

ANVIL OF BLOOD

As Nagash strikes back at those who would defy him, new undead heroes (or villains, depending on your point of view) rise from their graves to do his bidding. Some are skeletal wights, while others are deadly vampires or sinister Necromancers.

This month, we delve into the darkest crypts and forgotten mausoleums of Shyish, unearthing rules that enable you to bring your own Soulblight Gravelords to life (or at least some semblance of life). This article is the latest in a series that expands upon the hero creator rules of the Anvil of Apotheosis found in the *General's Handbook 2020*. This expansion includes a host

of ghoulish and gruesome options to create either a Vampire Lord, Wight King or Necromancer of your own design. Among our favourites of the new options are the 'Curse of Lycan' and the 'Curse of Midnight', which allow your Vampire Lord to transform into either a Dire Wolf or a Fell Bat during the battle (how cool does that sound?). Read on, puny mortals, if you dare ...

The rules in this section enable you to create a unique hero of your own design for a Soulblight Gravelords army. A blank warscroll to record your hero upon can be printed out from www.warhammer-community.com.

There are 5 steps to follow to create your own hero. As you follow the steps, you will have a host of options to choose from, including cursed weapons and undead mounts. After completing all of the steps, you will be able to field your hero in your games of Age of Sigmar.

The 5 steps are as follows:

1. Set a destiny point limit for your hero.
2. Choose your hero's archetype.
3. Equip your hero with weapons from the cursed armoury.
4. Choose a bestial companion (if any) for your hero.
5. Spend your remaining destiny points on any characteristic enhancements or abilities for your hero.

CHARACTERISTIC ENHANCEMENTS AND ABILITIES

Many of the steps include **options** to give your hero a [Characteristic Enhancement] or an [Ability]. If the option gives a [Characteristic Enhancement], modify the characteristic as noted. If it gives an [Ability], write the ability in the 'Abilities' section of your hero's warscroll. The same characteristic enhancement can be chosen up to 3 times for your hero; however, the same ability cannot be chosen more than once. Lastly, some options will have **restrictions** that limit which keywords can or cannot take a certain option.

STEP 1 - THE DESTINY POINT LIMIT

When creating your hero, the first step is to pick 1 of the following destiny point limits for your hero:

Champion

Limit: 20 destiny points

Conqueror

Limit: 40 destiny points

As you complete the rest of the steps, each option you pick for your hero will cost a certain number of **destiny points**. This will often be abbreviated as **DP**. Keep a running tally of the number of destiny points you have spent. The tally cannot exceed the limit you have set.

STEP 2 - ARCHETYPES

The second step is to pick the archetype for your hero. There are 4 to choose from in total: **Necromancer**, **Wight King**, **Martial Vampire Lord** (one whose prowess in hand-to-hand combat is peerless) and **Arcane Vampire Lord** (one who has mastered the dark magics). The archetype you pick will cost a number of destiny points (as indicated in the upper-right corner of the archetype) and will populate your hero's Move, Wounds, Bravery and Save characteristics. The archetype will also give them a set of keywords and any starting abilities, and there may be an optional rule you can choose for them. Write all of these down on your hero's warscroll after making your choice.



3

MOVE

5"

WOUNDS

5

6+

SAVE

7

BRAVERY

NECROMANCER

[Ability]	(Add the following to the warscroll): MAGIC This HERO is a WIZARD . They can attempt to cast 1 spell in your hero phase and attempt to unbind 1 spell in the enemy hero phase. They know the Arcane Bolt and Mystic Shield spells. In addition, they know any spells you have picked for them from the Spell Table.
Optional Rule:	You can pick 1 spell from the table over the page and add it to the warscroll.
Keywords:	DEATH, SOULBLIGHT GRAVELORDS, DEATHMAGES, HERO, WIZARD, NECROMANCER

3

MOVE

4"

WOUNDS

5

6+

SAVE

10

BRAVERY

WIGHT KING

Optional Rule:	You can pick 1 command ability from the table over the page and add it to the warscroll.
Keywords:	DEATH, SOULBLIGHT GRAVELORDS, DEATHRATTLE, HERO, WIGHT KING

5

MOVE

6"

WOUNDS

5

5+

SAVE

10

BRAVERY

MARTIAL VAMPIRE LORD

[Ability]	(Add the following to the warscroll): The Hunger: <i>Soulblight creatures crave the taste of blood and are empowered when they drink deep from the veins of defeated foes.</i> At the end of the combat phase, if any enemy models were slain by wounds inflicted by this model's attacks in that phase, you can heal up to D3 wounds allocated to this model.
Optional Rule:	You can pick 1 command ability from the table over the page and add it to the warscroll.
Keywords:	DEATH, VAMPIRE, SOULBLIGHT GRAVELORDS, HERO, WIZARD, VAMPIRE LORD

5

MOVE

6"

WOUNDS

5

5+

SAVE

10

BRAVERY

ARCANE VAMPIRE LORD

[Ability]	(Add the following to the warscroll): The Hunger: <i>Soulblight creatures crave the taste of blood and are empowered when they drink deep from the veins of defeated foes.</i> At the end of the combat phase, if any enemy models were slain by wounds inflicted by this model's attacks in that phase, you can heal up to D3 wounds allocated to this model. MAGIC This HERO is a WIZARD . They can attempt to cast 1 spell in your hero phase and attempt to unbind 1 spell in the enemy hero phase. They know the Arcane Bolt and Mystic Shield spells. In addition, they know any spells you have picked for them from the Spell Table.
Optional Rule:	You can pick 1 spell from the table over the page and add it to the warscroll.
Keywords:	DEATH, VAMPIRE, SOULBLIGHT GRAVELORDS, HERO, WIZARD, VAMPIRE LORD

USING YOUR HERO IN BATTLE

Once you have created your hero, you are ready to field them in battle. Below are a number of ideas of how to incorporate your hero into your games of Age of Sigmar.

Narrative Play Games: Your hero is perfect to use in narrative battles of Age of Sigmar. If you do so, your opponent could also create a hero using the Anvil of Apotheosis from the *General's Handbook 2020* or one of the other articles in the series we have published in *White Dwarf*. If you and your opponent have both created heroes, another idea is to play through a campaign. After each battle, both you and your opponent gain D3 destiny points, with the winner of the battle receiving 1 additional destiny point. You can each spend these destiny points on new abilities and characteristic enhancements for your heroes. Over the course of the campaign, you will see your heroes grow into mighty champions!

Open Play Games: With your opponent's permission, if you are using the Open War army generator from the *General's Handbook 2020*, your hero can be picked to be a Champion or Conqueror in your army depending on the destiny point limit for that hero.

Matched Play Games: Using these heroes in matched play is strictly a house rule and requires your opponent's permission. If you do so, count the number of destiny points you have spent on your hero and multiply the total by 10. This is the Pitched Battle points cost of that hero. In addition, your hero has the Leader battlefield role, unless it has the **MONSTER** keyword, in which case it has the Leader and Behemoth battlefield roles.

COMMAND ABILITIES

My Legion, I Summon Thee: *This leader's dominion over their followers is so absolute in battle that they can call upon these warriors to manifest in their presence.*

You can use this command ability at the end of the movement phase. If you do so, pick a friendly model with this command ability and 1 friendly unit currently set up in the grave as a reserve unit. You can set up that reserve unit on the battlefield wholly within 12" of the model picked and more than 3" from all enemy units.

Dark Paragon: *This champion of Death stands at the forefront of battle and is the first to plunge into the enemy lines, their fellow warriors following in their wake.*

You can use this command ability at the start of the combat phase. If you do so, pick a friendly model with this command ability that made a charge move in the same turn and 1 other friendly unit wholly within 12" of this model. Both this model and the unit picked fight at the start of that combat phase.

Bring Me Their Head!: *Arrogant beyond measure and driven by an all-consuming malice and hatred for the living, this warrior orders their legions to enact swift and total revenge upon any who dare defy them.*

You can use this command ability once per battle when a friendly unit is destroyed by an attack made by an enemy **HERO**. If you do so, pick a friendly model with this command ability. Add 1 to wound rolls for attacks made with melee weapons that target that enemy **HERO** while this friendly model is not slain.

SPELLS

All is Dust: *Dark tendrils of Shyishan magic coil around the foe, turning gleaming steel into timeworn rust in a matter of seconds.*

All is Dust has a casting value of 7. If successfully cast, pick 1 enemy unit within 18" of the caster that is visible to them. Worsen the Save characteristic of that unit by D3 (to a minimum of 6+) until the start of your next hero phase.

Abyssal Strength: *The caster draws upon the morbid power of the Shyish Nadir, infusing and sustaining a creature of the grave with a dark necromantic energy that allows it to shrug off damage and unleash its full fury upon the enemy.*

Abyssal Strength has a casting value of 7. If successfully cast, pick 1 friendly **SOULBLIGHT GRAVELORDS MONSTER** wholly within 12" of the caster that is visible to them. Until the start of your next hero phase, add 1 to rolls for the Deathless Minions battle trait for that **MONSTER**. In addition, until the start of your next hero phase, use the top row of that **MONSTER'S** damage table (if it has one), regardless of how many wounds it has suffered.

Crimson Ward: *Drawing upon the scant dark blood that still resides within them, the caster creates a barrier of crimson gore that protects them from harm.*

Crimson Ward has a casting value of 7. If successfully cast, the caster suffers 1 mortal wound that cannot be negated. In addition, until the start of your next hero phase, roll a dice each time you allocate a wound or mortal wound to the caster. On a 2+, that wound or mortal wound is negated. However, on a 1, the barrier fails and the spell ends.

STEP 3 - THE CURSED ARMOURY

The next step is to arm your hero with weapons from the cursed armoury. A hero can be armed with 1 of the following weapon options:

- 1 one-handed melee weapon.
- 2 different one-handed melee weapons.
- 2 of the same one-handed melee weapon (+1 DP).
- 1 one-handed melee weapon and a shield.
- 1 two-handed melee weapon.

The weapons and their profiles are listed in the table below, and each weapon costs a number of destiny points as noted in the rightmost column of the table.

For each weapon chosen, add the profile to your hero’s warscroll and write the name of the weapon in the description section.

If your hero is armed with 2 of the same one-handed melee weapon, only add the weapon profile once to the warscroll but double its Attacks characteristic. This costs 1 additional destiny point on top of the destiny points cost for each weapon. For example, if your hero was armed with 2 Soulbound Rapiers, the Attacks characteristic would be 6 and it would cost 3 destiny points in total.

In step 5, you will be presented with options to improve your hero’s weapons.

ONE-HANDED WEAPONS							
MELEE WEAPONS	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage	DP
Stiletto Dagger	1"	1	4+	3+	-3	2	1
Soulbound Rapier	1"	3	3+	4+	-	1	1
Cursed Mace	1"	2	4+	3+	-1	2	2
Deathlance	2"	3	4+	4+	-	1	1
Bestial Talons	1"	4	4+	4+	-	1	1

TWO-HANDED WEAPONS							
MELEE WEAPONS	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage	DP
Black Axe	1"	3	3+	3+	-2	2	3
Honed Bludgeon	2"	3	4+	3+	-1	3	3
Cursed Halberd	2"	3	4+	3+	-1	2	2
Ancient Greatsword	1"	3	3+	3+	-1	2	2
Crypt Scythe	2"	4	4+	4+	-1	1	1
Mortis Staff	1"	3	4+	3+	-1	D3	1

SHIELDS		
Ancient Shield	[Ability] Ancient Shield: If the weapon used for an attack that targets this model has a Rend characteristic of -1, change the Rend characteristic for that attack to ‘-’.	DP 1
Crypt Shield	[Characteristic Enhancement] Improve your hero’s Save characteristic by 1	DP 2
Enchanted Shield	[Characteristic Enhancement] Improve your hero’s Save characteristic by 1. In addition, once per turn, you can re-roll the first failed save roll for this model.	DP 3



STEP 4 - BESTIAL COMPANION

In this step, you need to decide whether or not your hero will have a bestial companion. There are 3 types of bestial companion: **Minor Beast**, **Mounted Beast** and **Gargantuan Beast**. A hero can only ever have 1 bestial companion picked for them. A Minor Beast follows or guards your hero, such as a swarm of bats or a constructed throne of bones. A Mounted Beast can be anything from an undead stallion to an ethereal steed.

A Gargantuan Beast is a truly colossal mount, such as a Zombie Dragon, Terrorgeist or Dread Abyssal. If you do not want to choose a bestial companion for your hero, you can skip this step.

You can pick 1 of the following bestial companions. Each costs a number of destiny points as listed in the table.

MINOR BEAST						
[Characteristic Enhancement] Add 1 to your hero's Wounds characteristic						DP 4
Melee Weapons	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage
Claws	1"	2	5+	5+	-	1
Maw	1"	1	4+	3+	-1	D3
Add the following text to your hero's description: MINOR BEAST: This model's Minor Beast attacks with its Claws and Maw. For rules purposes, it is treated the same as a mount.						

MOUNTED BEAST						
[Characteristic Enhancement] Add 2 to your hero's Wounds characteristic Change your hero's Move characteristic to 8"						DP 6
Melee Weapons	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage
Claws	1"	2	5+	5+	-	1
Maw	1"	1	4+	3+	-1	D3
Add the following text to your hero's description: MOUNT: This model's Mounted Beast attacks with its Claws and Maw.						

GARGANTUAN BEAST						
[Characteristic Enhancement] Add 8 to your hero's Wounds characteristic Change your hero's Move characteristic to 12"						DP 15
MELEE WEAPONS	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage
Claws	2"	12	4+	3+	-1	2
Maw	2"	2	3+	3+	-2	12
Add the following text to your hero's description: MOUNT: This model's Gargantuan Beast attacks with its Claws and Maw. Add the following keywords to your hero's warscroll: MONSTER Add the damage table on the right to your hero's warscroll.			DAMAGE TABLE			
			Wounds Suffered	Move	Claws	Maw
			0-3	10"	6	4
			4-6	8"	5	3
			7-9	6"	4	2
			10-11	4"	3	1
			12+	2"	2	1



If you have picked a bestial companion for your hero, you can pick any of the following options for them. Each option costs a number of destiny points as listed in the table.

BESTIAL COMPANION OPTIONS		
Winged Beast	[Ability] Add the following text to your hero's description: FLY: This model can fly. Restrictions: No Minor Beast	DP 4
Breath Attack	[Ability] Breath Attack: In your shooting phase, you can pick 1 enemy unit within 6" of this model. Roll a number of dice equal to the number of models from that enemy unit that are within 6" of this model. For each 6, that enemy unit suffers 1 mortal wound. Restrictions: Gargantuan Beast only	DP 4
Vicious Charge	[Ability] Vicious Charge: After this model makes a charge move, you can pick 1 enemy unit within 1" of this model and roll a dice. On a 2+, that enemy unit suffers D3 mortal wounds.	DP 1
Razor-sharp Claws	[Characteristic Enhancement] Improve the Rend characteristic of the bestial companion's Claws by 1 (to a maximum of -3).	DP 2
Nightmare's Miasma	[Ability] Nightmare's Miasma: While an enemy unit is within 3" of any friendly models with this ability, worsen the Rend characteristic of that unit's melee weapons by 1 (to a minimum of '-').	DP 3
Gobble Attack	[Ability] Gobble Attack: Each time this model attacks, after all of this model's attacks have been resolved, you can pick 1 enemy model within 1" of this model and roll a dice. If the roll is equal to or greater than that enemy model's Wounds characteristic, it is slain. Restrictions: Gargantuan Beast only	DP 3
Terror	[Ability] Terror: Subtract 1 from the Bravery characteristic of enemy units while they are within 3" of any friendly units with this ability. Restrictions: Gargantuan Beast only	DP 1
Savage Frenzy	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick either the bestial companion's Claws or Maw. Add 1 to the Attacks characteristic of that weapon. For Gargantuan Beasts, add 1 to each row of the appropriate column in the damage table.	DP 1
Lashing Tail	[Ability] Lashing Tail: At the end of the combat phase, roll a dice for each enemy unit within 3" of this model. If the roll is less than the number of models in that unit, that unit suffers D3 mortal wounds. Restrictions: Gargantuan Beast only	DP 3
Savage Ferocity	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick either the bestial companion's Claws or Maw. Improve the To Hit characteristic of that weapon by 1.	DP 1
Savage Strength	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick either the bestial companion's Claws or Maw. Improve the To Wound characteristic of that weapon by 1.	DP 1
Stomp	[Ability] Stomp: At the end of the combat phase, you can pick 1 enemy unit within 1" of this unit and roll a dice. On a 2+, that enemy unit suffers D3 mortal wounds. Restrictions: Gargantuan Beast only	DP 2

STEP 5 - CHARACTERISTIC ENHANCEMENTS AND ABILITIES

The final step is to pick any other options for your hero. Each costs a number of destiny points as listed in the tables. In this step, you can also choose for your hero to be accompanied by a Spirit Host. If you do so, this can be in addition to any other bestial companion they already have.

CHARACTERISTIC ENHANCEMENTS		
Unnatural Speed	[Characteristic Enhancement] Add 1" to your hero's Move characteristic.	DP 2
Dark Fortitude	[Characteristic Enhancement] Add 1 to your hero's Wounds characteristic.	DP 1
Extra Armour	[Characteristic Enhancement] Improve your hero's Save characteristic by 1 (to a maximum of 3+).	DP 2
Ferocity	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick 1 of your hero's weapons (not including mount weapons). Add 1 to the Attacks characteristic of that weapon.	DP 2
Weapon Master	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick 1 of your hero's weapons (not including mount weapons). Improve the To Hit characteristic of that weapon by 1.	DP 2
Unholy Strength	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick 1 of your hero's weapons (not including mount weapons). Improve the To Wound characteristic of that weapon by 1.	DP 2
Mighty Weapon	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick 1 of your hero's weapons (not including mount weapons). Add 1 to the Damage characteristic of that weapon. Weapons that have a random Damage characteristic cannot be picked.	DP 2
Honed Edge	[Characteristic Enhancement] Pick 1 of your hero's weapons (not including mount weapons). Improve the Rend characteristic of that weapon by 1 (to a maximum of -3).	DP 2
Master of Dark Magics	[Characteristic Enhancement] Increase the number of spells this hero can attempt to cast and unbind by 1. Restrictions: WIZARD only	DP 3

ABILITIES		
Curse of Lycan	[Ability] Curse of Lycan: Once per battle, at the end of your hero phase, you can say that this model will shapeshift into a Dire Wolf. If you do so, set up a new unit of 1 DIRE WOLF within 1" of this HERO and add it to your army, then remove this HERO from the battlefield. At the start of one of your subsequent hero phases, you can say that this model will shapeshift back into a vampire. If you do so, set up this HERO on the battlefield within 1" of the DIRE WOLF and then remove the DIRE WOLF from the battlefield. If the DIRE WOLF is slain, before removing it from the battlefield, set up this HERO on the battlefield within 1" of the DIRE WOLF, then remove the DIRE WOLF from the battlefield. Restrictions: VAMPIRE only. Cannot be taken by those with a bestial companion (including a Spirit Host).	DP 3
Curse of Midnight	[Ability] Curse of Midnight: Once per battle, at the end of your hero phase, you can say that this model will shapeshift into a Fell Bat. If you do so, set up a new unit of 1 FELL BAT within 1" of this HERO and add it to your army, then remove this HERO from the battlefield. At the start of one of your subsequent hero phases, you can say that this model will shapeshift back into a vampire. If you do so, set up this HERO on the battlefield within 1" of the FELL BAT and then remove the FELL BAT from the battlefield. If the FELL BAT is slain, before removing it from the battlefield, set up this HERO on the battlefield within 1" of the FELL BAT, then remove the FELL BAT from the battlefield. Restrictions: VAMPIRE only. Cannot be taken by those with a bestial companion (including a Spirit Host).	DP 4
Dark Acolyte	[Ability] Dark Acolyte: Add 1 to casting and unbinding rolls for this model. Restrictions: WIZARD only	DP 3
Immortal Champion	[Ability] Immortal Champion: Add 1 to the Attacks characteristic of this model's melee weapons if it is within 3" of 10 or more enemy models when you pick the target unit(s) for its attacks.	DP 3
Descent From Upon High	[Ability] Descent From Upon High: Instead of setting up this unit on the battlefield, you can place it to one side and say that it is circling high above as a reserve unit. If you do so, at the end of your movement phase, you can set up this unit on the battlefield more than 9" from all enemy units. At the start of the fourth battle round, any models that are still in reserve are slain. Restrictions: HERO that can fly or HERO with the Curse of Midnight ability only.	DP 2



ABILITIES		
Loyal Adjutant	[Ability] Loyal Adjutant: This model can be given a command trait in addition to the model picked to be your general.	DP 5
Feed on Necromancy	[Ability] Feed on Necromancy: Each time a spell is successfully cast by a DEATH WIZARD within 12" of this model, you can heal 1 wound allocated to this model after the spell has been resolved.	DP 3
Lead the Bloodshed	[Ability] Lead the Bloodshed: In the combat phase, after this unit has fought in that combat phase for the first time, you can pick 1 friendly unit wholly within 12" of this model that is within 3" of an enemy unit and has not yet fought in that combat phase. That unit must fight immediately, instead of being picked to fight later in that combat phase. Restrictions: Cannot be taken by a HERO on Gargantuan Beast	DP 2
Decapitating Strike	[Ability] Decapitating Strike: If the unmodified wound roll for an attack made with this model's melee weapons (not including mount weapons) is 6, that attack inflicts 1 mortal wound on the target in addition to any normal damage.	DP 4
Ride Them Down	[Ability] Ride Them Down: Add 1 to the Damage characteristic of melee weapons (not including mount weapons) with a Range characteristic of 2" if this model made a charge move in the same turn. Restrictions: HERO on Mounted Beast only	DP 1
Blood Retinue	[Ability] Blood Retinue: At the start of the first battle round, before determining who has the first turn, you can pick 1 friendly BLOOD KNIGHTS , BLACK KNIGHTS OR GRAVE GUARD unit in your army to be this model's retinue. Roll a dice before you allocate a wound or mortal wound to this model while it is within 3" of its retinue. On a 1-2, that wound or mortal wound is allocated to this model as normal. On a 3+, that wound or mortal wound is allocated to the retinue instead of this model. Restrictions: Cannot be taken by a HERO on Gargantuan Beast	DP 3
Ethereal Nature	[Ability] Ethereal Nature: Ignore modifiers (positive and negative) when making save rolls for attacks that target this model. Restrictions: Cannot be taken by a HERO with a Save characteristic of 3+ or 2+.	DP 4
Shyishan Ward	[Ability] Shyishan Ward: Roll a dice each time a wound or mortal wound is allocated to this model. On a 6, that wound or mortal wound is negated.	DP 3
Bat Wings	[Ability] Add the following text to your hero's description: FLY: This model can fly.	DP 4
Blood Frenzy	[Ability] Blood Frenzy: If the unmodified hit roll for an attack made with this model's melee weapons (not including mount weapons) is 6, that attack scores 2 hits on the target instead of 1. Make a wound and save roll for each hit.	DP 3
Deathly Vigour	[Ability] Deathly Vigour: In your hero phase, you can roll a dice for this model. If you do so, on a 4+, heal up to D3 wounds allocated to this model.	DP 3

SPIRIT HOST						
Add the following melee weapon to your warscroll:						DP 4
MELEE WEAPONS	Range	Attacks	To Hit	To Wound	Rend	Damage
Spectral Claws and Daggers	1"	2	5+	5+	-	1
Add the following text to your hero's description: COMPANION: This hero is accompanied by a host of spirits that attack with their Spectral Claws and Daggers. For rules purposes, they are treated in the same manner as a mount.						
[Ability]	(Add the following to the warscroll): Frightful Touch: If the unmodified hit roll for an attack made with this model's Spectral Claws and Daggers is 6, that attack inflicts 1 mortal wound on the target and the attack sequence ends (do not make a wound or save roll).					
Optional Rule:	You can spend an additional 2 destiny points to add 2 to the Attacks characteristic of this model's Spectral Claws and Daggers, or you can spend an additional 4 destiny points to add 4 to the Attacks characteristic instead.					

A QUEEN'S AUDIENCE

With the armies of undeath in disarray and their masters squabbling amongst themselves, the forces of Chaos plan once more to retake the Mortal Realms. The Dark Master plots and schemes, yet Neferata is ever watchful in this short story by Jordan Green.

Hengar Gorkava opened his eyes to darkness. Sense and recollection slowly, agonisingly, extended from the hollows of unconsciousness. Blinking his aching eyes, the tribal sorcerer attempted to take stock of his surroundings. There was not much to tell. He was sitting up, evidently in some stone oubliette based on the draught running between its pillars. His wrists were bound with freezing metal against a seat. Closing his eyes and reaching down to the dark furnace that blazed within, Hengar attempted to call on the unholy fire of the gods. The result was nothing save a sudden burst of white-hot agony that saw him thrash and roar where he sat. Someone had taken nullifying precautions, then.

How *had he got here*? That memory was far hazier, coming only in snapshot visions. Hengar remembered leading his Cabalists into the grim lands of Neferatia. He remembered being shook from slumber by the bellowing of his huscarls, and stumbling through the shifting twilit mist that smothered their encampment. He remembered pale maidens with scarlet eyes murdering with shrill laughter. He remembered the tide of skeletal dead men dragging him down into darkness.

Hengar could not help but feel slightly cheated. Such was not the glorious fate he had envisioned, but neither was it the worst of ends. Still, the gods did nothing without purpose. If he could survive, he could earn his freedom. Then, whoever had thought to bind Hengar Gorkava would find the tables most brutally turned.

Sudden illumination intruded upon the shaman's deliberation. Snarling through the thick tangle of his beard, Hengar was forced to squint. The light that now stemmed from candelabras set against the flanks of stone pillars – enchanted, clearly, but still candle light of a typical sort. The only exception stood immediately before him, set upon a wooden table with a similar chair to his own behind it. Again, the archaic style of the thing did not elude him. Hengar had little time to consider that as a noise from the other end of the dungeon hall echoed out: sharp, rhythmic steps descending a staircase, utterly unhurried. With a muttered prayer to the ruinous ones, Hengar worked to calm himself.

Then the source of the noise rounded a corner, and all notions of calm evaporated.



'You're staring.'

Neferata – legendary vampire queen of Nulahmia, first of the living dead – had an unusual laugh. It was not the girlish titter Hengar had expected, given the vampire's apparent youth, but a deeper, mellifluous sound he could





almost have described as weary despite its clear amusement.

Then again, perhaps the reason he found it so strange was that he was hearing it at all. He had to squint for a time, just to convince himself that it really was the monarch of legend facing him. Even Hengar, speaker to gods and daemons, had to fight not to obey her command. Swallowing, the shaman gritted his teeth and forced himself to maintain his glare, calming his thudding heart.

‘If you intend me to plead, creature—’

‘Stop,’ Neferata’s insistence was sudden and earnest, her porcelain features curling in disdain. ‘Stop, please, by the blood of dead Ptrā. You have no idea of the endless pleas for favour and mercy that a queen endures each dismal night. Dealing with you is my reprieve from all that. Pray, do not spoil it.’

Blinking in mild surprise, Hengar found himself giving a nod of acknowledgement. The vampire in turn offered a cool, poised smile, lifting a crystalline goblet to her lips and sipping at something that Hengar did not believe was wine. Upon her arrival Neferata had set down a silvered tray between them, a second goblet stood upon it. The shaman, of course, could hardly reach for it in his bound state. Despite everything, Hengar smirked. It was the sort of thing he himself might have done.

‘By “deal with me”, I assume you mean interrogation.’

‘If you like,’ the vampire shrugged, her voice never wavering in its sense of urbane command. Even so, Neferata seemed in no hurry. Hengar watched as she swirled the drink in her glass, gaze distant. ‘I find that there is value in flexing one’s old skills now and then.’ As she shrugged, the shaman forced out another small growl to spite his own dread, though his smirk remained.

‘I suppose I ought to be honoured, “Majesty”. Still, I’d have thought you had greater concerns than our little expedition.’

‘Oh?’ Neferata’s tone was dismissive, but the predatory flicker that flashed in her eyes was undeniable. For a moment Hengar thought of the mutant hounds that loped alongside his warband. No matter how many squabbled for scraps beside the firelight, tearing at one another with hooked claws and mighty flashing fangs, there was always one beast that hung back – watching, waiting, taking stock of which rivals would be weakened and could be preyed on in turn. Profiteers and plotters, of the most savage kind. Hengar had always felt something of a connection with such creatures. Currently, he found himself revising that notion. The shaman’s sneer flickered as Neferata chuckled again, an elegant nail tapping her glass. ‘Humour me, stripling. What is it you think you know?’

‘There are armies of corpses marching across your land,’ Hengar said in a gruff drawl. His eyes flicked to his restraints binding his wrists. Upon the faded metal links

were sigils of nullification, old signs that nevertheless pulsed with potential. That, at least, explained his failed attempt at spellcraft.

‘We *are* in Shyish,’ Neferata’s eyebrow arched as she chortled. ‘That is not exactly out of the ordinary.’

‘But they don’t bear your colours, creature,’ for all the bravado in his voice, Hengar could not meet Neferata’s crimson gaze for long. He fought to steady himself, to drag his soul back from where it threatened to become enthralled in those bottomless eyes. ‘I’ve studied the heraldry of your wretched bloodlines. They carry the winged skull of Carstinia, and they are pushing you hard.’ Neferata’s smile had not faded, but her attention was entirely upon him now. Still, Hengar considered, better not to waste this rare opportunity to spite a most persistent enemy of the gods. He lent forwards with a forced grin, flickering candlelight picking out every scar that marked his weather-beaten features.

‘And there’s more. We all felt it, we who wield the aether. Your deathstorm has been snuffed out. Old Bones was shattered under scintillating hammers. You revenants stood on the cusp of victory, and you let it slip away at the last. Now you’re turning on one another like jackals tearing at carrion. It must bother you, “majesty”, to find that your back’s the one against the wall for once.’

Zealous fervour, as good a means as any of repelling the vampire queen’s hypnotic allure, flared within the shaman’s breast. In defiance of all sense he attempted to surge to his feet, wishing at least to meet the end standing. Yet even as his restraints denied him that much, Hengar’s breath caught as he felt a sudden loosening in the right shackle. It was faint, an old weakness born from antique equipment, but it was there. If he could subtly work away at it ...

“My back against the wall”, Neferata’s laughter sliced across any deeper scheming. Rolling her eyes the vampire stood, elegant fabrics trailing behind her as she paced. Hengar’s gaze followed her before his mind had any say in the matter, even as his wrist continued its slow, testing rote.

‘Have we got all that wearisome defiance out of our system, mortal? “My back against the wall”,’ Neferata scoffed, as her pacing ceased. ‘Can you even begin to comprehend how often, over my gruellingly extended span, souls like you have told me that? How this time surely, *surely*, I will take the fall. Yet somehow, no matter what new foe rears their head, venerable me is still here. As for “Old Bones”, as you so eloquently put it ... he always comes back. If one thing has held true over the aeons, it is that he always comes back. But, on the subject of masters ...’

Like coiling vapour, Neferata was suddenly at his side, a talon lashing out to cut away a portion of the furs covering his chest. It was not the sudden chill that saw Hengar tense, but the grin that spread across his captor’s face as she regarded the chain-marked eightfold brand he bore there.



gibbering legions, Be'lakor ought to take caution. Even as our power perhaps recedes, for the moment, others drum a dirge of war that may overmatch even him.' She fell silent then, staring off into nothing, before glancing over her shoulder with a smirk.

'Thank you, mortal. You have confirmed a long-held suspicion. You may make your escape attempt, now.' The remark brought the shaman up short, heart turning to lead in his chest even as the wrist-flex saw the shackle threaten to give.

Neferata's eyes met those of her prisoner as she savoured his realisation. 'As I said. One must take their enjoyment where they can get it.' Despite himself, Hengar could not argue with that. To his own surprise he chuckled, head bowing in something approaching respect.

'You know I have to try anyway.'

'Of course you do.'

With a furious roar Hengar stormed to his feet, corded muscles straining as he yanked his wrist free of the weakened restraint. Instantly he felt power fizzing through him, a darkened window opened once more. Though his strength was still restrained, and though this was one of the dread Mortarchs he faced, perhaps if he could just concentrate the gods would—

Hengar detected no more than a prick along his throat before his roar turned to a rasping, thwarted wheeze. Seconds later, agony unlike any he had ever endured, as if every drop of his blood had turned to poison, suffused the shaman. With a howl he collapsed in a spasming heap. Even through the mind-shattering pain, the sorcerer was aware of the vampire crouching by his side, cursed dagger still dripping blood. Licking up some of the gore, Neferata leant in, her voice little more than a murmur.

'Though, there is one last thing I require from you ...'

Another wave of heart-bursting fire shot through Hengar, his sobbing growing more strangled as he felt the vampire's fangs plunge into his neck.

'And the mystery is revealed. I had my suspicions, but wanted to see for myself if they would really dare so boldly. Let's say its name, shall we, the thing who gave you this mark and bid you ransack my lands?' That same predator's thirst flashed through the vampire's gaze once more as she leant in closer, voice dropping to a bladed whisper. 'Be'lakor.'

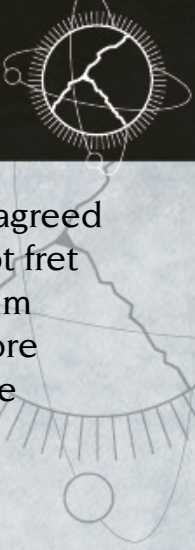
As the vampire spat each syllable, the candles flickered. Hengar had no vitriol to muster now. The shaman squirmed as phantom claws traced down his back, his mark pulsing with sudden pain. Straightening, Neferata turned and paced away, nodding to herself in apparent thought.

'So the Dark Master really does intend to set his power against all, does he? And with such ... servants, whom he sends to raise hell amongst us while he plots. But already I sense a change in the air. For all his poisoned skies and



'It is as we suspected. The Dark Master is probing us for weaknesses.'

Neferata found herself pacing again, even as she directed her words to the shadeglass mirror mounted on the wall of her opulent chamber. It was an unconscious affectation, of sorts, but one she could allow. Certainly the Mortarch of



the Necropolis did not comment on it. Katakros' unmoving features filled the mirror, eyes glowing softly as the vampire scowled and turned back to him.

'Olynder should never have humoured him. Whatever debt you feel you owe her, surely you consider it null and void now. She must be chastised.'

'By which you mean, you would see her star brought down so yours can rise further.' Katakros responded. There was no jest or mockery in his patrician's voice, a fact that only irritated the vampire further. 'Whatever Be'lakor plans, her deeds struck at the God-King. I have no complaints.'

'Yes, well, you wouldn't. You never did get over that run-in with the Unberogen, did you?' Neferata snapped with a scowl. Katakros did not rise to the bait.

'Mannfred—'

'I will deal with Mannfred. It amuses me to let his armies trek just a little further, before launching the counter-attack.' Neferata murmured with a dismissive hand-gesture. 'Thank you, Hengar dearest,' she added, nodding to the pale thrall-creature that shuffled forth to offer a crimson-filled goblet. 'We never talk any more, Orpheon. You almost make me miss Arkhan's moribund company.'

'Not enough that you will ignore the opportunities that lie in his absence, I am sure. Have Jakartai echelon reinforce before pushing across the Heartwound River,' the other Mortarch dictated to some unseen adjutant without missing a beat. 'We will fortify the Arx. Our enemies will break on our walls.' Before a reply could be mustered, Katakros' face shimmered, fading until only the mirror remained. The vampire gave her head a weary shake, lifting the goblet to her lips.

ARKHAN.

Neferata all but choked on her refreshment as the voice of Nagash – the sound of slamming mausoleum doors and wind howling through dead trees – filled the chamber. She recovered quickly enough, turning to the blazing eyes now staring out from the mirror and dropping into a curtsy.

'It is Neferata, my master. Arkhan fell in Hysh,' she said with utmost patience. Nagash's mind had always had a tendency to wander, at times. Now he was forced to claw back his power, his physical incarnation bound to Shyish once more, that quirk had become all the more exacerbated. Neferata knew better than to rise during the long silence that followed.

NEFERATA.

'Yes, my master?'

**THE DARK POWERS CONSPIRE AGAINST ME.
MANNFRED BELIEVES ME BLINDED AND BROKEN.
OLYNDER OVERSTEPS HER BOUNDS. YET YOU
REMAIN LOYAL.**

'As I have since the earliest days, master,' Neferata agreed with practised sincerity, suppressing a smirk. 'Do not fret over Mannfred. These ... antics are why you keep him around, are they not? My armies will corral him before long.' Stillness stretched out again, until the vampire almost believed Nagash had left.

NEFERATA.

'Great one?'

TECLIS. Such was the malice with which Nagash intoned the name of he who had broken him that even the Mortarch was forced to stagger back. With a pulse of willpower Neferata steadied herself, already feeling the god's mind slip away.

'In time, Lord Nagash. You will have vengeance, in time.' Her eyes fell upon the crimson-stained glass windows of her sanctuary, gazing out to the very edge of her domain where unclean storms roiled in the heavens. Despite herself, Neferata could not help but smile. *The game was afoot.*

'After all ... time is our weapon. And one day, we shall remind all our enemies of that.'

