's pavilions. It had stuck with Jerek because it said so much about Skellan's casual disdain for life. It was then he had known—known for sure and certain—that some small relic of his old self had survived the siring. So, in a peculiar way, he owed Skellan for proving he wasn't the monster he had thought he was.

Hearing the same song now went beyond mere coincidence. Jerek had long since stopped believing in random happenstance.

The whistling moved nearer, reverberating around the old tunnels. Jerek crept towards the edge of the burrow as it opened up into a vast cavern.

There was beauty in the Old World, or under it. The cavern was living proof of it. A river ran through it, falling away into blackness as it plunged over the lip of a huge chasm. The way the sounds echoed and folded back on themselves suggested it was a substantial drop. Spray rose back up from the depths creating a fine white mist that hung over the entire cavern.

Skellan sat on a rock, kicking his feet and whistling. He picked at his fingernails with a long thin sliver of wood. Jerek watched him for a moment, hatred bubbling inside him. He quelled it. Hatred would not serve him. Skellan was a stone cold killer. Hatred, rage, they were emotions, and emotions were weakness. That was Skellan's mantra. In this instance the old wolf knew he was right.

Skellan's lantern picked out the crystalline structure of one of the walls. Quartz and other faceted minerals caught, reflected and refracted the glare, conjuring ghostly rainbows across the mist.

Jerek walked slowly out into the centre of the cave.

He hadn't imagined a glory-hound like Skellan being capable of biding his time in some stinking tunnel when he could have been out in Altdorf revelling in the slaughter being wrought by his master. So what brought him down here and left him sitting idly twiddling his thumbs? The only thing Jerek could imagine was power. The vampire obviously believed there was something to be gained by hiding out down here while Mannfred fought. Did he hope to steal in and take advantage of the weakened count? Or was there something else down here in the darkness, some other fiend he sought to enlist? A fresh treachery to unleash? Nothing Jon Skellan ever did was simple or obvious.

The crash of water masked his footsteps until he was almost halfway.

"You don't appear to be a rat," said Skellan, looking up at his approach, apparently unbothered and equally unsurprised by Jerek's sudden appearance. "But then you don't look like much of anything."

He tossed the wooden pick away thoughtlessly, and swung his legs down and slid off the rock.

"Well, you've seen better days."

Skellan grinned. "So what are you? Apart from lost?"

"I'm not lost, Skellan," said Jerek. His voice betrayed him, he realised. For all the magic masking his face, his voice was still his voice.

Skellan raised an eyebrow in mock puzzlement. There was no indication that he recognised Jerek's voice, but then why would he? It had been a long time since their last encounter, Jerek reminded himself. "Well, well, you seem to have me at a disadvantage, fellow. Obviously you're not a woman, so I haven't left your bed before dawn and broken your heart. No, to be fair, you could conceivably be a woman, but if you *are*, you aren't a particularly attractive one and I can't imagine I would have crawled into your bed in the first place, so that pretty much discounts an illicit tryst. Yet you obviously know me and I haven't the slightest idea who you are. I have to admit I am curious."

"You know me, Skellan," said Jerek. He walked slowly into the centre of the room. Skellan's small bull's-eye lantern was trained on him. Jerek didn't shield his eyes despite the discomfort.

“No, I don’t think I do.”

Jerek knew he was babbling. It was too late for regrets, but he couldn’t help but wish he had taken Narcisa up on her offer of blood. “Oh, come on, Jon. We go back a long way, you and I. I’m hurt you don’t remember me. I had hoped after our last encounter that I would be the face that haunted your dreams... Oh, that’s it of course. You don’t recognise this face do you? How about the voice?” Skellan said nothing. “No? You disappoint me, Jon. You don’t recognise a fellow Hamaya? Did Konrad mean so little to you? What am I saying? Of course he did. But Vlad? Surely you remember us standing side-by-side with my sire, facing the great walls of Altdorf together in those last days before his fall?”

Jerek slipped his other hand into his pocket and cracked the small clay talisman the girl had given him. He didn’t feel anything, but he knew from Skellan’s face that the glamour had slipped as soon as the token had broken. He savoured the momentary glimmer of fear in Skellan’s one good eye.

“See, you do remember me. I knew you couldn’t have forgotten me after all we’ve been through together, Jon.”

“What do you want, wolf?”

“What do you think? To finish what I started at Grim Moor. I tire of this perpetual dance of death and would have it over once and for all.”

“You’ve come to kill me? You don’t have it in you, old man. You think you are a colossus, but I’ve got news for you, you’re not the mountain you think you are. You’re a mountain goat. There’s a difference.”

“You talk too much, Skellan. You always have. I’m not here for you, you’re the whipping boy. I’m here for your master.”

Skellan slapped his forehead in mock despair, and then burst out laughing. You’re priceless Jerek, do you know that? Truly, I don’t know how I will live without you in my life, but I suppose I will have to if you are hell-bent on hunting Mannfred. This is just too delicious for words’ Skellan moved forwards, arms open wide, as though to wrap him up in a huge bear hug. He stopped five paces from Jerek, a look of pure perplexity spreading across his ruined face. “Oh my word, you actually think you can kill Vlad’s heir, don’t you? Wonderful—and yet so utterly tragic. Have you looked at yourself lately, wolf? You can have all the glammers in the world cast on your mangy carcass, but they won’t disguise the fact that underneath them all you are a wreck,” said Skellan. He appeared to think for a moment. “I don’t like you, Jerek. You know that. Even so, I have no reason to lie to you. You won’t last two minutes if you go up against him. He isn’t like Konrad, and even that madman whipped your arse for you if I remember rightly. Trust me, wolf. I’ve seen him fight. He is everything Vlad was and more.”

“I’ll take my chances if it is all the same to you, Jon. You are obviously down here waiting for him. Just tell me where he is.”

“Ahh, but see, I can’t do that, old man. As much as I’d like to see your ashes scattered to the four winds, I can’t let you take that fight just in case by some miracle you do go and kill him. It would all become so terribly messy if you did. You see, as unlikely as that is, Mannfred’s demise would cause rather a problem for me. We’ve got plans. You don’t think I enjoy loitering in this pit do you? Let me just disabuse you of that notion if you do. I don’t, but there’s a reason for it. I’m waiting for Mannfred, you see. The war has begun and the living are completely oblivious. He’s the greatest of all of us, wolf: the grand schemer. Do you think Konrad’s insanity was mere chance? Do you think Vlad’s fall was a divine gift of Sigmar? It was all him. He has been playing the longest game of all. Even now he brings the greatest force the Old World has ever witnessed to bear, and the humans are clueless, because they cannot see it with their own two eyes. He will be culling them before they even realise he has come up from underground. To allow you through, to help you kill him, hurts me, not in any sentimental way; it’s all about self interest. It would undermine my power.”

“Then it would seem we are at an impasse. I am here to kill him, you can’t have me succeed.”

“There’s no impasse, wolf. I’ll just have to kill you myself. I hope you have coin enough to pay the ferryman. Oh wait, you don’t have a soul to take that particular journey, do you? Shame; you’ll just have to content yourself with oblivion.”

“And you think that should frighten me? What have I got to fear from oblivion? I am made from the dust of the earth and to the dust I shall return. Death, a second death, holds no fear for me.”

“I almost believe you old man, but then I look at you and see how desperately you’ve clung to this half-life of yours and that tells me different. You’re scared. You’ve grown fond of this stinking place haven’t you?”

Jerek reached slowly for the warhammer at his belt, but it wasn’t there. He couldn’t remember the last time he had held it. His heart sank.

Skellan laughed, seeing him come up empty handed. “Well you are in a pickle aren’t you, old wolf? I *almost* pity you. As it is I’ll just have to kill you all the more quickly.”

“This is the beginning of the end, Skellan,” said Jerek as he unleashed the beast within. His hands stretched, fingers elongating, nails hooking into talons. His face shifted too, altering as completely as when it had been under the spell of the urchin girl’s glamour. His brow broadened, the ridge of his eye sockets arching, becoming more atavistic as he connected with the beast.

Grinning, Skellan cracked his knuckles and squared up to the wolf. He moved quickly, spinning on his heel and lunging backwards for his sword, which he had left leaning against the rock.

Jerek reacted instantaneously, springing forwards and slamming into Skellan’s back.

They came down hard, sprawling across the rocky ground.

Jerek grabbed a tangle of Skellan’s hair and slammed his face hard into the ground. The sickening sound of bone splintering was lost beneath the roar of the waterfall and Skellan’s matching howl as he unleashed the beast within.

Jerek tried to hammer Skellan’s face back down, but Skellan contorted around beneath him, prying his fingers up into Jerek’s face and mouth, pushing his head back as he sought the leverage he needed to dislodge the wolf from his back.

Jerek crunched down into Skellan’s fingers, taking a huge bite out of the bone. Skellan shrieked, partly in agony, partly in anger, and wrenched his arm back, throwing Jerek bodily. Jerek sprawled sideways, rolled over and came to his feet panting hard.

Skellan dropped into a fighting crouch.

They circled one another warily.

Skellan’s grin was feral.

“Are you frightened, wolf? Yes, yes you are. I can smell it right there with the stink of rats and dead birds on your breath. Why would you be frightened if you hadn’t fallen in love with this life, eh?”

“I have no love of this life, believe me.”

“*This* life,” Skellan mocked, “but what of your life before? That’s it, isn’t it? You still yearn for what you were! That’s possibly the most tragic thing I have ever heard! I *love* it!” Skellan’s arm snaked out and he slapped Jerek open-palm across the face. Jerek rocked back on his heels, rolling with the blow. His head came back around slowly.

“Don’t tell me you don’t see ghosts, Skellan,” said Jerek, answering Skellan’s slap with a double-handed clap to either side of the vampire’s throat, a blow that would have shattered a mortal man’s neck. Skellan barely registered the strike, backhanding Jerek contemptuously. “I know what happened to your wife,” Jerek said. “Don’t tell me she doesn’t come to you at night, in your dreams. If one of us had cause to long for his old life it is you, not me.”

Skellan hawked up a wad of loose phlegm and spat in the wolf’s face. “She doesn’t come to me. She is at peace, something neither of us shall ever know.

The bellow of the waterfall was an indelicate thunder booming throughout the cavern. Jerek straight-armed Skellan in the forehead, snapping his head back. He followed the blow up with a savage left hook, driving his fist into Skellan's throat. Skellan answered with a clubbing right and four successive rabbit punches to Jerek's kidneys, lifting him bodily into the air. As he came down Skellan hammered a right cross into his face, shattering his nose in a bloody spray.

Jerek shook his head. His vision swam alarmingly, the world tilting around him as Skellan followed up the initial onslaught, stepping inside his wild swing and hammering home an elbow to the side of his head that had Jerek sprawling at his feet.

He stood over the wolf, a look of utter disdain on his ruined face.

"You really thought you could do this?"

Jerek swept his leg around, cutting Skellan's feet out from under him. Skellan came down hard.

Jerek pounced on him, tearing at his face and throat with his teeth. Skellan tried to throw him, but couldn't break Jerek's hold. He slammed his head forwards, his forehead connecting viciously with Jerek's already broken nose. Jerek clutched at Skellan's face, thrusting his fingers into all of the soft places they could find. He felt the heat of Skellan's tainted blood swell up around them. Skellan screamed and threw his weight to the side. They rolled, Skellan's greater strength giving him the upper hand momentarily. He straddled Jerek, pummeling his fists over and over into the vampire's face. Jerek took the beating. He delivered a single savage roundhouse of a punch, his fist cannoning into the underside of Skellan's jaw. Skellan spat blood as he sank back, shaking his head, even as Jerek pushed him away.

Jerek forced himself back to his feet. He stumbled back a step.

Skellan stared at him, his one good eye bloody, the eye patch torn away from his ruined eye to reveal the ragged wound Jerek had inflicted upon him back at Grim Moor. He pushed himself up onto his knees, coiled, ready to spring forwards. Skellan smiled bleakly. It was an ugly expression on his ravaged face.

Jerek backed up another step, bracing himself for the charge.

He felt the spray of the waterfall on his back and realised he'd somehow managed to be manoeuvred around until the chasm was at his back. He didn't dare risk even a brief glance over his shoulder to see just how close he was to the fall. He had to rely on his other senses. He concentrated on the echoing crash of the water. It was louder, resonating within his bones. That, combined with the kiss of the white mist on his neck was all the evidence he needed to know he was too close to the edge.

Before he could take another step in any direction, Skellan launched a blistering attack, coming out of his crouch like some dervish possessed, spitting blood and hissing. He hit Jerek full in the chest. For a moment they hung there before Skellan's momentum carried them both back over the chasm's edge.

They fell backwards through the fragmentary rainbows.

The drop was vertiginous. Water sprayed over them as they tumbled and twisted, falling through the air. Skellan tore at Jerek, trying to break free of his hold long enough to mutate into avian form. Jerek refused to let him go. Skellan shrieked, driving his head forwards to butt Jerek full in the face. The rush of air ripped and pulled at them as they tumbled head over feet, still locked in their immortal struggle, into the cannonade of water. The sheer elemental might of the waterfall ripped them apart, throwing Jerek back against the jagged rock wall, buffeting and bludgeoning him against the jagged stone before hurling him dear.

He lost sight of Skellan in the torrent of water.

Then he hit the ground with bone-shattering force.

He lay, broken, at the bottom of the fall, barely able to lift his head. Skellan was nowhere to be seen. The subterranean waterfall rose hundreds of feet above him. The agony escaped his lips. He tried to move, but couldn't.

"Well—that hurt," said Skellan, his voice was barely audible above the water.

Jerek tried to crane his neck to get a better view of his surroundings. He lay on a narrow ledge of rock that ringed a still deeper chasm. A lambent glow of orange came from below, molten in its intensity. A slender stone span bridged the chasm. Beyond the bridge lay another ledge of stone and beyond that a great pool that was fed by the constant spume of water. Splashes lapped over the lip of the pool, spilling across the narrow ledge and over the crevice. White steam rose in great clouds where the water hit the fiery pit below.

He couldn't see Skellan for the steam.

Then he saw his own leg. It was a bloody mess, broken in two places below the knee so that it stuck out at an impossible angle from his body. White bone pierced his trousers.

He tried to rise and fell back in a sunburst of agony.

"I'm coming to get you, wolf," Skellan taunted.

Jerek closed his eyes against the pain. He knew what he had to do. There was no choice. He couldn't allow himself to think about it. If he did he wouldn't be able to go through with it. He tore a strip from his ruined trousers, wadding it into a ball and bit down on it. Even that little movement was torture. He couldn't bear to look as he began to feel out the broken bone. He gripped the ruined leg hard and pulled down, forcing the bone back into place. The splintered edges of bone grated against each other. For a moment he thought he was going to black out from the pain. As it was the rag fell from his mouth and his screams drowned out the crash of the water.

"You're dead, old man. Dead, dead, dead," the words echoed around the cavern, folding in on themselves insensibly, diminishing into a babble of water. For all his taunts, there was no sign of Skellan. Jerek could only assume he was hurt.

Tears streaming down his cheeks, Jerek forced himself to sit up.

He swayed dangerously and almost fell back. Jerek forced himself to remain upright even when it felt as though the world fell away from under him. Biting back on the pain, he struggled to look around the cavern. He could see Skellan, lying on his back on the far side of the narrow stone bridge. He had fallen badly, but there was no way for Jerek to know precisely how badly. He had to move, he knew. He had to finish Skellan before Skellan finished him.

"It ends here, Skellan," promised Jerek, taking hold of his ankle. There was nothing to brace himself on and the rag had fallen out of reach. "One, two, *three!*" He gasped and yanked down hard on his disjointed ankle on three, the word tearing from his mouth in a shriek. The pain was excruciating as he forced the shattered bones together, pressing them until they ground into place.

"You scream like a little girl, wolf," Skellan mocked. He hadn't moved in all the time they had lain there.

"I'm coming to eat your heart, Skellan," Jerek called across the chasm. "Run if you can. Oh, look, you can't."

Jerek gripped the rock wall beside him and clawed his way up it through the pain barrier until he stood on his broken leg. He gritted his teeth against the pain and began to walk slowly, dragging his lame leg behind him.

Twice he stumbled and almost fell as he crossed the bridge over the lava pit. The heat coming up from the fissure was overpowering despite the fact that the pool of molten stone was hundreds of feet below.

Skellan hadn't moved.

The reason, Jerek saw, was that a huge stalagmite had pierced his lower stomach and abdomen and jutted up out of the wound like an accusing spear, effectively pinning Skellan to the ground.

Jerek stood over the fallen vampire.

"It's over, Skellan. You are dead."

Skellan shook his head, and reached up stubbornly clasping the stone spear as though intending to haul himself off it. "Not yet, wolf, not yet." But his voice was already fading, taking on a distant quality.

Jerek shook his head.

“Can you see the darkness? Is there anything there for us?”

“No,” Skellan said. There is nothing.” But a smile began to spread slowly across his face.

“What do you see, Skellan? Tell me.”

“I see you, wolf. I see you dead at my feet,” and, screaming in sheer bloody agony Skellan heaved himself upwards, his guts unravelling out of the huge ragged wound in his back like a huge skein of yarn. He fell back, pushing the stalagmite deeper, opening himself up. “You can’t kill me,” said Skellan, but it was obvious to both of them that he didn’t believe it.

“I don’t need to,” said Jerek. “You aren’t important. It was never about you.”

He knelt beside Skellan.

“May you find some kind of peace.”

“Go lick yourself, wolf.”

Jerek placed his hands on either side of Skellan’s head, holding it firm as he leaned in close. He could hear it above the cry and crash of the water, the siren song of the blood. Narcisa’s words came back to him: *to drink the blood of a vampire is to absorb some of its essence, its strength*. Lust, hunger, need, the base primal instinct to feed drove him and this time he surrendered to it, surrendered in hate and need, and desperation. Jerek leaned in, sinking his teeth into the vampire’s throat, and drank deeply even as Skellan struggled weakly to fight him off. Skellan’s corpse kicked and bucked and thrashed until the death shudder took him and he lay still. It was unlike any blood he had ever tasted: thicker, richer and more potent. It sang in his throat even as he sucked it down greedily. This was his blood, the blood of the vampire. This was a distillate of life eternal. This was power.

This was his curse.

This was his damnation.

He was a creature of the blood, a monster.

It was in him, this sickness, this power, and he enjoyed it.

He had proved himself a beast. Vlad von Carstein had been right when he had chosen him all those years ago. He did make a good vampire.

Jerek rose, wiping the last trace of tainted blood off his lips.

Skellan wasn’t dead, not yet, but drained there was no life in his corpse. It would return though, given time. Jerek couldn’t allow that to happen. An evil of Skellan’s enormity could not be allowed to rise again. The world had hurt enough.

Jerek reached down and hauled him up off the stalagmite. He carried him, limping and shuffling to the centre of the narrow bridge. He felt strong, stronger than he had felt in years, despite his wounds and the fire burning up his leg. Skellan’s vitality flowed in his veins.

He held Skellan’s corpse out over the chasm. It felt light in his arms.

“May you finally be reunited with your woman, Jon Skellan,” Jerek said solemnly as he let go. He watched Skellan’s corpse tumble head over feet until it disappeared beneath the smooth sea of orange and red flames hundreds of feet below, swallowed, cremated by the molten rock.

There would be no resurrection for Jon Skellan, of that Jerek was sure.

“From dust to dust returned,” he said, ending the prayer of interment.

Skellan had, at the very last, been smiling. Perhaps he truly had seen her ghost come to carry him home and that was the reason for the smile. Perhaps his last breath had been taken saying her name.

Jerek wanted to believe that it was so, wanted to believe that there could be some form of redemption for his own monstrous soul. He needed to believe it, but he knew it was a lie.

Skellan hadn’t been smiling.

Death’s rictus had been locked on his cold hard lips, and now there was nothing.

Both flesh and spirit had been destroyed.

Skellan was gone.

Jerek made the sign of Ulric as he watched the lava bubble and pop.

It was as though Jon Skellan had never been.

Jerek walked back across the narrow bridge. Somehow he needed to escape this chasm, but first he needed to rest.

He had lied to Skellan. This wasn't the end. It was the beginning. He had finally sacrificed himself. Becoming a monster was the only way he stood a chance against the greater monsters he hunted.

Drained, he slumped down against the wall, listening to the delicate sound of thunder rumbling deep within the earth until he succumbed to a fitful regenerative sleep.

There was no rest, though.

His dreams were haunted by a white wolf, the elusive animal leading his dream-self a merry chase through the subterranean world of his nightmare.

He came awake gasping, "I am the wolf," and he knew it was true. He had at last become the predator that Vlad had always known he was.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Small Magics

Ulthuan, Fabled Land of the High Elves

High in the mountains of Saphery, overlooking the Sea of Dreams, the eight winds were stirring.

In the shadow of the White Tower, Finreir tried to clear his mind of all conscious thought and distraction, but a single image refused to leave his mind's eye.

Boots, running, knee deep in the snow; thick heavily worked steel greaves; the chinking of armour; a run succumbing to abject panic; a darkness the likes of which he had never known in pursuit.

Finreir's nostrils filled with the scent of animal hide and the sickly bitter taint of evil. It clung to the winds. He sensed a great gnashing of teeth, a great goring of blood and felt as though he were the black crow high up above, watching it all. Trees, like black fingers thrusting up out of the ground, rushed passed his vision as the booted figure continued his desperate flight. The head of a glinting steel axe was brought to chest height as the exhausted runner could flee no more.

He turned on his pursuers, to face his own damnation.

He was a small man, tiny against the harrying pack.

Not a small man... a child of Grimmir, a dwarf, his face bloodied and bruised.

Evil was coming for him.

His only protection were the eight winds, none of which he could touch, and the axe in his hands. The eyes of his hunters were bloodshot, virulent, filled with hate and lust and hunger, and a single name rang out from within their minds: Mannfred.

Finreir came out of the trance with a start, his hands trembling and sweat beading on the back of his neck. His breath came thick and fast as though he'd been running, and in that moment of revelation he could not tell whether it had been a true vision or a snatch of someone else's nightmare.

He staggered to one of the doors of the White Tower and leant his hand against the cold stone, embracing its calming serenity. The old tower was implacable. His chest heaved. He had never known evil quite like the insidious dream-presence.

He sensed a disturbance in the balance of nature. This was more than a mere malevolent presence. This was a force intent on consuming everything in its path like a sickness.

In that moment he saw a twin-tailed hawk swoop down and snatch a mouse from the fields, and wondered if the dwarf he had seen was still alive or if indeed he had even been born yet. Such was the nature of a vision quest. Its truths could be illusive or they could provide moments of clarity greater than any spy glass.

There was only one creature that could tell him if what he had seen was history or deeds yet to come, and that was the creature through whose eyes he had seen the hunt unfold.

It took the mage, Finreir, a long time to feel comfortable confined once more in his robes. Nature's magics felt more intimate and liberating when stripped down for the ritual. That was why he had removed himself from the White Tower. Most of his kin looked unfavourably upon his quirks since,

as a high elf, modesty was expected of him and, as a sorcerer, discipline. In truth he lacked neither, he simply saw things differently and that is what set him apart.

Finreir believed deeply and passionately that although the Ulthuan civilisation was an ancient and wise one, those who dwelt upon the island did not know everything, and that lack of knowledge fed his unceasing curiosity. By night's end he had begged the indulgence of the council. As the youngest adept to have been bestowed the gift of High Magic he held considerable sway, despite the fact that he was still a child amongst his own kind.

But there were certain elves who simply did not accept him.

"You are still young, master Finreir, prone to impetuosity. It is understandable for one who has achieved much in such a short time, but the affairs of men are of no concern to the Asur. We don't deny what you have seen, but with maturity comes wisdom. In time you will see that it is not for us to decide the fate of the Old World. They have little knowledge of our kind and we would have it remain that way for a while longer."

Finreir had taken their chastisement with good grace, but the affairs had sought him out—on the eight winds, no less—and only an ignorant elf would turn his back on that.

Within the hour he had convinced three elf warriors to accompany him.

Something was infecting the entire Old World, something that had been brewing remorselessly over time.

An ancient sickness bubbled up from below, incipient enough for its influence to taint the very winds themselves. He had tasted it on Shyish. It caused Chamon to burn. It infused Ulgu with its noxious stain. It made Gyrin reek with its corruption. Already it had touched Aqshy, Ghur and Hysh. None were immune.

That was the power of the evil he hunted, but that did not seem to concern the council.

Finreir felt deeply that such a threat could not be allowed to go unchallenged.

The truth of his vision must be sought before a clash of civilisations wrought chaos across all the lands. Life was precious, even a dwarfs.

He issued various orders of preparation before returning to the heights of the White Tower.

Finreir swept up the winding stairs, rising higher and ever higher until he was one with the sky, miles above the surface of the earth. He stood in the immense domed ceiling of the tower, the vaulted windows glassless, exposing the inner chamber to the confluence of all the winds. He stood in the centre, the winds surging around him, whipping around in a vortex, howling in an unrelenting gale. Up here where the winds could move unfettered he held his hands aloft, touching them and letting them touch him. He became one with the ultimate power of the winds.

All of his senses had been subsumed by the winds. The winds were his senses now, his sight, his sound, his touch and taste. The reek of corruption swelled within him like a cancer. Out there, flying upon the winds, he found empty husks stripped of life and soul to serve as sentinels. Once they had been birds. Now they were mindless automata, soulless. They were limbs of the dark force, extensions of that malevolent mind. Their unnatural presence chilled him to the core.

This could not have appeared overnight.

Why, he thought, had no other elf seen this before?

Had the arrogance of his kin reached such dizzying heights that a threat such as this would pass unchallenged?

Finreir reached out with his newfound senses, seeking his quarry. He touched the hills of Lustria, scoured the coast of Araby, swept across the Sea of Claws and down the rivers of Middenland. He brushed the Mound of Krell, and rode the Grey Mountains. He skirted the forests of Loren and then the scent, light on the wind drew him towards Black Water and beyond to the dark spires of Drakenhof.

The stench of death was ever present. The carrion seekers circled in the air. There, laid out before him, was a trail of withered black trees that slowly gave way to a forest of bones impaled

brutally upon stakes and left out to be bleached by the sun. There, pecking at the eye socket of one hapless soul, was the crow that had taken him on his vision quest, and on its breath a single word: Mannfred.

He looked the crow in the eye.

The crow blinked and inclined its head, aware that it was being watched from a distance. In the White Tower high above the world Finreir whispered, "Take me to him."

The bird took flight.

Soaring high about the gothic sprawl of the castle below, its black wings danced across the eddies sending him soaring across the plains of the Moot. Following the River Aver and high above the black forests of Nuln, the crow swooped in on Altdorf and circled a city whose walls were empty and whose people had no protection from the advancing legions of darkness outside them. Finreir gasped, aghast at the display of such dark might, but the crow seemed disinterested in such esoterica. Whether a soldier was living or dead in this nightmare landscape made little difference. It would feed soon enough.

The crow extended its talons as it saw its quarry and swooped down to the head of the advancing lines, its gaze fixated on one man, Mannfred.

The bird came down, resting upon the vampire's shoulder. Mannfred flicked it away with an irritated swipe, but the crow refused to leave. Finreir could taste the influence of an even more illusive and malign force influencing even this wretched creature.

Finreir demanded one last thing of the bird, "Who puppets this monster?"

The crow buried its beak into the side of Mannfred's face, drawing blood and unleashing a tidal surge of hate that lashed back across the winds of magic all the way to the heights of the White Tower.

Finreir was pulled off his feet and hurled up into the vast vaulted dome of the chamber, slamming his willowy frame into the finely carved stone. He fell back to the floor, broken.

He knew only one thing as he slipped from consciousness—the vampire's protector was the dark, slumbering evil of Nagash.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Promises Broken

The Underways Beneath Nuln

Jerek sat, slumped against the jagged rock-face.

The waterfall dwarfed him, the cascade of white water pouring down the falls from hundreds of feet above.

There was no way up that he could see, except for what looked like an impossible climb up the near sheer rock face.

Jerek closed his eyes. He had no wish to taunt himself with this fresh failure. He had come so close. He had... an idea.

He concentrated on the image of a bat in his mind, trying to become it just as he so often became the wolf, but he felt no answering surge, no transformation. He pictured a bird, a huge black winged thing, but still his body refused to surrender its form. He willed himself into its shape, trying to fall into the wings, but it was useless.

He fell back against the wall, grunting in frustration. He slammed his clenched fists into his thighs, angry at his own impotence.

It ought to have been the same, simply a case of transforming. He could feel the wolf beneath his skin, so eager to be released, but the other forms refused to take shape.

He dug his nails into the dirt and rock beside him, trying to swallow back his frustration.

He was healing rapidly, the process accelerating beyond anything he had experienced since his siring. It was Skellan's blood. It invigorated his reparative system. Narcisa had been right when she had claimed that feeding on one's own somehow leached their essence, but Jerek knew it wasn't going to be enough. It could be days before his leg was strong enough to take his weight.

He tested his broken leg. It had been hours at most since he had come crashing down the subterranean waterfall. It didn't matter that the bones had already begun to knit, there was no strength in them. His lungs were full of water from the steam he had inhaled. He had no need of air, but the water set a fire inside him that dragged on his strength. He looked up at the daunting climb. There was no other way out of the chasm. Somehow he had to scale the wall. He wasn't built for climbing, lacking the lithe grace of Skellan. He was heavy set, powerfully muscled, broad shouldered and bullish. His weight and size were detrimental, but it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. He would haul himself up by bloody fingernails if that was what it took. He would not fail now, not when he was this close.

The heat of the lava drew sweat out of him and with it his resolve. He looked back up at the climb and knew there was no way he was going to make it.

He had an unnatural thirst on him, although it was more about blood than water.

Now that he had succumbed, he knew that the thirst was going to worsen until he slaked it again and again, and again. He had to escape. He had to make the climb, find Mannfred and end his threat so that he could finally find some rest.

That was all he wanted, to rest. He had lived too long and seen too much. When he closed his eyes, ghosts of the conquered drifted across his mind, butchered corpses dressed up like mannequins to puppet out his memories.

"I am the wolf," he said aloud. His words echoed up and down the chasm before being snatched away and drowned beneath the crush of water.

He pressed his back against the wall, using it to take his weight as he struggled to stand.

Despite the incredible healing properties of his tainted blood, the bones of his shattered leg were weaker than he had thought. Even a little weight would undo the healing process, the pressure driving the freshly knitted bones apart. He leaned heavily on his good leg, clutching the wall and working himself around so that he could begin the arduous climb.

The rock was slick with damp backslash from the waterfall.

He felt out a handhold and pulled himself up, taking all of his weight on three fingers of his left hand and holding himself there, a few feet above the ground, while he felt out a second handhold. Jerek shifted his weight, easing himself another few inches up the climb.

Two more and he found a toehold to take his weight while he leaned back, trying to visualise a path up the cracks and crevices to the top.

It was far from easy. There was no natural route that he could see, only several difficult traverses that would involve perilous moments hanging on by fingertips and with hope. He had no choice but to risk it, knowing that the stalagmites were far enough away so that falling shouldn't prove fatal, but there was the threat of the second crevice and the lava pit should he fall too far.

He forced failure from his mind and dragged himself up another two feet, grunting as his toe slipped off a narrow ledge. He clung to the rock, scraping his foot back and forth until it snagged on the tiny ledge and held firm. He looked down, but even as he did he knew he shouldn't have.

Already, it was a long way down.

It took twenty agonising minutes for Jerek to manipulate his body around so that he had moved out of the spray. Twice his fingers slipped, but he didn't fall. His fingernails had cracked and one had torn free, leaving a bloody mess. His shoulders and arms burned with the exertion. The muscles trembled violently as he struggled to support his weight. He didn't dare risk taking any of the strain on his wounded leg. Grunting, he leaned out to look for the next few handholds.

His hands were too big; they made gripping his fingers on the narrow ledges almost impossible at times. He felt himself weakening with every new reach and stretch. Still, a little over an hour later he reached up, his fingers snagging the lip of the chasm, and with one last almighty heave, he dragged himself back up to the top. He lay on his back, panting and looking at the rainbows and fragments of colour from the crystalline walls. His fingers were raw and bloody. His entire body ached.

Jerek tried to stand, but his leg gave out beneath him.

He lay there, fading in and out of consciousness.

The pain was excruciating.

He dragged himself across the ground, clawing his way to the boulder that Skellan had been sitting on, and lay propped up against it. He felt out the knitting bones, testing them without pushing them to the point where the marrow ripped. They were stronger again, but it would still be a day or more until the leg would be able to take his weight.

There was nothing he could do but rest and let the *unnatural* take its course.

He lay in the dark, listening, trying to discern whispers and sounds, convinced that somewhere out there Mannfred and his dead were scheming. If he could just listen hard enough, perhaps he could make out words in the echoes of the peculiar subterranean sounds.

* * * * *

When at last he was strong enough to walk, Jerek took Skellan's sword and used it as a makeshift crutch. He tore another strip from his ruined trousers and wadded it around the blade's point, tying it off so that the drag-and-carry of the crutch wouldn't damage the weapon beyond repair. He would have need of it soon enough.

It was a long walk back to the surface.

He had come to hate the dark and the claustrophobic confines of the tunnels. The subterranean underway was grim and oppressive, the weight of the earth constantly pressing down on him. It was too akin to being buried alive, and that was an experience Jerek was none too eager to relive. He still suffered traumatic flashbacks to that moment in Morr's garden in Middenheim when his eyes had first opened on the darkness of the tomb and he realised he had been cursed to this unlife. Being born again was not something any man should be forced to experience. Jerek shuddered at the memory and walked on.

It was impossible to tell if he was walking in circles, doubling back on himself and treading the same tunnels over again.

He began noticing signs scratched into the walls, the mark of the Horned Rat. Not wishing to stumble upon a lair of the loathsome ratmen, Jerek turned back, looking for other pathways that led slowly upwards. That was how he found his way out, looking always for the slight incline to confirm that he was moving in the right direction. Every so often he would come across one of the marks he had chalked on his descent. Whenever he saw the sign of Ulric he felt a surge of hope. He would make it. His god hadn't forsaken him.

As he wandered the dark underways he puzzled away the labyrinthine deceptions. The Lahmians had joined forces with von Carstein, of that there could be no doubt. The concubines and courtesans were paving the way for his armies, lulling the influential and powerful humans, bedding them and robbing them of their secrets, which in turn they delivered to Mannfred as their part of the pact. No doubt the whores whispered in their beau's ears subtle misdirections of where the Vampire Count would strike should he ever have the strength to pose a threat to the living, planting arrogance where there ought to have been fear. It was cunning, but then everything about the new count was sly.

What Mannfred offered in return, Jerek dreaded to think?

He was forced to rest more often than he would have liked, but rest served to make him stronger. After a few days he had healed beyond the need for a crutch and fastened the sword to his belt. He was building strength in his leg.

Eventually the sporadic marks of the wolf led him back to the familiar tunnels of the Alt Stadt and in turn back to the Eternal.

There was no warmth on the old woman's face as Jerek barged unannounced into her chamber.

"How dare you defile this place?" Kalada rasped, her voice rich and sibilant.

Jerek threw Skellan's sword down onto the floor at her feet.

"You chose the wrong side in this war, whore," said Jerek.

Outrage turned to fear as she saw the blood on him and understood the significance of the sword.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing that you can give me."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Everything, but first I mean to finish you."

"You don't have the strength."

"Is that an assumption you are willing to risk your life on? You might want to think about picking up that sword. I'll give you a moment to think about it. I'd hate for you to die without at least a struggle."

Before she could move Jerek swept across the five steps between them and took her in his arms. The physical violation of her skin pressed tight against his was clammy and repugnant. He tightened his grip, feeling her brittle bones crack. She struggled, but his grip was iron. His expression never

wavered as he leaned in closer and whispered, "Say goodbye to all of this, witch," his lips close up against her ear.

She whimpered as he yanked her head back. She was ancient. Her bones might have calcified and become delicate, but there was power in her blood. Hatred blazed in her eyes. There was a frightening power within her. Kalada's lips parted, jaw distending hideously as she lashed out at him, her nails clawing at his face, as Jerek sank his teeth into her throat.

It was the sheer audacity of his attack that was her undoing. She was so old, so used to deference, to temerity from her servants that she never imagined, not even for a beat of her dead heart, that a ragged peon of von Carstein's could prove her undoing.

Shock registered in her eyes, but by then it was too late for her to do anything but die.

For the second time since coming below ground Jerek drank the blood of his kin. The first mouthful was intoxicating. She bucked in his arms, her nails breaking against his cheekbone as they gouged bloody black runnels across his face. Still he drank another greedy mouthful. Unlike Skellan's blood, Kalada's was a heady elixir. The potency of the tainted blood surged through him, revitalising Jerek. He swallowed mouthful after gluttonous mouthful until the Eternal stopped screaming and collapsed slackly in his arms. He pressed his hand flat against her breast, pressing down with his cracked and bloody fingernails until they pierced the skin. The woman convulsed once, viciously, as his questing fingers forced aside the tough cartilage and pulled apart the bone cage of her ribs, exposing her withered heart to the stale air. It smelled rank, of corruption and complicity.

Jerek tore it from her chest and took a bite out of it as he let Kalada's corpse slump to the floor. It was tough, like old leather as he worked it with his teeth, and tasted of bile but that didn't stop him from taking another bite, chewing it slowly and swallowing it down. Piece by piece he ate her heart out, and then walked around the subterranean temple, overturning the oil lamps and igniting the tapestries and curtains until there was a fierce blaze taking shape. He stood awhile and watched to be sure that the place would burn, expunging the Lahmian witch and her cult from the face of the Old World. Each crackle and hiss of flame and snap and cackle of wood cracking and splintering as the dissolution set in and the temple drowned in flame.

Jerek reclaimed the sword and strode out of the temple, content that through his actions it would look for all the world as though Mannfred had betrayed the Lahmians, breaking their foul pact.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Matter of Little Faith

Across the Battlefields of the Empire

Vorster Schlagener lived. That was his greatest achievement as a soldier in Martin von Kristallbach's army. No matter how desperate the fight for survival became, Vorster Schlagener lived. It was a useful skill for a soldier and it had been noted among his superiors and the men beneath him.

Better a lucky officer than a tactical genius, he heard one man say, in defence of the mess they found themselves in. And it was true. As a soldier, Vorster would have always chosen to fight beside a lucky man in the hope that some of that luck might rub off.

Where others fell, Vorster somehow remained standing.

It went beyond useful. He became a talisman for the men around him.

He smiled at their talk of luck and the jibes about fate playing a hand. The truth was that none of them wanted to jinx whatever hoodoo kept the young soldier alive. Instead they sought to reap the benefits of his bravery.

As others fell, good and bad men both cut down before their time, Vorster found himself rising through the ranks until Martin himself named him Kreigswarden.

He tried to be a decent man and a fair leader, but it was difficult. Over the months he had developed a deeper appreciation for Ackim Brandt.

It had been more than a year since that first desperate cry of, "The vampires are coming!" And they had been fighting on three fronts in a bitter and bleak winter war. Snow swarmed in the air, whipping up a storm. The chill penetrated his furs, gnawing into his bones. The wind driving the flurry was biting cold, its teeth cleaving into his flesh, stinging all sense of feeling out of his hands. He rubbed them briskly together.

The winter had been the harshest in living memory. Cattle had died of lung blight, calves and foals were stillborn as the damned cold refused to relinquish its hold. The granaries and food silos were long since depleted. People were starving. Starvation led to discontent. With the uneasy peace it wouldn't have been a stretch to imagine neighbours turning on one another if the rumour of a decent meal became too much for them to resist. Regional affiliations ceased to matter. It became a question of survival. Remote settlements were cut off by blizzards. Every homestead suffered losses. The weak and infirm died from the extremes of the elements if starvation didn't take them first. It was all about filling empty stomachs.

Vorster was hungry. He couldn't remember the last time his belly had been full.

It was dark and he couldn't sleep so he had come outside to watch the silent enemy on the hills around them. The hillsides were lined with the army they said could never return.

It was difficult for Vorster to mask his bitterness.

He drew his sheepskin cloak up around his throat.

He turned his back on the dead and trudged back through the knee-deep snows to the pavilion that Ackim Brandt was using as his command tent. He pushed open the canvas flap and ducked into the tent, the storm blowing in behind him. Vorster stamped the snow off his boots and rubbed his

arms vigorously, trying to massage his circulation back into some semblance of life. He wasn't the only insomniac. Brandt looked up from the maps spread out across the table. He raised a curious eyebrow.

"No change," Vorster said. They're waiting for something, but I'm damned if I can work out what it is. It's obviously not the night, it's darker than a Shallyan priestess' puckered behind out there, and it's not the snow. Not even the damned phases of the twin moons seem to be making a blind bit of difference. I don't get it."

"Hmmm," Brandt mused, moving around the table. He steepled his fingers thoughtfully. The map spread out before him depicted the entire battlefield. It still fascinated Vorster to see a war played out so clinically with coloured flags for forces, hostile and friendly regiments, mounted knights and pistoliers. He had spent years down there on the killing ground unable to see the elaborate dance that was any given battle in all of its complexity. To him it was all about the fog of war, the fighting narrowed in around him in a clash of steel and spray of sweat and spill of blood, with him never really seeing anything more than a few feet beyond the tip of his sword. Brandt's world was different. Brandt saw it all dispassionately, like a hawk from above. It was like a ballet as opposed to a jig or a reel, every dancer moving in time to create something grander, something so much more than the sum of its parts.

That was what marked Brandt as special.

Interestingly, over the course of the year they had spent fighting together, Vorster had come to think of Brandt as a friend, but that didn't prevent him from being awed by the man's stratagems. He had never imagined they might end up on the same side, but petty feuds had been buried with the resurgent threat of the undead.

The Talabeclanders joined forces with Stirland's greater strength to fight back the skeletal armies of von Carstein as they came swarming up from the underground.

Even together they were constantly being pushed back. Something eventually had to give, and they all knew what it was. The alliance was a fragile one, both sides knew that, but if they hoped to live out the storm of the Winter War they knew that they had to stop tearing at each other's throats and fight side by side—fight as one.

They could and would turn on each other again if they survived. As he had promised, Ackim Brandt requested Vorster be seconded to his force. Martin had been more than happy to grant the request. It was a tie that bound their pact. Vorster knew that the elector count was using him as a diplomatic manacle around Brandt's ankles. It was a strange position to be in. He liked, even admired Brandt, but his loyalty lay with Martin. The pair of them had fought side by side during the opening months of the campaign, each gaining the trust of the other and creating a bond quite different to the one that captivity had formed between Brandt and Vorster.

Brandt crumpled a paper knight in his fist and threw it on the floor, unable to mask his frustration.

There were heroes out there freezing to death and the galling thing was that the cold didn't touch their enemy. It was not an equal battle. Vorster knew that they needed to find a way to neutralise the elements, but for the life of him he couldn't see a way around the simple truth that the cold was their biggest enemy. They had fought the dead for so long, they were almost common place. The sight of reanimated bones didn't immediately strike fear into the hearts of the men. It galvanised them. They knew that the dead could die again and again and again. They knew that the vampires could fall and the zombies could be returned to the dust of the earth. They knew that they could live. It was what they did, they were soldiers. They lived.

"Can't you feel it?"

Vorster nodded. He could. He had no idea what it was, but he could feel *something*. It was like a clawed finger hooking down into his gut and agitating the digestive acids. "Do you think it's him?"

"Von Carstein? Taal's teeth, I hope not," admitted Brandt. The man was a champion, a conqueror, but he wasn't a fool. The Vampire Count would be more than a match for their already

exhausted forces. The dead had kept them on the run for four weeks already, harrying them and picking away at the men one night after another. He looked down at the map. Even he could see they were being shepherded into a dead end.

If they couldn't choose their own place for a last stand—the thought was interrupted by a peculiarly uncomfortable sensation, what his mother had called a goose walking over her grave. Vorster turned, his hand instinctively going towards the sword on his hip. There was no one behind him. He couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

"I felt it," he said. "We aren't alone."

Brandt nodded. "It's been out there a while."

"What is it?"

"If I were being forced to bet my life on it, I'd have to say a vampire. Its presence is repugnant."

"An assassin?"

"I doubt it," said Brandt. "Murderous stealth isn't exactly our enemy's style."

"Look at us, jumping at ghosts."

"Not ghosts," Brandt said, pointing at the shadow-thief creeping around the side of the pavilion wall. The guttering oil lamps picked his silhouette out against the canvas. Brandt held a finger to his lips. Vorster watched the intruder move towards the tent flaps. He drew steel, ready to fight for his life. His palms were slick with sweat, his heart palpitating. He stepped aside, blade-tip levelled at the black gash that was the tent flap.

The intruder never came through it.

They waited.

The creeping edge of fear made turning his back on the entrance impossible. Vorster couldn't think straight. He strained to listen, but there was nothing out there to be heard beyond the faint susurrus of the snow falling. He moved towards the tent flap, ready to throw it open. Brandt held up his hand, stopping him. "We do not rush out into the unknown, my friend. Haste is a death sentence."

"What do you suggest?"

Brandt moved away from the corona of light, withdrawing a dagger from his boot and slashing through the tent's wall where the shadow was deepest. He slipped out into the night on the other side.

Vorster followed.

They circled the pavilion until they found the interloper's prints in the fresh fall of snow. The track's betrayed his passage. He had moved off beyond the tents. They followed, expecting the tracks to lead to the owner of the shadow. They didn't. They led them into the first stand of trees and then deeper before they petered out into nothing, leaving Brandt scratching his chin, perplexed.

Vorster turned in a slow circle, but with the leaves and branches intermeshing to blot out the moon it was nigh on impossible to see anything beyond shadow and more shadow.

He heard something, a crackling of branches. The sound echoed from tree to tree. He looked up instinctively and saw something black scamper from branch to branch scared out of its hole.

Then the creature swooped down on them from above, black fur cloak billowing out behind it as it came.

Vorster lashed out with his sword blindly, catching the black shape high across the shoulder. Before he could follow up with a reverse cut and thrust, the creature had him on his back in the snow, the wind knocked out of him.

"Listen to me," the creature rasped and then it was spinning away to the side as Brandt's blade lashed out, slicing deep into the fusty wool of the beast's tunic.

Brandt edged forwards in a tight fighting crouch, black blood on the edge of his sword. Vorster scrambled to his feet. His sword had fallen ten feet away and there was no way he could get to it. Fear gripped Vorster, a cold fist clenching around his heart. He looked around frantically for a

weapon, anything he could use to defend himself with. The beast's blood stained the snow between them.

No one moved.

"Listen to me," the vampire repeated.

"Shut your vile stinking mouth, beast," Vorster snarled.

"I could have killed you if I wanted to."

Vorster stared at the creature. It was wild, feral. Its very nearness gnawed away at his gut. Brandt edged closer.

"You want to speak, beast, then speak," Brandt said. There was blood on his shirt from a cut high on his left arm.

Looking from one to the other it was impossible to tell which was the monster. Brandt's face twisted into a bestial snarl whereas the vampire's face remained devoid of any emotion.

"I have a message. I need it delivered to Altdorf."

"And why should we believe you, beast? You come skulking in the night like some cut-throat assassin. What is to say this isn't a lie to disarm us? What is to say that there is any message for the capitol? Your kin are renowned as princes of deceit."

"I am not one of them," the vampire said. There was something in his eyes that terrified Vorster. It took him a moment to realise what it was: compassion. Of all the traits of the living it was the last thing he had expected to encounter in the dead.

"Then what are you?"

"My name was Jerek Kruger. I fought as Knight Marshall of the Knights of the White Wolf. I was the wolf itself. I slew the first Vampire Count. This... this incarnation... is my punishment. The beast robbed me of my humanity. Now I am nothing. I would end things. There has been too much death."

"Yet you come to us in the night? You creep among us. You do not enter my tent and seek to parlay. Instead you fall on us from the trees." Brandt pressed a hand to the shallow cut in his arm. "You draw blood."

"But," the vampire countered, "I do not feed."

"Why should we believe you?" Vorster asked, finding his voice. The fear inside refused to subside.

"Because I am your only hope, young man and because you do not want to suffer my fate. Because on the morrow the dead will come swarming down from those hills and you cannot hope to resist them, because without me you will die."

"You paint a grim picture, dead man."

"I tell the truth. I do not waste words painting pretty pictures or whisper sweet sounding deceptions. There is no point."

"What do you want from us?" Vorster cut to the chase. He cast a calculating glance in the direction of his sword; there was no way he could possibly reach it before the beast fell on him. Would Ackim Brandt be fast enough to get between them and save his life if he made a rush for the blade?

"Don't think about it, soldier," the vampire said as though reading his mind.

Vorster took an involuntary step backwards, his boot scuffing up snow. Wraiths of foggy breath corkscrewed from his nose and up through the air in front of his face as though he were a bull gathering himself to gore his enemy. He saw Brandt watching him, saw Brandt's left hand flex into a fist. It was a subconscious reflex. It was Brandt's tell. Vorster had fought alongside the man for long enough to learn the idiosyncrasies of Brandt's fighting style. Every soldier had certain tells that betrayed them in combat: a twitch, a flick of the eye, something that telegraphed their intentions a split second before the actual attack. Such a weakness could be lethal against a foe familiar with it, although it was seldom that one man would face another in anything like ritual combat. War was

dirty and fast, the brutality of it more than outweighing the finesse of reading an opponent's body language. That clenching of his left hand was an unconscious thing, a tic, but Vorster had seen it often enough to know that Brandt was bracing himself for violence.

"I am not a great lover of magic, but I have seen enough to pay heed. A creature came to me inside my head, painting a memory for me and bade me deliver it to you. His message could turn the tide of the war in favour of the living, forever. Can you take the risk of ignoring it?"

"You had a dream? You expect us to spare you because of some damned dream?" Vorster asked harshly.

Jerek shook his head. "It was no dream. The creature's name was Finreir, his words carried on the winds. He had power, true power. He was unlike any living creature I have ever encountered. He showed me things, secrets."

"What are these great secrets then?"

The vampire shook his head. "They are not for you to know."

"Then deliver the message yourself."

"Are you naive enough to believe that is a possibility, soldier? No, I thought not. We both know I cannot walk amongst the living, not now, not with the dead coming up from the underways and the vampires abroad. I would be hunted down, staked, mouth stuffed with white roses and my corpse buried face down in the dirt. I can see it as clearly as I could if I had been gifted with foresight. You must send runners where I cannot go. I'll write the message down. It has to be this way."

The urgency of the vampire's words disturbed him.

"I am not comfortable with this," Vorster told Brandt. "I feel as though we are being played for fools."

"Deliver the message and you will be undoing the Vampire Count's threat."

"It cannot be that simple," said Brandt doubtfully.

"It was the first time," said Jerek. "There was no gift from Sigmar. It was a message, yes, but there was no divine source. The message that proved the key to the fall of Vlad came from his own get. He was betrayed."

"Now you intend to emulate the betrayer," Brandt said, ironically. "What is your price, daemon?"

"Peace," said Jerek.

"Are we to believe that a bloodsucking fiend could suddenly turn pacifist?"

"I don't care what you believe, soldier. The truth is all that matters to me now."

"Come with us to Martin," Brandt said. "Make your case. The import of your message will decide whether you live or die."

"No," Jerek said, shaking his head. "I will not beg Stirland. As grateful as I am sure he would be for my betrayal of his enemy, I am not fool enough to believe that his benevolence would extend to me walking away from his Runefang with my head still attached. I was the Wolf of Middenheim, but to van Kristallbach I am von Carstein's get, nothing more nothing less. No, if I had wanted the elector count I would have drawn him out here. I chose you. I have watched you. You are soldiers, much as I once was. Those are your men out there freezing to death. You care about them. You don't want them to die needlessly so you will send runners to the cathedral in Altdorf. You will see that my words are heard by those who need to hear them."

"What would you have us say?"

The fate of the living hung on the seven words Jerek told them.

Mannfred von Carstein's legion of the damned marched on through the driving blizzard, oblivious to the battering of the elements.

The snow swirled in their wake like white devils and crunched under the bones of their skeletal feet.

The dead came on endlessly.

They had no need of comfort.

They keened and cried and wailed, their lament tormenting the landscape. Not once did they stumble or fall.

They were a relentless tide.

Thousands upon thousands of rotting corpses and bare bones, clad in scraps of armour, leather straps rotted through, and breastplates and cuirasses hanging lopsidedly off the cadavers, marched on.

The ghosts were the worst. They were both pitiful and terrifying. The restless shades seemed ignorant of their own deaths and fought blindly, against and among themselves, over and over. Their non-corporeal forms re-enacted the battles that had seen them fall, only for the ghosts to rise over and over for “One last push!” and “One more charge!” before they fell to the cries of, They come, they come!”

Ethereal screams haunted the fields as the shades threw themselves once more into the fray.

The clash of ghostly swords and the cries of the fallen were ever present.

Adolphus Krieger stood in the middle of it, basking in the memories of slaughter. Feeling the sorrow and fear radiate from the ghosts deep into his bones was akin to the joy he felt during torture and the rapture that the act of killing delivered. He fed on it every bit as greedily as he fed on blood. He was a cruel creature. Mannfred had turned to him when Skellan had failed to return. They were similar monsters. Their natures were the same. They were a match in their appetites for cruelty, as bloody as cleaving a co-joined twin at the spine. They were butchers. Krieger turned and turned again, brushing his fingers through the ghostly warriors, shivering with delight at the static lightning-charge that coursed through his body at the contact. He drank down their misery like the finest of wines, the headiest of liquors. The screaming and wailing and gnashing of teeth rose into a symphonic roar swelling over the field.

Soon the dying would be real enough.

Soon the screams would be true.

Soon the ghosts would be joined by more, newer, fresher shades.

Soon the living would join the dead.

For now they fled, in utter terror. The priests in the temples had sworn, had promised, that these armies could never return, but they had been proved liars and fools.

The skeletal fingers of the long and recently dead clawed up through the earth around Krieger, as the rank and file of von Carstein’s armies shambled out from the underways.

They emerged within a day’s march of Altdorf itself, behind the lines of the defenders.

The Winter War would be remembered for its legendary suffering. With the men out chasing shadows, the women and children were left alone within the city walls to bleed and die, and to satisfy Adolphus Krieger’s need for pain.

He strode ahead of the main body of the army.

The vampire was the vanguard, the hammer to the forge’s fire.

The ripple of fear would chase away from them, all the way into the heart of the city. There was no time to flee. No time to panic.

In the distance the grand spires of Altdorf reflected the moonlight back up to the heavens, and the dead marched on.

Confession wasn’t good for the soul, and when committed to paper in the form of history those weighty tomes were nothing more than links in hefty chains. They weighed down upon the reader, testing his faith to the core.

Kurt III, Grand Theogonist of Sigmar, holiest of holies ran his crooked fingers across the spidery scrawl of his predecessor's submission, and he was afraid, deeply afraid. Outside the walls of Altdorf the dead gathered, but Kurt was besieged both from without and from within.

How could such a devout Sigmarite commit such filth to vellum and in so doing cast such untruth in stone? How could such a great man fall so far? The irony was not lost on the priest, given that Wilhelm had plunged from the battlements of Altdorf locked in the Vampire Count's deadly embrace. Death was not averse to irony.

Kurt refused to believe the story unfolding within the diary.

He hurled the book across the floor, the pages spreading like wings as they hit the black iron dogs of the open fire. One of the pages blackened and burned. For a moment he thought about leaving the book there and letting Wilhelm's confession be consumed by the hungry flames, but only for a moment. He couldn't do it. He couldn't be responsible for the death of history. The words, that spidery scrawl, were all that remained of Wilhelm's fatal encounter with the first Vampire Count. Somewhere in there, surely, was the key that would set them free. Vlad had fallen, so too would his vile progeny.

"No, no, no, no."

He slapped out the first wisps of black smoke as they smouldered through the ancient leather.

He couldn't let the book burn.

And yet he couldn't move beyond the confession, the lie, that Sig-mar's hand had been nowhere near the dank crypts while a sick old man prayed for a miracle.

"You want me to believe that it wasn't Sigmar who came down?" He made the sign of the hammer across his chest reflexively. "You want to believe it wasn't Sigmar who granted you the strength to battle, despite the sickness eating away at your flesh? You want me to believe that it was a vampire that delivered to us salvation? God help me!" Spittle frothed at his quivering lips as he threw his arms up in anger and despair. He spun around, lashing out at the oil lamp on the table, sending it crashing across the floor. Blue flame spread virulently across the flagstones. He watched the flames dance, allowing them to burn themselves out.

He tore out a single sheaf of vellum from the binding of the unholy book, crumpled it and threw it into the fireplace. For a moment it looked as though the page would resist the teeth of the fire, immune to its heat, but then it blackened and shrivelled, and finally burst into all-consuming flame, taking its lies with it. He tore another handful of pages from the book and raised his arm as though to hurl them into the fire, but he let them slip through his fingers and fall at his feet.

Exhausted, he sank back into his chair, staring at the ancient diary.

"What am I supposed to do? What do you want from me? What am I to do when the progeny of unfettered evil bears down upon us and there's no thief to steal us a victory? Am I to fall upon my knees and beg for mercy from a creature that knows no such thing? Am I to fall upon my knees and pray to a god who abandoned us before? Am I to hurl myself from the spire and fall upon the pikes of their advance? I don't know what I am supposed to do." That was the truth. He leaned forwards, drawing closer to the book. "What is the point in prayer when I am praying to a lie?"

Fat tears of frustration broke and rolled down his cheeks, falling onto the scattered pages of the old priest's confession.

A knock at the door dragged him from his melancholy.

"Come," he said, looking up.

The heavy door swung open and a young messenger entered, wearing the colours of Stirland. The grime of the road was beaten deep into his features.

"What is it, boy?"

The messenger reached into his satchel and withdrew a missive bearing the red wax seal of von Kristallbach. He handed it to the old man, eager to show that he had not broken the seal. Kurt took a knife from the table, still wet from where it had been slicing the flesh of an apricot. He slipped the

blade beneath the seal and cut it loose. He teased the single sheet of parchment out of the envelope and brought it over to the light.

He read the single line with weary eyes and felt the hand of Sigmar rest upon his shoulder.

“What is it, sir?” the messenger asked, even though it wasn’t his place.

A glimmer of a smile touched the Grand Theogonist’s thin lips. “It is salvation, my boy, salvation.”

He read the single line of text again: *What can be bound can be unbound.*

The Grand Theogonist swept purposefully through the dark halls of the cathedral and across the courtyard, acolytes swarming around him, one handing him his cloak, another trying to impress upon him that perhaps there were other options.

“Perhaps the priests of Taal have another copy of the book, your grace?”

Kurt held out his arms for the acolyte to dress him even as he argued.

“There are no other copies of the nine books of Nagash.”

“Are you sure, your grace?”

“Positive. The only known copies were destroyed here, on this very soil two centuries ago. Where are my horses?”

“They’re in the courtyard, your grace.”

Kurt spun on his heel and marched out into the snow-filled air, saying, “I ride for the libraries of Arenburg. There, perhaps, we might find something. The scribes are far more knowledgeable than I.”

“You do yourself a disservice, your grace. Your knowledge and our resources here are unrivalled.”

He reached the horse.

“Were not books taken to the scholars at Middenheim or the scholars of Nuln? Not that it matters. You’d never make it through. Listen to them, your grace. They’re here.”

Ignoring the acolyte’s warning Kurt said, “No, no, no, young Kristoff. The books were burned in pyres. The priests gathered them, drenched them in oil and sacrificed them to the fires.”

He swung himself up onto the horse.

In the distance they heard the screams of retreat as people fled from the undead scourge. Thousands of rusty swords clanged and hammered, and beat against shields conjuring thunder that boomed and rolled across the great city. The dead were encircling the city walls like a noose around her delicate neck.

“Here... under our very feet, are the ashes of those books.” Kurt glanced up in the direction of his room, the dance of flame on the burning confession still playing out across his mind’s eye. Something lurked in the shadows, tantalisingly close. The pyres were here,” he repeated emphatically, “here.” The letters on the illuminated page had been in different inks. When one had touched the flame, he recalled the way that they had flared on ignition. For one brief moment he had been presented with the answer. Only now did he see it. What’s beneath our feet, Kristoff?”

“The ashes?” the young acolyte asked, a little bewildered.

“No, Kristoff, the catacombs’ That was it. That was what he had seen in the burning paper, only he hadn’t recognised it for what it was; he’d been too busy feeling angry with his god. There were no answers at Arenburg. They were here, buried deep. Like all true secrets, the words of the *Liber Mortis* had been lost for so long that they had become legend, and legends were stories, and stories were make believe... only, they weren’t, of course. For every lie there was a grain of truth.

He didn’t wait for the acolytes to follow. He dismounted and swept across the courtyard oblivious to the snow, through the majestic double doors into the cathedral, and down into the catacombs. His footsteps rang out hollowly, echoing up and down the dark passages. He snatched up a flaming torch and plunged deeper into the secret places of the house of worship. Light danced off

the carvings lining the rows of ornate priestly sarcophagi. He walked slowly down the line, shadows dancing all around him. The musty smell of cold damp stone filled his nostrils. He heard scuttling—rats hugging the walls.

He cast about left and right, looking for something to call to him. He wasn't certain what he was looking for, but he had renewed faith—it would present itself to him. Here was the history of the priesthood laid bare, his forebears in stately repose, guardian swordsmen hefting their blades aloft in exultation to Sigmar.

All, that was, except one, in a dark recess further down the hall.

The stone swordsman's blade stabbed down into the lid of the sarcophagus of a child's tomb at its feet, as though guarding against some infernal evil.

The other sarcophagi bore the names of those interred, but this one bore two simple couplets, engraved into the facade of the tomb. He held the torch closer so that he could better read them. *Child of Death, Free of Death.*

He knew the inscription well. He had always thought it such a sad one, but now, reading those words again, he began to unravel the secret hidden in plain sight. *Child of Death, Free of Death.*

In the old scholar's tongue the couplets meant the same thing: *Liber Mortis.*

The same word for child and free had a third meaning.

Liber also meant book.

Liber Mortis: the book of the dead.

A chill shivered down the ladder of his spine.

How many times had he, and others, passed the tomb without a second thought? They had chosen to hide one of the most repellent artefacts of the undead nation beneath the holiest of holies. All that it needed was someone with the eyes to see beyond the simplicity of the message. He made the sign of the hammer again, uttering a soft prayer to his lord.

He was not alone.

Anxious footsteps echoed down the stairs towards him.

"Your grace? Are you all right?"

Kurt gripped the lid of the sarcophagus and leaned his back into it, heaving with all of his might. "Come!" He called. "Come help me!"

The acolytes rushed to his aid, throwing their combined strength into the task, gradually prising the stone plinth from its resting place and smashing it to the ground. Holding their torches aloft, they gathered around the open tomb as the grand theogonist rummaged around inside.

There was no body.

He lifted out the unholy manuscript and held it at arms length, already feeling its insidious evil worming its way into his heart.

"Come! Sometimes it takes evil to fight evil. Let the wretched carry out burdens and squabble amongst themselves. Sigmar is with us!"

"Sigmar is with us!" they repeated.

Mannfred stood beneath the imposing walls of Altdorf and surveyed all that he had wrought. He was the wrack and ruin of mankind.

He had not expected the seeds of the fear he had sown to be so fruitful.

The living had fled.

Chill winds swept along the empty battlements, rattling the unlit braziers at each abandoned sentry post. Where normally the flames would be lit to mark the beginning of man's domain the braziers remained unlit, testament that death had encroached beyond the humanity's defences. The once flaming braziers that stood watch over the city illuminating its night had fallen into darkness. Their fires had burned out with no one there to tend them, the embers long since dead and their rattling bronze wailed in the night, beaten by the winds without mercy.

Mannfred roared with laughter, turning around to his troops, raising his fist. "Now they cower! Finally they heed the lessons taught by our kith and kin! Altdorf is ours!"

Adolphus Krieger stepped up beside him, a finger to his lips as he hushed the whole army, even his leader. A slow, cold smile spread across his lips as the lone cry of a baby echoed from the narrow streets behind the high walls and out across the horde. Delicious victims waited for him.

From out of the darkness a lone black bird descended. It swept low, settling on Mannfred's broad shoulder. The Vampire Count swatted it away, but the bird would not be cowed. It bit a chunk out of the side of his face, drawing blood, and in that moment, a name rose in Mannfred's mind, as though he had been touched by another remote force, one other than the slumbering malevolence he had unearthed deep in the Lands of the Dead.

"Finreir," he said, tasting the name. A face flowered within his mind's eye.

"What are you talking about?"

Mannfred reacted quicker this time, snatching the crow from his shoulder. He snapped its neck and threw it to the ground.

"Nothing," he replied.

"What are we waiting for?" Krieger muttered.

"We are not waiting, we are savouring the moment," said Mannfred. "Where my sire failed, I have risen to best them all. It is I, Mannfred, who stands before the terrified city. It is I, Mannfred, who will drink on the blood of Altdorf's finest. It is I, Mannfred, who will claim this greatest of prizes. This is my destiny!" His words carried out over the dead, his voice spiralling in its intensity whipping the hordes into a frenzy of bloodlust. It was no *natural* lust. The sheer power of Mannfred's words imbued the ranks of the dead with his own hunger. The ghouls panted and salivated, goaded on beyond reason by the mere promise of meat. "Now, we break open this rotten carcass. It is time for us to feed!" He launched his sword at the city gates to manic cheers from the animate cadavers.

They surged forwards throwing themselves at the gate, trampling one another underfoot in their lust to be the first to breach the wall.

Mannfred stood in the centre of it.

This was his moment of triumph, the breaking of humanity.

Then, high on the walls, he saw a lone figure wrapped in holy vestments, battling against the elements. It was almost comic. One man, no matter how holy, couldn't hope to stand against the might of the vampire nation. Mannfred smiled, waiting for the fool to be torn limb from limb by his wretched horde.

Unperturbed the figure strode to the very centre of the battlements, showing no fear.

He reached into his vestments and produced, not a shield nor a sword but a book.

"What's this fool doing?" Adolphus Krieger asked. Then his face split into a manic grin. "He's going to sing for us!" The notion delighted the vampire.

The voice that came down from the battlements was not miraculous or musical. The intonation was flat, emotionless, but somehow the words carried.

Mannfred recoiled in horror, recognising the arcane tongue immediately.

"It cannot be," he said in disbelief.

Suddenly the ground quaked beneath his feet. The high walls trembled and the rumble of the storm took substance. The rhythmic beating of the undead's shields faltered before the might of holy wrath. Without warning, lightning cleaved the sky, forks spearing down before the battlements. The blistering maelstrom swarmed around the priest. One by one, the braziers at the guard's posts exploded into flame, the detonations shooting pillars of fire up into the heavens.

In desperation, Mannfred screamed at his armies, "*Bring me his head!*"

Krieger leapt to the attack, running for the priest. On his sixth step his body shimmered into vapour and from the smoke a huge black bat took flight, its wings skimming over the upturned heads of the skeletal army, and ploughed through the blizzard remorselessly.

Another line tore from the priest's mouth as the Great Spell of Unbinding took shape, its echo so powerful that Krieger's ears began to bleed. The bat slammed into the wall and tumbled to the ground, its wings ripped by bone and rusted armour as the mindless dead fell upon it.

This was not the moment of glory Mannfred had believed was his by right.

Krieger's body took shape at the foot of the mighty walls, battered and bruised, and bloodied beyond all recognition. The vampire roared his anger and frustration, but undeterred continued to scale the backs of the skeletal army as they ramped up against the stone walls.

The Grand Theogonist turned the page to read the final line of the incantation. His trembling lips tripped over the final words, sheer exhaustion consuming his fragile body. He had done all that he could do, more. His knees buckled and the book tumbled from his fingers and fell, pages torn apart by the gale. The skeletal army arrived atop the battlements and reached out to grasp him.

Kurt closed his eyes and offered himself up to the mercy of Sigmar. It was out of his hands now.

As Krieger climbed higher, scrambling against the bones of his makeshift ladder, his foot suddenly gave way, ploughing into the disintegrating chest cavity of a dead foot soldier. He struggled to pull his foot free and regain some kind of balance, but wherever he lashed out he found nothing but crumbling bone. The dissolution set in. One by one the soldiers of the undead army fragmented, collapsing in on themselves as whatever magic bound them to this hellish form degenerated.

All around Mannfred skulls rolled off shoulders and swords and sword arms clattered to the ground in tainted heaps. The chiming of desiccated muscles and stringy sinew snapping rang out across the battlefield as mass atrophy took hold.

Mannfred stood, despairing at the absolute collapse of his forces.

Piles of bones gathered at his feet, rapidly disappearing beneath flurries of fresh snow. The glowing torches of Altdorf looked down upon him in mocking disdain. The living had found themselves an unlikely hero, not a man of the sword, but a man of the cloth. Because of one man's faith, the dead were forced to flee.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Small Matter of Revenge

Drakenhof Castle, Sylvania

Kallad Stormwarden broke his vow.

He hoped Grinnir would forgive him.

He led his dwarf brethren through the dark crags and into the belly of the Worlds Edge. The reality of being back in the tunnels was considerably less troubling than the fear he had allowed to fester. Cahgur suggested that they held off from lighting the torches until they were deep beneath the mountain so as not to risk smoke or light signalling their arrival to the unsuspecting world above. Kallad agreed, although the ground seemed slick and treacherous underfoot. The ragged sounds of his own breath filled his ears, but something seemed different.

The return of the echo was muted.

They pushed on, deeper into the darkness.

They became increasingly aware that some quality within the tunnels had changed. The air thickened with moisture. It wasn't damp. It was hot.

Belamir huddled in close with Kallad and Valarik.

"I can't stand this dark," Belamir cursed. "I'm gonna end up on my arse!"

"Strike a flint, fer Grinnir's sake and let's get some light in here."

The rasp of the flint being sparked was followed by the sudden bluish flare and the drawing of flame. Valarik ignited the tinder and in turn a torch. The dwarfs squinted against the brightness, waiting for their eyes to adjust. Only then were they able to fully comprehend the horror unfolding before them.

"I have no liking for this," Molagon said. "Not one little bit. It's unnatural."

"Well this is what we came for, what did you expect?" Kallad asked. "The glittering halls of Grinnir and the magnificent forge of Grungni?"

The others laughed, but it was nervous laughter. Only now were they beginning to form an appreciation for what he had been through. His bravery was no bluster.

The walls were slick with blood, hot fresh blood turned black by the dark stone. It reeked of the forges of the metalworkers. Kallad knelt and pressed his fingers into the blood, raising it to his nose. It stank with a tang of iron. Dwarf blood, he knew from the higher iron content, and it was fresh, which meant that he had been wrong.

He hadn't rescued everyone. Some had still died down here. Some were still dying. He unclasped Ruinthorn and plunged headlong into the darkness.

The Soul Cages were empty when they arrived.

They creaked and groaned on black iron chains, suspended over fire pits for cleansing, to burn the blood and faeces off. The sight of them brought back bitter memories of his time in the arena.

Othtin set off across the floor, ducking beneath one of the swinging cages.

"Not that way," Kallad said. "Trust me there are no glittering halls that way."

Othtin stood stock still and turned slowly to face Kallad. He raised an eyebrow. "How about Grungni?"

Despite himself, it made Kallad smile.

"Not unless he's fighting in the arena."

"So which way then?"

There were five doors leading off the cleansing room, one on each point of the pentagram. Two led down towards more prison cells, one fed off towards the galleries surrounding the arena, one to the arena itself. Only one led up to the galleries above. Kallad pointed. "That one."

"Where does it go?"

"Up."

"I don't like all this quiet," Skalfkrug grumbled.

"I can't say I'd prefer a welcoming party," Kallad said.

"Unless they brought ale," Belamir chimed in.

"Then why are we standing around here yapping, I'm parched." Valarik smacked his lips, clapped his hands and led the way.

They moved single file up the tight corridor. Grooves had been worn in the middle of the steps from the shuffling feet of countless condemned men. They crept on. The place was eerily empty. They had come prepared for grisly work and had thus far met nothing. Considering the enemies that could have been waiting, Kallad claimed it as one little victory.

They were not here to fight a war.

They were here to kill quietly and leave.

The strains of a haunting melody began to filter through from the throne room.

The smell of perfume and wine filled the air.

Kallad stood on the threshold watching a beautiful, naked harpist playing her fingers down to blood. The filaments of the instrument were so fine that they cut into her ivory skin like wire, and still she played on through the pain, feeding it to the threnody to make it all the more elegiac.

His clan brethren fanned out behind him, drawing their hammers and blades silently.

The lord of this wretched domain reclined languidly in a chair with his back to them, his effeminate hand clutching a lace handkerchief. A crystalline goblet, half-full of rich ruby blood, coagulated on the table beside him.

"Come to me, woman," the vampire commanded. Her fingers trailed across the final notes, enthralled. She rose and moved with grace to kneel before him. The vampire took her ruined fingers in his hand and raised them to his lips to drink. Her eyes fluttered closed, her breast heaved and her breath hitched in her throat as the beast drained her.

It served as the perfect distraction.

The dwarfs crept silently across the marble floor, using the shadow of the obsidian throne as cover until they could be certain that there was no one watching who could alert Mannfred from the galleries above. The lord of all darkness was unprotected. All Kallad could think was that this had to be a trap. It was too easy, but, for all that, he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity. Cutting off the snake's head might not kill it, but it was satisfying to watch it flail around in pain.

"Mannfred," Kallad said, "I'd like to reintroduce you to Ruinthorn. I believe you've met."

Without waiting for the Vampire Count to turn around, Kallad slammed his trusty axe into the back of the vampire's head, splitting the beast's skull in two. There was a moment of utter disbelief. The beast was dead.

"Right," said Cahgur. "Let's see about that ale then, shall we."

"Stay your thirst, Cahgur," Valarik said. "There's something very wrong here."

"Yes, it's a bleedin' castle full of vampires," Skalfkrug said, stating the obvious.

"Really? Then where are they?"

“Let’s get this wee lassie out of here. There’ve been enough victims already.” Othtin reached out to take the harpist’s hand and led her to freedom, but as their fingers touched, the girl recoiled and turned on them, her face contorting like some wild banshee as she opened her mouth and screamed.

“Shut up, lassie,” Othtin said, bewildered. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Kallad Stormwarden could see in her black eyes that she wasn’t screaming out of fear. She was screaming for help.

“Oh, bugger.”

He didn’t even think about it. He buried Ruinthorn in her throat silencing her screams.

The others stared at him in horror.

“She was one of them,” he said. It was all he offered by way of explanation.

“So what about this ring then? Isn’t it meant to bring him back from the dead? Maybe we should take it off his hand before it can do the business.”

“Aye,” Valarik agreed.

Kallad stepped over the bodies. Ruinthorn had obliterated Mannfred’s features, cleaving through his face, rendering him unrecognisable. The signet ring on his finger was all the proof he needed that he’d killed the right monster. He saw the feral bat shaped around the ring and knew it as von Carstein’s mark. He took the beast’s ring, finger and all.

He hefted his axe up onto his shoulder.

“Let’s go,” he said, but their retreat was already being countered.

Two vampires leapt through the stained glass windows above the gallery. A third loomed in the doorway. The girl’s cry had been answered.

The breath of talons brushed across Kallad’s throat.

The dwarf was fast. He smashed the vampire’s claws away with the butt of Ruinthorn and reversed the blow, bringing the axe-head up to thunder the flat of it into the beast’s face.

The other dwarfs instinctively scattered so as to make the vampires work for their targets.

Warriors never willingly bunched up.

Kallad hammered the blade into his opponent’s grinning face, opening its leering smile all the wider. The dwarf launched into a whirlwind spin, Ruinthorn arcing out in a lethal silver flash. Just as the next vampire launched forwards, the axe sheered through both of his fangs and tore out of the side of his face. The beast went down in a spray of tainted blood.

Valarik was not so lucky.

He charged at the fiend barring the threshold, axe raised above his head, but the vampire was faster. It leapt over the dwarfs wild swing, taking the flesh of Valarik’s throat with him. The dwarf was dead before he hit the floor.

Cahgur and Skalfkrug fought side by side, beating the unlife out of a fallen vampire. Their hammers mashed the creature to a bloody pulp.

“To me!” Kallad yelled, unhooking a peculiar looking mechanical crossbow from his belt. He took aim and squeezed down on the trigger, releasing the grapple. It sailed up over the gallery’s balustrade and clattered into place. He tugged down on it hard to make sure it was secure. He wrapped his arm around the rope and hit the spring-loaded winch propelling him out of the clutches of the vile beasts.

Kallad grabbed on to the top of the stone balustrade and hauled himself up onto the gallery. Gasping for breath and acutely aware that his brethren were locked in a desperate battle below, he jammed the crossbow-winch into the balustrade, hammering it tight with the butt of Ruinthorn. Moving quickly he disconnected the metal grapple and tossed one end of the rope down. Kallad speared the hook into the winch mechanism turning it into a handle.

Belamir grabbed the trailing rope and began to climb. Kallad spun the winch frantically, pumping his arms. Moments later Belamir was hauling himself up over the top and throwing the

rope back down. He unshouldered his own rope and sent that over the top as well, allowing Othtin and Cahgur to climb together.

“Hurry!” Molagon bellowed. More vampires were arriving, closing in all the time. Skalfkrag was being forced back into a corner, three vampires slashing and clawing at his face even as his warhammer caved in temples and gouged out eyes. He fought like the mad dwarf that he was.

The ropes were thrown down again, slick with sweat and grease from going through the winch. No one was holding the end of the second rope. It fell in a serpentine coil, leaving the single rope dangling.

Molagon grabbed for the rope and missed. A vampire hurled itself into his back, punching him off his feet. As the beast’s fangs came down to tear open the back of his throat, Skalfkrag landed on its back, driving the wicked point of his hammer into the top of its skull and opening the back of the creature’s head up.

Molagon crawled out from beneath the dead vampire.

Together they grabbed the rope, but their weight was too much for the winch and Kallad’s tiring arm.

Cahgur and Belamir reached through the balustrade, struggling to grasp the rope and pull their friends to safety. Hand over fist, they dragged them higher. With the two dwarfs hanging in the no man’s land between the gallery and floor, the load on the rope suddenly grew lighter. Skalfkrag’s screams rang out through the great hall. Talons had sheered through the muscle and bone at the base of his neck, rendering him crippled. He fell and lay there, helpless, looking up, unable to defend himself as the beasts gathered around.

Kallad couldn’t watch as the vampires fell upon his friend.

“Look away,” Belamir said, revulsion clogging in his throat. “Give him his dignity.”

Cahgur helped Molagon up onto the gallery.

Down below one of the beasts looked up, and grinned, relishing the hunt. The air around him shimmered as his body slowly shifted into the form of a great black bird.

The bird flew at Kallad’s face.

Swinging Ruinthorn, Kallad split it in two. Both bloody parts fell at his feet. He was running before they hit the floor.

Broken glass and jagged lead crunched beneath his boots as he launched himself through the shattered remains of the great stained glass window. The others came behind him. The icy wind almost snatched Kallad off his feet. He slipped and skidded on the slick roof tiles, casting around, looking for a way down.

The blizzard had mercifully blown itself out for a while.

He saw huge claw marks gouged through the ice and into the very masonry of the castle, the feet of their maker almost certainly larger than the dwarfs were. Kallad had no desire to meet the beast responsible for them. He pulled a set of spikes from his pack and stamped them onto his boots hurriedly before running. He traversed the roof, peering over the edge, searching for a way down. The path across the top of Drakenhof led towards a far tower, its roof in two parts, a spired top and a mid-section collar that, Grimnir be with them, they could jump down onto.

Four vampires appeared on the crest of the roof behind them. They had unleashed the beast within, their faces contorted into vile animalistic masks. They moved with ungodly grace across the slick tiles, always in balance as they scuttled forwards.

The dwarfs knew where to pick their battles, and an icy rooftop was no place to fight a vampire.

Kallad leapt from rooftop to rooftop, across the uneven gothic gables, slipping and sliding on the treacherous ice every step of the way. Only the spikes on his boots prevented him from careening off the gables. He pulled up short, confronted by a sea of corpses impaled on spikes, some so fresh that their blood was still oozing down through the runnels in the earth and into the belly of the old world. He knew, sickly, where the blood in the tunnels had originated. It was another crime that the

Vampire Count had on his undead soul. Anger swelled inside Kallad. The scourge of the vampires was relentless.

“We did what we came to do,” Kallad said. “We can’t take them all. We have the ring. There will be ample time for retribution.” He threw himself across the gap to the collar, barely making the jump. The wind howled around him, bullying him off the parapet.

He fell to the earth like a stone.

The others came down behind him, the rooftop vampires breathing down their necks.

They stared for a moment, confronted by the forest of the impaled, and then they ran.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Duel

Marienburg, the Imperial City

Finreir broke bread with the humans.

“The Vampire Count lives despite the would-be assassination, I see.”

The men of Marienburg were still uncomfortable in the elf's presence. They looked upon him with something akin to awe and suspicion, as though, Finreir thought, a god walked among them. What he did here at Marienburg would shape how humans and elves interacted for centuries to come. In some ways they were like children, blood-thirsty children, admittedly, but children none the less. Finreir was here to turn the tide against evil, although he was not entirely convinced of human kindness and was in half a mind to recommend on his return to Ulthuan that these creatures be watched from afar with keen eye. That is if they did not strip him of his status due to youthful impetuosity first. No doubt his expedition would trigger repercussions. Three elves breaching the seclusion of their people, indeed betraying their existence to these short-lived humans, could not go unpunished, but there was cause, good cause.

At the very least the humans deserved to survive this onslaught.

On an intellectual level, he suspected that given time the humans would learn to accept him, but they did not have time. As it was they deferred to him, which suited his purpose for now. It was a deference brought about by fear and suspicion, but again that suited him. It struck him yet again as remarkable that human and elven life spans were so different. At 60 years old in the human world he was not a child, but a wise elder and he was treated with respect accordingly. The feeling was good. He was not about to correct them.

“I do not understand,” said Johan Kleine, captain of the city guards. “You’ve only been here a week and you know more than we do about the wolf at our door.”

“One needs only to listen to the winds to know the truth,” the elf said, not bothering to explain further. “Mannfred has spent much of midwinter licking his wounds and replenishing his forces. You humans are so eager to die and join his ranks. He grows in confidence daily. Three skirmishes in as many weeks, and three times your forces have been driven back. It has been a month since your last victory. The tide of war is against you, but eventually tides always roll in. Such is the ebb and flow of war. He will be here before sundown so the only question that remains is will Martin von Kristallbach reach us in time or should we make peace with our creators?”

“We can’t afford to be optimists. We have to prepare for the inevitable.”

“Death is always inevitable, soldier,” said Finreir philosophically. “It is merely a matter of when we choose to depart this mortal coil.”

They were in a huge tower room armoury, the forges below belching out steam and smoke. There was the sizzling of water as weapons were plunged into cold baths to temper them. Around the room other soldiers were gearing up. The place reeked of linseed oil, beeswax, leather, horsehair and sweat, lots and lots of sweat.

The room was awash with the din of preparation: the clank of metal, the rasp of whetstones on steel sharpening swords, the sound of knives splitting quills and trimming the willow, the gentle whistle of fletchers biting down on the feathers as they bound them with sinew to arrows.

Johan Kleine cinched the strap of his metal vambrace into place on his lower arm. A page knelt at his feet, helping him fasten his greaves securely. He adjusted his scale hauberk so that it sat comfortably on his shoulders. Another page fastened his fault to his abdomen once his cuirass had been secured.

The heat from the forgers beating out arrowheads and casting cannonballs, and from the hot lead of musket balls was fierce. The deafening hammer blows of armourers hammering out dents from the breastplates and other oddments of armour beat out the rhythm of the drums of war. The men wiped the sweat from their brows with hands thick as ham hocks and black with soot. Once an hour, more pages rushed into the chamber to slake their thirst for ale. It was an endless carnival of motion.

In the middle of it all, implacable, stood the mage Finreir, surveying the machine of war as it gathered momentum.

The heavy oak doors of the massive chamber opened. Three elf warriors strode imperiously into the room to confront the mage.

“Does Mannfred approach?” Finreir asked his kinsman.

“He does, and he will rip through these humans without breaking sweat. Look at them with their toys of war, Finreir.”

“They do what they must to bolster their failing spirits.”

“Then why won’t you let us fight alongside them?”

“We did not come to watch carnage. It gives us no pleasure,” Málalanyn added.

“A wise commander studies his enemy before he weighs in. Impetuosity wins nothing.”

“Do not presume to lecture me on the tactics of war, mage. Battles are won by overwhelming force. If it has already come to blows the study of the enemy is meaningless. It is time to put an end to this haemorrhaging,” Aelélasrion said.

“These humans are brave,” Rinanlir, the last of the three moved out of the shadow of his brothers, “but they are not endless in number.”

Finreir turned his back to his kin and stepped to one of the arrow slits, contemplating what awaited them over the horizon. He had touched Mannfred’s evil and recognised the steering hand of Nagash. He realised that he would not be able to discern the slumbering evil’s scheme unless he removed his proxy. It was time to remove Mannfred von Carstein from the game.

“Prepare your horses,” he said, simply because there was hope.

At dawn he had reached out across the winds, srying the lie of the land. Events unfolding across the generations of the Old World were greater than he had anticipated. The humans had already fought this battle and won countless times, but they had made catastrophic mistakes, mistakes that could not bear repetition. The forces of Stirland under the banner of Martin von Kristallbach combined with the might of Altdorf and regiments from Talabecland were marshalling. They did not know, Finreir. How could they? But through the eight winds the mage knew them. The minds of the humans were akin to open books hungry to be read.

Beyond the trees he saw roiling dark clouds rolling in and felt the touch of darkness. This was no natural night rolling towards them. Dusk was not for another three hours. Mannfred was growing in confidence. Already he was arrogant enough to turn day into night in his hunger to bring the battle forward.

With Martin’s forces gathering behind the dead it fell to Marienburg to be the rock against which Mannfred and his damned legions could be smashed. The strategy was clear: to hold out for as long as was humanly possible.

Finreir turned back to face Aelélasrion. The elf’s words made what he was about to do all the easier. “The humans are coming. Ride for Martin von Kristallbach, tell him that his hour has come. We will hold Mannfred at Marienburg. We invite the leader of men to come, to smash the Vampire Count upon our rock.”

“How dare you banish me on some menial errand? I am not your lackey! I am here to fight!”

“Then if you want something to fight you had best hurry, Aelélasrion.”

Finreir knew Aelélasrion’s anger would only serve to quicken his passage to Martin. The warrior would be hungry to return in time for the meat of the battle. “Remember, they have never met our kind before. Try not to frighten him. He is rather useful.”

“I am a swordmaster. I am no messenger boy, Finreir. Get someone else to run your errands.”

“I was not opening the matter up for debate, Aelélasrion. You have your orders. I suggest you ride, now.”

Aelélasrion stiffened as though to voice more complaint. Instead a moment later he said, “He doesn’t know us. What if he doesn’t believe me?”

“We can only trust that he will; our lives depend upon it.”

Aelélasrion bowed deeply and swept out of the room.

A deep basso-profundo horn rumbled, shaking the very foundation of the armoury tower.

The enemy had been sighted.

The massive teeth of the portcullis hung over the maw of the city wall, hungry to bite down as the defenders marched out to face their foe.

Archers lined the battlements, their barbuts gleaming in the last glimmers of daylight. A single archer, crouched, nocking an arrow as he aimed his recurve bow high. The man had been chosen from the ranks of the city a champion archer from the last tourney. Breathing shallowly, he drew back his arm until the catgut had dug so deep into his fingers that he had lost all feeling. The arrow felt unwieldy. He had never fired its like before. Its balance was unnatural, but he followed Finreir’s instructions to the letter. He made a silent count of ten before he loosed the sorcerer’s arrow high into the black sky.

As the arrow left the bow, the archer recoiled as it unexpectedly burst into flame. Its red glare streaked over the heads of the dead before exploding in a shower of shimmering fireballs that hung in the air, revealing the extent of the enemy they faced.

The front line swelled with the slack-skinned putrescent flesh eaters scuttling forward. Behind them came the Black Hand, skeletal knights in rusted armour, under the command of Adolphus Krieger. Unmatched terror emanated from their corpses, fear rolling across the battlefield. Mannfred’s own grave guard, wights wielding deadly wight blades and clad in gleaming black plate, brought up the rear.

On either flank were the Black Knights, the right led by Gothard, the Undying Wight Lord, and the left by a faceless vampire, a white rose emblazoned on his chest. The knights reined in their skeletal steeds, chomping at the bit, hungry to taste man flesh.

Finreir and the two elf warriors, Rinanlir and Málalanyn, emerged from the great mouth of the city, the rank and file of humanity swelling out behind them to face the undead.

The human forces, led by the army general and an experienced and battle-scarred veteran, Syrus Grymm, flanked Finreir to the left and to the right in ranks ten deep and one hundred wide, spreading out across the killing ground of the battlefield. Down the entire length of the city walls before them a harsh snow-filled landscape rolled out for yard after yard, until the first line of undead foot soldiers stood mockingly just out of arrow range.

The undead army roared as one at the living, their mere existence taunting them, beckoning them closer, but the humans would not move.

Mannfred gave the signal to the left flank.

Gothard responded by spurring his nightmare steed into a charge, leading a single probing wave of Black Knights down the length of the men’s front line. They immediately drew fire from the frightened archers up on the battlements, but curiously the infantry did not flinch or recoil. Instead as the riders of the dead raced back and forth, their presence goading the living, the entire rear line of Marienburg’s innocuous looking foot soldiers sprang into action. Grabbing up sharpened pikes

that had been concealed in the snow, they raced to the front line and ten deep thrust their pikes into the ground, erecting a barrier that no riders, undead or otherwise, could ever hope to penetrate.

It was little more than a trace memory, a ghost of who he had been, but he felt it: satisfaction. He had forced the living into showing their hand. Gothard led his riders back to their place on the left flank to await further orders.

Mannfred saw instantly that he must send in his foot soldiers.

He ordered the flesh eaters—and only the flesh eaters—to advance.

The cadaverous ghouls salivated and slavered, shrieking with delight as they surged across the no man's land between the forces, banging gnawed bones and clubs to raise a cacophony of sound. They broke into a run, brandishing their chipped and rusty swords above their heads.

Finreir nodded once to Grymm and once to the sergeant of the archers on the battlements who raised his arm in acknowledgement. The man's arm came down with a cry of, "Loose!" A rain of steel poured from the heavens.

Arrow upon arrow thudded into putrid chests and pus-filled arms, cutting down wave after wave of the damned flesh eaters.

A cold smile spread across the Vampire Count's grim face. The living had taken the bait. He called forth his necromancers, bidding them have the newly dead rise. The fear in the faces of the living was a wondrous sight to behold.

The dead flesh eaters rose from the dirt right on top of the terrified pikemen.

Finreir had anticipated this manoeuvre too.

A second row of archers sprang up from behind the first along the high walls of the battlements, crossbowmen bearing flaming bolts soaked in naphtha. They took aim and fired upon the undead.

Adolphus Krieger chuckled bleakly at the obvious mistake. "The living were commanded by idiots. They fire on us, they fire on their own pike-men," he said, pointing out the irony that already the pikes were burning as the flesh eaters surged relentlessly forwards, throwing themselves onto the defences. Soon they would be reduced to ash and that would allow the riders back through. We must press the advantage!"

Mannfred gave the order for Krieger to advance with the Black Hand, marching on the centre. At the same time, he released the dire wolves to undertake continuous hit-and-fade assaults on the flanks of the living forces, augmenting the knights' more powerful cavalry charges with constant harassment attacks and drawing the archers' fire away from Krieger's foot soldiers.

Across the battlefield Finreir felt deep satisfaction that the arrogant dead had fallen for his double bluff. His only remaining fear was that Grymm and the living could not hold their line or their nerve long enough for the reinforcements led by Martin of Stirland to arrive and smash through the exposed ranks of the damned.

Mannfred threw up his hands, the lethal incantation screaming off his tongue. Ribbons of dark energy coursed from his cruel fingers, rippling out across the battlefield and ensnaring his front line. The flesh of the risen zombies became thin and desiccated as Mannfred's magic took hold. Compelled to thrust out their arms, they grasped for the nearest living being. Flesh decayed beneath the zombies' touch, fell conduits for the vampire lord's power. Their victims didn't even have time to scream.

Finreir reacted swiftly, raising his ivory staff and planting it firmly in the ground between his feet, but it was too late for many. The ground shook so violently that forces on both sides lost their footing and fell. In response, the snow and dust raised up from the ground beneath the living hung in the air for a moment, before blasting across the battlefield into the faces of the flesh eaters, like a maelstrom. The ice and the snow scoured the ranks of the dead, ripping the very flesh from their bones, pitting their bodies and obliterating them before the eyes of the humans.

There was nothing left for the necromancers to raise.

Mannfred raged in the cold heart of the undead army's ranks, his eyes blazing.

Finreir turned to his kin. "Remove the necromancers from the field, brothers"

Rinanlir and Málalanyn set off at a mad dash, using the chaos of battle as cover. None could touch them. Their swords whickered out occasionally, cleaving a path out of the flank, seeking the opportunity to cut back inside and catch Mannfred's sorcerers unawares. It was a simple but effective manoeuvre, surgical in its precision, elegant in its execution. The two elf swordmasters made light work of all in their path, but they did not underestimate the long-reaching powers of the magicians. Speed was of the essence. Within feet of the necromancers they felt their blood beginning to boil and their energy draining as the flesh began to melt around their bones.

Málalanyn brought one of Mannfred's grave guards to his knees and, leaping from the undead warrior's back, launched into the air, scything around in a deadly arc. His sword cleaved through the skulls of a surprised coven of necromancers. He landed in the midst of the dead, sword planted in the ground. He looked back at Rinanlir and said, "Your turn."

But there was no one left to kill.

"You take all the life out of fun, my friend," said Rinanlir shaking his head. "Perhaps we should take the initiative to kill a few more of these... things."

Mannfred's elite grave guard, seven feet tall, were already closing in on the company of two elves.

"This could be interesting," Rinanlir said, raising his sword in readiness.

Before a single blow could be landed, Finreir's presence touched their minds, ordering them back to the line.

As they turned to withdraw, they saw that Mannfred was already unleashing his next gambit, the bones of the long-dead clawing up from the earth in a vile parody of birth. But Mannfred's rage was not sated. Out at the extreme flanks of the living's lines, a foul stench began to form, filling the senses. The noxious fumes came not from without, but from within the very flesh of the soldiers, the rank corruption causing their flesh to rot and fall from their bones. The soldiers screamed in absolute terror and utter agony.

Gothard seized his chance, and the once proud warrior of the Knights of the Divine Sword led his riders in a wild charge at the human's flanks, racing them down the rear of the human forces. His damnation tore through him, flickering half-memories of a time before Mannfred had raised him from the dead, a conscript to his damned army. Emotions were alien now. There was no sense of self, no recognition of the banner of the Divine Sword, no stirring within him. He hungered for nothing more than the death of self. He lived on merely to fight, to serve, to destroy all that he had once held dear. He was destruction, wrath personified.

Finreir closed the noose on the perfect play, signalling Syrus Grymm to lead the remaining forces out, holding the flanks to face inwards and slam shut the steel trap, cutting off Mannfred's riders from the rest of his hellish legions. Held as they were at the foot of the city walls, the ranks of crossbow men and archers above loosed everything they had.

A swarming sound filled the air, a swirling black vortex of flesh eating insects streamed across the killing ground from Mannfred's fingertips, chewing a path through the living. The insects swarmed into mouths and eyes, and up the noses to clog the throats and choke the life out of the soldiers in their pestilential path.

Finreir cried, "Stay out of the light!" as static blue charges lanced from him into the soldiers next to him and on from them, cascading into the next and the next, and the next until every living soul was alive with raw power. The static light drove back the unnatural darkness, cracking open the sky. The light was so bright that the flesh eating insects combusted, flaming like a shower of hot coals falling into the snow with a hiss.

In the distance, the sound Finreir and the living had been longing for, Martin's horn, heralded the arrival of reinforcements. Banners flapped in the wind, regiments of Stirlanders marching side by side with an army carrying the banner of Altdorf. Thousands of soldiers were moving with rhythmic precision across the fields. They banged swords on shields, hammering out their defiance

as they advanced. The clamour had little effect on the dead, immune as they were to such primal instincts as fear, but it served to rouse the living, renewing strength in exhausted limbs, giving them fresh hope that they might yet live despite the uncompromising evil they battled.

Finreir smiled. Such was the power of hope. A single spark could banish an all-engulfing darkness.

Mannfred cocked his ear. How had he not seen this? His blindness incensed him. Finreir had drawn his Black Knights, and his rear was completely unprotected. Mannfred had expected to make an assault upon a city. He had not expected that the assault would be upon him. Finreir had played him masterfully, but the game was not over yet.

Krieger, almost at the front line of the living, came to the same realisation. He unleashed his will, invigorating the Black Hand with the sheer malevolent force of his presence, spurring them into a wild frenzy. They charged, concentrating his forces on a single point. The only task was to punch a hole through the living to rescue what was left of the Black Knights.

Mannfred did not wait to see if Krieger's Black Hand were successful. He wailed at the night, calling forth the banshees of nightfall. The wailing spectres would hold back the living long enough for them to flee.

This battle was over, but the Winter War was not.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Carpe Noctem

Hel Fenn, The Blighted Forests of Sylvania

And so the living drove the dead relentlessly out of the Empire and back into the foul forests of Sylvania.

It was not one battle, not one decisive victory that did it. Scores of skirmishes and confrontations with a spiralling death toll matched the determination of the living not to fail. Swords clashed across hundreds of miles, the dead of countless provinces, hamlets, towns and villages gathering to rot in ditches so very far from home. The living swelled the ranks of the dead. Faith was stretched thin and hope was all but crushed, but that last stubborn flicker refused to die and from it blossomed an unflinching optimism. The living fought for their friends, their families and their land, the dead fought only for their master. It wasn't fear or hunger that drove them on, they were far removed from such base emotion, it was a weakness that death had cured them of.

Carrion crows hovered over the battlefields, picking at the remains of two hundred thousand souls. It was death on an unprecedented scale. That was the cost of the endless Winter War. For the living it seemed as though spring would never come, indeed, for more than a year it didn't. Though the snows came and went with the melt, death held the landscape in its icy grip. Morr's appetite for souls was so fierce that it could never be slaked.

There were too many skirmishes to remember, too many bodies to count, too much grieving to be done. It was an endless stalemate, no one's objectives truly met.

Battlefields were scoured and the fallen gathered into huge pyres. The cremation fires robbed von Carstein of more foot sloggers.

Even so, too many were born again into the ranks of the undead.

The clash of steel and the rasp of whetstones became the anthems of humanity.

The balance was precarious. The ebb and flow of slaughter never ceased. Martin, Count of Stirland and Kurt III, Grand Theogonist of Sigmar, marshalled the combined forces of humanity. Despite huge losses, they decimated the ranks of the undead more than once.

The strength of steel and the unbending determination of faith combined to forge two beacons of courage. They led by example. Martin von Kristallbach's horn rang out over the battlefields. He was not some fair-weather leader who sought the protection of the command pavilion. He fought with the rank and file, inspiring those around him with his bravery. Though others damned him for his reckless stupidity, none were prepared to carry the fight to the undead. Martin von Kristallbach was the unwavering beacon of humanity that inspired the living and drew the undead like flies.

Martin's grasp of strategy was instinctive and often daring.

Kurt witnessed a greater evil playing out on the battlefield and prayed to Sigmar for guidance. The Man-God granted him strength of purpose to do what must be done, the answer revealed when what appeared to be a ghoulish foe that had fallen at his feet begged him for release. The ghoul turned out to be no ghoul at all, but a revived cadaver whose original spirit, imprisoned in its vile flesh, had been unable to cross over into the afterlife. Kurt recognised him. He had been cut down on the battlefield only hours before and somehow, through sheer force of character, had managed to regain a shred of control over his lips so that he could beg to be released from his own personal hell.

If this had happened to just one man, how many thousands of others were, like him, denied salvation?

Honour was satisfied even if death wasn't.

For every victory the living claimed, the dead matched them.

The living learned their lessons well.

Martin refused to allow Mannfred the luxury of time.

The living harried his forces across the world.

Respite was rare and broken.

Under Martin's guiding hand, the men shaped themselves into a mighty foe-hammer. They beat down remorselessly on the flesh eaters and the Black Hand.

Differences cast aside, the men of the Empire refused to be humbled. In that, they reaped what they sowed. Their courage brought them small victories. Each small triumph spurred them on as the nature of the war shifted. There were cowards, of course, but there were heroes too, ordinary men like Vorster Schlagener, whose bravura, courage and skill on the battlefield earned them reputations among the men.

Fewer and fewer skirmishes took place on the wide open fields of battle as the conflict became a guerrilla war, the living being forced to scour the woods for the vampire's foul army.

The dead were not content to be victims.

Mannfred deployed all of his cunning to make the hunt lethal, fashioning traps, pits and spikes, nets and more wily artifices to ensure that the living trod softly, forever fearful of their hidden enemy.

Still, the deadlock could not last.

Vorster emerged from the trees, blood caked around a wound on the side of his head.

An open plain sloped up gradually to a sharp ridge. Beyond it stood yet more trees.

He felt nauseous. He had taken a blow to the head that morning. A cudgel had lifted him off his horse and left him unconscious in the mulch of fallen leaves. Twice since coming around he had found the world spinning beneath him, his vision blurring. He wasn't about to complain. He was alive. Fifty men had fallen. It was a sobering thought.

Vorster Schlagener and Ackim Brandt rode side by side up the ridge, along with one hundred men who were part of Stirland's ranger advance, scouting out the lie of the land.

Hel Fenn spread out before them. Fog had settled in. Wisps of white drifted through the twisted trees, moving sluggishly on the breeze that came from the stinking swamp. The cloying reek of the place was foul.

The ball of the sun hung low in the sky, the light fading fast.

Vorster's first thought was that his mind had been damaged by the blow to the head. It looked for all the world as though the blackened limbs of the trees were moving!

He steadied himself in the saddle, closed his eyes and opened them again, the wave of sickness passing.

It was no fever-dream.

The bones of the forest were on the march, the dead streaming out of the withered trees in droves.

Vorster's horse shied as it caught the stench of rotting flesh.

A thrill of fear chased up the length of his spine.

More poured out from the forest, endless columns of walking dead.

They were not alone.

Wolves loped along at their side and the sky grew black as a flock of fell bats converged in swirling clouds.

The dead spread out before them, thousands upon thousands, an endless danse macabre.

His breath caught in his throat. Vorster had faced the undead more times than most, and still the sight of them exerted a grip of fear around his heart that no other enemy could. He felt the first constricting touch of horror and struggled to banish it. Fear was a soldier's worst enemy and constant companion.

They came out of the forest, spilling endlessly across the plain.

"Do you think it's too late to burn the forest to the ground?" Ackim Brandt asked, irony bitter in his voice.

"How can they have grown so?" Vorster breathed in disbelief.

"The world is full of the dead, my friend. It is the living we have a shortage of."

"Now *that* is a sobering thought."

The darkness thickened. The shriek and chitter of the bats was the only sound across the whole battleground.

The truth was sickening. While playing hide and seek in the damned forests, the Vampire Count had drawn them into the jaws of a trap. He had lulled them into believing that in harrying his forces, chipping away at their number battle by battle, they were somehow winning the long war of attrition.

The proof of that lie was laying itself out before them in the form of a vast host of skeletons, ghouls, zombies, wights and, alongside them, the vampire's peasant levies.

"What man would willingly march to war under the banners of the undead?" Vorster asked. He still found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that any of the living could willingly choose to throw their lot in with the vile dead.

They fight for their cruel masters because they fear them, my friend. It is as simple and as sad as that. Fear can drive a man to do many things'

Vorster shivered.

"As hard as it is for us to comprehend, they see von Carstein as their legitimate lord. It infects them with a twisted sense of loyalty. To them *we* are the invaders and they are merely protecting their homeland."

"Then I pity them," said Vorster, earnestly.

"Pity is better than hatred. That way lies madness. The best we can hope to achieve is to bring death to a few of them. Doubtless it is a release from a much worse fate."

Two hundred thousand strong, at least, and still the undead spilled from the cover of the trees.

"So this is to be our doom," Vorster said to the man beside him.

"It would seem so," Brandt agreed as it became sickeningly obvious that for every human there were twenty or more creatures dragged back from beyond the grave, hungry to kill them.

"Why do we even bother with the charade? How can we do anything other than die here?"

"Look at our choice of masters. Should we die in battle, we'll still be enlisted into this war, my friend."

They watched with mounting horror as still more and more of the corpses shuffled out of the forest, forming into hellish regiments in complete silence. No order was shouted, no trumpet bayed.

Then they saw him, a distant smear in the dusk's light. The Vampire Count's silhouette was unmistakable.

He threw his arms aloft, the sky answering with a devastating crack as lightning trembled and flashed around him. The harsh bluish-white light revealed the full extent of his forces. The vast fen was a sea of dead. They surged forwards as still more corpses swelled in behind them, a relentless tide rolling towards the living.

Brandt called a young rider forward.

"You see what we face, soldier?"

The fresh-faced rider nodded sickly, making the sign of the hammer across his chest.

“Good. Carry it with you. Martin is half a day away. Drive your horse into the ground. Ride the poor animal until she drops. There is nothing to be gained from sparing her. You *must* get word to Martin. Tell him the vampire has found new strength and has been waiting for us. Should he find us amongst the enemy, beg him to be merciful and slay us quickly. Now ride like the wind, soldier.”

The sunlight streaming in through the stained glass window refracted into the eight colours of the winds.

Finreir stood over the battle plans, playing at general, pleased with himself and his first victory, and eager to march deeper into the lands of the Vampire Count to press home the advantage he'd secured.

He looked up.

One by one the colours wove themselves into the tapestry of a man, no, not a man, an elf.

The spectral projection of his tutor, Areiraenni, took shape and stepped out of the glass window to stand before him. The old sorcerer was not amused.

“I see you play at soldiers.”

“I am making a difference, master. The humans need us.”

“The humans need many things, Finreir. We are not one of them. You were forbidden from coming here. You are to return to Ulthuan immediately.”

“But I have so much to do.”

“It is not a request. The council has issued an edict. You will carry it out. If you cannot find within you the discipline that is required I will recommend that you begin your studies all over again, and I shall remove myself from the council for I shall have failed in my role as your teacher.”

“If I can just show you what I have found here, master, the threat the humans face,” he walked over to the map. “So many battles, but they all rise from the same darkness. The sleeping one's influence is undeniable. If he is allowed to wake—”

“Finreir, are you so naive as to think you are the only one that has seen what is happening here? The council sees wisdom in not interfering. This is the fight of humans. It will define their place in the world. If they fail, well, they have no place living. You must allow nature to take its course. There is a reason for everything. You will come voluntarily, or we will forcibly remove you.” With that, the shadow-shapes of two guardian elves began to form on either side of the sorcerer's projection.

“Tell me something, Finreir, does Málalanyn live?”

“He does master. Your son acquitted himself well in the battle. He will become a fine warrior one day.” He saw upon the old elf's face the relief that only a worried parent could know.

“My apologies if I have offended the council, master. It was not my intention.”

“You will apologise to them in person within the month. I suggest you also beg for their forgiveness. I also suggest that you take the shortest route possible, Finreir. Your proclivities for exploration will not be tolerated further until you come of age. Is that understood?”

Finreir understood perfectly well, but he would continue to watch over the humans from afar. There was nothing the council could do to stop that.

Kallad Stormwarden stumbled out of the forest.

Cahgur and the other survivors staggered out behind him, exhausted.

They lay in the snow, peering up at the sky, wondering how, why, they still lived.

Cahgur sniffed the air curiously. “Do you smell ale?”

“We're running for our lives and *that's* all you can think about?” Othtin asked in disbelief.

“Well it's not *all* I can think of, but it is a goodly portion of it,” Cahgur said, sitting up. “Seriously, can you smell it?”

He looked around, trying to see where the tantalising smell was coming from.

A small ramshackle cottage sat to the side of deeply rutted tracks. They were on a trade route of some kind, although it was unlike any trade route the dwarfs had been on before. This was a road no traveller dared veer from. The cartwheel ruts were deep and rigidly adhered to. The long, skeletal fingers of the withered trees dragged low enough to snare any passing coaches.

"Is that a house?" Cahgur pointed at the dilapidated building.

"Surely not, who'd be mad enough to live out here?"

There were more horses tethered outside than they would otherwise have expected from a hovel.

"It looks like an inn to me," Othtin said.

Kallad pulled himself up to his feet using one of the dragging branches. He sighed wearily. "Well, whatever it is, it's got four walls and a door. That ought to be enough to keep a vampire out for the night. At the very least if they are still chasing us by dawn anyone in that building just joined our wee gang."

He set off in the direction of the building.

"What if they're already in the other fella's gang?" Belamir wondered. "Oh, did I say that out loud?" He grinned at the others. "All this running works up a thirst."

"Skalfkrag and Valarik would have loved this place."

"Aye, that they would, laddie, that they would," said Kallad.

The door to the taproom swung open on the creek of rusted hinges.

Kallad felt as if he had stepped back in time.

He walked through the rotten sawdust up to the bar where an emaciated barkeep towelled out a pewter flagon. Kallad reached into his pouch and pulled out the dead vampire's ring, finger and all, and slammed it down on the ale-stained bar. "I'm here to see about a bloodsucker."

"He's been expecting you. He sleeps in the basement."

Kallad nodded.

His kinsmen were shocked. "You knew we were coming here?" Cahgur asked, shaking his head.

"Nothing on our journey is without reason," Kallad said.

"So what's down there?"

"Nothing you want to see. I'm here to settle my debt." He slapped a handful of coins on the bar. "The drinks are on me. Try not to fall down. We might need to leave in a hurry."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Molagon.

"But I do like the smell of that ale," Cahgur said, grinning, willing to forgive anything for a dram of the wet stuff. "So, barman, busy yourself, I've worked up a fearful thirst."

Kallad left them drinking and disappeared into the dank cellar beneath the inn.

The first thing he noticed was the smell, the musk redolent of the grave.

Kallad said into the darkness, "There are easier places we could have met."

"Ahh, maybe so, but none more scenic."

"You're a strange one, even for a dead man. If you weren't dead already I'd have half a mind to kill you where you stand."

"There's time for pleasantries later. Do you have the ring?" Jerek von Carstein asked, emerging from the sanctuary of the shadows.

Kallad gladly gave him the finger.

Jerek unwrapped the small muslin bundle hastily, his hands shaking with anticipation as he removed its contents. He stared at it for a moment. The dwarf could not fathom whether his disbelief was born of pleasure or disgust until the ring finger went flying across the room, clattering off an unseen wall. "It is a very pretty ring, dwarf, but it is not the ring I asked for."

"You wanted Mannfred dead," said Kallad. "I made sure of it. I walked into the very heart of his damned castle and cut off his head while he sat on his stinking throne. That is his finger. That is his ring."

“That was not his ring. You did not kill Mannfred. You killed Mannfred’s man.”

“What are you saying?”

“The Vampire Count is still at large, as is the damnable ring. You merely ensured he has one less decoy in the world, one less thrall willing to die for him.”

“You mean to say it was all for nothing?”

“Not nothing,” said Jerek and then a moment later, Yes, nothing.”

“I lost two dwarfs for that bloody ring!”

“Careless.”

“I consider this debt settled,” Kallad said.

Jerek moved in swiftly. “Know this, dwarf. I do not consider it settled. We had an agreement. If you do not deliver the right ring, I consider your life forfeit, and I *will* exact payment.”

There was nothing he could say to that. He trudged wearily back up the stairs to the taproom and determined to console himself with ale.

But Kallad had no taste for it.

He sat apart from his compatriots, nursing a tankard.

Then a hooded man he had never seen enter the bar spoke, “You look lost, dwarf.”

“What’s it to you, stranger, whether I am lost or found?” he demanded with suspicion. He couldn’t see the stranger’s face; the hood was drawn down so completely as to obscure it.

“I cannot linger, dwarf, but know that I have come to deliver a message.”

“Who the bloody hell are you?”

“Names are not important.” the stranger pulled back the hood to reveal aquiline features. Something about him seemed unreal, insubstantial. “I was with you when you fled Drakenhof. I was with you when you stumbled through the forest of bones’

“Well I didn’t see you. You could have lent us a hand!” Kallad grumbled sourly.

“There is little a carrion bird can do but watch. You acquitted yourself well.”

“What, by Valaya’s buttocks, are you talkin’ about, fella?”

There was something not quite right about the stranger; he did not look human. He knew instinctively he was no vampire, but equally, he knew he was no man either. No, the more Kallad stared, the more he realised exactly what the stranger was: an elf.

“I don’t have much time, dwarf. I am not going to waste it explaining insignificant details to you. I am here to deliver a message. Know this, Kallad, son of Kellus, last dwarf of Karak Sadra: All of the Old World is in jeopardy. The life of every living creature hangs in the balance. The war with the undead wages still. It cannot be fought by man alone. The dwarf nation will determine whether the Old World as we know it stands or falls. That is your destiny, Kallad. That is the storm you were born to ward, Stormwarden, son of Kellus.”

“How do you know who I am, and who are you to tell me what my destiny is? Answer me, elf! And give me one good reason why I should believe a word out of yer treacherous mouth! Now!”

“The forces converge. You must away to Hel Fenn.”

Kallad launched forwards, clutching at the stranger’s cloak. It turned to rags in his hands and crumpled to the floor.

There was no sign of the stranger.

Across the room, Belamir and Cahgur roared with laughter. “Kallad’s drunk off his arse. He’s arguing with the curtains!”

Martin of Stirland held the higher ground.

His left flank was sheltered by forests and farmland, and to his right stood the ruins of an old stone fort. Ahead lay a raised track running parallel to the bottom of the hill. His position was strong, but it wasn’t perfect.

Martin von Kristallbach arrayed his artillery pieces across the crest of Thunder Ridge. Both cannon and mortar had good vantage over the approaching enemy. He did not want to risk a repeat of what Gothard's Black Knights had attempted at Marienburg. He gave particular attention to supporting his flanks, which he did by installing brigades of his elite Ostland Black Guard under the aegis of Vorster Schlagener in hiding among the masonry of the ruined buildings. The vast bulk of his army, the infantry under the command of Ackim Brandt, the cavalry answering to Dietrich Jaeger, he kept hidden behind Thunder Ridge, while he stationed huntsmen and free companies out in plain sight, as his bait.

For all his strengths, Martin had a weakness too, and one of the most human, forgiveness. Jaeger had been disgraced, humiliated by Vorster, and had turned into a laughing stock amid the rank and file, but Martin had found it in him to give the man a chance at redemption. No man, the count said, deserved less. He had served in several of the smaller skirmishes, acquitting himself well. It was as though in shame he had decided to become a hero, placing little value on his own skin. So Jaeger had the cavalry with Martin's blessing.

The landscape, and a huge slice of luck, would decide this battle. Martin had every intention of drawing Mannfred in, blindsiding him with the grandest of ambushes.

In the calm before the battle, a priest of Morr walked within the ruins before the bowed heads of the Black Guard, bestowing upon them the blessings of the god of death and dreams. Four thousand of the fearsome black armoured warriors hid within the old fort, another thousand at the farm. Each warrior carried with him a pouch containing two silver pieces. The coins were an offering to pay their way into the afterlife should they fall on the field of battle.

Although he was not one of them, and did not wear the lacquered black plate and hauberk of a true Black Guard, Vorster took the blessing gratefully. He, like every man in the regiment, had worked his way up through the ranks, earning his place in the battle with deeds and courage not birthright and patronage. He was proud to stand beside them and would be equally proud to fall with them. Beside him Vladimir Ludennacht, champion of the Elector Count of Ostland, bowed his forehead until it touched the hawk's head embossed upon the gleaming hilt of his zwei-hander great sword. The weapon was truly a thing of beauty eager to cleave undead flesh and bone.

It would not have to wait long.

There was no signal that Vorster could see.

When Mannfred's army came it did not pause to bluster, to wail, to gnash or to goad. It simply continued its eerily silent advance until the skeletal riders and a vast regiment of bone-white infantry under prior orders from the Vampire Count altered course and made directly for the old fort on the right flank of Thunder Ridge.

With that one simple manoeuvre the battle of Hel Fenn had begun.

"Hold," Vorster whispered. "Hold." He held up a hand to stay the men under his command, and from his vantage point, continued to watch the creeping advance of the undead draw ever closer to their hiding place. The bones were here for one purpose and one purpose alone. They were not here to frighten or to send a message of fear to the humans. There was no need of fear now. No, they were here to kill them.

The skeletal riders surged forwards, cantering across the no man's land. They met no resistance. The lie of the ruins was inviting, but entering would have forced them into a narrow formation, compressing their flanks. Their commanders were reluctant to sacrifice their mobility before the skeletal foot soldiers were in place.

Ludennacht was itching to attack. "Why don't they come?" he whispered, barely breathing the words.

"They are looking for the advantage. We must not surrender it to them," said Vorster calmly. "Hold."

The dead crept forwards inch by inch without pause or thought as they clogged into the funnel betwixt and between the rubble.

Vorster had the spot all marked out: three paces, two, one.

“Now!”

All four thousand of the Ostland Black Guard came out of hiding, swinging. The dead had no comprehension of what hit them. Slow to react, the first lines were reduced to nothing more than shattered bone and weeping marrow within minutes as the Black Guard’s great swords cut a swathe through their ranks. Not once did the undead cry out as they fell beneath the barrage of blades. For a moment Vorster dared to believe that it might be over quickly. It wasn’t. He ducked a wildly swinging blade. The edge caught him high on the shoulder. A little higher and it would have opened his neck. As it was the blow glanced off his armour harmlessly. The man beside him fell, only to be replaced by another. A corpse stumbled at Vorster’s feet. Before he could banish it to whence it came, the creature lashed out, scratching Vorster across the face with foetid fingernails. A ribbon of blood ran down the warrior’s cheek. He did not wipe it away—another corpse swung for him before he could. Vorster matched blades with the undead as they continued to surge forwards in wave after wave of rusted metal and makeshift weapons. The ruins stank from the rotting marrow of their broken bones. With each blow that cracked open a bone, the stench intensified. The Black Guard’s repel was fluid. As the undead army probed for weaknesses the Black Guard shored up their line, never once allowing them through. This would have remained a precarious defence, but Martin had had the foresight to prepare a masterful counter-strike.

Pistoliers and musketeers rained down a ceaseless hail of lead from the upper levels of the ruins. The cacophony was deafening.

Runners raced frantically to fetch shot and blackpowder to keep the volleys going.

A rusted blade nicked Vorster’s shoulder. He battered it away, barely ducking beneath a wild swing meant to separate his head from his body. Crouching low he drove his sword into the wretched creature’s gut, opening it wide. The creature fell at his feet.

More gunshots cracked, raining down death from above, and it was not long before a cloud of billowing smoke from the sheer volume of shots enveloped the fort.

For the first hour the right flank held.

For the second hour the right flank held, barely.

Nameless men fell around Vorster, good men who had lives and all the accoutrements that went with them. Those same good men began to rise, drawn back to hellish unlife by the Vampire Count before they were bludgeoned to broken bone and mashed flesh by their friends. And still the dead kept coming.

From his horse, Martin von Kristallbach watched the battle unfold and prepared himself for Mannfred’s next move, sickeningly sure of what it would be.

Martin had read it right. True to form, the Vampire Count readied his forces for an attack on the left flank. Behind the walls of the farmhouse, the remaining one thousand Black Guard lay in wait alongside heavy cannons and a regiment of ordinary footsloggers, but the foot soldiers were not battle-hardened like the elite guard. Martin had bet everything on Mannfred attacking the right flank first. As a result the left was inherently weaker. He feared it would be the first to fall, and with good reason.

He watched and he waited, and he feared.

“Sir! Sir!” a runner cried, stumbling across the snow-packed sod.

“Runner, report,” Martin said, not taking his eyes from the field of battle for a second.

“Look to left flank, sir!”

“What about it?”

“There are dwarfs arriving, hundreds of them. Their leader pledges his allegiance to the flag and vows to fight until every shambling rotten undead piece of filth is dead again. Those are his words, sir, not mine.”

Martin sat forwards in his saddle, unable to believe his luck. He spied the tree line and within it, the first stirrings of movement. “By Sigmar! We *will* win this day! Send word to their commander, what’s his name?”

“They come under the banners of Karak-Kadrin, Zhufbar, and Karak Raziac, sir. Their leader calls himself Stormwarden.”

“Then send word to this Stormwarden that the Empire thanks him for his bravery and will not forget this day. Tell him to marshal his might and remain hidden within the tree line. Let the vampire think we are weak, and when he tries to press his advantage, crush him.”

“Very good, sir.”

The runner sprinted for the trees.

For the first time since the fighting began, Martin allowed himself the ghost of smile.

Mannfred’s army advanced with speed on the left flank, hoping to catch the living off guard.

Chariots at the fore, manned by skeletal archers, flanked by dire wolves and trailed by peasants, they saw the gap in Martin’s defences and rushed to exploit it with a would-be hammer blow.

The Black Guard rose heroically, presenting themselves as a target.

The undead charged them at a frightening clip. The sickle-shaped scythes set into their wheels sliced through the air, and as they met the living, sawed through their knees.

It was an undead victory that would not last long.

Kallad Stormwarden whirled Ruinthorn above his head, leading from the front as the dwarfs came streaming out of the trees, accompanied by the rapid-fire volleys of their quarrellers. His blade rasped through the ranks of the enemy, opening up a bloody path. Kallad plunged into it, bellowing his rage as he swept Ruinthorn around in savage arcs. The axe was lethal close up. The dwarfs charged in behind him, hammering into the backs of the dead, cutting them down. Axes shattered skulls and ribs, and cleaved through pelvises and every other foetid bone in their stinking bodies.

The dead fell silently.

Kallad drove his axe into the ribcage of a cadaverous brute, splintering it in two. The stench was sickening. Ruinthorn cracked the skeleton open as if it were the brittle shell of a nut. A scythe cut the air beside his head, slicing into his helm. The blow rattled his brains. Reeling, Kallad answered it by disembowelling the offender. The battle raged around him. He was a rock. He would not fall.

He was the last son of Karak Sadra. He was not fighting for himself, for the living. This was for the dead. His dead. The living rallied around his glittering axe. Blood flowed.

Again, the flanks held, despite all the odds.

It was painfully obvious to Martin that should one fall it would be a disaster.

Mannfred was forced into engaging the centre.

The undead army moving across the plain was vast. Blocks of skeletons marched in perfect unison, thousands strong, shattering the silence by crashing their spears against their shields. Zombies shuffled, gnashing their teeth, and scores of dire wolves slavered behind them. The air above the host was black with bats, blotting out the sun. It was mid-morning, but it was as though dusk had come early.

“Good,” Dietrich Jaeger said to the waiting cavalry around him, “We shall have our battle in the shade.”

The stump where his hand had been itched. He scratched at it. It always itched when he grew excited. He was reminded of his shame.

“It will not happen again,” Jaeger pledged. “Today is ours for the taking boys!”

The air thrummed with the beat of wings and the ground shook under marching feet.

Martin von Kristallbach wheeled his mount around to see the full extent of the slaughter. They were so many, the dead. Legion. The living could not hope to stand against their might.

“If we are to die here, then we die,” he said to the dispatch rider beside him. The man looked terrified by the prospect. Martin could not blame him. “But let’s see if we can’t drive them all the way back to hell, eh?”

He sent orders to the artillery on Thunder Ridge—hold the line at all costs. The men cheered as the great cannons and mortars boomed and kicked into action, blasting shot at the approaching dead. Clods of mud were thrown into the air as the cannon balls hit the ground and on the bounce battered the skeletal ranks. Gaping holes appeared in their masses, bones shattered, bodies breached.

Martin kept the reserve firmly hidden behind the ridge and sent only the front ranks forward to weaken the enemy advance. This thin line was dubbed the forlorn hope by the men who waited behind it.

Jerek sheltered in the trees.

He wore the face and body of a huge dire wolf.

It was fitting that the final moments of the White Wolf of Middenheim should see him transformed thus.

From his vantage point he could see both sides of Thunder Ridge clearly.

He watched as Mannfred’s forces engaged a weak looking centre. The spearmen of the Empire stood in ranks only four deep. Though they fought valiantly, they had nowhere to go but to slowly retreat up the hill, back towards the artillery.

Jerek could not help but smile as, invigorated by this turn of events, Mannfred ordered the bulk of his army to surge forwards with renewed vitality, victory in sight. But Jerek could see what the vampire could not, that Martin’s forlorn hope was nothing but a clever feint to draw the Vampire Count in.

As each defender fell in the weak looking line, another would race up from the hidden reserves behind the ridge to replace him, so in effect the wall was eternal and could never be broken while appearing to Mannfred to be forever on the verge of collapse.

It was ingenious.

With so much of his army committed, it opened up a gap at Mannfred’s end of the battlefield, giving the Elector Count of Stirland the chance to decapitate the Vampire Count once and for all.

“Ride!” Martin gave the order to Dietrich Jaeger.

The shamed soldier spurred his mount forwards, answering the order.

Vorster watched as Stirland’s cavalry spread out across the plain, their trot increasing to a canter as they advanced around the ridge. They gave the horses their heads, galloping. Their wave of steel and courage smashed into the undead and broke them utterly.

Jaeger brandished his sword in his left hand, a relic of his duel with Vorster. The soldier felt no guilt at the fop’s ruined hand. He could easily have been left dead on the duelling field instead of maimed. At least fate had given him the chance of redemption, claiming another small victory.

And there it should have ended.

The cavalry charge had achieved more than the allies could have hoped, but they should have turned back to the Empire lines, regrouped and made ready towards another foray.

Vorster watched in disbelief as Dietrich Jaeger succumbed to vanity.

Instead of breaking away and fading in search of a more accessible target, Jaeger continued the charge towards Gothard, looking to bring his head home to Martin as a trophy.

The fop chased the Black Knights until he was deep beyond the undead lines. He fought like a daemon possessed. The cavalry rallied around him, cutting and killing, opening corpses and flesh eaters alike. But it wasn’t enough.

Disbelief turned to horror as Mannfred commanded his elite grave guard to form up into spear blocks and cut off the cavalry's escape.

Jaeger, who had been so focused on bringing down Gothard, failed to notice the gravity of his error. Vorster had no such blessing. He stood slack jawed as Mannfred's counter ensnared Jaeger and all of his men. Their horses were exhausted. With nowhere to run as Mannfred's noose tightened, no amount of hack and slash from the riders could prevent a thousand undead spearmen from goring the horses to death. With the riders either crushed beneath the weight of their dying animals or left to fend on foot, Mannfred's necromancers were quick to raise the horses from the mud and snow to trample their former masters to death.

Dire wolves prowled closer in packs, hungry for the flesh of horse and man.

Vorster watched with barely suppressed fury as the blowhard Jaeger tried to rally his troops. Around the battlefield the cannons fell silent, the gunners frightened of hitting their own men.

The distraction cost him dearly. A callow-faced flesh eater grabbed hold of his legs and pitched him into the sludge of snow and mud. Two more were on top of him in a heartbeat, trying to claw through his armour to his heart. He struggled to fight them off but they were relentless, in his face, biting, tearing their fingers bloody trying to open him up. And then the skull of one opened, crying blood down on him where the back of it had been cleaved in two. The second fell across him, a huge gaping wound in its back where a steel blade glittered red, slick with ichor. Vorster rammed his own blade up into the throat of the last one and rolled clear.

He didn't see who had saved him. All around him swords flashed wildly as men fought for their lives.

And then, for a moment, respite in the frenzy.

"So much for redemption," he breathed in the lull, his words carrying.

In the midst of it, Dietrich Jaeger cut and ran for his life.

For a moment he was master of his fate, and because of it, Dietrich Jaeger died a hero. For all that, Vorster could see the terror in his eyes as he ran at the dead, hacking a path through a shambling horde of zombies.

He fell to an arrow in the back.

Jaeger's folly had cost Martin his cavalry.

Mannfred von Carstein watched in delight as barely one hundred knights managed to scramble from the encirclement and make it back to the Imperial lines.

He felt buoyed by this success.

He ordered his reserve to finally be brought into play. They joined the grave guard bringing up the rear. The entire strength of the undead rolled forwards, giving no quarter to the living.

He could taste victory.

It quickly curdled in his mouth.

An ink-black bat swooped low, out of the maelstrom above, skimming across the bleached-bone skulls of the skeletal horde, its leathery wings beating urgently. In one swift tumbling movement the bat's shape shifted, and a grim-faced vampire scout stood before him. He delivered a dire warning about the shape of the battlefield.

"My liege," the vampire bowed low. "Reinforcements march for Stirland beneath the banner of the Knights of the Divine Sword. The Grand Theogonist himself leads them."

"Does he have the damnable book?"

"I cannot tell."

"How long until he joins the fray?"

"An hour, maybe two, but no more than that."

Mannfred was again swayed by the sight of the forlorn hope across the ridge. He clenched his fist in bitter frustration. "Surely one decisive blow will break them." It occurred to Mannfred that

the reason the flanks had resisted him thus far was down to Stirland's folly. The man had obviously committed the bulk of his troops to them. Mannfred had been fighting the battle under the misconception that Stirland was stronger than he was and had withheld a reserve force out of sight somewhere. The arrival of the priest told him otherwise. The Knights of the Divine Sword were the reserve and they had not even reached the battlefield. Time was of the essence. The living were stretched thin, to the point of breaking. He could not afford for the wretched priest to take up his position and bolster them once again. "Would someone rid me of this damnable holy man?" No one answered him.

Mannfred decided that swift action was required.

There could be no waiting.

He ordered his forces to quicken their advance, throwing all their weight at the centre.

The forlorn hope must fall.

It was an error of judgement that would prove fatal.

The Grand Theogonist, Kurt III, received his orders from Martin and understood what was required of the Divine Sword.

They formed an armoured column, like one half of the pincer of a mighty demi-kraken. Thousands of knights resplendent in full battle armour rode onto the field of death. They held aloft flaming torches. The reddish hue of fire danced across the contours of their burnished plate armour. They were an awesome sight to behold, riding out of the storm. The snow seemed to melt away from them.

Spurring their warhorses into a wild charge, they punched a hole clean through the ranks of the dead. Trailing their sword arms low, the knights wielded their flaming brands like great swords and thrust at the horde of undead, igniting the rags they were clothed in. The fire spread like a plague. The sweet stench of cooking flesh wafted across the battlefield.

They did not scream.

Ablaze, they marched ever onwards, driven by Mannfred's unbending will.

It was not long before their charred bones became so brittle that their legs snapped like twigs as they marched and then crumbled into a fine coating of black soot, dusting the snow.

The horns of the Divine Knights blared out, sending a message of hope to the defenders. The dwarfs, seeing the dead burn and the knights riding through the fire, fought with renewed purpose.

The clash of steel on bone was sickening.

The flames roaring around him, Kurt III, Grand Theogonist of Sigmar, signalled to the entire left flank that now was the time to break from defence and drive forwards down the ridge, corralling the enemy into the centre ground.

Across the battlefield, on the right flank, Vorster, exhausted, bloodied and sweating, his battered armour hanging heavy on his bruised and equally battered body, matched the signal, three sharp blasts on his trumpet, signalling Ackim Brandt to lead the reserve and charge at the right flank.

Just as the Knights of the Divine Sword had punched through on the left, so Brandt's reserves smashed through on the right.

Their legs pumped, knee deep in thick snow, their feet slipping and sliding through the treacherous icy bog. It mattered little that the men were fresh into the battle.

The only thing that mattered was that they carried out this single manoeuvre at speed.

They began driving the enemy into the centre ground.

By now Mannfred's shock at seeing not one regiment but two enter the fray must surely have worn off. He would be able to see clearly that Martin's ultimate strategy was to envelop his undead horde in two mighty pincers and crush them.

Identifying a plan and neutralising one were two different beasts.

Orders and counter orders rippled down the enemy lines.

They only served to wreak confusion as the legions of foot sloggers, flesh eaters, dire wolves and ghouls quickly discovered that they had nowhere to advance to, nor retreat from. They were bogged down and defenceless.

Kurt unleashed the Divine Sword.

The knights raced to encircle the battlefield, driving the stragglers from Mannfred's army deep into the fray at the centre. They joined up with the right flank.

Mannfred's entire army was trapped within the noose.

All that remained was for Martin von Kristallbach to tighten it.

High above Hel Fenn he ordered the gunners, the cannoneers, the musketeers and the pistoliers to begin a relentless and unceasing bombardment of the heart of Mannfred's ensnared forces.

All around the Imperial circle, pike—and spearmen rushed forwards, slogging through the mire, to form the teeth upon which the undead would be devoured.

Mannfred, trapped in the centre, panicked. It was not an emotion he was familiar with. The alien sense of fear had him reeling. He spun his nightmare steed around in circles, yanking at the reins. Flame billowed from the beast's nostrils. The scent of blood filled the air.

Everywhere he looked, the living pressed in.

A low-lying undercurrent of chanting took shape. It possessed a steady melodious rhythm that seemed to enthrall the outermost lines of the dead, holding them at bay as surely as any sword or axe. The devout priests of Taal were joining the circle. It was their song that penetrated into the cavities of the corpses searching for their souls. Ordinarily an undead warrior was a hollow husk devoid of any holy light, but as the grand theogonist had discovered, when some of the humans fell their bodies were being raised so quickly to fight in the undead legions that their souls had not yet crossed over and were trapped, often powerless inside the meat of their former selves.

Now, one by one, a shining blue corona of holy light blossomed around random carcasses.

Seeing the spectral lights flowering across the battlefield, the Grand Theogonist saw the extent of his task and began his invocation. The flurry of thick winter snow sparkled like fireflies around the glowing corpses. It was a glorious sight, proof of the divine.

He threw his arms up to the heavens beseeching Sigmar's intervention with Morr, god of death and dreams, on behalf of these wretched souls. They deserved to die warriors' deaths. They could not do so as prisoners. He prayed for Sigmar's help to break the bonds of Mannfred's will and giving each man back his destiny, and more importantly, his death.

The final words of the invocation spilled from his tongue and a miraculous sight took hold. Throughout the ranks of the dead, soldier turned on soldier, the illumed against the shadowed.

It reduced some of the soldiers to fighting with tears streaming down their cheeks as men they had fought side by side with during the long bloody days of the campaign were allowed to fight and finally die with dignity.

As each shadow fell, Mannfred's army simply diminished, but with each illumed that fell the mesmeric blue corona that had come to define them found release, coruscating down into the snow and billowing out in one final pulsating glory that illuminated the ground at their feet, to the earth returned.

Martin von Kristallbach saw the final chapter of the battle with perfect clarity.

As the last of the illumed faded, their essences rippling out through the cracked ice and muddy snow, he saw the opportunity to finish off Mannfred's remaining forces. He led the charge to tighten the noose he had so masterfully looped around the Vampire Count's neck.

With Vorster and Brant stepping up, aiming to meet him in the centre, the hack and slash of cruel battle was undeniably in their favour.

The other regiments picked their targets and seized the night.

The Knights of the Divine Sword wheeled their mounts in their hunt for the wight lord known as The Undying.

The knights still knew their enemy as Gothard for he had been one of them.

They saw his slaying as their sacred duty, not because they hated him for the monster he was, but because they loved him for the man he had once been.

As one, they made for the once proud champion of their order and raised their great swords in his honour before raining them down upon his corrupt flesh and finally laying him to rest.

His death was savage. Even after he had fallen they cut him limb from limb, hacking his corpse into ruined pieces.

Kallad Stormwarden spied Mannfred, Adolphus Krieger at his side. "Come on, lads. This is what we're here for." Belamir cracked four skulls in a wide sweeping arc.

Othtin mirrored the blow, caving in the chest cavity of a zombie.

Gasping for breath, Kallad rammed his head into an undead beast's maw and fell upon it, Ruinthorn splitting the beast from throat to gut.

Cahgur lunged forwards, thrusting the head of his warhammer up under the chin of the zombie before him. The blow came out of the back of its skull, sending a spray of rotten brain showering over the shambling undead that remained behind.

Molagon cut the legs out from under a stumbling skeleton. The bone splintered, and even though the thing fell it still clawed on through the snow grasping for the dwarfs boots. Molagon stamped on its head, grinding the bone to dust beneath his hobnailed boot.

Seeing the skeletal horde humbled and no longer the terrifying force they had once been, the dwarfs regarded them as little more than an inconvenience on the path to their ultimate goal.

Hacking and cleaving at bone, they lopped heads and severed limbs, driving towards the two vampires.

With his army collapsing around him Mannfred saw a path opening up.

The crush of the dead had thinned.

The battle was all but lost.

He did not have to lose the war.

Now was the time to make good his escape.

Adolphus Krieger saw it too. With chaos reigning around them it was pointless to stand and fight. He pointed the way with his black blade.

They plunged forwards, leaping their nightmarish mounts over the bodies of the fallen in their haste to make it through the opening before it slammed shut and the opportunity to escape was snatched away.

Hammer blows rained down on the legs of both steeds, from nowhere, crippling the animals. The two vampires came crashing down headlong into the snow to the agonised screams of their mounts. Krieger's nightmare reared up, flames snorting from its muzzle as the animal's legs buckled and then fell directly on top of him.

Pinned under a tonne of panicked animal, even the vampire's formidable strength could not save him.

Two dwarfs stood over him.

Together they raised their hammers and piled them into his skull again and again and again until it caved in on itself, spilling the beast's brain across the battlefield.

Kallad Stormwarden blocked Mannfred's path.

"I killed you too fast the first time. I shall not make the same mistake a second time," said Mannfred coldly.

"Are you the beast or just another one of his proxies?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm not a fan of thinking, it interferes with the killing." Kallad looked down at the beast's right hand. He wore but a single ring, a plain signet. It looked utterly unremarkable beside the vampire's gaudy ceremonial finery. The plates of armour were decadent and impractical, offering no protection from the enemy's weapons. He needed no such protection. He had other means of defence. The plates were designed to allow the dexterity needed for spellcraft. "Just so you know, whether yer him or no, I'm gonna batter yer anyway."

Mannfred opened his mouth to respond, but stopped short, sensing movement to his right. He whirled around with hideous grace to see another dwarf charging straight at him. Kallad raged, but his moment had been shattered.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Molagon responded, "Not standing around scratching me backside talking to the whoreson, that's for sure."

It was the last thing he would ever say.

In a blur of motion, Mannfred lunged at the attacking dwarf, his entire form shifting into a slick coat of grey fur and the snout of a huge dire wolf. The beast buried feral claws into Molagon's belly, opening him up with a savage slash.

With a mouthful of snarling teeth, Mannfred bit out his throat.

Kallad screamed his pain. He could not save his friend, but he could kill the beast.

Belamir and Cahgur abandoned Krieger's corpse and ran to engage the dark lord.

Kallad split the wolf's spine with Ruinthorn, chopping the mighty axe deep into the Vampire Count's arched back. The beast howled its pain and bolted for freedom, Kallad struggling to restrain it, but Ruinthorn's purchase became slick with blood and quickly tore free of the wolf's flesh as the creature writhed beneath it.

The wolf disappeared amid the legs of the dead, racing for the cover of the woods.

The dwarfs set off after it, struggling through the blood and the mud, and the churned snow.

Suddenly a terrifying howl rang out across Hel Fenn. As Kallad emerged into open ground beyond the line of the Taal priests he saw a second huge wolf come barrelling down towards them from out of the trees.

Not them, he realised... towards the beast that was Mannfred!

The two wolves clashed in mid-air in a fury of fur and teeth, and claws.

Neither beast could get the upper hand.

They tumbled in the snow, kicking and biting, snapping at each other furiously until suddenly one emerged atop the other, pinning him down by the chest and biting down on a hammering paw, chewing it clean off. The victor having claimed his prize had no interest in whether his prey lived or died. The vanquished wolf yelped pitifully, staggered to its three remaining paws and limped away towards Shadow Lake, leaving nothing but a trail of blood in the snow.

But who had injured whom?

Kallad could not tell.

The pain was excruciating.

Mannfred could barely see as he stumbled forwards. He felt his grip on his lupine form slacken. He could not maintain it. He felt the fur go first, melting away from his arms. His sense of smell diminished, lost to the overwhelming reek of blood. He collapsed to the snow and crawled forwards on his one good hand and knees.

He looked around to see how far he had made it from the battlefield, but no more than a few hundred feet away he saw the damnable dwarf raising his fingers to his lips and unleashing an ear-splitting whistle that drew every living eye in his direction.

He watched as Kallad levelled Ruinthorn, pointing the axe at him, yelling, "The beast is injured!"

Within moments Martin and his cavalry were closing in.

Mannfred groaned and stumbled to his feet. The snow was thick and deep, obscuring the treacherous nature of the terrain beneath. He ran, fell, ran and fell again.

The second wolf padded along beside him, tantalisingly out of reach, taunting him, making sure that whenever he ducked out of sight of the Empire forces he drew them back to the vampire's trail.

"Who *are* you?" Mannfred yelled at the beast.

It didn't answer. Its silence mocked him.

Shadow Lake lay hidden within the depths of the forest.

It was towards here that Mannfred ran, with its underwater caves and grottos hidden within the reeds. If he could only reach it, it would be the perfect hiding place for respite and recovery.

If he could only reach it.

Martin, Vorster and Ackim Brandt spurred their mounts forwards, answering the shrill whistle.

The horses lengthened their strides, eating up the snow-covered ground as they made for the dwarf axeman.

Mid-gallop, Vorster Schlagener reached down and scooped Kallad Stormwarden up, helping the dwarf commander into the saddle behind him. Kallad clung on for dear life, but was thankful for the human's intervention.

"I'll not be missing out on this," the dwarf rumbled.

Together they bore down on the last of the Vampire Counts.

Darting between the thinning trees, they were forced to slow when they hit the marshes, but it was of no consequence. It was obvious to all that Mannfred had nowhere else to run.

They dismounted and drew their steel, closing in for the kill.

Despite the weight of the Runefang in his hands and the thrill of victory in his heart, Martin von Kristallbach was not fool enough to have banished his fears completely. He approached the vampire with caution, knowing full well that an injured animal was always at its most dangerous when cornered.

"I will burn your corpse, vampire, and make sure your kind can never return."

"So *this* is how it ends?" Mannfred held up the bloody stump where his right hand had been. "I seem to have lost my... protection." He threw back his head and laughed bitterly. "Take me then. End it. Or are you afraid? I may be weakened, human, but I could tear your heart from your chest and feast before you knew it was gone. So, are you man enough?"

There was no more need for words.

Vorster and Brandt stepped aside to allow Martin, Elector Count of Stirland, victor of Hel Fenn, through. He swung his Runefang with such decisive might that Mannfred von Carstein was hurled back into the black lake, truly dead before the brackish waters closed over his corpse.

Skull cleaved in two, the last of the Vampire Counts was no more.

Together, Vorster and Ackim Brandt walked back to the battlefield, leading their horses by the reins. The moment Mannfred had died, the remnants of his army had crumbled to dust.

Handfuls of peasant levies crawled around in the snow, weeping. How these pitiful wretches could fight for the dead, could mourn the undead, baffled them. They lacked the courage or good grace to fall upon their own blades and hasten their journey to join their vile masters.

Thick palls of smoke hung to the fen where the living had gathered their dead into huge pyres and begun the grim work of cremation. The casualties were horrific.

Vorster and Brandt stood, awed by the slaughter, wondering how they had survived.

The death toll was severe.

They walked among the casualties, unable and unwilling to appreciate the true extent of the horrors they had lived through. Blood soaked into the battlefield; the blood of good men. Vorster could not begin to count their losses. Thousands upon thousands lay dead in the field.

The Knights of the Divine Sword knelt in a circle, heads bowed in prayer, willing the souls of the fallen on their way. More than three thousand of their brothers would never lift a sword again. Their prayer became a song of farewell as they lifted up their heads, their hearts and voices breaking as they serenaded the dead.

The survivors of the Ostland Black Guard began gathering the bodies of their kin for the huge funeral pyres. There would be no night, only endless day as the red flame turned the black sky day bright. They moved the dead with tenderness and compassion, each one treated like the hero he was. More than two hundred Black Guard joined the flames.

The Priests of Taal moved through the carnage, bestowing blessings and prayer on the few who clung stubbornly to life, and offering guidance to the souls of the departed so that they might find Morr and know peace despite the brutality of their slaughter. They made no distinction between rank or duty, between the shredded hide of a woeful flagellant, religious zealot or crossbow wielder, musketeer and gunner, pike man and foot soldier.

They all deserved peace.

Kallad stood by the lakeside in quiet reflection.

The humans were gone now.

Martin had thanked him and offered his sorrow at the losses his people had suffered, and promised that dwarfs and men should stand together. They were stirring words, words that ought to have resonated within him. Kallad made the right responses and when they parted company it was as new friends.

But as Kallad remained, looking at the frigid waters of the icy lake where Mannfred had fallen, a single thought weighed heavy on his mind.

“Someone stole his bloody ring.”

He had a reasonable idea that he knew who.

The wolf.

It wasn't over, not yet.

For all the dying, the deed wasn't done.

Cahgur and Belamir joined him by the water's edge.

“I could do with an ale, I don't know about you?”

EPILOGUE

Buried Undead

Somewhere in the Old World

Kallad laid another course of mortar and set a brick down on top of it.

From his side of the growing wall Jerek said, "I heard a story once, an old lady told it to me."

"Aye?"

"It was a sad tale. I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now. It was about a boy and a girl. The boy fell on the field of battle to a bitter blow, his body cleaved in two, disgracing the family with his failure. "None shall grace him with sepulchre or lament, but leave him unburied, a corpse for birds and dogs to eat, a ghastly sight of shame," proclaimed his father. The girl, his sister, gathered all of her courage and defied their father the king, standing proud. "I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living. In that world I shall abide for ever," she whispered, sprinkling grave dirt over her brother's broken corpse. Livid, her father walled her up in his castle for he was a vengeful soul who did not like being shamed in any way.

"The woman who told me this story said it was my curse. I did not understand it at the time, but I do now. I know what it is to be trapped between both worlds—the dead and the living."

"So you have taken her words to heart and made them your doom?" The dwarf knocked the errant brick into place, smoothing off the rough edges.

They were in an old ruin in wastelands far from Imperial civilisation.

"I have no alternative, dwarf, I cannot allow this thing to stay in the world unprotected. I cannot risk another uprising. I could not live with the death of the world on my shoulders."

Jerek spoke the truth. There were no other options. If Kallad slew the vampire the problem of the ring would not go away. Dwarfs did not live forever and the memories of what had happened with the Vampire Counts would inevitably slip away, pass into history, into legend and finally, myth, losing the cold hard immediacy and reality of what the ring represented. There would always be another Skellan, another Mannfred, another Konrad. There would never be another Jerek. The man's humanity was awesome. How it had held off the sickness of the blood curse, he had no idea.

"The ring doesn't just need a guardian," said Jerek. "It falls to me as the last surviving heir of Vlad to see that its evil is negated once and for all. I know with certainty what it represents, because I was there. I know what it can do. I will not die and leave it unguarded."

Kallad set another stone in place. The wall was almost complete.

"Without feeding you will go mad."

"Forget about me. Of the two of us, only one of us has an actual life to live."

Kallad laid another brick, and another. The wall crept slowly higher.

"Farewell, Jerek. For all that you're a bloodsucking fiend you are not a bad man."

The vampire laughed as Kallad laid the last stone in place, sealing him in his immortal tomb.

The vampire stared at the wall, alone, and waited for a death that would never come.

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