

WARHAMMER

REST ETERNAL

Anthony Reynolds



A WARHAMMER STORY

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Knights of Bretonnia - 02.1

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(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)



The knight's heavy plate armour, once flawless, was now dented and worn. Once it had shone like a mirror; now it was dull with grime and wear, and awash with fresh blood.

Some of that blood was his, but most of it belonged to the beast.

"Lady, give me strength," said Calard. His breath was coming in short, sharp gasps, and his heart was hammering in his chest.

As if in response to his prayer, the beast roared, the sound reverberating off the dank walls of the cavern. Calard's bearded face was splattered with the vile beast's stinking spittle. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his weapon, a bastard sword with a blade four and a half feet long. Blood dripped from the tip.

The icy mountain winds outside howled. The claws of winter tugged at Calard's tattered woollen cloak and ruffled his unwashed hair, but he kept his eyes fixed on the beast. He had pledged his oath—his questing vow—to see this monster dead, and he would not falter. Either it would die, here and now, or he would.

The cold winter light outside was quickly swallowed by the darkness of the cavern. The shape of the beast could only be dimly discerned, but its breathing was loud. The close walls further amplified the rumbling sound, giving the impression that it was the cavern itself that was breathing.

Nevertheless the darkness could not hide the sheer size of the beast. Its reptilian, horned head was massive. Its eyes—or rather the one eye that Calard had not yet put out—glinted reflectively, filled with murderous hunger as it focused on him.

The beast's tail was poised behind it, curved over its body like a scorpion's, ready to snap forward and impale him. Its barbed tip dripped with noxious venom.

The wyvern—for it could be nothing else—was the grey-green colour of mountain rock, and the heavy blows that Calard had already landed upon its toughened hide oozed crimson. The foetid odour of the beast was strong.

Lowering its head, the wyvern bared its array of tusk-like teeth, each as long as Calard's forearm. A bruised purple tongue, split at the ends, darted forth to taste the air. Calard saw the beast's muscles tense as it prepared to launch itself at him. The knight lowered his centre of gravity, ready to spring.

The wyvern's growl rose to a bloodcurdling roar, and its jaws yawned open as it lunged.

Calard threw himself to the left, moving towards the wyvern's blind side as it bore down on him. Its jaws slammed shut behind him with force enough to snap a tree trunk. Calard uttered a wordless battle cry as he came to one knee and brought his sword around in an arc that connected solidly with the beast's skull, snapping one of its tusks and digging deep into its reptilian flesh. It was like striking the mountain itself. The blow jarred up his arms painfully, and while blood gushed from the wound and he had undoubtedly chipped bone, Calard knew he had done little real damage.

Bellowing in pain, the beast swung its heavy head around, hooking one of its immense curving horns underneath Calard and hurling him into the cave wall ten feet away.

The air was blasted from his lungs as he hit first the wall then the ground, and he struggled for breath as he scrambled unsteadily to his feet. The wyvern's barbed tail speared towards Calard's face, and he swayed to the side at the last moment to avoid being impaled. The poisoned tip slammed into the wall, and cracks spread across the rock face.

Grunting with the effort, Calard brought his sword down on the wyvern's tail. Even with all his strength, he was unable to hack through it, dense muscle and vertebrae stopping him from completely severing it. Hissing in pain, the beast pulled its tail back sharply, and Calard saw with grim satisfaction that the sting was hanging limp at its end, held on by gristle and skin.

The wyvern snapped at him again and Calard, his back to the wall, had little room to move. He threw himself desperately to the side, and though he avoided the deadly bite, it caught his trailing cape in its maw. With a wrench of its head it tore him from his feet, slinging him up towards the cave roof.

He hit the rock face first, breaking his nose with an agonising crack before dropping back to the floor. He crashed down onto his back and lay there unmoving for a moment, dazed, his sword slipping from numb fingers. Blood was smeared across his face, and he blinked, struggling to focus.

One of the wyvern's winged forelimbs slammed down onto his breastplate with enough force to break bones, and he gasped as his armour strained beneath the weight. The beast lowered its head towards him, growling, and a thick rope of drool dripped from its maw. The stink of the beast's breath was overpowering, like rancid meat and offal. It was all Calard could do not to gag.

Turning his head he saw his sword lying nearby, and he reached for it desperately. His fingers touched the pommel but it was just out of reach. All he succeeded in achieving was pushing it farther away.

The beast's serpentine lips rippled, and its tongue darted forth to brush Calard's face. He grimaced at its cold, repellent touch, sickly mucus smearing his cheek.

The wyvern stared down at him hungrily, its one good eye blazing with rage. That eye was the colour of an unfanned ember, glowing with dark intensity, and its pupil was nothing more than a sliver of blackness bisecting it. Calard could see himself reflected in the monster's gaze.

"Finish it," snarled Calard.

A sudden gust of wind brought a flurry of snow into the cave, and the wyvern's attention was momentarily distracted, perhaps as fresh scents were carried to its nostrils on the wind. As it turned its head, Calard's hand slipped to his belt, and he dragged his knife from its scabbard. The wyvern felt the movement and pressed down upon Calard harder, the metal of his breastplate groaning under the pressure, and swung its head back towards him. Calard rammed his knife into the claw pinning him to the ground, embedding the six inches of metal into the wyvern's flesh, slicing through sinew and lodging it between bones.

Calard had been gifted the blade over a year earlier after saving a rich merchant and his daughter from the bloodthirsty intentions of an ogre in their employ. The blade was not of human origin, that Calard knew for certain; it was like no metal he had seen before. He suspected it had been crafted by the fey folk of Athel Loren.

The beast roared in agony, its flesh smoking from the wound as if the glittering blade were aflame, and it pulled away sharply. The pressure was released from Calard's chest and he rolled towards his sword, fingers closing around its hilt.

The wyvern snarled as the flesh around the knife blistered, giving off a horrible stench of burning meat. It was shaking its foreleg, trying to dislodge the gleaming blade from between its metacarpals, having seemingly forgotten Calard.

The knight rose to his feet, hefting his bastard sword in front of him, and flicked his wet hair out of his eyes. Ignoring him, the wyvern gripped the knife between its teeth and pulled it free, tossing it away.

Calard darted forward, hefting his heavy blade over his shoulder, mouthing a prayer to the Lady. With a grunt of effort, he slammed it into the wyvern's neck, striking with all the force he could muster. The blade hacked deep with a sickening wet sound, and the beast screeched as hot blood gushed from the wound, spraying across Calard and painting the cavern in a red torrent. The beast reared up on its hind legs, head thrashing from side to side, almost wrenching the sword from his hands.

As the beast staggered, its head collided with the cave wall, bringing down a tumble of rocks and dust, and Calard only barely managed to avoid being knocked from his feet by its wildly thrashing tail. Stepping in precariously close to its heaving bulk, he slashed a deep cut into its pallid underbelly, unleashing a flood of grotesque intestines. The unmistakable shape of half-digested human bodies could be seen within the beast's semi-transparent tract. Calard swallowed back his revulsion, stabbing into the wyvern's stomach again and again.

The wyvern scrambled backwards, hind claws ripping up the cave floor, and snapped at Calard, who lurched out of the way and slashed with his sword. He severed the beast's tongue, and it gave out a piteous yelp. Blood was still gushing from its neck in rhythmic spurts. There was so much blood on the floor and walls now that the cave resembled a slaughterhouse.

"For the love of the Lady, just die!" shouted Calard, lashing out at an open claw that reached for him, hacking deep into flesh and bone.

The beast was backtracking frantically now, dragging its thick intestinal ropes across the floor. It sounded like a wounded bear, a growling whine rumbling within its chest as it staggered farther back into the cave, but Calard had no intention of letting it escape. He followed it mercilessly, cutting and hacking with his blade.

The last of its lifeblood pumping from its neck, the wyvern launched itself at him one last time. Its mouth opened wide, and Calard knew he had not the speed or strength remaining to avoid it. Instead, he stepped forward, directly into the path of the gaping jaws and stabbed upwards.

The blade pierced the roof of the beast's mouth as it closed upon him. Calard cried out as tusk-like teeth punched through his armour as if it were paper, but he maintained his hold on his blade, pushing it up into the monster's brain.

With a final bellow, blood bubbling up its throat, the full weight of the wyvern's head bore Calard to the ground. That head alone would have weighed as much as two Bretonnian warhorses and, for a panicked moment, Calard thought that was how he was to meet his fate, ignobly crushed to death by the monster he had just slain.

At last he dragged himself free and rose shakily to his feet. Breathing hard, he reversed the grip on his sword and dropped to one knee, closing his eyes as he placed his forehead against the crossbar of the hilt.

"Lady of mercy, I dedicate this kill to your honour," he breathed, "and pray that in your wisdom you shall show me your favour."

He remained there for many minutes, exhausted. After some time, he heard a sound behind him and he surged back to his feet and swung around, his sword at the ready.

There was a startled screech and his manservant, Chlod, jumped back in fear. The hunchbacked peasant slipped on the blood-slick rock floor and fell heavily.

"It is just me, master!" Chlod cried.

"Stupid peasant," Calard said, shaking his head. "That's a sure way of getting yourself killed."

"Sorry, master," said the filthy lowborn, dipping his head.

Calard sheathed his sword across his back and after a brief search he retrieved his knife. The blade was gleaming with a soft, inner light.

He staggered and almost fell as the pain of his injuries crashed in on him. His wounds needed tending; who knew what vile poisons would have been carried in the wyvern's claws and bite.

Wearily, Calard moved towards the cave entrance.

"Fetch your axe," he said to Chlod over his shoulder. "I want its head."

There were cheers and clapping as Calard approached the snow-topped palisades encircling the mountain village, but he did not deign to raise his hand in response. He had cleaned his armour and skin as best he could in a mountain stream. The icy water had washed away the worst of the wyvern's blood, but he was still covered in grime and dirt, the result of nearly five years on the road. He was unshaven, his cloak hung in tatters and his armour was in need of urgent repairs, but for all that he rode with his head held high, his nobility plain for all to see.

Though he was no cleaner than the stinking rabble that welcomed him as their avenger and saviour, he looked down his nose at them. They were classless outcasts, exiles and rascals living beyond the law, while he was a noble of Bretonnia, a questing knight of the Lady.

If the village had a name, Calard had not heard it, and nor did he care to. Located high in the peaks of the Grey Mountains, the soaring range that divided Bretonnia and the Empire, it overlooked the pass known colloquially as the Crooked Corridor. Calard was not sure if it fell officially on the Bretonnian or Empire side, but it hardly mattered; neither realm cared enough to claim it.

The people of this village were a bastard mix of intermingled backgrounds. They spoke a pidgin hybrid of Bretonnian and Reikspiel, and Calard was certain that the majority of them were nothing short of brigands. Doubtless they ambushed the caravans seeking to avoid paying the taxes of Axe Bite Pass and risking the Crooked Corridor. Calard did not know which was worse—the smugglers that used the pass, or the cutthroats that preyed upon them.

Nevertheless, the Lady had led him here and he had sworn to the self-appointed village burgomeister that he would see the beast dead. He felt the envious eyes upon him as he rode through the village gates, and while the wretched curs were undoubtedly pleased that he had vanquished the beast that had been plaguing their lands, he was still wary of the potential for robbery.

The villagers cleared a path for him, broad smiles splitting their faces as they whooped and applauded. His lip curling in distaste, Calard guided his proud Bretonnian warhorse through the press of unwashed bodies. The highly-trained animal snorted as the villagers pressed in around it.

“I know,” said Calard, patting its neck.

Behind Calard came Chlod, riding upon a dejected-looking mule. The malformed peasant waved cheerily and grinned his stupid lopsided grin. Dragged through the mud and snow-slush behind him was the wyvern’s head, drawing gasps and whispers from the villagers.

Calard guided his steed up towards the high point of the village, winding his way past dozens of shanty houses, all covered in a thick layer of snow. The burgomeister was standing out on the porch of his home, a structure that stood out as rich and ostentatious amongst the other hovels. Still, the house was little more than a shack, and Calard looked upon it with disdain. A hangman’s gallows protruded from the front stoop of the building, a grim reminder that this place was outside of Bretonnian and Empire law.

The burgomeister was a heavy-set, jowly man, and he stood on his porch with a broad grin on his face as he waited for Calard to draw near. He was surrounded by a handful of richly-dressed individuals, and his fat wife stood at his side.

“The hero returns!” declared the burgomeister, raising his arms high. “The beast is dead!”

The rest of the village had followed Calard and Chlod and stood now in a semi-circle around them at the foot of the burgomeister’s stoop. The crowd erupted into further cheering and clapping.

“We shall have a feast this night in honour of this great deed!” promised the burgomeister, eliciting another burst of applause.

The man spoke with a strong Parravonian accent, a noble’s accent, and Calard wondered briefly what the man had done to be living out here. Murdered a rival and been cast out? Run up debts from which he had fled? Been dishonoured in some

sordid court intrigue? Whatever the answer, the man was an outcast, worthy only of Calard's contempt.

The head of the wyvern was manhandled to the foot of the burgomeister's stoop by five men, and a great cheer rose as ropes hauled it up upon the gallows. The ropes creaked under the immense weight, and it spun there in place, its one remaining eye bulging from its socket.

"A bed shall be made up in my own house for our brave hero!" declared the burgomeister. "We shall eat and drink well this night!"

More cheers sounded, but Calard raised a hand. The villagers fell silent.

"That won't be necessary," he said. "I cannot tarry. I must continue on my journey. All I require is a fresh supply of food and some dry tinder."

There were mutters amongst the crowd at this, and Calard saw the burgomeister's grin falter.

"Night draws in, sir knight," said the man. He was still smiling but his smile no longer reached his eyes. "Let us show our gratitude. Be our guest of honour this evening. Please."

"No," said Calard, shaking his head. "I must decline. I need only some food and dry tinder, and I shall be on my way."

"Is my home not good enough for you, noble sir?" snapped the burgomeister's wife. "Are you worried it might not be seemly to consort with the likes of us?"

The burgomeister shushed his wife, and Calard curled his lip, not even attempting to hide his scorn.

"Regretfully, my vows do not permit me to sleep in the same place two nights running," said Calard, his voice filled with anything but regret, "lest the Lady judge me idle in my quest. If it were not for my vows, I should gladly take up your kind offer, madam. Alas, it is not to be. I bid you goodbye."

He turned his horse around, intending to leave the village and its honourless inhabitants behind him.

"Come, peasant," he said to Chlod, clicking his fingers. Calard glanced back over his shoulder as he nudged his steed towards the village gates.

"Food and dry tinder, thank you," he said. "I shall wait outside the palisades."

With that, Calard rode from the village, uncaring of the venomous glares he was receiving.

The fire crackled and spat and the damp wood smoked heavily, filling the enclosed shelter with the scent of burning pine needles. It had been some two hours after the sun had set when Calard had called a halt, deeming it too dangerous to continue their descent in the darkness.

They had taken shelter in the lee of a rockfall just off the main path leading down towards the Crooked Corridor, and Chlod had quickly rigged up some additional protection in the event of the weather worsening. Under Calard's watchful eye and with his thick tongue poking from the side of his mouth in concentration, the peasant had woven branches together to form a rough framework roof, over which he had laid a blanket of smaller twigs and pine needles. An oiled canvas sheet was strung up to form an entrance, and weighted down with rocks it formed an adequate barrier

from the wind. There was enough room within the shelter to house both Calard's horse and Chlod's mule as well as the two men, and while the Bretonnian nobleman was not overly pleased at having to be in such close proximity to his manservant, he had a belly full of food and the fire was warm.

As exhausted as he was, sleep eluded Calard. Wrapped in a woollen blanket, cloak balled up into a pillow, he stared into the glowing fire, listening to its reassuring crackle and the howl of the wind. His horse whinnied softly and shifted its weight at the back of the shelter.

If the storm that had been threatening to break all week did not come, they should pass into the lowlands of Bretonnia within a day or so. It had been almost five years since Calard had taken up his questing vow, and just over four since he had last set foot in the land of his birth. He longed to hear Bretonnian voices, eat familiar food and drink a goblet of a fine Bordeaux vintage. Too long had he been travelling through uncultured foreign lands.

In his relentless quest for the grail, Calard's travels had taken him far from his beloved homeland. He had gone as far north as the frozen lands of Kislev, inhabited by its warlike savages, and as far to the south as Tilea, an amoral cesspit of intrigue and backstabbing where a warrior's honour and sword sold to the highest bidder. In the east, he had travelled through the dwarf-patrolled passes of the World's Edge Mountains and looked out across the desolate Dark Lands beyond.

He had spent the better part of two years within the borders of the Empire, and had come to loathe the place and its citizens. There was no divide between the classes in the Empire, and even the lowest born cur could rise to the heights of power. How such a society could operate was beyond him.

Everywhere Calard went he saw dishonour and death, and through it all he steeled his soul, praying fervently to the Lady to lead him onwards, desperate to prove himself worthy. Visions and dreams of the grail haunted him, the holy chalice always appearing so close but just out of reach. In the Lady's name Calard had done great and noble deeds across the length and breadth of the Old World, hoping against hope that with one such action his deity would favour him by manifesting before him.

It was said that only those questing knights of pure and noble intention would ever be blessed with a visitation from the Lady of the Lake, and of those, few were judged worthy. Fewer still survived imbibing the elixir held within the grail itself, for only the truest exemplars of Bretonnian knightly virtue, paladins with souls unsullied and free of taint, were able to drink it and live.

It felt like an age had passed since Calard had relinquished his rulership of Garamont, since he had symbolically set aside his lance and forsaken all else but his holy quest. Calard had named his nephew Orlando his heir, presenting the boy the Sword of Garamont, the ancient heirloom of his family's rulership. Until his successful return, the boy was the ruling Castellan of Garamont. Orlando had been seven years of age when Calard had left; he wondered if he would even recognise the boy now.

Calard knew that he had left Garamont in good hands. He had requested that the Baron Montcadas act as regent for his lands until such a time as he returned—or Orlando came of age—and he trusted the man implicitly. Montcadas was a bear of a

man, full of warmth, paternal wisdom and strength. He was also the terror of his enemies, fearless and unforgiving, roaring his challenge as he thundered into battle swinging his heavy morning star—or at least he had been before he had lost his sight. One of his eyes had been put out fighting the bloodthirsty beastmen of the wildwoods; he had lost the other in a tragic tourney accident. He yearned to hear Montcadas' booming laughter and wise counsel again.

A part of Calard longed to walk the halls of Castle Garamont again, to ride the perimeter of his lands and see his own heraldry, a silver dragon rampant on a field of red and blue, flying from the parapets; but he reminded himself that it would not be the same as it had once been. It would not feel like home anymore.

His father, that stern and cold figure that had ruled over Garamont for nigh on forty years, was dead, having never accepted Calard into his heart. His stepmother, Calisse, hated him more than ever. And Bertelis was gone.

More than anything else, Calard missed his half-brother.

He felt a stab of guilt as he thought of Bertelis, and he wondered if he would ever see him again; and if he did, if his brother could possibly find it in his heart to forgive him.

The last time he had seen Bertelis had been within the shattered walls of Lyonesse, after the departure of the Norscan hordes that had besieged the island fastness. It had not been a happy time, and they had not parted on good terms. Calard burned with shame thinking back to that fateful day.

He had relived it so many times in the last five years. Even now he could hear that horrible sound as Elisabet's head connected with the marble stairs. He saw again Bertelis' face, aghast. Rationally, Calard had known that it was an accident, a tragic, awful accident, but he had allowed himself to be blinded by rage and grief.

His brother had begged his forgiveness, but Calard had turned his back on him.

"I have no brother," he had said, his voice cold and empty. In the days afterwards, as he grieved, he regretted speaking those words but there had been no opportunity to make amends. He had not seen Bertelis since, nor even heard of his whereabouts, though not for want of trying.

Calard's grim thoughts were interrupted as Chlod rolled over and began to snore loudly. Calard regarded the peasant with an expression of distaste, and swore under his breath. The ignorant wretch was curled into a ball, an idiotic smile on his face. Chlod clutched a regal blue scrap of cloth in his hands, one side lined with mink. Once, that scrap had been a part of the cloak worn by the holy grail knight Reolus. Even five years on, Calard could not believe the knight was dead.

Chlod muttered in his sleep, then giggled, and Calard swore again. He hated how sleep always came so easily to the peasant, while it took him hours to drift off. Even then, Calard's sleep was restless and fraught with nightmares. Who knew what sort of dreams the ignorant peasant was having. Frankly, Calard did not wish to know, certain that they would be unwholesome and base. The little hunchback was an unpleasant fellow, seemingly bereft of conscience, but he had a certain animalistic cunning that had served Calard well on occasion over his years of servitude. His eagerness to please and sycophantic toadying were disgusting to behold, but Calard tolerated these.

The howling gale outside was picking up. The sound was mournful, almost like the roaring of great beasts was concealed within it. Calard shivered, and pulled his woollen blanket tightly around him.

Chlod passed wind loudly and grunted in his sleep before starting to snore once more. Calard tried to blot the noise out, but it was no use. In frustration and exasperation he sat up. Grabbing one of his heavy boots, he hurled it across the makeshift shelter, hitting Chlod square in the face.

The peasant awoke with a shout, jerking sharply. He blinked, looking around him fearfully.

“You were snoring,” said Calard.

“Sorry, master,” said Chlod.

“Give me back my boot.”

The peasant scrambled from beneath his blanket and crawled across the shelter, holding Calard’s boot like a holy artefact. He spat on it and gave it a quick rub down with his shirtfront, making Calard grimace. Grinning like a simpleton, Chlod set the boot down carefully alongside its partner.

“Can I get you anything, master? Water?”

“No,” said Calard, rolling away from Chlod. “I just want to sleep.”

He heard his manservant crawling back to his blanket, and bit down his frustration at the noise the peasant made, despite his trying to be quiet. The wind continued to howl outside, and again there came another sound, something like a howl.

“What was that, master?” said Chlod, his voice fearful.

“Nothing. The wind. Go to sleep.”

“I heard that there are beasts what live up here in the mountains,” said Chlod. “Big shaggy cats with teeth like swords. Maybe they are out there now, hunting us.”

“And I will throw you to them if you do not shut up,” said Calard. “Now, I don’t want to hear another word from you until morning. Don’t let the fire die down overnight.”

“Yes, master,” said Chlod. Calard could still hear the fear in the peasant’s voice.

It took him another half an hour to fall asleep, dreaming of home, and of cats with teeth the size of swords, and then nothing.

Calard awoke instantly, knife in hand. Chlod was leaning over him, and the cold light of morning was penetrating the thatch of branches overhead.

Chlod’s eyes were fearful. He was fully dressed and had clearly been up for some time. It was remarkable that Calard had not woken earlier, for he was a light sleeper and would normally have been roused as soon as Chlod had stirred.

“What is it?” said Calard in irritation, wiping the last of the sleep from his eyes.

“There’s people, master,” said Chlod. “They’re armed, and they look like they are in a murderin’ mood.”

Calard threw off his blanket and sheathed his knife. He pulled on his boots, and picked up his bastard sword. He could hear voices, a dozen or more, the sound an angry murmur. He slid the scabbard from his blade and tossed it onto his blanket before kneeling briefly before his small triptych shrine to the Lady, closing his eyes

and invoking her blessing. He then rose to his feet and stepped out into the morning glare, the fresh snow crunching beneath his boots.

There was a shout, and the first of the men appeared, pushing through the low branches of the pines outside Calard's encampment. There were at least a score of them, he saw, and Chlod was right: they looked as though they were out for blood.

He recognised several of them as villagers from the day before. There were too many of them for him to defeat, he knew that, but he would be damned if he didn't take several of them with him to the halls of Morr if they came at him.

They were scowling and muttering angrily, and they spread out as they closed in on him, cudgels, hatchets and daggers clenched tightly in their hands. Several of them had hunting bows in hand, arrows nocked to strings, and Calard's disdain deepened—amongst the Bretonnian nobility, the bow was a coward's weapon, fit only for hunting, or for peasants who had no comprehension of honour.

Calard walked out to meet the villagers, rolling his shoulders. He gripped his blade in both hands and set himself in a ready stance, ensuring that he could see each of the would-be brigands.

"Is this how you thank those who do you a service?" he said, his voice filled with scorn. "You wait until they leave your village and follow them to their camp, intent on murder and robbery?"

"Honourless dog," said one of them, a brutish man with a thick beard.

"I bet he ain't even a knight," said another, his face twisted in anger. "Probably stole that armour off some poor dead bastard. Killed him, maybe."

"I'm gonna cut your heart out," said a third man, fingers tightly gripping a butcher's knife. He had clearly been crying and his eyes burnt with rage and grief. "My Adela's dead because of you!"

The first man, clutching a woodcutter's axe in his hands, nodded. "He'll pay for it, all right," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Calard, his voice low and menacing. "But come one step closer and you're a dead man."

"So long as I take you with me, I don't care," said the grieving man. He held his knife out in trembling hands. The man was no warrior—Calard saw that instantly.

"Don't, Pieter," said one of the others. "Let's just kill him. Ain't none of us have to get hurt."

There were angry snarls of agreement, and Calard tensed as the strings of four bows were drawn back.

"She was with child!" shouted the grieving man, Pieter, quivering with rage. "And now she's gone, and it's all your fault!"

"I have hurt no woman," said Calard, "and I will strike down any man who claims otherwise. I have done nothing but that which was asked of me."

"Nothing but lied to get a free feed, more like," sneered another of the men.

"I am a knight of Bastonne. I do not lie," said Calard, eyes flashing.

"Blood's been shed, you bastard," snarled another man. "You'll pay for what happened to Pieter's woman."

"Enough," said Calard. "If it is your intention to rob and kill me, get on with it. You bore me."

The archers tensed.

“Hold!” came a shout. “Hold!”

Calard saw the village burgomeister stomping through the snow from the main path, pushing his way through the angry mob. His face was flushed.

“I knew you were nothing more than a brigand, you cur,” said Calard. “I should have left you to your fate, to be devoured by the beast.”

The grieving man gave out a garbled scream and lurched forward with his knife. Expecting the attack, Calard slammed the flat of its blade against the man’s wrist, knocking the blade away. The man cried out and fell to his knees in the snow, gasping in pain. Startled by the sudden move, one of the bowmen loosed his arrow.

Calard was already moving, and the hastily taken shot glanced off his shoulder and struck a tree. Calard stepped forward, swinging his blade over his shoulder.

“Hold, damn you!” boomed the burgomeister, his voice filled with authority, giving the other bowmen pause.

“What is going on?” hissed Calard, not lowering his weapon.

“I might well ask you the same thing,” retorted the burgomeister.

“Speak plainly,” said Calard, “or your man here dies.”

“We know that you did not kill the wyvern,” said the burgomeister slowly.

“Are you bereft of your senses?” said Calard. “You hauled its head up on your damned gallows! You all saw it.”

“I don’t know how you did it,” said the burgomeister. “Sorcery, perhaps. What I don’t understand is why. You wanted no reward, only food and dry tinder. What do you gain from your deception?”

“You’re insane,” said Calard. “On my honour, I killed the beast. Tracked it to its lair and cut its head off. What is this? Some excuse so you can come down here to rob and kill me.”

“If you killed it,” said the burgomeister, “then why was its head gone this morning? And why was it seen flying above the peaks at dawn? If you slew the thing, how did it kill poor Pieter’s wife and destroy his home?”

“You are mistaken,” said Calard. “It must have been something else. Wolves, perhaps.”

“It weren’t no wolves,” said the burgomeister. “I saw it with my own eyes. It was the beast.”

“I killed it,” said Calard. “On the honour of my family name, I killed it.”

Calard was in a silent rage as he pulled his cloak tight around his neck, trying vainly to protect himself from the blizzard. The storm had finally broken, lashing Calard, Chlod and their steeds with gale force winds and snow, and though it could not have been even midday, it was as dark as twilight.

He could see no more than ten yards in front of him, such was the intensity of the snowstorm. At any moment, Calard expected to be blown off the side of the cliff, falling to his death. He knew they ought to turn back, for the path—little more than a goat track clinging precariously to the side of the mountain—was dangerous in the best of weather, let alone in this blizzard.

They had passed nothing that would have served as shelter in the last hour, and from what he could judge, they were only half a mile or so from the beast's lair. Calard decided that their best bet was to press on, and to sit the storm out within the wyvern's cave, as distasteful as the idea was.

For the last half an hour he had been leading his steed by its reins, forging on through the thickening blanket of snow. Their tracks were covered almost instantly, erasing all evidence of their passage.

Calard did not believe for a moment the villagers' claim. He suspected that this was some ploy by the burgomeister, but for what purpose, he could not comprehend. He planned to return to the monster's lair, find its corpse and journey back to the village with irrefutable evidence that he had done as he had pledged. He would not have his good name besmirched by mutterings of dishonour.

He leaned into the wind, his head lowered. His face was wrapped in woollen scarves so that only his eyes were exposed to the ruthless elements, and ice had formed a thick crust across his eyebrows.

He turned around, blinking through the blinding snow to see his manservant staggering behind with his mule. The peasant was tougher than he looked, but Calard didn't think he would last long. Neither of them would. They needed to get to shelter, fast.

The path narrowed up ahead, and Calard pressed close to the cliff face as he edged his way forwards. The cliff dropped off into nothingness below. The Crooked Corridor, some two thousand feet down, was completely hidden in the storm. Calard was not sure what was worse—seeing the ground so far below, or seeing nothing but knowing the drop was there nonetheless.

A steep overhang jutted over the path as he trudged his way onwards, forcing Calard to duck his head to keep away from the cliff's edge. His steed snorted in protest, pulling against him, but he calmed it and led it on. He recognised this location. They were close.

He emerged from the overhang, and snow pelted him. It was a struggle to keep moving, but he had no other choice. To stop was to die.

He heard a sound amid the gale—a roar?—and turned around, trying to discern its origination. Was it just the wind? Looking back the way he had come, he swore as he saw Chlod hanging over the cliff edge, clutching frantically for purchase. The only thing keeping him from falling were the reins of his mule, wrapped tightly around one hand. The obstinate beast's head was down, its neck straining as the full weight of the peasant pulled at its mouth. Calard could see instantly that at any moment the beast would slip, and then both it and Chlod would disappear over the edge. Perhaps more importantly, the mule would take all of Calard's possessions, which were strapped across its back, with it.

Mouthing a curse, Calard began to slide past his horse, moving to the peasant's aid as quickly as was safe to do so. With his back to his towering warhorse, nothing but open space filled with swirling snow in front of him, he shimmied his way back. His feet were precariously close to the cliff edge, and he prayed silently to the Lady.

There came another roar in the storm, and a monstrous, winged creature appeared out of the blizzard.

It came from below, rising up the sheer cliff face with powerful beats of its immense wings. Its serpentine eyes blazed like embers, and Calard stared back in shock.

For a second he was sure that it was the same beast that he had already fought, but that was madness. No, he had killed that one, there could be no doubt of that; he'd cut its head off and put out one of its eyes. This beast had both its eyes, and its broad, heavy head was firmly attached to its muscular neck.

A second wyvern then, Calard thought. The mate of the first?

Buffeted by the strong winds and borne aloft upon its mighty wings, the beast lunged, huge mouth gaping. Calard's horse reared, whinnying in terror, and he was knocked to the ground, scrambling frantically not to slip over the cliff edge.

The monster's mouth clamped shut around his horse, and with a wrench of its neck it dragged the noble steed from the mountain path. One of its hooves clipped Calard's shoulder, and he slid further over the cliff's edge. The horse's arterial blood sprayed, staining the snow, and the wyvern shook its head from side to side. Even through the gale, Calard heard the horrible snap as his steed's spine was broken. The beast's wings beat faster to compensate for the additional weight, and it dropped half a dozen feet. A sudden gust dragged it further out from the cliff face, and it disappeared in the storm.

Calard's hand closed around a jutting rock and he gripped it tightly, forestalling his fall. His legs were dangling over the seemingly bottomless expanse. With a grunt of effort he hauled himself back onto the mountain path, clambering to his feet and unsheathing his sword. He turned and pressed his back against the cliff wall as the wyvern reappeared.

It descended on him, massive hind claws extended. Calard hacked with his sword double-handed, severing two talons, and the beast bellowed. Its other leg raked downwards, carving three furrows in the rock where Calard's head had been a moment earlier.

The questing knight turned his face away as a shower of rock and snow struck him, and as the wyvern kicked at him again he threw himself further down the path. He landed on his chest in the snow, and slid half a dozen yards before coming to a halt, turning and rising to one knee, his sword at the ready.

The wyvern beat its wings and disappeared into the blizzard overhead once more, and Calard risked a glance back along the path. Chlod had clambered from the edge of the precipice, and was staring at him fearfully. The peasant shouted something that was swallowed by the roaring winds and pointed, and Calard glanced movement out of the corner of his eye.

The wyvern was coming down at him again, its wings buffeting him with wind and snow. Its tail stabbed for him and he slashed with his sword as it plunged for his chest, knocking it aside and carving deep into the bony sting.

The beast came in to land, one foreclaw clutching onto the cliff face for balance as it gripped the narrow path with its hind talons. One of them slipped off the edge, dislodging a landslide, but the beast regained its balance and began making its way towards him, moving crab-like along the narrow path with surprising dexterity.

Calard began backing up, seeking to get under the overhang, where the wyvern's bulk would make it almost impossible for it to come at him. Seeing what he was doing, the wyvern hopped towards him faster, closing the distance in two bounds.

Its jaw snapped towards him, slamming shut less than half a foot away, and Calard slipped, falling to one knee. The beast hopped nearer, its foreclaw and left wing clutching at the cliff face, balancing itself as it leant upon its other wing.

Knowing that he couldn't get away from the beast, Calard took the only other option that remained for him—he attacked.

With a shout, Calard leapt forward and slammed his sword into the beast's wing, breaking several of the slender bones that fanned out from its claw. The beast roared, and brought its other wing around in a sharp arc. With no room to move, Calard was smashed into the cliff face by the force of the blow, striking the back of his head hard.

The beast grabbed him around the ankle with one of its foreclaws, dropping him to his back and pulling him through the snow. He fought it, kicking and struggling as he tried to bring his blade to bear, but he was dragged helplessly towards the wyvern.

He kicked the beast hard as its mouth opened, striking one of its tusk-like teeth. If the wyvern felt any pain it gave no indication, and it stretched its neck forward to bite him in half.

Calard managed to thrust the blade of his sword forward, and the beast stabbed itself in the gum as it strained towards him. Blood ran down the blade, and the wyvern hissed and pulled its head back. Calard managed to kick his foot from the monster's grasp, and he scrambled back away from it as it lunged again.

Part of the cliff path gave way beneath the wyvern's weight suddenly, and it scrabbled for purchase. Its body slammed into the path as a boulder slipped under its hind legs, and one foreclaw gripped the rock tightly, less than two feet from Calard's position.

With a shout, he brought his sword down hard upon it, breaking bones.

With a roar, the wyvern lost its grip and fell, tumbling backwards over the precipice. Its left wing would not work properly, the wing-bones broken by Calard's first strike, and the wyvern tumbled down the cliff face, unable to keep itself airborne. It was gone almost instantly, careening off the cliff face once before being swallowed by the blinding snow.

"Is it dead, master?" shouted Chlod in his ear, coming up behind him. Calard shrugged.

"We must move on!" he shouted. "We'll be dead if we don't find shelter."

With that, Calard stumbled on, fighting through the blizzard, Chlod and his mule close behind.

If anything, the storm had worsened by the time they reached the cave, and they were exhausted and half-frozen as they staggered inside.

They moved to the back of the cavern in an effort to escape the biting winds. Calard couldn't feel his fingers or his toes, and he had stopped shivering, which he knew was a bad sign. He felt incredibly tired, and the desire to just lie down on the

floor and sleep was strong. The rational part of his mind knew that to do so was to die, but another part of him whispered that he would just close his eyes for a moment.

Chlod had collapsed on the ground, a huddled ball of misery, and Calard prodded him with his foot.

“Fire,” Calard managed on the third attempt, forming the word with difficulty; his lips were completely numb.

The peasant groaned something indecipherable, and Calard kicked him hard in the side. That got a reaction. The peasant’s face was blue, but the colour started to come back as he prepared a fire.

Ten minutes later, the peasant had a small blaze going, and they crouched over it, warming frozen hands. Calard’s fingers began to tingle painfully as sensation returned. He removed part of his armour, unhooking the iced-up greaves as he attempted to rub some warmth into his limbs.

With his body finally thawing, the firelight casting its orange glow across the interior of the cavern, Calard realised for the first time that the headless corpse of the wyvern was not here.

Frowning, he lifted a burning brand from the fire and stood up, turning on the spot.

This was most definitely where he had fought the beast; he could see evidence of the battle. Dark, rust-like patches marked the floor, and there were cracks in the wall where its monstrous sting had struck, but of the body itself there was no sign.

“Devoured by scavengers?” he said, speaking aloud.

“Master?” said Chlod, looking up from beside the fire, but Calard ignored him.

The questing knight frowned. It had been only yesterday when he had killed the beast. Surely no scavenger could have devoured it in that time, bones and all, leaving no evidence of it ever having been here except for the bloodstains on the floor. Not even the other wyvern could have eaten it in that time.

Thinking about the immense, crushing jaws of the wyverns, however, he could well believe that they would be fully capable of consuming bones. A brood of wyverns? There had been at least two of the creatures. Could there be more?

The thought was not comforting. The stink of the beast still lingered in the cave even if its body did not, a potent animal smell that made his stomach heave.

Holding his burning brand aloft, Calard ventured deeper into the cave. It went back further than he had thought, and as he advanced the flame of his torch sent flickering shadows across its uneven walls. There were bones scattered within naturally formed alcoves, and he knelt beside them, lifting them up for inspection. Most of them were human, but there were others that were shorter and denser. He found a shattered, fanged skull tucked away in a hollow.

“Greenskin,” he said, kicking the skull away.

There were strange markings on the walls, he realised, and he stepped up close to one of them, lifting his torch. Underneath a layer of rock dust and grime he could see that something had been daubed onto the walls. Frowning, he brushed his hand along the crumbling granite, revealing a crude depiction of a warrior: a warrior fighting a winged beast that was unmistakably a wyvern.

“What in the name of the Lady?” said Calard.

Stepping back, he saw the walls were covered in similar pictures. Everywhere he looked he saw depictions of wyverns. They were devouring people and shaggy mountain cattle, flying over crudely rendered mountains with blood dripping from their exaggerated teeth and stings. In many of the pictures, there was a solitary warrior fighting the beast. Sometimes this lone warrior stood victorious over the wyvern, his sword plunged into its heart, or its severed head lying at his feet. Sometimes the warrior lay dead at the beast's feet.

Calard followed the images further back into the cave, intrigued and horrified.

Was this the remnant of some cult, venerating the Chaos beasts? Had there been wyverns in this area for hundreds, even thousands of years? Was there something here, in this cave, that drew them to it, like slivers of metal drawn to a lodestone?

The pictures led him further away from the entrance, and the howling of the wind outside faded. Soon, even the flame of Chlod's fire had ebbed. Abruptly, the cave ended. The floor sloped downwards, hinting at a deeper cavern, and the images too followed this descent, but he could go no further, for the way was blocked by a pool of dark water.

Ice had formed a fragile crust around the edge of the pool, though its centre was clear. The water was black. Calard cracked the skin of ice with the heel of his boot; it was not thick. He stood there for some moments, wondering where the passage led, before shrugging and turning away. He was hungry and tired. He would have Chlod cook him a meal and then settle down to wait out the storm.

From behind him came a splash, and Calard looked around to see the surface of the black pool rippling.

His sword was drawn and at the ready, the heavy blade held two-handed; the flaming torch was left burning on the ground. His gaze flicked left and right, seeing movement everywhere in the shadows cast by his flaming brand, but his attention snapped back to the pool as it began to bubble, as if it were boiling.

Not taking his eyes off the pool, Calard moved towards the edge.

"Master?" called Chlod from some way back, his voice muffled and echoing off the walls. "Master?"

Calard ignored the peasant, gripping the hilt of his bastard sword tightly.

Something began to rise from the water; something *large*.

The tip of its wings emerged first, then its massive head breached the surface, water spraying out as it exhaled sharply from its nostrils and sucked in a deep breath.

Mouthing a curse, Calard saw that it was another wyvern, easily as big as the last two. Black water ran off its grey-green scales, and secondary eyelids flicked back from its hateful orbs. Its pupils contracted as it swung its head towards the bright light of Calard's fallen torch, and it blinked in the glare.

This must have been where the foul things were originating from. Was there some foetid brood lair in a deeper cave, and this pool was the entrance?

He had been lucky to kill the others, he knew that. Weak and half-frozen, he knew that he would not be able to best this one if he allowed it to emerge from the water fully. It seemed not yet to have noticed him, and so Calard leapt forward as the monster began pulling itself out of the pool. Before the monster could react, he had

plunged into the icy water and thrust the tip of his sword straight into one of its eye sockets.

The wyvern shrieked in agony and thrashed its head, ripping the blade out of Calard's hands and knocking him backwards. Blood was running from the horrible wound, forming an oily film across the surface of the black pool. Bellowing deafeningly, the beast began retreating, dragging itself back the way it had come.

Calard heard Chlod arrive behind him, holding another flaming torch, and the peasant gasped as he saw the wyvern half-submerged in the cave pool. The beast was pulling itself back down the waterlogged cavern, first its curving back disappearing, then its wingtips. Finally, its head ducked under the water, taking Calard's sword with it.

Determined not to let the beast escape, Calard sucked in a deep breath and dived under the water. His armour weighed him down considerably, and he struggled not to sink. The water was dark, though the flickering light of the torch allowed him to see the vague, shadowy form of the monster as it slipped away from him. In frustration, Calard came up, knowing that to go any deeper was to drown, weighed down as he was.

He swore loudly, and began wading to the water's edge, unbuckling his breastplate as he did so.

The Lady had led him here for a reason. Perhaps that reason had not been to kill one wyvern, but to butcher the entire brood.

"Fetch me wood, tinder and flint," he ordered Chlod. "Wrap it tightly in oilskins. I want it waterproof."

Chlod's eyes boggled. "Master, surely you are not..." he began.

"Do as I say, peasant," snapped Calard, before lowering himself to one knee and praying. "Quickly!"

He inspected Chlod's work when he returned and, satisfied, he slung the bundle over his shoulder. He had stripped off his armour and was armed only with his knife, still glowing with a faint light of its own. Chlod was hopping from foot to foot, wringing his hands nervously.

"Don't go anywhere," said Calard. Then without further delay, he clenched the knife between his teeth and dived into the icy water once more. As far as he understood, wyverns breathed just as he did—or at least he hoped they did—and he judged that there must be air somewhere further along the submerged tunnel.

Kicking out strongly, he passed beneath the rock, and a moment of panic washed through him as he realised that he could not now merely swim to the surface to breathe. He continued on, deeper into the cavern.

His lungs began to burn, but he pushed on, swimming further. He continued on blindly into the darkness, his panic rising. He had gone too far to turn back now.

It took him a moment to realise that he could see light again, a red glare from up ahead, and he kicked towards it in desperation as the last of his air turned to poison in his lungs. There was a ruby glow infusing the water, originating further along the tunnel, and with a final burst of strength Calard kicked towards it.

He came up quickly, breaking the surface of the water and sucked in a deep breath.

He was blinded for a moment by the red light, and he blinked as his eyes adjusted to the glare, all the while treading water to keep afloat. There was a metallic taste that filled his mouth and nose, and his eyes were stinging.

“Lady above,” he breathed as he looked around.

He was no longer underground. He was no longer anywhere that even vaguely resembled the Grey Mountains bordering Bretonnia and the Empire.

A sky of fire burned overhead, and the heat was oppressive.

He was in hell.

His heart beating frantically, his mind reeling, Calard swam to the edge of the pool. The water had changed consistency, turning viscous, and he realised in horror that it was not water at all, but congealing blood.

He clambered up onto the gore-slick rocks that rimmed the blood-pool, removing the knife from between his teeth as the contents of his stomach rose into his throat. He doubled over and was violently ill.

Wiping his mouth, his mind rebelling, Calard straightened and turned in a slow circle, taking in his surroundings. A featureless, barren wasteland of red sand and rock spread out as far as the eye could see in every direction.

Rippling flames consumed the heavens, the sky burning from one horizon to the other, an inferno in constant flux.

It was ungodly hot, a merciless dry heat that scorched his lungs with every breath. The horizons shimmered with heat haze, and Calard could feel the moisture on him drying up, leaving a scab-like crust of blood across his skin.

“Where in the name of the Lady am I?” he breathed.

He heard laughter nearby, the mocking sound carried to him on the wind, and Calard spun around, his knife at the ready. There was no one there.

The Lady is dead, breathed a haggard voice and Calard jerked in shock, feeling the speaker’s breath in his ear. He turned, but again there was nothing there. Mocking laughter came at him from several sides as he looked around warily, eyes wide in fear.

We’re all dead, said a different voice.

“Who are you?” said Calard, his voice cracking.

You’ll soon be dead too, said another voice.

“Show yourselves, cowards!” said Calard.

The laughter assailed him from all sides at that, and he heard a multitude of mocking voices.

Show ourselves, he says! laughed one, rough and masculine.

If that is what you desire, said another, giggling.

You’ll be with us soon, said a woman’s voice, filled with sadness.

A deafening sound crashed in on Calard, filled with unholy screams of agony and madness. In that fraction of a second he saw figures all around him: loathsome, terrifying men and women, their flesh flayed and their muscles exposed to the elements. They stood around him in a numberless horde, eyeballs rolling loosely in their sockets, and bloodied hands clutched at him.

As quickly as it came, the vision was gone, taking with it the hellish taunting.

Calard cried out, his body shaking uncontrollably, the knife clasped in his sweaty hand quivering.

“Lady of mercy, give me strength,” he breathed.

I’m going to kill you, said a child’s voice in his ear.

Calard turned around on the spot and saw the bones.

He didn’t know how he had not seen them straight away. He was certain they had not been there before.

Beside the blood-pool was the immense skeleton of a wyvern. Calard made his way around the pool towards it, moving warily. There was not a scrap of flesh or skin left on it. The bones were as dry as tinder. It was as if it had been dead for centuries.

We are all dead, came a whispered voice behind him, and Calard’s hackles rose.

Calard’s sword was protruding from one of the empty eye sockets of the wyvern’s skull, and he moved towards it, stepping cautiously. He sheathed his knife at his waist before gingerly lifting his sword clear. It was exactly the same as it had been when he had last held it, and the weight of it was reassuring in his hands.

He turned around on the spot once more before coming to his decision.

He strapped his sword across his back alongside the roll of oiled leather that contained the wood and tinder that Chlod had prepared for him, and, suppressing the disgust that he felt, he began wading back into the blood-pool.

Taking a deep breath, readying himself for the difficult swim back, he dipped his head below the surface of the congealing gore. Diving down, kicking hard, he struck rock. In confusion, he felt around with his hands, thinking that perhaps he had risen up through a hole or a tunnel. Feeling around blindly, he could find no such entrance.

He rose to the surface of the pool, sucked in a searing breath and dived again. Over and over he dived, searching frantically for the way back. After half an hour he gave up, despairing. Pulling himself out of the quagmire of vital fluids, he cried his horror and anguish to the heavens. Laughter all around mocked him.

Calard sank to his knees in the red sand and prayed.

Chlod sat staring at the icy pool of water, biting his lip. It had been two days now since his master had disappeared beneath its surface. He must be dead, he thought.

He didn’t feel any particular grief at the thought, though it certainly made him reassess his options. During his time in Calard’s service, he had never wanted for food. Now he was alone again, he would be forced to fend for himself. Still, he had a mule, and enough supplies to last him a good week or two. He could always sell the mule if need be. Or eat it.

Chlod grinned. Things were working out rather well.

“Well, that’s that then,” he said to the ageing rat perched upon his knee, who twitched its nose in response. “I reckon we’ve given him enough time. He ain’t comin’ back, so it seems, so we’d best be off.”

Chlod had wanted to make sure that Calard would not return before he abandoned him. In the past five years, he had learnt enough of his master to know that he would not look kindly upon him had he returned to find his manservant departed with all the food. He would not have put it past him to track him down, no matter how long it took, just to see him hang.

Two days he'd waited. Chlod felt confident that Calard was not coming back.

With that decided, he stood up, shoving his pet back into the deep pocket on the front of his tunic.

Leading his mule, Chlod moved towards the cave entrance. He wouldn't return to Bretonnia, he decided. He would travel back into the Empire, back to one of the enormous cities that he had visited with his former master—Altdorf perhaps.

He was feeling quite cheery as he strode out into the snow. The storm had died down the day before, and the air was crisp and clear. He breathed in deeply, savouring the near absolute silence.

The slight breeze changed direction, and his mule suddenly reared, nostrils flaring and ears flattening against its head.

"Whoa!" shouted Chlod, trying to calm the beast. Then his blood ran cold as he heard a low growl from nearby.

Chlod turned slowly to see a massive, shaggy-coated animal padding towards him. It was the size of a draught horse, and its fur was pale and thick. A mane the colour of virgin snow encircled its heavily-muscled neck, and a pair of curving teeth, each the length of a short sword, emerged from its snarling mouth.

A growl to his left announced the presence of a second cat, and he saw a third moving up to his right. He could see dark stripes upon the flanks of the snow-coloured predators, and their massive paws left deep indentations in the snow as they moved towards him.

Chlod turned tail and ran.

He heard his mule's tortured scream as the cats bore it to the ground behind him. That scream was cut short, and Chlod dared not turn to see if they were now leaping for him. Expecting sabre teeth to close around his neck at any moment, Chlod fled back into the cave, the sound of crunching bones echoing around him.

Ducking down behind a rock some way in, he turned, breathing hard, to see if the mountain cats were following him. One of the beasts came loping in after him. Its predatory gaze was fixed on his hiding place.

Chlod fled further into the cave, falling back as far as he was able. On the cat came, unhurried and following him inexorably. As it closed, it was joined by its pack, which instinctively fanned out to cut off any chance of escape. Chlod backed into the black pool of water.

"Cats don't like water," he murmured, hoping against hope that he was correct. Perhaps if he waded in deep enough they would leave him be. That faint hope was shattered as the biggest of the sabre-tusks came straight in after him, a deep growl rumbling within its chest.

Seeing no other option, Chlod sucked in a deep breath and turned his back on the sabre-tusks. He heard them roar, and then splash towards him, and with that he dived into the black water.

Calard's eyes flicked open, the prayer dying on his lips as a shape rose from the blood-pool. In an instant he was on his feet, swinging his bastard sword up in readiness of attack.

At first he thought he was having another horrific vision, seeing again one of the daemonic things that whispered in his ear. It was covered from head to toe in blood, and its thick, malformed body struggled as it tried to pull itself clear of the foul, clinging gore. It looked straight at him, eyes wide and full of terror, and Calard lowered his guard a little.

“Peasant?” he said. “Is that you?”

“Master!” cried Chlod, dragging himself out of the blood-pool to fall at his feet. “Praise Ranald, I thought you were dead!”

We are all dead, whispered a voice in Calard’s ear, but if Chlod heard it too, he didn’t make any reaction.

“Not yet,” said Calard, answering both.

“You’ve been gone so long, I was worried, and then there were these sabre-cats and they...” His words trailed off as he seemed finally to register his surroundings, and his eyes went wide. The hunchbacked peasant looked around him in dawning horror, and a pitiful moan escaped his lips.

“Gone so long?” said Calard. “I’ve only been here for... what, an hour perhaps?”

“An hour?” said Chlod, looking up at him. The peasant shook his head. “You’ve been gone for two days, master.”

You are dead, said a voice. *You just don’t know it.*

“Did you hear that?” said Calard. Chlod was starting to shake, and tears were running down his cheeks. Calard could see that the peasant’s sanity was close to breaking.

“Peasant!” he snapped, and Chlod jerked, looking up at him with haunted eyes. “Did you hear that voice?”

“Voice?” said Chlod.

“Never mind,” said Calard.

“What’s in there?” said Chlod pointing.

“What?” said Calard. “There’s nothing there...”

His voice trailed off as he followed Chlod’s gesture and saw that there *was* something nearby, something that had not been there before. Or at least, something he had not seen.

It was a pile of large red boulders, about a hundred yards away, and it looked akin to an old burial cairn. A way in to the cairn was formed by two tall boulders that leant against each other, forming a crude portal. The inside was dark.

Calard wondered how he had not seen it before.

Your eyes are closed, said a voice in his ear. *You blind yourself with lies, denying yourself, deluding yourself.*

“Oh, and Chlod doesn’t?” said Calard aloud.

“Master?” said Chlod, eyes darting around to see whom Calard spoke with.

He is a simple creature. He knows what he is. His eyes are open. He does not try to be something he is not.

“And I do?” said Calard.

You are dead! said the voice vehemently, the words spoken with hatred.

Chlod was looking at Calard strangely. Ignoring him, Calard moved towards the cairn.

Did he lie to himself? Calard wondered as he made his progress across the searing red sand. He knew the answer, of course. He always had. For years he had tried to be something that he wasn't. For years he had tried to live up to hopeless expectations: his father's, his own.

He heard laughter then, filled with self-satisfaction, and Calard pushed the sound and his doubts away as he reached the cairn. This place was insidious, preying upon his mind. He must not let himself succumb to the voices.

With his sword drawn, he stepped inside the cairn.

A man was kneeling in front of a crude shrine, his back to Calard. He was dressed in plate armour, though it was battered and old, covered in a layer of red dust. His hair was long and lined with silver, and he wore a tattered cloak over one shoulder.

Calard held his sword tightly in his hands, standing over the vulnerable figure. He could cut him down so easily.

Do it, urged a voice, making him start.

The man looked normal enough, but Calard knew that nothing in this hellish realm could be trusted. He shuddered as he thought of the other visions he had already seen, the teeming hordes of skinless, hateful daemons that he still felt crowding in around him, just beyond the veil of reality. Was this figure one of them, merely in a guise that might make him lower his guard? If it turned around would its face be missing, nothing but red-raw exposed muscle and veins?

Calard clenched his teeth, his muscles tensing as the urge to cut the man down took a hold of him. This is no man, he thought. This is a daemon. His heart beat furiously in his chest, and he could hear the pumping of blood in his head, deafening him and blotting out rational thought.

Calard tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword as a savage madness took him, and he stepped forward to strike the man down, his face twisting into a snarl.

As he lifted his sword up for the killing blow, he was momentarily distracted by something glinting in the shadows. His gaze was drawn to a small icon standing upright upon the crude shrine before which the man knelt, and as his gaze focused on that pendant, the blood-fury that had claimed him receded.

With a shake of his head, Calard cleared the last vestiges of the savage rage that had almost overcome him. He lowered his sword, hearing disappointed murmurs and bitter whispering all around him, wondering if this was merely some new vision.

The icon was a small brass statuette attached to a necklace. It was perched upright, leaning upon a rock, and depicted a female figure, a large goblet held in her hands over her head.

"The Lady of the Lake," he breathed, in awe.

Dead, said a voice in his ear.

The kneeling figure lurched to his feet at Calard's voice, swinging a sword around in a gleaming arc. Calard's own blade flashed, and the two swords came together with a sharp clash, and the two knights were locked together for a moment, staring into each other's eyes.

The knight's face was not that of some hateful daemon; it was the face of a man, though it had the hollow, haunted look of one that had seen more than his sanity was capable of enduring.

“The goddess be praised,” said the strange knight, his voice cracked and dry. He collapsed to his knees, and tears of relief ran down his ashen cheeks. “She has answered my prayers at last.”

Calard stood there, helpless and in shock, looking at a man who was undoubtedly a fellow knight of Bretonnia.

“There is only the one beast, reborn time and time again,” said the knight, his voice lifeless and hollow. His name was Orderic of Montforte and, like Calard, he was a questing knight, seeking the Lady’s blessing. His armour was of an antiquated style unfamiliar to Calard.

He sat with the knight upon a pair of rocks outside the crude cairn-like structure. Chlod knelt in the sand at Calard’s knee, shuddering and whimpering, glancing around him fearfully.

“I... I cannot recall how many times it has risen,” Orderic said. “A dozen times? A hundred? I don’t remember. It’s all a fog...”

The haunted knight’s voice trailed off and his eyes clouded over, lost in his vague memories. The knight seemed confused when Calard asked him how he had gotten here.

“How *long* have you been here?” said Calard, breaking the silence that had fallen between them as the knight tried to remember. Orderic jerked and looked at him in surprise, as if he had forgotten that he was not alone.

“I... I don’t know. A while. There is no night here, so it is hard to judge. A week? A year? I don’t know... The Lady led me. Just as she led you.”

“So it would seem,” said Calard, looking around him warily. “But I cannot see why she would bring me here.”

“I know why you came,” said the knight vehemently. “She brought you here that you might relieve me of my vigil. It is your time now to stand guard over the beast, and to slay it when it next rises.”

“What?” said Calard. “No. That is not why I have been brought here. That can’t be the reason.”

“You have to take up my vigil,” said the knight. “I’ve been here too long. I... I am losing myself in this place.”

“But I am embarked on the quest,” said Calard.

“As am I,” said Orderic. “Though I was close to accepting defeat. I have been delayed here too long. Many nights have I prayed for someone to come to relieve me. Those prayers have now been answered.”

Calard bit his lip and looked down. The Lady *had* led him here. Was this her will? Was this then to be his fate, to take up the knight’s vigil, slowly losing himself to madness until another knight arrived to replace him? Was he to become a pale, haunted shell of a man like Orderic?

“Why did you take up the quest?” asked Orderic suddenly.

“What?” said Calard, frowning, as if the question was ludicrous. “What do you mean?”

“Why did you take up the quest? I took it up for glory,” said Orderic, laughing hollowly. “And this is where it led me. I realise now that I took up the quest for the

wrong reason. The search for glory is not noble. That is why the Lady brought me here. This vigil has been my penance. What did you do to be brought here to this hell?"

"I... I took up the quest to prove that my blood was free of taint," said Calard, surprised that he had never realised it in such simple terms before. "To prove it to myself, and to my knights. And to prove myself to my father. To make him proud."

He realised how stupid that was as soon as he said it, for his father was dead and could never give him the acceptance he so craved.

"You are questing for the wrong reason," said Orderic. "You will never reach your goal until you realise that reason."

"What is it?" said Calard, but Orderic merely shrugged, smiling without warmth.

"I don't know," he said. "But I have learnt that the quest is more than a feat of arms. It takes more than just killing a monster to be granted the Lady's visitation. It is a quest of faith—of faith in the Lady, faith in your belief, faith in yourself."

"Faith in yourself," echoed Calard, brow creasing as he pondered the knight's words.

"You *have* to take up my vigil," said Orderic, pleading, desperate. "Please take up my vigil. I... I cannot go on anymore."

The knight's gaze dropped, and he merely stared blankly into nothingness. Calard did not know what to say.

"I have denied death for so long waiting for you to come," breathed the knight. "My quest is unfinished. I cannot die before it is completed. I cannot. Let me finish it."

Roiling blood-red clouds rolled across the fiery heavens with unnatural speed, and Calard eyed them nervously as ruby lightning lit them from within. Chlod was rocking back and forth on his haunches, speaking softly to himself, and Orderic continued to merely stare into space. Things flickered at the edge of Calard's vision, as if in agitation at the brewing storm, and the first drops of rain began to patter down onto the red desert sand.

The light shower grew heavier and Calard blinked as it began to run down his face, and only then did he realise that this was no normal rain.

"Blood," said Calard in horror as warm rivulets ran down his armour and face.

"It begins again..." said Orderic, suddenly coming out of his stupor. He drew his sword as he rose wearily to his feet.

"What is it?" said Calard, standing and drawing his own blade.

"The beast is reborn," said Orderic, moving in the direction of the blood-pool and the wyvern's skeleton. His shoulders were slumped in defeat and exhaustion.

Chlod was still rocking to and fro on the ground, and Calard gave him a quick glance before hurrying after Orderic. As he got closer to the blood-pool, he could see that it was bubbling furiously. His eyes widened and he gripped the hilt of his sword tightly as he looked upon the skeleton of the wyvern.

Like a sponge, the porous, dry bones were sucking up the blood, and they were now a deep, bruised red. Sinew and muscle started forming across the skeleton. Ligaments and tendons pulled the bones together tightly, and internal organs formed within the beast's abdomen. A massive heart grew within its chest cavity, and a

spider web of veins and arteries spread across the rapidly regenerating musculature. That heart began to beat, then it was obscured as more muscle and flesh built up over it.

Still not yet fully formed, the wyvern rose from the ground, its red-raw body coiling sinuously, as yet unfleshed wings flexing.

The beast's massive jaws opened in a silent challenge, its vocal chords not yet formed, and hateful eyes grew within their sockets. The wyvern clawed up the earth as it shuddered and writhed, as if in pain or ecstasy, and finally its green-grey skin began to spread across its flesh.

It all happened within the space of ten heartbeats, and by the time Calard and Orderic closed on it, it was fully regenerated. The beast was already wading into the bubbling pool, and the two knights broke into a run towards it.

"It cannot be allowed to pass through!" shouted Orderic, leaping into the pool. He landed knee-deep in blood, and began splashing towards the wyvern. Calard was only a step behind him. The beast swung its massive head around towards them as it registered their presence, and it let out a deafening screech.

Five minutes later, the beast was dead, and Calard and Orderic collapsed on the bank, exhausted and bloodied. The two knights had fought well together. As quickly as it had arrived, the blood shower had passed, the clouds streaking across the sky to disappear over the burning horizon.

Once again, the beast was nothing but bones, dry and brittle; its flesh had turned to dust as Calard had struck the fatal blow, his sword penetrating the wyvern's heart. In the blink of an eye, the bones were back where Calard had first seen them. Indeed, the only evidence to show that he had not imagined the entire episode were the injuries that he and Orderic had sustained, and the blood on his blade, which the oppressive heat had already dried to flaking rust.

"There must be a way to end this cycle," said Calard, wiping his blade clean. "Some way to put the beast to rest once and for all."

Orderic merely shrugged.

What if there was no way to end the cycle? Was this to be his fate, then, to be stuck here in this nightmarish plane, fighting the beast every time it rose? He thought of the horror and slaughter that would result if the beast passed through the blood-pool, unleashing its fury upon the Old World. Could he in all sincerity turn away, and do nothing?

No, he realised. He could not. If this was what the Lady willed of him, then he would take up Orderic's vigil. Perhaps it was penance for the tainted blood he suspected ran in his veins. Or perhaps it was as Orderic had suggested—punishment for taking up the quest for selfish reasons.

"Faith in yourself," Calard muttered. He sighed and shook his head, his shoulders slumping.

You will be with us soon, whispered a voice.

Perhaps this was where he belonged.

Time had no meaning in this hell, and Calard could no longer gauge how long he and Chlod had been trapped there. The peasant had become completely non-communicative, merely rocking back and forth and muttering to himself.

At first, Orderic spoke with Calard about all manner of things, mundane and otherwise. Orderic talked of his homeland, Montforte, and of the things that he missed; the mountain air, the springtime, the endless blue sky.

“And bluebells,” he said with a shadow of a smile on his face. “I miss bluebells.”

Nevertheless, Orderic had slowly become quieter until he had slipped into a protracted silence, staring into nothingness. His eyes had become vacant and dead, and Calard had given up trying to speak with him. Was that what he would be like, given time? Was he to merely wait here until another came to take up his vigil?

He tried to sleep, but whenever he closed his eyes he saw the skinless daemons surrounding him. Waiting.

Calard took to patrolling the area but there was nothing to see from horizon to horizon, save the blood-pool and the cairn. While he walked, his mind whirled with jumbled thoughts. Was Orderic right? Was he questing for the wrong, selfish reasons? Had he blinded himself with falsehoods, trying to be what he was not?

A thought occurred to him. If Orderic killed the beast each time it arose, then why had he faced it in the Grey Mountains? He wanted to question Orderic, but the knight was completely unresponsive.

The fires of Chaos rolled across the heavens, and the red earth was scorching hot beneath his boots. Sometimes he thought he saw winged black things circling overhead, and at others voices whispered in his ears, telling him things he did not want to hear.

You are already dead, they hissed. You just don't know it.

Calard probed the blood-pool, trying to find a way back to reality, but it was no use. He was becoming resigned to the idea of staying here in this hateful realm of Chaos, though the thought of doing so filled him with horror. Yet if it were the Lady's will, what right had he to argue?

It was while testing the depths of the blood-pool that he found the body.

Sweating and breathing hard, his lungs burning, Calard heaved it onto the bank.

“What are you doing?” asked Orderic, his voice full of horror, making Calard jerk in shock; he had not heard the knight's approach. Orderic was staring down at him, panic written on his face.

“I found...” started Calard, but his voice trailed off as he stared down at the skeletal remains that he had dredged up from the bottom of the pool.

It was the skeleton of a human, wearing antiquated plate armour. The armour looked familiar...

“Lady wept,” said Calard, looking between Orderic and the corpse. “You're dead.”

Orderic was shaking his head in denial, his face a mask of confusion and fear.

“No, no, no,” he was saying, backing away, his expression gaunt.

“The wyvern defeated you,” said Calard, kneeling over the skeleton. He touched the thick hole in its breastplate, a hole larger than his fist. “Its sting punched through your chest. It must have killed you almost instantly.”

Orderic touched his own chest, where now there was a gaping hole, and his hand came away bloody.

“It is this place,” said Calard. “It’s brought you back, just like it does the wyvern.”

“I am not dead!” shouted Orderic, clutching his head in his hands and sinking to his haunches.

Calard stood, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, Orderic,” he said. “Your quest is over. You died. Let yourself go.”

“No, no, you’re speaking lies! Daemon! Sorcerer!” said Orderic.

“I’m sorry,” said Calard, edging towards the blood-pool, away from the pitiful sight of the tortured knight.

He knew why the Lady had brought him here.

Calard did not know how much time had passed before the thunder began, and the blood clouds raced once more across the burning heavens. Orderic had disappeared. Calard hoped that the knight had finally moved on, his soul passing to Morr, but he knew that was not the case. The knight would never attain that while his body dwelt in this realm of Chaos.

Calard truly felt sorry for him, but had faith that he was doing the right thing. This was the reason the Lady had brought him here. It was not a test of arms as he had first thought. He had not been brought here to kill the wyvern, or at least not directly. No, he had been brought here to give Orderic his rest eternal.

He had removed the armour from the dead knight’s skeleton and bundled the bones up into a satchel, which he now slung over his back as the blood rain began to fall. Half carrying Chlod, he moved towards the bubbling pool.

The wyvern was in the process of reforming itself, glistening muscles building up over its skeleton, but this time Calard did not draw his sword. He merely waited as veins and sinew grew from blood, and grey-green skin encased its flesh. Fully reborn, it slipped into the bubbling pool.

“What are you doing?” yelled Orderic, reappearing suddenly, his sword drawn. “It will pass through! It must be stopped!”

“No,” said Calard, moving to intercept the knight, drawing his own blade. “It is the only way to get back to Bretonnia; the only way that you can attain peace.”

“You would draw your blade against me?” said Orderic. “You truly are a daemon!”

“No,” said Calard, sheathing his sword. “I will not fight you. If you wish to cut me down, do it, but I will not stand aside.”

For a moment, Calard thought the shade was going to do it, to run him through then and there, but Orderic relented, dropping to his knees.

“I’m sorry,” said Calard, “but this is the only way. May you soon find peace, Orderic of Montforte.”

He turned away, and moved quickly towards the blood-pool, dragging the whimpering peasant Chlod along with him. He reached its edge just as the wyvern disappeared beneath the bubbling surface, its spined tail flicking, and he shoved Chlod roughly into it. The peasant was babbling something indecipherable, and Calard was not sure if he had any real understanding of what was going on.

“Dive!” he shouted. “Dive, you stupid peasant!”

“You would abandon me here?” called Orderic, his voice filled with longing and despair, but Calard ignored the plaintive cry. “Don’t leave me here alone!”

“I’m sorry,” he said under his breath as he waded out into the blood-pool. Praying that this was going to work, he sucked in a deep breath and dived. He had no idea if Chlod was following.

He swam down and down. It was pitch-black, but he was swimming through water now rather than blood.

At last he came up, breaching the surface of the water and he breathed in deeply. The air was freezing, but he smiled broadly, overjoyed to be away from the burning hot otherworld. He was within the beast’s cavern lair, and he thanked the Lady. Still, the wyvern was loose, and more people would likely die if he did not hurry.

Chlod came up after him, half-drowned, spluttering and coughing, and Calard hauled him to the shallows.

“Come, peasant!” said Calard, hurrying towards the cave entrance.

He stepped out into the bright daylight, blinking against the glare. There was not a hint of cloud in the bright sky, and Calard smiled up at it, never more thankful to see it. The flaming heavens of that corrupted realm of Chaos had been driving him slowly insane.

The snows had all but gone, only patches of it remaining in the shadowed lee of pine trees and rocks. He shook his head, wondering how long they had been trapped in that hellish realm.

With Chlod in tow, Calard scrambled further up the mountain until he came to a glade within the pine trees. The view was spectacular, overlooking the mountains and down towards the lowlands of Bretonnia, towards Montforte. Bluebells spread out across the grass beneath the trees. It was a place that Orderic would have liked, he decided.

Calard dug a shallow grave and placed Orderic’s bones reverently within. Chlod offered to help, but Calard refused. This was something he had to do alone. He filled the grave with soil, and then spent the better part of the afternoon gathering and heaping stones on top of it in order that wolves and other scavengers did not dig it up.

Atop the burial mound, Calard erected a small tri-frame of pine branches. Around the top of it, he wound Orderic’s necklace, so that the little bronze statuette of the Lady hung above his resting place. It wasn’t much, but it seemed appropriate.

“Be at peace, Orderic of Montforte,” said Calard as he knelt before the grave.

The next day, weary and footsore, Calard and Chlod passed a pair of hunters, fresh kills draped across their shoulders. From those simple men, Calard heard a strange tale. They said that a wyvern had been seen abroad the day before, flying above the

mountain peaks, but that it had turned to dust mid-flight, to be dispersed on the breeze.

“What does it mean, master?” said Chlod after they had bid farewell to the hunters. His eyes were still haunted from the sights he had seen in the Chaos otherworld.

“It means that my task here is done,” said Calard. “In life the wyvern defeated Orderic, yet he refused to accept death or failure. He became locked in an eternal loop, seeking always to defeat it; sometimes he would win, sometimes he would lose. Granted final rest, perhaps it too was allowed to move on, once and for all.”

Chlod’s brow furrowed, and he picked his nose.

“Do wyverns go to Morr’s hall too, master?” he said.

“It is like speaking with an orc,” said Calard, shaking his head. The peasant grinned and dribbled.

“Where do we go now, master?” Chlod said after a few minutes.

“For now, homeward,” Calard said. “After that? Wherever the Lady leads us.”

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