

WARHAMMER

THE
ISLAND OF BLOOD

A Novel



DARIUS HINKS

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Darius Hinks

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

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

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

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

As the time of battle draws ever nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

CHAPTER ONE

“It lives,” gasped Ratchitt, backing nervously away from the machine.

One by one the warpstone lanterns flickered and died, until all that remained was the infernal glow of the device, growing more powerful with every wheeze of its ratskin bellows. “It lives,” repeated the trembling skaven, grabbing the nearest slave and shaking him violently by the shoulders. The creature flopped lifelessly back and forth in his grip and gave no reply. Ratchitt dropped him to the ground with a snarl of disgust and peered into the flickering shadows. The machine’s light flashed in the goggles of his long leather mask, creating the illusion of two perfectly circular green eyes. The soot that covered the lenses was so thick that he had to flip them back to properly view the chaotic scene. Smouldering corpses lay everywhere: slumped across the workbenches, crumpled against the furnace and spreadeagled across the oily ground. “Useless,” he snarled. “My greatest triumph and no one’s alive-left to see it.”

A grinding clatter came from the base of the machine’s tall, brass cabinet and emerald sparks began to spit across the floor.

“*No!*” cried Ratchitt, rushing back towards his creation. He stroked the glass sphere that crowned the cabinet, ignoring the fierce heat radiating through the glass and muttering a string of soothing incantations. Once the clanging noise had dropped to a low rumble, he stepped back to admire his handiwork. “Now they’ll respect Ratchitt,” he chuckled. “Now things will be *different*.”

He rattled a large key in the cabinet door and silenced the machine, extinguishing its green light. Almost immediately, the lanterns that lined the chamber walls leapt back into life, swelling with renewed brilliance as the glow from the sphere faded away. Ratchitt secreted the key deep inside his filthy robes and sighed with satisfaction. Then, treading heedlessly over the charred remains of his assistants, he strode from his lair.

Once outside, Ratchitt lifted his leather mask and sniffed the dank air, relishing the myriad smells that flooded his twitching nostrils. Skavenblight rushed by in a torrent of fur and teeth, blind to his genius; blind to the emergent god in its midst. He studied the verminous horde with disdain. Every size and shape of ratkin was scampering past, pouring through the city’s maze of tunnels and clambering along its narrow, twisting streets. All around him the shadows were alive with movement; wheels rattled, forges hissed and pulleys groaned, with the endless, frantic industry of skavenkind.

He sniffed again. “Good-good,” he muttered, baring his fangs in a broad smile. “I smell change.”

He pulled his cowl low over his face and slipped into the chittering masses.

Qretch Toothsnapper slammed into the wall and dropped to the floor with a whimper. He wiped fresh blood from his muzzle and climbed back to his feet, tilting his head subserviently as he rose. “But, your glorious magnificence,” he whined, gesturing to the tattered banners and brutal weapons that decorated the walls of the cave, “what hope could such a wretched traitor have against the mighty Warlord Verminkin?”

“Idiot!” screamed the massive figure looming over him. “Half the clan are nesting with that worm.”

“Only the worst half,” snivelled Toothsnapper, pawing at his master’s powerful frame. “We’re better off without them!”

Toothsnapper’s fawning supplications were silenced by a brutal kick. He rolled across the throne room and came face to face with one of the warlord’s other advisers, Scratch Bloodfang. Bloodfang’s reassurances had met with even less success. His whole head was badly bruised. It was also lying several feet away from the rest of his body. Toothsnapper decided to keep silent for a moment.

“I taught that whelp everything!” howled Warlord Skreet Verminkin, stomping around the chamber and pounding his paw against the breastplate of his thick, brass armour. “*Everything!*” He rose up to his full height and roared at the ceiling. “I’ll wear his guts as a necklace!” He began to swing a meat cleaver around his head, hacking and lunging at the filthy banners that decorated the walls, surrounding himself in a cloud of dust and cloth.

Toothsnapper eased himself carefully back into an alcove, relieved to be forgotten for the moment. Then he paused. On the far side of the chamber, a hooded figure was watching the warlord’s furious display. The newcomer’s face was hidden in shadow, but his red eyes were clearly visible, glittering with excitement as they followed Skreet’s spasmodic rampage. Only the warlord’s closest advisers were admitted to this inner sanctum and they were all accounted for—their shattered bones and glistening innards had already been used to decorate the room.

“Master,” he gasped, pointing at the shadowy figure.

Skreet rounded on Toothsnapper with a spray of drool. “Where are *you* going?” he screamed, striding towards the alcove with his cleaver raised above his head. “To grovel your way into that traitor’s stronghold?”

Toothsnapper let out a terrified screech as the warlord loomed over him. “No! Look,” he cried, pointing desperately at the stranger.

Skreet’s bulky frame was twitching with rage as he turned to look in the direction of Toothsnapper’s trembling claw.

His eyes flashed when he saw the hooded shape.

“Spinetail?” he roared.

“No. A friend,” replied the stranger in a thin, nasal drone.

The figure that stepped out from the shadows made a strange sight. His armour was laden with a bizarre array of pistons and obscure mechanical devices and even his matted fur was threaded with engine parts and bundles of copper piping. As he moved closer, the glow of the warp-stone lanterns flashed along the side of a short metal tube he was clutching tightly in his paws.

“An engineer?” snarled the warlord, baring his long teeth as he strode back into the centre of the throne room. “What do Clan Skryre want here?” He waved to the

rows of corpses that cluttered the shadows. “Tell them Clan Klaw isn’t defeated yet. I still have—”

“I said I was a friend,” interrupted the stranger. “I’m Warlock Engineer Ratchitt. I’m here to offer my help.”

The warlord’s eyes rolled back in their sockets and he let out a strangled bellow of rage. “Help? Do you think I can’t deal with a miserable turncoat like Spinetail?” He dashed across the chamber at Ratchitt, raising his cleaver above his head. “Help this!” he cried, swinging the weapon at the engineer’s face.

There was a brief flash of light and the warlord cried out, dropping his weapon to the floor with a clatter. He clutched his empty paw and backed away in confusion as a muffled humming sound filled the room.

The engineer was unharmed, but now there was something even more odd about him. The lines of his face were blurred and vague, as though the shadows had reached out to protect him. For a moment, the warlord seemed to be facing a ghost. Then, with a click of a dial on his arm, Ratchitt silenced the humming sound and snapped back into focus. His small eyes glittered with fear. “Warlord Verminkin, please understand me,” he said quickly. “I’m here to help.” He tapped the metal tube in his paw. “I have something you need.”

The warlord eyed the clockwork dial suspiciously, unsure what had just happened. Then he took a slow, juddering breath in an attempt to calm himself. He scraped his cleaver from the floor and scowled at Ratchitt, but the rage in his eyes was now mixed with something else. “What *is* that?” he hissed, nodding towards the tube.

Ratchitt sighed with relief and gave a low bow. “I’ve heard of Warlord Verminkin’s power, but now I see that he is also wise-wise beyond—”

“Stop fawning, whelp,” snarled Skreet, brandishing his cleaver. “Just tell me what it is. I have a clan to rebuild and a traitor to skin.”

“Yes,” replied Ratchitt. “That’s why I’m here. You need to crush the traitor quick-quick. You need to kill Spinetail before the rest of Clan Klaw joins him.”

Skreet’s fur bristled. “How do you know so much about Clan Klaw?”

“The streets of Skavenblight are clogged with your dead, lordship. Word of the battle has spread fast-far. I know all about Spinetail’s treachery.”

“Don’t mention that filth-runt,” roared Skreet. He headbutted a nearby stalactite and the column exploded, sending rocks clattering across the floor of the throne room. “I’ll wear his face as a hat.”

“Yes-yes, of course you will, but what if you had a great-powerful weapon to aid you?” Ratchitt edged closer to the warlord and lowered his droning voice into a conspiratorial whisper. “Why play fair? He has half your clan with him now.”

Skreet was grinding a chunk of the stalactite between his powerful jaws, grinning to himself as he imagined eating the head of his former minion. “What?” he said. “Did you say a weapon?” He spat the fragments of rock to the floor and stooped until his face was level with the engineer’s. “What kind of weapon?” He looked suspiciously at the dial on Ratchitt’s arm. “Clan Skryre warp-magic?”

Ratchitt stifled a grin. “No, lord. An ancient magical amulet. So priceless and powerful, the elf-things have kept it hidden away for centuries on a secret island. They call it the Phoenix Stone.”

The warlord’s advisor, Toothsnapper, loomed out of the shadows. He was still wiping blood from his snout as he cowered next to his master. “So what’s that?” he asked, pointing a splintered claw at the small tube.

Skreet glared at his underling, then turned back to the engineer. “Yes-yes—what’s that?”

Ratchitt began to unclasp the tube. “Have you ever heard of the Island of Blood?” he asked, sliding out a piece of bleached ratskin.

Skreet snorted. “The Island of Blood?” He narrowed his eyes. “Is this what you’ve come to waste my time with? That old whelp-tale? You warp-addled runt. No one knows what’s on that island, because no one’s ever returned from it.”

Ratchitt nodded eagerly and gave another low bow. “His lordship’s words are wise-wise. It’s true that the island is blight-cursed.” The engineer’s tail twitched with excitement. “But,” he unrolled the ratskin to reveal a bloodstained map, “for those with the correct knowledge, it contains great power. Power enough to rival-match even the Lords of Decay.”

Skreet and Toothsnapper stooped over the engineer’s map, peering at the crudely scribbled lines. Toothsnapper strained to see round the bulk of his master and frowned. “What use is a map? I’ve heard the legends. Massive, red daemons guard the Island of Blood.” He looked nervously around the gloomy cave, as though he expected to see one of them watching him from the shadows. “They see everything with elf-thing sorcery. And they burn anything that gets too close. We wouldn’t live long enough to dry our fur, never mind follow your directions.”

Ratchitt dragged one of his long, curved talons along the ratskin. “These are the daemons,” he whined, pointing out a series of circles dotted around the coastline. “The elf-things call them the Ulthane. They’re not living creatures. They’re statues that have stood there since the great wars at the start of time. Their power comes from the far side of the ocean—from old stones that, guard the elf-things’ homeland. It’s true that they’re full of red fire though. They kill anyone who isn’t meant to be on the island.”

“So, anyone like us, then?” said Toothsnapper, shaking his head in confusion.

Ratchitt’s narrow chest swelled with pride. “No,” he said, stuffing the map back in its tube, “not you. Not Clan Klaw. I guarantee it. After all these ages I, Ratchitt, have found a way to defeat the Ulthane. I’ve built a device even more powerful than elf-thing magic: the Warp-Diffusion and Discontinuity Escapement Chamber.”

“The wha—?” began Skreet, before shaking his head. “Can it kill the red daemons?”

“Not exactly, but it will send them to sleep. Opening up the whole island to anyone with a map.”

The warlord took a deep breath and scratched at his scarred snout. “And this elf-jewel—this Phoenix Stone—it’s a powerful weapon, you say?”

“Powerful enough that the elf-things have kept it hidden all this time. Unnatural fogs surround the entire island. What could be worth such great magic, other than a weapon?”

Skreet looked closely at the engineer. “Why would you lead *me* to this stone?”

Ratchitt raised his paws innocently. “I just want to help you rebuild—”

Skreet lifted the engineer off the floor and pressed the bloody cleaver up into his throat. “Don’t treat me like a fool, Ratchitt.”

Ratchitt squirmed and giggled in the warlord’s grip. “Well, of course, my work is expensive. If the wise-kind Verminkin could share some of the wealth generated by the stone...”

Skreet nodded, but before loosing the engineer he pressed the blade a little harder. “And what’s to stop me slitting your throat the second we reach the island?”

The engineer licked his teeth nervously and tried to pull his head back from the blade. “Warlord Verminkin would do well to keep me alive. I can supply Clan Klaw with the most incredible weapons.” He shrugged. “And I know where to find the elf-thing amulet.”

Skreet frowned and looked at the map lying at their feet. “I thought you said—”

“The map only shows the locations of the Ulthane. I need it to work my device, but it doesn’t show the stone.”

Skreet’s muzzle trembled and his lips curled back from his long, vicious fangs. When he spoke, his voice was little more than a growl. “Then how will we find it?”

Ratchitt finally dared to smile. He tapped a claw against his forehead. “It’s all in here, Warlord Verminkin. I spent hours with the elf-thing who was carrying the map. He didn’t want to talk, but my inventions have many uses. It was hard to understand his final screams.” His smile grew. “But I managed.”

Skreet gave a grudging nod of respect, but kept the blade in place. “If this turns out to be some kind of trick, Ratchitt, I’ll sew your face to your belly and tickle your brains with a pickaxe.”

Ratchitt hurried eagerly towards his new master’s chamber, accompanied by a chorus of moans and gnashing teeth. Hundreds of clanrats clogged the surrounding tunnels: tending to some of the injured and feasting on the rest. The birth of Clan Klaw had been unplanned and messy. It had splintered from an even larger clan—Clan Mors—in a frenzy of bloodlust and backstabbing. The traitorous chieftain, Spinetail, had been one of Skreet’s closest advisers and his betrayal had come just as the clan was becoming a powerful new force in Skavenblight. The stakes were high. Whoever managed to wrestle control of this nascent, sprawling horde would become one of the Under-Empire’s most powerful warlords, rivalling even the might of the four great clans.

Sentries nodded briefly at Ratchitt as he scampered into the Hall of the Great Wheel. An impressive force was mustered beneath the arches of the ancient, domed cave. The engineer shook his head in wonder as he saw several thousand figures milling around in the shadows. Every kind of skaven was gathered there: from scrabbling, wretched slaves, to muscular, armour-clad stormvermin; even the lumbering, mindless behemoths known as rat ogres. As he approached the crowd Ratchitt winced at the awful screaming sound that filled the cave. A colossal wooden wheel was turning slowly at the centre of the hall, shedding screws, planks and screaming slaves as it ground inexorably on its axis, heaving at countless pulleys and dragging tiny scraps of warpstone from the mines below. The thing was so big that it

scraped the distant ceiling of the cave, sending dust and rocks tumbling down onto the army massing beneath it. All around the wheel, engineers were hammering together great war machines. As they worked they babbled and chattered—singing vile liturgies as they infused the weapons with the power of the warpstone. Ratchitt stood to watch for a few minutes, chuckling as he considered what a powerful force he had allied himself to. Then he ducked down a side passage and headed for the command chamber.

He blinked as he entered the warren's innermost cave. The walls were lurching and swaying with light. A fast-flowing underground stream poured down through the ceiling and the water was pulsating with a whole rainbow of virulent colours; lurid greens and pinks that flickered in the current and flashed across the armour of the assembled skaven. At the head of the creatures was a figure even more twisted and hunched than the others. His flesh seemed to warp and undulate in time with the water and the same evil light flashed in his eyes. His tail was unnaturally long and bristled with a forest of vicious barbs.

"Well?" asked Spinetail, as Ratchitt bowed low before him. "Did the old fool bite?"

"Of course. As your lordship predicted. He has no inkling of my true allegiance."

Spinetail clapped his paws together in excitement and began pacing around the glittering chamber. As he neared the gurgling water, the lights revealed the full extent of his deformity. Almost all of his fur had fallen away to reveal a patchwork of scabs and bleeding, open sores. Most of his diseased skin was hidden under battered plate armour, but his hairless snout was clearly visible, wrinkled and twitching beneath his serrated helmet. One whole side of his face was layered with angry, red scars and the eye he turned on the grovelling warlock engineer was twisted into a permanent squint. "You're sure-sure?" he gurgled, with a voice like a blocked drain. He grinned at the soldiers nearest to him. "Skreet may be stupid, but he'll be on the lookout for some kind of trick."

"I'm sure," replied Ratchitt, raising his voice to be heard over the rushing water. "He thinks he's the only one that knows about the map, and my device. I told him that your rebellion was doom-cursed. I begged him for a place by his side."

Spinetail let out a low, bubbling moan of delight. "Good-good! Good-good! He'll drop dead of shock when he finds me waiting on the island for him."

"No!" yelled Ratchitt. Then he lowered his voice to a more respectful level and held out his paws in supplication. "No. Your glorious eminence must wait. I've instructed the warlord to meet me at the coast at midnight but your lordship must not arrive until an hour later—it's crucial to the success of the plan. There are dozens of ancient tunnels that lead from the mainland, under the sea and out to the island. They've been blocked for centuries, to keep us safe from the elf-things' magic, but with my machine in place, we're safe to open them up and invade! The tunnels are huge-big." He waved back to the Hall of the Great Wheel. "Even Klaw's new war machines will fit through. I'll direct Verminkin through the tunnels first—and then by the time you're ready to follow, he'll already be halfway across the island."

Spinetail scurried across the chamber and peered anxiously into the engineer's face. "But is that wise-safe?" he hissed. "What if he reaches the stone first? What if he gets his paws on the weapon before I do?"

The engineer shook his head. “Remember, master: the statues aren’t the only guardians of the island.”

Spinetail’s face broke into a sallow, pockmarked grin. “The elf-things.”

“Yes-yes. They keep a small force there, just in case the Ulthane were ever to fail. Why should you face them in battle?”

Spinetail chuckled and snaked his deformed tail around Ratchitt’s neck. “When we could let the old brute stumble into them first.”

Ratchitt nodded eagerly. “Yes-yes. He won’t be expecting them, but he’ll have so many ratkin with him, they’ll probably wipe out most of the garrison before they die. They may even kill all of the elf-things before we arrive.”

Spinetail groaned with pleasure, throwing his head back with such enthusiasm that several of his boils burst. “And then we arrive to butcher the survivors and claim the stone!”

“His lordship is wise-wise,” said Ratchitt, with another fawning bow. “Your plan is perfect. Why risk your new army, if Warlord Verminkin can do the fighting for you?”

“Exactly,” replied Spinetail, tightening his grip around Ratchitt’s throat. “My plan will work, Ratchitt, but are you sure your machine will?” He ran a paw over the thick crust that covered his scalp. “Is the device definitely stable? If we were trapped on the island...”

Ratchitt puffed out his chest and flared his nostrils with pride. “My Lord Spinetail has nothing to fear—it’s *perfectly* safe.”

Spinetail gave a sly nod and placed a paw on the sword in his belt. “Then you will be too, Ratchitt.”

As Ratchitt rushed back down towards the lower warrens, he congratulated himself on his genius. With the two halves of Clan Klaw busy butchering themselves, it would be all too easy for him to slip past the defeated elf-things and grab the Phoenix Stone. By the time they realised the treachery, he would have deactivated the machine and left them in the hands of the monstrous Ulthane. He giggled as he ran. What could possibly go wrong?

Upon entering his laboratory, he realised immediately that something was not right. The lamps had been turned off, plunging the cave into darkness, and his nose informed him quite clearly that he had visitors. Even the smell of his assistants’ charred flesh could not disguise the thick musk of strangers, lurking somewhere in the shadows.

He felt a cold chill of fear as he thought of Skreet Verminkin. Had the old warlord sent his guards to steal the machine? Or maybe Spinetail’s diseased mind had finally led him to the truth? Had he taken the device? The thought so terrified him that he let out a little squeak of fear. He dashed to the wall and pulled a lever. There was a crackling sound as warpstone lanterns flooded the laboratory with pale green light. The glow washed over dozens of jars and crucibles and mounds of discarded scientific equipment and, to Ratchitt’s delight, the machine. His relief was shortlived, however. Two crook-backed figures were standing right next to it, watching him with calm disdain. Skulls and warpstone fetishes dangled from their tattered robes and thick, gnarled horns curled up from their crudely stitched hoods.

Their fur was a strange grey colour and each of them carried a twisted staff, topped with a fist-sized chunk of warpstone.

Ratchitt dropped to his knees with a whimper.

The grey seers watched the engineer's squirming in silence for a few moments, giving no response to his fawning pleas for mercy. Then one of them stepped forwards. His lower canines were grotesquely enlarged and curled up around the sides of his snout like a boar's. As a result, when he spoke it was in a slurred whisper. "Does it work, Ratchitt?"

Ratchitt's pride overcame his fear and he rose to his knees, looking imploringly up at the priests. "Yes-yes," he cried, trembling with excitement. "Nothing like it has ever existed before." He climbed to his feet and tapped a claw against the large pressure gauge in the centre of the brass cabinet. "It can suppress even the most powerful magic." He rummaged in his robes and drew out the key, holding it up proudly to the grey seers. "If you want me to, I—"

"When were you going to tell us?" hissed the second grey seer, with a dangerous tremble in his voice.

Ratchitt flinched at his venomous tone. He lowered the key and began to edge back towards the entrance.

"Have you forgotten who your true masters are, engineer?" came a voice from behind him.

Ratchitt whirled around and squealed as he saw a third figure, blocking his exit. He threw himself to the floor, covering his head with his paws and whimpering pitifully. "It wasn't finished," he cried. "I had to be sure it was safe!" He looked up and waved at the blackened remains that covered the floor. "I couldn't risk this happening to you. I couldn't harm emissaries of the Horned Rat. I had to finish the tests."

The first priest stepped forwards and ground his staff down between Ratchitt's shoulder blades, flattening him against the floor. "But you were happy to share your news with others."

Ratchitt froze. "What does his magnificence mean?"

The stone at the head of the grey seer's staff flashed with an inner fire and a thin spiral of smoke snaked up from Ratchitt's back. He gasped with pain and tried to crawl away, but the grey seer pressed the staff down even harder. Small green flames began to flicker around the shaft and the smell of cooking meat filled the cave.

"I was going to tell you," screamed Ratchitt. "I needed to prepare a report that I could bring to the Shattered Tower. I knew you wouldn't want to bother the Lords of Decay until my plans were sure of success."

"Plans?" barked the grey seer. He lifted the staff from Ratchitt's back and hammered it into his face, sending the engineer rolling across the floor of the cave. "What business have *you* making plans?" He strode after the whimpering engineer and cracked the head of the staff across his snout. "We employed you to use your fingers, not that rotten walnut you call a brain."

Ratchitt's thin, whining voice rose to a piercing shriek. "But my lords, it was just a final test. I wouldn't dream of troubling you with these technical details. I thought I could do one last experiment, and at the same time rid you of a clan that I know has been troubling you." Ratchitt rose slowly to his feet, being careful to make no sudden

movements. He held his paws up in a placatory gesture. Blood was rushing from his muzzle, but the excitement was back in his scarlet eyes. "I was going to present you with wonderful gifts, my lords: the destruction of Clan Klaw, an incredible new machine and an elf-thing artefact of unimaginable power."

"And why should we wish the destruction of Skreet Verminkin?" asked the figure by the door.

Ratchitt gave him a sly look. "Because Clan Klaw has grown far too powerful for your liking. But my plan will ensure they destroy themselves on the elf-thing island, without any suspicion falling on the Cult of the Horned Rat."

The three grey seers looked at each other in silence for a few seconds and Ratchitt had the unnerving sense that they were exchanging more than just meaningful glances.

The priest with the deformed fangs grabbed Ratchitt by the throat and slammed him against the crudely soldered metal of the machine. "Talk," he said, pressing a knife against Ratchitt's trembling belly. "Quick-quick."

CHAPTER TWO

“They’re judging me,” gasped Kortharion, giving up on sleep and climbing wearily from his bed. He stood naked at a tall window, letting the torpid breeze crawl over him; but there was no relief for his sweat-drenched flesh. Whatever the season, whatever the hour, the temperature was always the same: the temperature of his own blood. In the silence of his room, he could feel his pulse throbbing quickly, drumming tirelessly in his ears and clouding his thoughts. His chamber was perched way up at the top of the temple, but even from here it was hard to see much of the island. The unnatural fog gave everything such a shifting, ghostlike quality that as he peered out into the darkness the landscape seemed as twisted as his dreams. Gnarled, serpentine limbs of rock covered the whole island and vile, pallid flora crawled from beneath every twisted stone. He shook his head. For nearly fifteen years he had girded his thoughts against the corruption that surrounded him, but finally an end was in sight. In just a few months another would be sent to replace him and he could return home to nurse his wounded soul. So why did he not feel any relief?

The temple sat at the end of a small peninsula that jutted out from the south coast of the island. Its architects were long forgotten, but deep within its crypts lay the prize that they were tasked with protecting—the Phoenix Stone. Kortharion had never seen the amulet himself, but he knew its worth. He felt its presence constantly at the back of his thoughts. He knew it was the only thing that stood between them and all the screaming horrors of Chaos. The burden weighed heavily on the whole garrison. Kortharion knew he was not the only one with haunted dreams.

The mage sighed as he looked across the narrow bridge of rock that linked them to the rest of the island. “What do you want from me?” he murmured, looking at the distant red beacons that circled the coast. They were as insubstantial as everything else, staining the fog with their sanguine light, but he felt their eyes burning into him. “I’ve served my duty. Why do you stare at me like that? What more can I do?”

He pulled on his ceremonial robes and stepped softly out into a narrow, gloomy hallway. Even the most beautiful Sapherian drapes could not hide the grotesque nature of the elves’ adopted home. Despite all their efforts, the temple wilfully asserted its unnatural origins. As Kortharion rushed towards the stairs, he had to dodge several limbs of jagged stone that jutted from the walls and tread carefully across the rippling, uneven floor.

He nodded at the mail-clad guards as he made his way out into the cloying heat and left the temple grounds. As he stepped onto the slender isthmus that joined the temple to the rest of the island, Kortharion paused. The booming of waves, crashing against the rocks far below, finally drowned out the thudding of his heart and enabled him to think. As a fine mist of sea spray needled his face, Kortharion realised what he must do. He wiped the saltwater from his eyes and looked down the coast towards the

distant beacons. "I must commune with them," he muttered. "I must know what I've done wrong before I leave. I won't endure this any longer." He hurried back across the peninsula and made his way to the stables.

Silvermane grew skittish as he approached, rattling her delicate halter and clattering her hooves on the cobbled floor. Her excitement quickly spread amongst the other horses and Kortharion placed a hand on the mare's trembling neck to calm her down. He allowed her to nuzzle against him for a few seconds then signalled for one of the grooms to saddle her up.

"Kortharion?" came a voice from outside.

The mage turned to see a willowy figure, wearing a coat of gleaming mail and a tall helmet of filigreed silver. Moonlight washed over the old warrior's face as he approached, revealing the concern in his almond-shaped eyes.

Kortharion smiled softly as he mounted the horse. "Just once I'd like to hear your approach, Kalaer. Couldn't you at least pretend to be as clumsy as the rest of us?"

The warrior did not return the smile, but placed a hand on Silvermane's flank and looked up at his friend. "What drags you from your chambers at this unholy hour? It's nearly midnight. Is it the dreams again?"

Kortharion held his smile for a little longer, but failed to hide the slight tremor at the edges of his mouth. "I could say the same to you, Kalaer. Do you ever sleep?"

Kalaer tapped the hilt of his sword. "I felt restless, so I thought I would run through some exercises. I was still not tired though, so I decided to take a stroll around the walls and make sure the guards were all still awake."

Kortharion studied the beautiful, two-handed weapon. The red light of the beacons traced down along the blade, like trails of blood. He shivered and looked away. "Yes. *It is* the dreams again. I thought a ride might clear my head."

Kalaer frowned and followed the mage's gaze to the distant lights. "A ride alone? Now? Is that wise? The island is treacherous enough by daylight. Let me accompany you, if you really must go."

Kortharion closed his eyes and ran a hand across his brow. "It's the Ulthane, Kalaer; they haunt me. I see their faces when I'm trying to sleep. Even during my waking hours I can feel their disapproval. They look at me as though I've failed them somehow."

Kalaer shook his head. "Failed them? How could you? They're here to serve us, not the other way around. Remember what the Loremasters said: they're our only allies on this hellish island. Why should they disapprove of you?" Kalaer moved his hand onto the horse's reins. "You worry too much. Don't leave in this frame of mind. Stay. Try to sleep."

Kortharion shook his head and gently removed Kalaer's hand. "I won't go far," he said with an unconvincing smile. "I just feel the need to be near one of the guardians." He laughed at his own ridiculousness. "I've no idea why, but I feel it is somehow important that I go now."

"Then let me come with you," insisted the swordmaster, gesturing for the groom to saddle up his own horse. "I could do with some exercise."

"No, Kalaer, I beg you. I feel foolish enough without dragging you away from your duty."

“Some of the guards then?”

The mage shook his head angrily. “That would be even more absurd. I won’t have the temple left half-defended just to help me sleep.”

Kalaer shrugged and mounted his horse. “Just you and me then,” he said, riding out towards the narrow bridge of rock.

The mage sighed with frustration. Then he shook his head, smiling to himself as he rode after the stiff-backed swordmaster.

CHAPTER THREE

“By the Horned Rat,” cried Ratchitt, “hold on to the wretched thing!”

He was standing several feet away from the device, but even at that distance the heat was immense. Incandescent cords of power were lashing across the clifftop, sparking and crackling from the brass cabinet and making jerking, screaming candles of Ratchitt’s terrified slaves. Dozens of them were already dead; their pitiful, twitching corpses were huddled around the flashing device like an excited audience, fixed in place by the energy rippling through their blackened bodies. A few were still alive though, and as Ratchitt screamed at them from the safety of a rocky outcrop, they made another desperate attempt to screw the contraption back together. There was a *crump* of folding metal and the machine jerked backwards, causing the glass sphere to roll in its cage of brass rings and flash even brighter than before. The slaves were briefly silhouetted by the emerald glare, before collapsing into piles of ash and cinder.

Ratchitt screamed with dismay. “Traitors!” he cried, leaping up from the outcrop and pulling at his fur in panic.

“The warlord will be here any minute!” He looked anxiously out across the crashing waves to the island. It was almost a mile from the mainland, and as ever, it was obscured by a thick haze of unnatural fog; but there was no disguising the angry, red glow of its guardians. They glared defiantly back at him across the tumultuous sea, seeming to revel in his failure. Ratchitt looked from the red sentinels to the sparking machine and then back out at the island again. Fury finally overcame his fear. He pulled his leather mask a little tighter and snapped down the eyepieces. Then he dropped from the outcrop and scampered over the scorched grass, dodging the blasts of power that danced across the ground. As he neared the cabinet, he reached for a bundle of copper tubes strapped to his back and snapped down a small lever. A green light rippled from the pipes and spread across his fur, until his body was as luminous as the machine.

As he reached the cabinet there was a grinding, wrenching sound of colliding energy fields. The blaze became so intense that Ratchitt’s leather mask began to smoke and droop down around his neck. He knew he had seconds at most before the warpfire tore him apart, but there were so many loose screws and ruptured pipes that he didn’t know where to start. He let out a screech of frustration and punched one of the few panels that was still intact. The grinding sound stopped immediately and the light dimmed to a steady glow. Ratchitt yelped in shock, then collapsed to the ground, giggling hysterically. “Fixed-fixed,” he cried, looking up at the stars wheeling overhead. Then he closed his eyes for a minute to savour the quiet, stable hum of the device’s whirring gears.

“Ratchitt?” called a voice from out of the darkness.

The engineer leapt to his feet and saw hundreds of bulky shapes scuttling across the moonlit fields. They were black-furred stormvermin, with thick plate armour and long halberds. At their head was an even larger skaven. His brutish, scarred muzzle shone out in the darkness, underlit by the baleful glow of a warp talisman dangling beneath his jaw. The sight of Warlord Verminkin filled Ratchitt with panic and he turned quickly back to the machine. "Almost ready!" he called back, pressing down with all his weight on a rusted cogwheel. There was a scream of grinding metal and a rattle of slowly turning gears. Then the humming of the machine's generator suddenly stopped.

Ratchitt stiffened with panic as the light in the glass sphere vanished.

"Ratchitt?" snapped the warlord, now just a few feet away.

The engineer turned to Verminkin with an explanation on his lips, but before he could speak, the machine let out a piercing, deafening whine and lit up the night sky with a brittle blossom of lightning bolts. The skaven were all thrown clear by the force of the blast and tumbled across the grass with a chorus of screams and curses.

Skreet Verminkin rose to his knees and cursed, shielding his eyes from the sudden glare. Squinting through his claws, he watched lightning arc out over the crashing waves and head straight towards the mist-shrouded shape of the distant island. The lightning moved with unnatural precision: twelve slender needles of light, knifing through the bloody haze and heading straight for the crimson beacons.

Ratchitt climbed to his feet, dazed from his fall, and weaved his way unsteadily to the warlord's side. He pawed desperately at Verminkin's armour. "My lord! Don't be concerned! I just need to make a few more tweak-tweaks, then everything will be fine. I *know* I can make it work!"

The warlord did not seem to register the engineer's words as he shoved Ratchitt to one side, scampered to the edge of the cliff and looked out over the sea at the island.

He grunted in surprise.

Ratchitt frowned and dashed to his side, wondering why Verminkin had let him live. As he reached the clifftop he had his answer: the island had vanished from the horizon. It had been plunged into darkness.

The red beacons were no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kortharion grimaced with distaste as he saw small, white flashes of movement up ahead. The elves had never found any descendants of the island's original settlers—the deranged beings who built its bizarre, scalene temples and altars—but the place was far from uninhabited. The ground was soaked with the memory of dark sorcery and over the centuries, strange mutations had transformed the island's flora and fauna. No mammals could survive for long in such a tormented environment, so other creatures had scuttled from beneath the blasted rocks to fill the void: anaemic, chitinous things that gleamed and rattled like bones as they scattered from the approaching horses. The elves watched the shadows carefully for signs of danger. Lack of natural predators had allowed some of the ghostly insects to grow to grotesque proportions. Several unwary elves had found themselves on the wrong side of their milky, translucent carapaces.

“The path is already becoming overgrown again,” said Kalaer, hacking at the strange undergrowth with his greatsword. “It was only cleared two days ago. Such vile fecundity. It seems to be getting worse.”

Kortharion nodded, raising his blazing staff a little higher to illuminate the jagged rocks and twisted thorns. The garrison maintained a path around the coastline of the island; a narrow passage that encircled the madness of the island's rotten heart. It was never an easy ride, but now it was nearly impassable. “Something is wrong,” he replied. “Something is stirring.”

As Kalaer struggled to steer his horse over the difficult terrain, he snatched a quick glance at the mage. “What do you see, old friend?”

Kortharion shook his head in disgust. “Chaos. I feel its presence more than ever before. Chaos in everything: in the rocks, in the plants, in the air. It clouds everything until I can't be sure what's real and what's not. In my dreams I see the largest of the Ulthane—the one that faces out towards the mainland. He looks down at me, filled with despair and pity. I feel that if I could just see him, maybe I would have an answer of some kind.”

Kalaer flicked his boot to dislodge a pallid worm that was trying to twist around his calf. It was over a foot long and he realised with disgust that it had already sunk countless spines into his flesh. He peeled it away with the tip of his sword and shook his head at the trail of slime it left behind.

After a slow tortuous journey, they finally reached their goal. As they reached the top of a small incline, Kortharion paused and pointed his staff at the ruptured horizon. “There it is,” he muttered.

Kalaer reined his horse in beside Silvermane and peered at the distant, red statue. “I'm not sure what you expect to find out here, Kortharion.”

“Neither am I,” replied the mage. He turned to Kalaer with doubt in his eyes, but before he could say any more, the horizon lit up in a fantastic display of green lightning and the heavy silence was sliced open by a long, screeching cry.

“What in the name of Aenarion was that?” cried Kortharion, trying to control his panicked mount.

“Look!” cried Kalaer, pointing to their destination. The light of the distant beacon flared suddenly and then died, plunging that part of the island into a darkness even more profound than before. “And there!” Kalaer pointed out the other red lights that circled the island. One by one they all vanished. “The Ulthane. What’s happening to them?”

The mage shook his head as he watched the lights vanishing. “What a fool I’ve been. I should have learnt by now not to ignore my own dreams. Why did I wait so long?” He clicked his horse into a gallop, continuing in the direction of the now invisible sentinel. “We’ve no time to lose,” he said, as Kalaer rode after him. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. It would take sorcery of the most incredible power to blind the Ulthane. And that was like no lightning I’ve ever seen before.”

The two elves drove their horses as fast as they dared over the uneven rocks and dismounted at the foot of the ancient sentinel. The marble statue towered over the surrounding rocks and trees, surveying the forest with huge mournful eyes and resting its hands on the hilt of a greatsword that was a thirty-foot replica of Kalaer’s.

“By the Gods! Its fire has been put out,” breathed Kortharion as he looked up at it.

Each of the Ulthane wore a stone circlet around their lofty, regal brows, with a huge red stone mounted in it. As long as the elves had inhabited the island, the stones had burned with inner fire: a powerful warning to those few trespassers who reached the coast. To see one of the ancient crowns grown dark and lifeless chilled the elves profoundly.

Kortharion dropped from Silvermane’s back and leapt up the steps of the statue’s vast, crumbling pedestal. He placed his hands on the Ulthane’s legs and closed his eyes. After a few moments, the mage turned back to Kalaer, his face twisted with anguish. “Nothing,” he muttered. “All trace of life has been extinguished. This is just a piece of rock.”

Kalaer dropped from his own horse and looked around warily, levelling his long sword at the shadows. “Could there be some simple explanation?” he replied, peering up at the statue’s face. “What kind of power could stifle such ancient magic? Perhaps if we wait a moment, the light will return?”

Kortharion gripped his friend’s shoulder and spoke with dawning horror in his voice. “The power of the Ulthane stems directly from Ulthuan. What if this is a sign of some greater catastrophe? What if the vortex itself is under attack?”

The swordmaster raised his eyebrows. “Calm yourself, Kortharion. Remember who you are, student of the White Tower. We are the heirs of Aenarion. What threat could possibly challenge the majesty of the Asur? We must simply return to the temple and send a signal.” He climbed calmly back down from the statue. “Come. We must sound the alarm.”

As he reached the bottom step, he froze. There was a new source of light in the forest. Dozens of red lights were glimmering beneath its twisted boughs, a tide of glinting eyes, rushing towards them with horrible urgency.

“Khitons?” asked Kortharion, stepping closer to the swordmaster.

Kalaer shook his head. “I’ve never seen the insects move like that, not with such a sense of purpose.” He fastened his helmet a little tighter and nodded to his friend’s delicately carved staff.

Kortharion closed his eyes and muttered a brief incantation. For a few seconds, he allowed the winds of magic to pour through him and into his staff. Dazzling white light poured from the stone embedded in its head and flooded the clearing that surrounded the statue.

The mage gasped.

Hundreds of mangy, hump-backed creatures were caught in the glare, shielding their eyes from the sudden blaze as they cowered beneath the trees. They were almost as tall as men, but with wiry, fur-clad bodies and long, drooling snouts. Every one of the creatures carried some kind of cruel blade and many of them wore thick plates of battered, serrated armour.

“By the Everqueen,” hissed Kortharion, lifting his staff higher to reveal even more of the monsters. “Skaven.”

At the sight of the two tall, dazzling figures, the rat-things paused, hovering nervously at the edge of the clearing and looking back over their shoulders with a chorus of screeching, snarling sounds. An acrid stink of sweat, excrement and rotting meat poured out of them.

Kalaer sneered imperiously and assumed a fighting stance, shifting position with the languid ease of a dancer. “There’s nothing here to concern us,” he said. “These wretched vermin will flee at the first sign of danger.” He swung his sword in a complicated series of arcs and levelled the long blade at the skaven. “Let them come.”

Kortharion nodded in reply, trying to assume the same scornful expression, but as he looked up at the blank-eyed stare of the Ulthane he felt a profound unease.

There was a deep, bellowing cry from further back beneath the trees and the creatures rushed forwards. They moved with incredible speed, scampering out into the clearing with a series of frenetic leaps and bursts.

As they reached the foot of the pedestal, they paused again, snarling and spitting at the elves and brandishing their crude weapons. The calm poise of their prey seemed to unnerve them. A large shape emerged from the forest, howling with rage. The leader of the skaven was a couple of feet taller than the others and its bulky, hunched frame was knotted with scarred muscle. It jabbed at its troops with a vicious-looking halberd and snarled insults through gritted fangs, ordering them forwards.

The creatures were even more afraid of their leader than the elves and they leapt to attack.

As the first of the monsters darted up onto the broad steps, Kalaer stepped silently amongst them, swinging his greatsword as lightly as a dagger in a blinding series of thrusts and slashes. The skaven screamed in panic as he created a spray of blood and severed limbs. With their leader still snarling and cursing behind them, however, they

had no option but to press forwards, clambering desperately over their fallen kin and leaping up at the grim-faced swordmaster.

As the frenzied creatures surrounded him, Kalaer's calm demeanour became even more pronounced. His body was almost motionless as the huge sword twirled around him, spinning with dazzling, effortless speed. The sculpted plates of his armour were quickly stained red as dozens of the skaven disintegrated in a blur of steel.

Kortharion, meanwhile, had backed slowly up towards the statue's feet, still holding his staff aloft and muttering incantations under his breath. As he reached the top step of the statue's pedestal, he let out a musical cry and slammed his staff down against the ancient stone, opening his mind even further to the winds of magic. At his command, a circular wall of white flames leapt up around the statue, lighting up the clearing and engulfing dozens of the skaven.

The rat-things screamed in panic and some turned to flee, but the warlord hacked them to the ground with his meat cleaver and bellowed again, summoning another figure to its side. This skaven was wearing a hideous leather mask that stretched over its narrow snout. Its armour was cluttered with dozens of clockwork contraptions and vials of green liquid, and as it entered the clearing the strange-looking creature raised a long pistol and took aim.

Kortharion gave a nod of satisfaction as he saw his wall of fire devouring the hideous vermin. Kalaer's lethal artistry was making short shrift of the trapped skaven and their nerve was already breaking. He saw that his old friend had been right; a few more minutes and the whole sorry lot of them would be fleeing for the cover of the forest. He raised his staff and prepared to slam it down for a second time, raising his voice to a fierce crescendo as torrents of energy pulsed through the sculpted ivory.

A shot rang out across the clearing and the masked skaven tumbled backwards—cursing as its pistol disintegrated in a cloud of smoke and broken metal.

Up on the pedestal, the mage cried out in pain and toppled backwards. He collapsed against one of the statue's feet and saw a dark stain spreading quickly across his chest. The agony that gripped him was so intense that for a few seconds he failed to register what the mark was. Then he pulled at his robes and revealed a thick, ragged tear below his shoulder. The image seemed so surreal that he almost laughed.

"Kortharion," cried Kalaer, looking back at the mage with horror on his face.

As the mage slumped even lower against the statue, a sickening nausea washed over him and his staff was suddenly too heavy to hold. As it clattered away down the steps, the light of its stone pulsed once and then vanished.

There was a raucous cheer as the wall of fire disappeared and the skaven pressed forwards.

The swordmaster's unrelenting strikes continued, even as he saw Kortharion collapse, spilling fresh blood down the steps towards him. But with the falling of the mage, the skaven's fear evaporated and they clambered towards Kalaer with renewed determination. More of the creatures were pouring from the trees all the time and Kalaer let out an indignant roar as he realised that there were too many for him to hold back alone. Slowly, reluctantly, he began to retreat towards his groaning friend.

As Kortharion's life rushed out of him, his head clunked back against the stone and he found himself looking up at the face of the Ulthane. It was a scene he recognised immediately—the noble, haunted features of the statue, gazing down at

him with a look of profound sorrow. “It’s my dream,” he gurgled, as his throat filled with blood. “*This* is my failure.” He suddenly saw the full scale of his mistake. Without its mage or swordmaster, the elven garrison would be greatly weakened. With the Ulthane disarmed, and no magic to aid them, half of the island’s defences would be gone. By bringing Kalaer out into the forest, he had risked everything. This was the failure he had dreamt of. The premonition had pointed to this very moment. An awful grief knifed through him and he cried out in anguish, reaching towards the unheeding Ulthane with a desperate plea.

Kalaer appeared at his side. He was still swinging his sword with incredible speed and precision, but his face was ashen. The gleeful skaven pressed around him in their dozens and however many he sliced apart, crowds more rushed to replace them. “We must warn the others,” he gasped, casting an anxious glance at the blood pouring from Kortharion’s chest.

The mage shook his head, and managed to raise himself up on one elbow. “*You* must warn the others,” he answered, nodding to the horses tethered on the far side of the clearing.

Kalaer’s eyes widened in horror at his friend’s words and he shook his head fiercely, lashing out at the creatures with even more vigour.

The mage’s face was a ghastly white as he pulled himself into a sitting position, but there was a glint of determination in his eyes. “You must leave now. You cannot sacrifice yourself so needlessly. Think of the others—they must be warned that we’re under attack.” He began to stumble over his words as the pain worsened. “The-they will need your leadership to def... to defend the temple.”

The swordmaster shook his head again as he hacked and lunged.

“Think of what is at stake!” cried the mage with sudden vehemence. “The temple must... it must not fall to these monsters.”

The swordmaster stumbled backwards as the weight of bodies pressed against him. He was now standing right over the prone mage, defending him with a bewildering display of swordsmanship. But as the circle of skaven crowded around him, the sheer volume of blades and teeth began to tell; gashes and dents appeared on his armour and his footing became less sure as the enemy finally began to land blows on his slender body.

“Flee now, or you could risk everything,” gasped Kortharion. Then he began to mutter another incantation.

The mage’s words were thick and slurred by blood, but Kalaer recognised their intent. As the spell began to take shape, he felt powerful tides of magic eddy and swirl around the pedestal, rattling through the scales of his armour and rippling through his flaxen hair. He risked a brief glance at his fallen comrade and saw that light was pouring from his eyes. Even the mage’s skin was gleaming with power. “No!” he cried. “I will not let you do this. You must—”

“Now!” cried Kortharion, lurching to his feet and raising his hands above his head.

With a howl of frustration, the swordmaster leapt backwards. He flipped over the steps with a movement too fast for the eye to follow and disappeared from view.

He made his move with only seconds to spare.

As the skaven stumbled into the void left by the swordmaster, Kortharion uttered the final word of his spell and a deafening explosion rocked the clearing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caladris stumbled and fell with a cry of pain. As he dropped to his knees, the cobalt silk of his robes settled over him like a shroud.

Storms had gripped the Great Ocean for months now and the deck of the *Flame of Asuryan* was a grey haze of rain and sea spray, but the fall of the young mage did not go unnoticed. Several figures jumped lightly from the rigging and rushed to help him to his feet, handing him his staff, pulling back his robes and peering with concern into his ashen face.

“Take me to the prince,” gasped Caladris, leaning heavily on their shoulders as he stood. “Something terrible has happened.”

The sea guard flinched at the pain written across Caladris’ face. The elven fleet had set sail from Ulthuan over a year ago and the bookish youth had been the butt of their jokes ever since; but seeing him like this—wide-eyed with despair and clinging weakly to their arms—even the most hardened of them felt pity. As they led the mage across the lurching deck, they raised shields over his head, trying to protect him a little from the fury of the storm as they led him into the prince’s cabin.

“But why have I never heard of this stone?” demanded Prince Althran Stormrider. There was a sharp edge to the noble’s voice as he stumbled back and forth, trying to restore some order to his lurching cabin. In opening the door to the mage he had briefly allowed the storm to dance through the charts and maps that covered his desk, scattering them to the four corners of the small room. As Caladris slumped weakly in a chair by the door, the prince gathered his papers together and stuffed them into a tall, ivory cabinet, sighing with annoyance as he saw how drenched they were. Even with the door closed, the fury of the storm was inescapable and as he returned to his desk, the prince had to grip the low-beamed ceiling to steady himself. “If there is such a priceless, powerful amulet on one of these islands, how can *I* be unaware of it?”

Caladris could not immediately reply. He was starting to tremble with shock and simply nodded gratefully as the prince offered him a goblet of wine.

The expression on Prince Stormrider’s face softened a little as he saw how unnerved his young charge was. “Be calm. Don’t hurry yourself,” he said sitting down opposite Caladris and pouring himself a drink.

Caladris drained his goblet and opened his eyes. “I was told that even within the White Tower itself there are very few who know of the stone’s existence. I assure you, it is no reflection on you, my lord. Since the time of Bel-Korhadris, only the most learned loremasters have been privy to the legend of the Ulthane and the Phoenix Stone.”

The prince let out a snort of disdain. “My ancestors were patrolling these waters before Bel-Korhadris was even born. If the Island of Blood is home to such a treasure, my father would certainly have known of it.” He drummed his delicate, bejewelled fingers on the arm of his chair and gazed out of the cabin’s single, small window. “There was much left unsaid between us at the time of his death, but if he hadn’t been taken so suddenly, I’m sure he would have confided in me.”

Caladris lifted his chin defiantly. “I wouldn’t know about that, lord. I only know that the stone is a closely-guarded secret. And it has always been so, because...” he paused, and leant forwards with a grim look on his face. “Because if anyone other than the Asur were to learn of the Phoenix Stone, the consequences could be terrible.”

The prince sat back in his chair and smoothed down his beautifully embroidered surcoat, obviously unconvinced. “Really? Are you sure it is of such importance? What kind of power does this amulet wield? Is it truly such a great weapon?”

“Oh, no,” replied Caladris, shaking his head fiercely. “It’s powerless by itself. It has no military application at all.” He frowned and looked down at the floorboards, unsure how continue. “You remember I mentioned the Ulthane?”

The prince nodded. “The statues?”

“Yes... Well, no... They’re not simply statues, or even beacons. Or at least they weren’t always.” Caladris frowned at the golden crescent at the end of his staff, obviously frustrated by the need to explain in such detail.

The prince scowled. “You’re not the only one here with any learning, Caladris. All the knowledge in Ulthuan does not reside within the White Tower. I hope you are not doubting my ability to understand. If you really expect me to change our heading you’ll need to give me a *very* good reason. Tell me, what were these Ulthane before they became statues?”

“Great heroes,” said the mage, meeting the prince’s eyes. “As the legend tells it, they were amongst the very first of our knights, trained by the Defender himself, as the world teetered on the brink of ruin. As our forefathers created the magical vortex that holds back the daemonic legions, the Ulthane were battling on the far side of the world. And as Caledor completed his final rituals on Ulthuan, the Ulthane discovered a rift: a fatal flaw in his great spell.”

Prince Stormrider finally dropped his air of disbelief and leant forwards, gripping the arms of his chair. “But they must have closed the portal, or we wouldn’t be here now.”

Caladris nodded and his eyes flashed with pride. “I have devoured countless texts on the subject. The legends say that they gave their lives, but in doing so, managed to stem the ruinous torrent from flooding the island. Despite their terrible wounds, the twelve of them poured all their faith and love for Aenarion into a simple trinket—a small, obsidian amulet snapped from a chain around one of their necks. And as they drew their final breaths, they sealed the rift with it. Only then did they allow themselves to die, and only once they had sworn to protect the amulet for all eternity—even from beyond the grave.”

“Can this be true?” muttered the prince. He looked out of the window at the mountainous emerald waves. “And the statues?” he asked, turning back to the mage with a frown.

“They’re tombs, built in the likeness of the fallen heroes; but over time, those sent to guard the amulet came to believe that the spirits of the knights had returned, imbuing the statues with life. At first the claims were dismissed by the loremasters, but as the centuries passed, the Ulthane began to shine with crimson power, illuminating the coast of the island with their fierce gaze.” The mage’s eyes grew wide with passion. “At times of crisis, they would awake, striding into the sea and destroying the ships of our enemies with great swords of marble.” He shook his head. “Theirs is not the only magic at play, however. Over the millennia, traces of the rift have altered the island. Those sent to guard the place fulfil their duty with pride; but they return home utterly changed. The island gnaws at the souls of its guardians, eating away at their sanity like a disease.”

The prince rose to his feet and began pacing around his cabin. “And now you say that these Ulthane have been destroyed? After all their centuries of watchfulness?”

The mage clutched his head in his hands. “I can’t be sure,” he gasped. “I only know what I saw; my former master, Kortharion, crying out for help.” He shivered with horror at the memory of the vision. “I saw him screaming in utter despair. And towering over him, I saw one of the Ulthane, its power extinguished.”

The prince let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry to hear that this Kortharion is suffering in some way, but I can’t believe the island’s guardians would suddenly abandon their oaths, after all these centuries. And, as you told me yourself, some of Hoeth’s finest swordmasters are there to safeguard the amulet’s security. Are you sure we need to change course?”

The mage leapt to his feet and grabbed the prince by his shoulders. “I beg you, my lord. If only you had seen the despair in Kortharion’s eyes, then you would understand. The island is in the most dire need!” He tapped his chest. “Only I could have heard my master’s call and here we are, just a few miles away. How can such a thing be mere coincidence? This is our destiny—I’m sure of it!”

The prince gently shrugged off the mage’s grip and stepped away from him. He sighed and picked up another map from the floor by his desk. “From anyone else, I would dismiss this as idle fancy.” He lifted the map closer and peered at a tiny island marked on the thick vellum. “But you have a habit of being right, my young friend. Maybe we can spare a day or so, just to put your mind at rest.” He traced around the island with his finger. “Maybe my family name will be linked to the history of this mysterious stone after all.”

As the two elves left the cabin, the storm swelled with renewed fury, crashing over the gunnels and howling around the masts. “We have a new bearing,” cried the prince, looking stern and regal as the crew stumbled towards him across the heaving deck. “Summon the eagles. Alert the rest of the fleet.” He shielded his eyes from the spray and looked out through the spiralling thunderheads. “Make for the Island of Blood.”

CHAPTER SIX

“What is this place?” hissed Chieftain Spinetail, as he emerged from the tunnel, peering suspiciously through the tattered rags of a palanquin. The route from the mainland had been as easy as Ratchitt had promised, but as Spinetail’s slaves carried him out onto the island he sniffed the strange, humid air with distrust. The trees that surrounded the tunnel’s exit were like nothing Spinetail had ever seen. Their thin, segmented branches reached down towards him, spider-like from the fog, and each arachnid limb was draped with pale sheets of grey skin that seemed to pass for leaves. “Are these the guardians?” he snapped to his guards, eyeing the strangely animated plants.

“No, your eminence,” replied one of the armour-clad soldiers. He waved his halberd at a towering, shadowy figure on the far side of the wood. “That must be one of them though. The engineer said they were statues. His machine has killed them all.”

“Yes-yes,” said Spinetail with a nervous grin. He picked excitedly at his scabs and looked back across the water towards the mainland and the distant device. As the banks of fog shifted and writhed in the moonlight, he caught glimpses of its brass cabinet, still perched on the cliff top. Its glass sphere was pulsing with inner fire. “He’s drained the life from the statues. Now I’ll do the same to him.”

The guard looked back at his master with concern. “But don’t we need him to find our way around the island, lord?”

Spinetail waved his jagged sword at the strange landscape. “Idiot! Can you see the fawning maggot anywhere? He promised to be waiting here to guide us, but I can’t see him, can you?” The chieftain laughed bitterly at the soldier’s confused expression. “Of course not! He’s betrayed us already, you dolt. I never doubted it for a second. Or perhaps he’s dead-dead. Warlord Verminkin has either discovered the engineer’s double dealing and slit his throat, or struck a deal with him to betray me.” He spat on the floor and muttered under his breath. “Always, everyone is against Spinetail!”

The soldier clutched his halberd more tightly and looked around at the vague shadows. “So, we’ve been led here as a trap?”

Spinetail hissed. “Of course.” He lashed out with his sword, sending the skaven nearest to him scrambling for cover. “He’s lied to me! But what does Spinetail care?” He spat again, dredging something thick and pungent up from his diseased chest. “No matter. Neither Skreet nor his treacherous engineer have any idea of the deals I’ve struck.” He waved to the hordes of skaven pouring from the tunnel behind him. “They have no idea of the size of my new army. I can’t wait to see their faces if they try and spring an ambush.”

“But what about the engineer’s map?”

“A map? Why do we need a map?” He waved at the thick trail of skaven paw prints leading south from the tunnel, “I don’t think we’ll have too many problems finding our way around.” He peered at the statue, wrinkling his flaky snout into a grimace. “Let’s just check Ratchitt’s machine has definitely worked though. Maybe he lied about that too.”

The guards edged cautiously towards the trees. As they stepped beneath the quivering, spindly boughs, a breeze seemed to strike up from nowhere, rippling through the broad, pale leaves and dislodging a couple of them.

The skaven hurried towards the glade that surrounded the statue, but before they reached the far side of the trees one of them let out a scream. The others turned back to see that a voluminous leaf had settled over his face, the translucent membrane wrapping itself around him like swaddling. However he pulled and tugged at it, it wouldn’t come loose.

“It’s just a leaf, you pathetic runt,” snapped Spinetail, but as he watched the struggling soldier, he shrank further back into his palanquin and muttered nervously under his breath.

Beneath the grey membrane, the skaven’s flesh began to slide and melt. His screams became more desperate as steam hissed from beneath the folds of the leaf. He dropped to his knees, still pawing at the filmy skin in a frantic attempt to free himself. As the other guards backed away, his entire body collapsed in on itself with a sickening *plop*. Within just a few seconds he had melted into a viscous pool of fur and quickly dissolving bones.

As one, the guards scampered back towards the tunnel, leaping over the steaming puddle and dodging the leaves that were now falling in their dozens all around them.

Spinetail was still grimacing as the guards rushed towards him, looking anxiously over their heads at the strange trees. He turned to the skaven rushing from the tunnel behind him. “Keep to the open ground,” he screamed, pointing his sword to the south. “Head for those hills. The plants are...” he stumbled over his words and shook his misshapen head, unsure how to explain what he had just witnessed. “Just keep to the open ground.”

Spinetail drove his army before him in a frenzy of excitement and fear. “We must find the stone before Warlord Verminkin gets there,” he spat, lashing out at the slaves toiling beneath his palanquin. “They’re all against me! And we’re a day behind already!”

The skaven crawled and scampered as fast as they could over the jagged rocks, but the stone was a mass of razor-sharp edges and hidden drops. After an hour’s march, they were littered with cuts and weals. But it was not the rocks that caused them to mutter and hiss: it was the broad canopy of stars arching over their heads. To travel in such open spaces made their fur itch with fear. They longed to crawl beneath the rocks, or to make for the cover of the trees; but Spinetail’s screamed commands made them scurry all the faster, rushing over the rocks in a flood of claws and fur.

After another hour of this, the skaven reached the shores of a small lake. As with everything else they had passed, it followed none of the usual laws of nature. The sand that bordered it undulated sinuously, as though serpentine beasts were stirring

beneath, and the water itself was as black as ink. Nothing stirred on the surface, but pale, ethereal shapes could be seen, slipping back and forth in the depths.

“Keep me away from the edge,” growled the chieftain, winding his tail tightly around the posts of the palanquin and grimacing at the dark expanse.

His words were unnecessary. By this point, the hills were close enough to become a solid, if unnerving, reality, and the skaven had picked up their pace as they clambered and clawed their way up the treacherous slopes.

Spinetail hunkered down in the seat of his palanquin and scratched anxiously at his knotted brow. As the twisted, writhing hills rose up around them, his doubt grew. The further south they headed, the stranger the place became. There was a powerful scent of magic on the air; ancient, vengeful magic, which bled through the rocks and seeped from the undulating trees. The chieftain pulled his helmet down a little lower over his face and turned away from the shattered hills.

He flinched in shock.

On the other side of the path, just a few yards away, stood one of the ancient sentinels, looking down at him in impassive, watchful silence. Spinetail sneered and spat. “They’re all against me,” he muttered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Morvane took a long, slow breath, following the route of the oxygen as it rushed through his body, coursing through his folded limbs and filling him with carefully controlled vigour. He felt countless other things just as clearly. The cool, marble floor beneath him; a gentle sea breeze filtering through diaphanous drapes; the distant call of gulls, gliding over the Sea of Dreams, and, from every corner of the globe, currents of magic, trailing up towards his lofty seat. Above all, though, he sensed his master's presence. He felt their two minds orbiting each other like celestial bodies and knew he was finally beginning the long journey to understanding. Despite the powerful magic enveloping them both, an intense feeling of calm filled the tiny room, perched way up at the top of the tower, almost half a mile above the shady bowers below.

Things had been this way forever, or only seconds; it was meaningless to determine which. Morvane's soul had become so closely linked to that of his master's that even the slightest change in his perception was apparent to him. So, when his master suddenly opened his eyes and let out a howl of grief, Morvane felt it as painfully as a hard slap to the face. He gasped and dropped a pair of objects he had long forgotten he was holding. A large, gilt-edged book fell into his lap and a silver candlestick dropped to the floor with a *clang*, spattering hot, blue wax across the polished stone.

Morvane rolled back across the circular chamber until he was resting against the curved wall. He pressed a hand to his pounding chest and looked up at his master in alarm.

The mage had risen awkwardly to his feet and was peering out from the room's single, tall window. His frail body was trembling as he leant heavily on his staff.

"Master," thought Morvane, trying to calm his breathing. "What happened?"

The mage looked back at him with agony written across his gaunt face, but gave no reply. He smoothed down his blue and silver robes and stood as erect as his ruined body would allow. Then he closed his eyes and gripped his crescent-tipped staff firmly in both hands.

Despite the shock, Morvane's mind was still entwined with that of his master's and as the mage began to mouth words, a torrent of images flooded his mind. He saw foul, hump-backed ratmen, plotting deep below the earth; then he saw one of his own kind, a Sapherian mage, crying out with guilt as an ancient, pitiless statue looked on.

"My brother," said the mage, speaking aloud for the first time Morvane could ever remember. "They will not survive without your help." As Morvane looked on in wonder, the mage lifted his staff through the window and levelled it at the clear blue skies. White fire leapt from the crescent, jolting the mage's arm back with its power.

The noise of the flames drowned out his words, but Morvane felt them quite clearly in his head. “You must fly, brother,” said the mage. “Let me give you wings.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Flame of Asuryan cut cleanly through the waves, its graceful lines and fluttering pennants dwarfed by the brutal coastline ahead. Despite the gloom that lay over the island, traces of a distant dawn still glimmered on the ship's golden hull and flashed along its spars and beams. Rows of slender-helmed elves watched patiently from the deck as the ship's captain navigated the final stages of the treacherous approach. Most were indifferent to the gloomy landscape unfurling before them, looking instead at a tawny shape gliding overhead, leading the way towards the coast. It was a vast, winged monster, with huge outspread wings, powerful feline claws and the noble-looking head of a great eagle. Sitting proudly on its back, carrying a long, glittering lance, was their prince.

As the ship dropped anchor, the crew leapt confidently into the foaming waves. They were the legendary Sea Guard of Lothorn, inured to the hardships of life at sea by centuries of experience. They raised their bows and spears above their heads as they jogged towards the beach, and as their feet crunched onto the shale, they took in their surroundings with silent dispassion. Even for such hardened soldiers, however, the sight that greeted them was something of a surprise. The ugly, misshapen rocks that lay jumbled across the coast were unlike anything they had ever seen before. There was a pallid, fleshy quality to them that seemed somehow obscene. Thick veins of dark liquid pulsed beneath their surface and as the elves approached, some of them shifted forwards slightly, as though sensing the elves' presence.

"Keep away from the stones," called a voice from the waves.

The elves turned to see the young mage, Caladris, struggling through the crashing surf with his staff held above his head. Since collapsing on deck the day before, his face had remained knotted and pale with anguish, and he lacked the easy grace of his comrades as he fought through the choppy water. As they helped him up onto the beach, the mage nodded at the quivering stones. "This whole island is cursed," he snapped.

The elves seemed a little unwilling to take their orders from the young mage, but they backed away from the rocks nonetheless and formed a neat phalanx in the centre of the beach, eyeing their surroundings with cool disdain.

Caladris drained the seawater from his sodden robes and peered up through the thick fog. A broad, winged shadow was circling overhead and as he watched, it let out a long screeching caw. The elves all looked up as the griffon called for their attention. The figure on its back could barely be seen through the spray and fog and the prince's voice was snatched away by the breeze, but his signal was clear enough; as the griffon was buffeted back and forth beneath him, the noble pointed his lance south along the beach.

Caladris frowned up at the sky. “No,” he cried, cupping his hand around his mouth in an attempt to be heard over the wind. He pointed at the steep bluff that led up from the beach. “We must head inland.”

The captain of the sea guard, a stern-faced veteran named Althin, broke ranks and strode towards the shivering mage. “We must follow Prince Stormrider’s order,” he said, clearly shocked by the mage’s impertinence. His words were calm and unhurried but Caladris was under no illusions as to the captain’s opinion of him. The decision to bring such an inexperienced mage on the expedition had been the prince’s alone. The crew’s disapproval had been obvious even before he fainted on deck and dragged them completely off course.

“We must head inland,” repeated Caladris, straightening his back and giving the captain an imperious glare.

The captain raised his eyebrows. “Do you doubt the prince’s judgement?”

The mage narrowed his eyes. “Of course not. But he is not in possession of all the facts.”

There was an exasperated cry from above as the prince steered his mount down towards the beach, landing just a few feet away from the ranks of elves. The huge creature landed with surprising grace and the prince immediately leapt from its back, unfastening his tall winged helmet as he strode towards them. “What is the delay?” he snapped. “There’s no time to spare. We must find this Phoenix Stone.” He pointed down the beach and turned to Caladris. “The peninsula that holds the temple is just along the coast. We must announce ourselves to the garrison immediately.”

Caladris shook his head. “My lord, Kortharion is not at the temple—I saw him quite clearly in my vision. He was lying beneath one of the Ulthane and he looked tormented—I can only believe he was in mortal danger. We must find him quickly. Or I fear it will be too late.”

The prince’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You try my patience, Caladris. If this Phoenix Stone is so important, we must be sure that it’s safe.” He closed his eyes for a second to think. “Very well,” he said, pointing out a few of the soldiers. “I’ll take some of the guard with me and see if I can find your former master. We can travel light and fast. We should find him quick enough. You said that these Ulthane are scattered around the coast?”

Caladris nodded.

“Well then, it should be no great feat for me to fly ahead and check each of them. The guard can follow behind me on foot.” He gave a wry smile, “Just in case the natives prove too powerful for a prince of the Asur.”

Several of the sea guard began to laugh.

“The rest of you,” continued the prince, glaring at Caladris, “will make your way down the beach to the temple and wait there for the rest of the fleet to arrive.”

“Surely we should all travel together?” replied Caladris.

The prince shook his head with an air of finality, making it clear that the conversation was over. “No. You, the captain and the others will head for the temple and alert the garrison to my arrival. I will not abandon all sense of protocol. Anyway, their need may be even greater than Kortharion’s.” He put his tall helmet back on and strode back towards the griffon. “The eagles will have carried my orders to the rest of the fleet by now and the instructions were to head straight to the temple as soon as

they land. They should arrive soon.” He nodded at the young mage as he climbed up onto his mount. “I’ll meet you at the temple. Hopefully, I’ll have Kortharion with me and we can leave this wretched place.”

The prince leant back in his saddle and shook his head in awe. From his vantage point in the clouds, he could see the full extent of the island’s corruption. He saw glades of bloated, carnivorous trees devouring each other in an endless, brutal cycle of gluttony; he saw fleshy grubs the size of dogs; and worst of all, he saw the earth itself, rolling and swelling as though great beasts were preparing to rise from beneath the surface and devour the whole cursed mess. “By the Phoenix King,” he muttered. “No wonder my father never mentioned this place.”

Beneath him, the sea guard were making slower progress along the rugged terrain than he had hoped. They had found a coastal path to follow, but it seemed almost completely overgrown. He noted with pride though, how calmly they accepted the grotesque sights that assailed them, marching in neat, orderly ranks past the spectral shapes and leering rocks, and raising their spears to salute him in perfect unison. He nodded back and directed onwards with a wave of his lance, gesturing to a distant statue that he knew they could not yet see. It was the fourth such statue they had encountered and, so far, they had discovered nothing. The statues themselves were beautiful—a wonderful testament to the skill of their long dead sculptors—but otherwise unremarkable.

The prince’s earlier doubts over the island’s importance returned. Now that he had stood beneath one of the crumbling giants, he found it hard to believe they could have ever strode into the sea, smiting foes with their greatswords and blazing with crimson light. Could young Caladris have been misled, he wondered? Not for the first time, he questioned his decision to bring the youth. His knowledge of magical lore was unquestionable—and had previously saved the prince’s life—but the boy seemed barely in control of his own emotions. As the prince looked down over the strange landscape below, he wondered if the tales of the Ulthane were no more than legends. If that were so, then maybe the same could be said of the Phoenix Stone? He shook his head and steered the griffon down towards the next statue.

As the griffon landed, the prince dropped lightly from the saddle and peered through the gloom. He could see immediately that there was something different about this statue. Dark, smouldering shapes lay scattered over its plinth and its marble shins had been scorched by recent fire. He trod carefully, keeping his eyes on the surrounding trees as he crept closer. His nostrils flared with distaste at the smell of burnt fur and flesh. The scorched remains of ratmen were scattered across the whole clearing, piled in great heaps at the statue’s feet and tainting the beautiful stone with their dark, clotted blood.

The prince paused, looking back over his shoulder at the griffon waiting patiently at the edge of the clearing. He sensed disapproval in the gold-flecked irises of its huge, hooded eyes. The prince slowed his pace even more and quietly drew his sword. He prodded at a few of the corpses, shaking his head in disgust at their sinewy, hunched bodies and cruel, bloody snouts. Then, just as he was about to climb back down from the steps, he paused. Amongst the greasy, matted fur and broken,

burnished steel, he saw a flash of blue; a fragment of silk, just visible beneath the pile of twisted limbs.

Prince Stormrider frowned and looked around the clearing again. He peered into the trees for any sign of life, either his own guards, or something more sinister, but all seemed to be quiet, so he stepped cautiously towards the blue silk. As he approached, the prince groaned and dropped to his knees, clearing aside mounds of bloody flesh to reveal a charred, crumbling skeleton. "Gods, is this him?" he groaned as he saw the Sapherian needlework that adorned the blue and white robes. "Kortharion?" he hissed, placing a hand under the blackened head and lifting it from the stone. "What did you do?" The bones collapsed into ash at his touch and the prince shook his head. "Oh, Caladris," he said, remembering how fondly the young mage had spoken of his former master. "We're too late."

A branch snapped at the edge of the clearing and the prince levelled his sword at the trees. "Sharpclaw?" he called out, looking over at the griffon.

The creature's head was resting on its forelegs and it gazed back at him with a look of regal disdain.

There was another sound, this time from the other side of the clearing, and the prince whirled around. "Who's there?" he cried, placing a protective hand over the remains and crouching even lower.

"My lord," cried one of the sea guard as he emerged from the trees. "I think we've discovered something."

The prince sighed with relief and lowered his sword. "Aye, me too," he replied. "I'm afraid our young friend's vision was too late to be of use."

The soldier looked at the crumpled blue robes with obvious grief. "Kortharion?"

The prince nodded sadly. "I think he fell by his own hand," he said, stepping away from the scorched bones. He waved at the flakes of ash, drifting like snow over the clearing. "This explosion was not the work of any skaven." He shook his head. "I think Kortharion must have sacrificed himself."

As the rest of elves filed into the clearing they lowered their heads respectfully. Several of them climbed up onto the steps and placed their hands on the blue robes, muttering prayers as they considered the awful tragedy of losing a member of their ancient, dwindling race.

"What have you learnt?" asked the prince, turning to the elf who had first entered the clearing.

The elf raised his chin and replied in calm, even tones. "These bodies are just a fraction of the skaven army," he said, waving at the smoking remains on the steps. "We've found a trail of blood, weapons and pawprints." He looked at the prince. "There seems to be a great many of them. And they're heading south; straight towards the temple."

Something flashed in the prince's eyes and he gripped his sword a little tighter. "How recent are the tracks?"

"Less than an hour old, my lord."

The prince rose to his feet and looked over at his mount, still waiting patiently at the edge of the clearing. "This murder will not go unpunished," he said, jogging down the steps and pointing his sword south. "Follow me as fast as you can, if you

want to help avenge Kortharion.” He gave them a stern nod as he climbed up onto the back of the huge beast. “My judgement will be swift.”

CHAPTER NINE

Ratchitt took a small copper box from one of the many pouches that covered his armour. His paws were awkward and clumsy with fear, but finally he managed to pull back the clasp. He gave the box a firm tap and the front panel fell away, allowing a series of jointed tubes to rattle down towards the floor, making a long tube that ended in a large, bulbous lens. The warlock engineer crept a little closer to the edge of the precipice he was perched on, raised the tube to his eye and peered at the horizon. "There it is," he hissed. He was so excited by what he saw that he began to scamper about on the rock. His frenetic movements dislodged a few of the stones and he jumped backwards with a yelp of fear, slamming into the large figure waiting behind him.

"What?" snapped Warlord Verminkin, grabbing the engineer by the scruff of the neck and lifting him up before his snarling face. "There is *what*? Another flesh-melting forest? Or an impassable lake of acid? What else can this stinking island throw at us?" He crushed his snout against Ratchitt's and glared at him. "I'm beginning to have serious doubts about the whole expedition." He let go of Ratchitt, and the engineer slammed down onto the hillside with a clatter of metal and glass. Verminkin waved his meat cleaver at the columns of rock that surrounded them. Dozens of pale finger-like grubs had begun trailing from the crevasses and writhing towards them across the ground. "This place is alive!" he cried. "I can smell it! And it wants us dead!"

"Yes-yes!" gasped Ratchitt, leaping up from the floor and pawing at the warlord's armour. "You're right, as always, master. The island is even more cursed than I could have ever imagined." His eyes widened with excitement. "Which proves everything I thought." He waved his looking glass at the undulating rock. "What kind of magic could cause this amount of strangeness? Chaos magic! Warp-magic! The stone of the elf-things must be even more powerful than we thought!"

The warlord threw back his head and roared with frustration. Then he slammed the engineer against one of the columns, straight into a nest of squirming grubs.

Ratchitt screamed in terror as the pale digits fanned out over his face and gripped him firmly against the stone. "Ach!" he shrieked. "They're eating me!"

The warlord held him firm and let out a guttural laugh. "Well," he cried. "Why not?" He waved his cleaver at the horde that was struggling up the hill behind him. Every single one of the skaven was wrestling with some kind of bizarre assailant and all of them were injured in some way. Every inch of the island pulsed with malicious life and mindless hunger. "Everyone else is being eaten," snapped Verminkin. "Why should you go free?"

Ratchitt struggled desperately as the fingers slid beneath his armour and began spreading across his chest and neck.

“Tell me,” snarled the warlord, crouching next to the struggling engineer. “Why shouldn’t I turn back while I still can and leave you to rot on your precious island?”

“Look!” wailed Ratchitt, shoving his looking glass across the ground. “On the other side of the hill!”

The warlord looked at the copper tube with a doubtful grunt.

“Quick!” gasped Ratchitt as he felt the grubs bursting through his skin and easing themselves into his flesh.

Verminkin stamped on the tube. “I’ve had enough of your pointless gadgets,” he muttered, grinding it beneath his heel.

Ratchitt groaned in horror as the lens shattered beneath Verminkin’s clawed, leathery foot.

The warlord shook his head as he watched the engineer’s desperate attempts to free himself. “What was I thinking?” he muttered.

Ratchitt screamed again as he felt the moist digits writhing beneath his skin and burrowing inwards towards his pounding heart.

The warlord sniffed and looked up through the fog as a shadow passed overhead. “What now?” he growled.

Prince Stormrider’s griffon slammed down onto the hillside with such force that it triggered a small landslide.

Verminkin loosed his hold on Ratchitt to shield his face from the shower of rocks that flew down towards him.

Ratchitt gasped in pain and relief as he wrenched himself free from the worm-infested rock and collapsed to the ground. As the engineer rolled away from the column of rock he felt himself teetering on the edge of unconsciousness: blood was rushing from countless holes that covered his torso and his head lolled weakly on his shoulders as he scrambled away from the griffon.

The griffon let out a deafening screech as the prince steered it at the warlord.

Warlord Verminkin dived out of the way just in time, and the beast’s talons sliced into the ground. “Attack!” he howled, unhooking his halberd and pointing it at the rearing griffon. As he crawled to safety, he grabbed the warpstone talisman swinging round his neck and stuffed it safely behind his breastplate, muttering a quick prayer to the Horned Rat as he did so.

Crowds of skaven rushed forwards to protect Verminkin, but as the monster reared over them, they eyed each other nervously and paused. None of them were keen to be the first to strike against such a fearsome creature.

The choice was taken from them as the griffon pounced forwards again, screeching and snarling as it crashed down onto the confused mass of struggling figures. As the skaven raised a forest of spears and halberds, trying desperately to defend themselves from the griffon, they were too busy to stop the lithe, golden figure that leapt from the monster’s back and sprinted towards their warlord.

The prince drew back his sword as he ran and muttered a bitter oath of vengeance as he swung it at Verminkin’s head.

The warlord rose up to his full height and hissed with rage, blocking the elf’s sword with his halberd and shoving him back down the slope.

The prince rolled gracefully back onto his feet and lashed out again, leaping up at the warlord with an undulating war cry.

Ratchitt steadied himself against a rock and grinned. His legs felt as though they might buckle beneath him at any moment and his head was clouded with pain, but once again he saw that fate was with him. He felt the powerful gaze of the Horned Rat watching over him, willing him to succeed. “Quick-quick,” he muttered to himself and scrambled awkwardly down the slope. “Only Ratchitt’s toys can save us now,” he giggled as he rushed past the two duelling figures and headed back towards the main skaven force.

As he climbed down the slope he saw that the griffon was already surrounded by a pile of gored flesh and twitching limbs; but the skaven were crowding forwards in such huge numbers that they were gradually penning it in with their jagged weapons.

One of the larger skaven—a heavily-armoured brute in a crested helmet—climbed up on the back of his ratkin and raised a triumphant fist. “We have it surrounded,” he screeched, preparing to thrust his halberd at the thrashing animal. But before he could strike, an arrowhead burst through his cuirass. He clutched the arrow in shock for a few seconds, looking down in confusion at the blood that rushed from his chest; then he toppled forwards into the welcoming claws of the griffon.

The other skaven howled in dismay and confusion and the circle of halberds faltered as they turned to see who else was attacking them.

Such a brief hesitation was enough to seal their fate, as the griffon pounced forwards and tore into its attackers with armour-shredding ferocity.

Ratchitt scurried up onto a rock and looked down the slope. Further down the hill, a column of white and blue figures was slicing its way up through the vanguard of Verminkin’s army. “Elf-things,” Ratchitt hissed, dropping down behind the stone and hiding from view. As he hunkered against the rock, the engineer giggled again. “Yes-yes,” he muttered. “Only Ratchitt’s toys will save Verminkin now. Then he will have to listen.” Still chuckling to himself, the engineer dashed from behind the rock and scrambled down the slope, forgetting the pain of his injuries at the prospect of utilising one of his inventions.

With the warlord still locked in battle and the rest of the skaven either fending off the griffon or struggling with the approaching elves, no one paid much attention to Ratchitt as he rushed over to one of the carts he had persuaded Verminkin to bring. As he approached, he ordered his slaves to unfasten the canvas roof and unload the cart’s contents.

The slaves wheezed and grunted with exertion as they shoved a strange-looking machine down a small ramp onto the hillside. It looked like a squat mortar of some kind, but the barrel was covered with rune-engraved plates of metal and gleaming pistons.

Ratchitt flinched as a familiar roar echoed around the rocks. Despite being massively outnumbered, the elves had already cut deep into the skaven army and were now only a few minutes away from Warlord Verminkin. The warlord had seen their inexorable approach, but was powerless to escape the lightning-fast sword strikes of Prince Stormrider. His snout was glistening with blood as he struggled to defend himself and all he could do was howl in frustration as the elves advanced towards him.

“Quick-quick,” snapped Ratchitt, clouting his slaves around the head as they struggled with the cumbersome machine. “Where are they?”

One of the slaves leapt back onto the cart and dragged a large chest towards Ratchitt, bowing repeatedly as he flipped back the lid.

Ratchitt groaned with ecstasy as he saw the contents, dozens of glass balls, encased in riveted copper cages and filled with luminous green, virulent-looking liquid. “Ratchitt is far too clever-clever to be treated so badly,” he whispered, rubbing his paws together. “Load her up!”

The slaves rushed to obey, with an elaborate series of bows. They gingerly carried some of the glass balls over to the machine and lowered them carefully down into the barrel.

As soon as he saw that the balls were safely in place, Ratchitt elbowed the slaves out of the way and clambered onto the machine. He unclasped a wire hoop fixed above the muzzle and peered through it at the chaos below. Then he frowned and muttered a brief incantation under his breath, tapping a small brass cylinder on the side of the weapon as he did so. “To the left,” he snapped, summoning for the slaves to approach again. They rushed forwards and shoved the machine slightly. “Not so much!” cried Ratchitt, punching the nearest slave and sending the scrawny wretch tumbling down the slope. The other slaves quickly dragged the machine back a couple of inches and looked expectantly at their master. He peered through the wire again and gave a nod of satisfaction. Then he stepped back a few feet and waved to a fuse on the side of the weapon.

The slaves looked nervously at each other.

“Fire it!” screamed Ratchitt, drawing his odd-looking pistol and pointing it at the head of the nearest slave.

As the others scampered out of harm’s way, the slave muttered a quick prayer to the Horned Rat and lit the fuse.

Nothing happened.

Ratchitt frowned in confusion for a few seconds, still pointing his pistol at the trembling slave’s head. “Wrong,” he muttered and pulled the trigger. The recoil threw his arm back and filled his eyes with smoke. When the haze had cleared, the other skaven gasped in horror.

The hapless slave was lying twitching and headless next to the machine.

“Quick-quick,” said Ratchitt, cheerfully waving his gun at another one of the slaves. “Try again.”

The chosen slave edged towards the machine and crouched next to the scorched fuse. As Ratchitt peered suspiciously over his shoulder the slave carefully examined the mechanism. With a nod of satisfaction, the slave noticed that several of the screws had come loose. He quickly tightened them with one of his long talons and dragged a lever back. Then he looked nervously at the headless corpse at his feet and turned back to Ratchitt.

Ratchitt curled his lips back, revealing a row of cruel yellow fangs.

The slave closed his eyes and lit the fuse.

Ratchitt squealed in delight as a bolt snapped forwards with a loud *crack* and the mortar fired its contents down the hill.

Down below, the rocks erupted into a huge mushroom of green fire. The blast echoed over the whole hillside, scattering skaven and elves before it like leaves in a storm.

The prince and the warlord stayed their blows and looked down at the battle in shock. As the plumes of emerald smoke cleared, the full extent of the damage was revealed. A large, blackened crater had appeared on the side of the hill and it was piled high with charred corpses. Most of the dead were skaven, but there were several elves in the crater too and the prince howled in dismay.

As the prince staggered towards his fallen soldiers, white-faced with shock, Verminkin saw his chance and lashed out with his meat cleaver.

The prince saw the danger just in time to shield his face, but the blade cut straight through his vambrace and bit deep into his forearm. He stumbled backwards with a curse and toppled down the slope towards the skaven army.

“Fire-fire! Fire-fire!” cried Ratchitt, skipping back and forth as his slaves carefully loaded more of the glass spheres into the machine. There was no need to prompt them this time; before Ratchitt could even raise his pistol, one of the slaves lit the fuse and sent the balls whizzing through the air.

Another green explosion rocked the hillside. This one was even bigger than the first and almost all of the figures hurled into the air were elves.

The prince scrambled to his feet just in time to fend off the wall of halberds and swords that were hurtling towards him. The skaven that crowded around him were driven into a frenzy by the smell of the blood pouring down his arm. “Sharpclaw,” he gasped, as he crawled back up the slope.

The griffon was only a few feet away. There was a ragged cut in its flank and a halberd embedded deep in its thick neck, but at the sound of its master’s voice, the beast reared up on its hind legs and let out a deafening screech. The skaven that surrounded the monster balked at the sheer size of the creature and once more it took the opportunity to plough into them, scattering limbs and weapons as it charged to the prince’s side.

As it lunged towards him, the prince wrapped his arm around the griffon’s neck and swung up onto its back. With the skaven pressing around it, the griffon reared again and this time the prince howled in unison with the creature’s deafening cry as he looked down on his slaughtered brothers.

Even such a fierce display could not hide the elves’ defeat, however, and the skaven circled victoriously around the creature, swarming over the gulleys and peaks in vast, unstoppable numbers.

“Follow me,” cried the prince to the remainder of his troops, clutching his bloody arm as the griffon launched itself into the sky. “We must withdraw to the temple.”

The second blast had given the skaven new reserves of courage, and less than half of the sea guard remained to hear the prince’s cry. Those that were able to, turned and fled after him, sprinting into the eddying mists with swarms of screaming skaven close on their heels.

“In the name of Aenarion,” cried the prince as the griffon soared up into the sky. “Head for the temple.”

“Fire-fire!” cried Ratchitt again, laughing hysterically at the destruction he had created, and ignoring the fact that there were now only skaven left on the hillside.

The slaves were giggling too, and they jostled each other aside in their eagerness to load the spheres onto the weapon. In their excitement, two of the slaves collided with a crack of breaking glass.

Another deafening blast rang out and the machine vanished in a cloud of spinning wood, vaporised rock and roiling green smoke.

Ratchitt found himself lying against a rock, several feet away, looking at an upside down world that was fragmented into dozens of tiny diamonds. There was a shrill whistling in his ears and he wondered if he had somehow dislodged his brain. Then, as he slid to the ground, the shattered glass fell from his goggles and his vision returned to something approaching normality.

An upside down Warlord Verminkin loomed over him, covered in blood and limping as a result of a deep gash in his thigh. He drew back his meat cleaver with a furious snarl.

“Wait!” cried the engineer, clambering back onto his feet and backing away from Verminkin. “I just saved your life! The least you can do is let me show you what I’ve found.”

“The least I can do is nothing,” growled Verminkin, lunging forwards with such speed that blood and drool flew from his trembling muzzle. “But I think I still have the energy to skin your worthless hide.”

“Wait!” cried Ratchitt again, levelling his pistol at the warlord’s face.

Verminkin stumbled to a halt. He knew that the gun was as likely to backfire as work properly, but at this range either result might leave him without a face. He looked back over his shoulder. His army were rushing towards him, led by the triumphant stormvermin, but they were still a few minutes away. He shrugged, and lowered the blade. “Show me,” he grunted. “Then die.”

Ratchitt waved Verminkin back up to the top of the precipice with his gun and scrambled quickly after him. As they reached the edge, he rummaged beneath his armour and pulled out another cylindrical copper box. As before, he unlatched it, gave it a tap and extended it towards the floor with a series of clicks. Then he handed the ornate tube to the warlord and gestured across to the other side of the valley.

Verminkin wiped the drool from his snout with a contemptuous sneer and raised the looking glass to his eye. “What am I supposed to—” He paused and stepped forwards, leaning dangerously out over the steep drop below. “What *is* that?” he hissed, lowering the device and turning to Ratchitt.

Ratchitt took the looking glass and peered through it himself. On the far side of the valley was the south coast of the island, and jutting out from it was a narrow neck of land. At the end of the isthmus, rearing up from the mist-shrouded rocks, was a towering, teetering mass of black skulls. It was hundreds of feet tall and obviously intended as a temple of some kind, but the architecture was like nothing either of them had ever seen before. The stone skulls leaned up to the heaving sky in an impossible jumble of gables, cupolas and parapets. Ratchitt had no doubt that this twisted, lunatic building was the heart of the whole island. “That, oh sagacious one,” he answered, “is our prize.”

CHAPTER TEN

As Bladelord Kalaer looked up from his broad, ivory desk the candlelight washed over his face, revealing an intricate network of scars, both old and new. One wall of his spartan study was lined with ancient sword manuals and tactical treatises, but it was the scars that spoke most eloquently of his past. His long, elven frame was knotted and hardened by centuries of warfare and self-denial and as his guests approached, he glared up at them from his chair like a cornered beast, as though waiting for the right moment to pounce.

“There’s no chance he could have survived,” he snapped. His eyes were blank, but the tremor in his voice revealed a barely suppressed fury. He rose from the desk and looked down at the huge greatsword that lay across it. Like the swordmaster’s face, it had obviously seen recent battle, but the battered steel had been cleaned and polished as lovingly as a holy relic. “I had the enemy in my grasp,” he continued, looking up at his guests defiantly, as though daring them to contradict him. “In a few more minutes I would have finished them, but Kortharion...” he paused, and shook his head in disbelief. “Kortharion decided that the best course would be to immolate himself. He destroyed the creatures with his own funeral pyre.”

The small delegation gathered in Kalaer’s study turned to look at the young mage waiting near the doorway. At the swordmaster’s words, Caladris leant heavily on his staff and his youth seemed to abandon him, weighing down his narrow shoulders and drawing lines of anguish on his slender face. “Why would he do such a thing?” he muttered.

As Kalaer looked back at Caladris, the tremor in his voice became even more pronounced. “It’s not my place to question the logic of mages,” he snapped. “Kortharion had been on the island for a long time. He’d begun to suffer from the most awful nightmares. It’s possible that lack of sleep clouded his judgement.” He shook his head. “Maybe he had simply lost his stomach for the fight.”

Caladris stiffened at Kalaer’s words. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have abandoned you if he thought there was any other way.”

Colour rushed into Kalaer’s cheeks and he fixed the young mage with a withering stare. “Kortharion has taken his reasons with him to the grave. We must deal with this inconvenience without his help.” For a moment it seemed his mask of calm might slip. Then he turned away from Caladris and addressed the knight stood next to him, a proud-looking veteran, carrying a tall shield decorated with a beautiful image of a sea drake. “How many soldiers came with you on the prince’s ship, Captain Althin?”

The captain looked briefly at Caladris, but the ashen-faced mage waved dismissively and backed away to the corner of the room, so Althin answered the

swordmaster's question. "There's my own detachment of sea guard and also," he gestured to another armour-clad figure stood behind him, "Eltheus and his knights."

Eltheus stepped forwards with a slight bow. His helmet bore the pale grey plumes of an Ellyrian noble and his weathered skin spoke of a lifetime spent in the saddle.

Kalaer took in the knight's light, supple armour and his long, rune-engraved spear. "We're a long way from the plains of Ellyrion, my friend," he said, with a wry smile. "You may find yourself riding a little slower here."

The knight lifted his chin and tapped his spear on the stone floor. "Speed isn't the only weapon in our arsenal, swordmaster."

Kalaer nodded vaguely and looked back down at his sword.

An awkward silence filled the room.

"And your prince has more soldiers with him too?" asked Kalaer eventually.

"Aye," replied Althin with a nod. "Prince Stormrider should be here soon, with the rest of the sea guard. And more will be on the way, when the rest of our fleet arrive."

The swordmaster let out a bitter laugh. "Fleet, you say? Well, well..." he muttered, being careful to avoid Caladris' eye. "I don't think these skaven will pose half the threat Kortharion imagined. It sounds like we have an entire army at our disposal." He picked up his sword and gestured to the door. "I see no need to delay. Let's ride out now and send the miserable creatures back to the cursed earth that spawned them."

The elves filed out of Kalaer's study and into a wide, domed hall, with long Sapherian banners hanging from its ribbed ceiling. As in the rest of the temple, the elves had been unable to fully disguise the odd, undulating design of the architecture and the newcomers trod carefully as they crossed the room, feeling as though they were crawling through the bowels of some awful, dusty leviathan.

Guards were rushing back and forth with concerned faces and there seemed to be a commotion on the battlements outside. At the sight of Kalaer, a soldier dashed across the hall. "Bladelord Kalaer, the skaven are massing against the outer wall."

The swordmaster's only sign of surprise was a slight raising of his eyebrows. "They're here already?" He turned to Caladris and the knights. "These vermin move fast. Still, I suppose they've saved us a journey." He nodded to the knights' weapons. "You may not even have need of those. If the fools have decided to knock at our front door, we should be able to give them quite an impressive welcome. This could all be over *very* quickly." He looked back at the soldier. "Load up the bolt throwers. Or are they already deployed?"

The soldier hesitated. "The rat creatures aren't alone, Bladelord," he explained. "You'd better come and see."

They rushed down a narrow spiral staircase and emerged in the courtyard below. More soldiers and grooms were rushing back and forth in the moonlight. As the servants lit torches along the walls, a tableau of enormous stone skulls flickered into life, leering down at the elves as they headed out onto the narrow neck of land that joined the temple to the rest of the island.

At the far end of the small peninsula, they reached the temple's outer defences: an undulating, serpentine wall, topped with fang-like turrets that reared forty feet up

from the jagged rocks. They could see hundreds of elves lined up above them on the parapets, both archers and spearmen, but all seemed reluctant to use their weapons.

“What are they waiting for?” muttered Kalaer as they climbed up towards the battlements. As they reached the top of the wall, some of the sentries rushed towards the swordmaster with questions on their lips, but he barged straight past them and peered out into the night.

“By the gods,” gasped Caladris as he reached Kalaer’s side and looked down over the island.

The warped landscape below them was teeming with skaven. The approaching army rushed towards them through the darkness like a tsunami of twitching shadows. The inky shapes moved so fast and in such heaving, liquid surges that even the clear-sighted elves struggled to make out individual shapes. This was not the reason for their hesitance, though. Gliding back and forth over the shifting mass was the griffon, with a figure crouched low on its back, loosing arrow after arrow down into the shapes below.

“I assume this is your prince?” asked Kalaer, turning to the young mage at his side.

The griffon was performing a breathtaking series of swoops as its rider fired on the shadows massing beneath. For a few seconds, Caladris was too stunned by the scene to reply. He felt as though he was looking back through the aeons. The sight of an elven noble, launching himself so fearlessly against such a monstrous horde, seemed plucked from the most ancient legends. “Yes,” he breathed eventually, nodding his head in wonder.

“Then for his own sake, call him to your side,” demanded Kalaer. “I have no desire to witness another needless sacrifice.”

“He’s right, Caladris,” said Captain Althin, stepping up to the battlements. “Look at those lights; they have some kind of magic at their disposal. He’s playing a dangerous game.”

Caladris followed the captain’s gaze and saw that he was right. Flashes of green flame were erupting from the scurrying masses at the foot of the wall. He closed his eyes for a second and allowed his senses to fly out from between the turrets and plummet down into the army below. After a few seconds he gasped and turned to the others, his eyes wide with alarm. “They must have powerful sorcerers with them. Their weapons are charged with warp magic.”

“I can see that for myself,” snapped the captain, waving at the brittle trails of light flashing up towards the griffon.

“Call him back.”

Caladris gave a brusque nod and closed his eyes again, holding his hands out from the top of the wall and muttering a single, fluid syllable.

The griffon immediately soared up away from the skaven and hovered for a moment, flapping its wings with great, booming swipes and giving the elves a clear view of Prince Stormrider as he looked towards them. The prince nodded, fired one last arrow and then steered his mount towards the temple. As he glided towards the waiting elves, he raised his lance in a magisterial gesture of defiance. The warpfire that surrounded him glinted along his polished gold armour and, as he descended

from the flickering clouds, Caladris thought he looked like Aenarion reborn, carrying all the fury and tragedy of his race on the flashing gilt of his lance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We are legion!” howled Warlord Verminkin, rearing up above the writhing mass of his army. As he rose up from the swarming figures he shook his meat cleaver defiantly at the griffon hovering overhead. “Flee back to your little house, elf-thing,” he howled. “The Under-Empire is rising! Our time has come!” Then he looked around in wonder, shocked to see just how true his words were. Thousands of skaven were rushing across the island towards the temple. “There are so many of us,” he said, looking down at Ratchitt with a hint of confusion in his voice. “We seem to have even more clanrats than we set out with.”

The warlock engineer clambered up onto the shoulders of a slave and looked back over the huge army. “It’s true. There are many-many,” he replied with a cringing bow. “The most distinguished warlord has won back the fealty of his clan.”

Verminkin frowned. “You mean...”

Ratchitt nodded eagerly. “Yes-yes, your brutality. My device is still suppressing the power of the island’s guardians, and the tunnels are still open. Many of the clanrats who betrayed you are now abandoning Spinetail and rushing to join you in victory.”

Verminkin peered back over the army and began to nod in agreement. “Yes. It’s true.” He pointed his cleaver at a soldier just a few rows back. “That’s Skurry Slicksnout, the treacherous runt. He must have come to his senses and abandoned that wretched usurper.” His excitement grew as he spied several other skaven he thought lost to him. “Yes-yes. Many of those stormvermin had abandoned me too.” He howled up at the griffon again, quivering with ecstasy and bloodlust. “Flee while you can, elf-thing. Death is coming!” As his frenzy consumed him, Verminkin grabbed a nearby slave by the scruff of the neck and hurled him up at the receding griffon. The screaming slave tumbled through the air in a jumble of thrashing limbs and rolling eyes, before slamming to the ground with a dull *crunch*.

To Verminkin’s delight, the griffon banked away and flew towards the temple’s vast outer wall. “See how he runs?” he cried, jabbing his cleaver towards the heavens and scampering back and forth across the backs of his soldiers. “He dares not face the wrath of Warlord Verminkin.”

A huge roar erupted from the surrounding skaven and they began racing towards the gates that blocked their way onto the peninsula. The rattling of their swords was deafening as they darted across the twisted rock, but as they reached the gates the clamour died down. The huge doors towered thirty feet over their heads and were made of the same gnarled, impenetrable rock as the rest of the wall.

“Ratchitt,” cried Verminkin, grabbing the engineer by the throat and lifting him up out of the heaving throng. “What can you do about those gates?” He pulled

Ratchitt so close that the engineer could see the blood vessels pulsing in his rolling red eyes. “Smash-break! Smash-break!”

Ratchitt clawed at his throat, trying desperately to breathe. “Yes,” he gasped eventually, after managing to loosen the warlord’s grip. “My machines,” he croaked, waving at the row of carts rattling along the rocky path behind them. “Let me...” His words trailed off into a squeak as the warlord reasserted his grip.

“I want to see them crushed, Ratchitt,” snarled Verminkin, hurling the engineer back down into the crowd. “Just don’t fail.”

Ratchitt slammed onto the black rocks with a yelp of pain. He tried to rise, but an avalanche of claws, wheels and weaponry bowled him over again. Spitting curses, he crawled up onto a gnarled column of rock and scampered out of the way of his charging ratkin. “I won’t fail, Verminkin,” he muttered, clutching his pistol and glaring at the back of the warlord. “Ratchitt’s time is coming. You’ll be the first to know when it’s here.” He looked back over the advancing army at the approaching wagons. Then he leapt from the rock and scuttled across the backs of the other skaven.

As he made his way back through the crush, a strange, whistling breeze sprang up behind him. The engineer paused and looked back towards the temple. It was too dark to see anything clearly at such a distance, so he took a spyglass from his robes and cranked a small handle on its side. The handle rotated a series of cogs and as Ratchitt furiously wound the handle they began to spark. After a few seconds, green light began to pour from the lens and Ratchitt held the spyglass up to his eye. He hissed. The sound he had heard was no natural wind. The warp-powered lens allowed him to see almost as though it was day, and he saw that with the prince now safely behind the wall, the elves had wheeled dozens of huge wooden eagles into view. The beautifully-carved birds gazed serenely out from the parapets, with their gleaming gold and ivory paintwork lit up by the surrounding beacons, giving them the appearance of proud avian spirits as they poured clouds of razor sharp bolts down onto the huddled masses below.

As the bolts found their mark, a chorus of screams erupted from the skaven nearest to the wall. The graceful design of the weapons could not disguise their cruel efficiency. Waves of arrows hurtled down into the advancing army and each one had enough force to slice through the armour of several panic-stricken skaven. Ratchitt twitched and hissed with dismay as he watched the lethal storm. He could not believe the speed and effectiveness of the weapons. Not one of them backfired or even stalled as they poured death down from the temple walls.

“Ratchitt!” roared Verminkin from a few feet away. His face was contorted with rage as he levelled his cleaver at the wall. “Smash-break! Smash-break!”

Ratchitt gave a fawning, simpering bow and turned on his heel. He scampered back towards the largest of the carts—a huge, lumbering wagon—and leapt up onto its canvas covering. “Quick-quick!” he screamed at the slaves dragging it forwards.

With the help of his terrified assistants, Ratchitt heaved back the cloth and revealed the colossal weapon beneath. As the filthy canvas crumpled to the ground, the surrounding rocks were bathed in unearthly green light. Ratchitt’s tail quivered with excitement as he dashed back and forth over the device: an enormous, rune-engraved cannon, bolted to a throbbing green boulder of pure warpstone. The

engineer moaned with pleasure as he ran his paws over the copper barrel of the gun. Such things had been built before, but never so big. Ratchitt had created a weapon on a scale previously undreamt of. "Take down the walls," he hissed, jumping to the ground and shoving the slaves towards the firing mechanism. "Crush-smash!"

The weapon team pulled leather hoods down over their snouts and rushed to obey. After checking the harnesses that held the huge weapon in place, three of them leant their weight against a ratchet attached to the back of the gun. The slab of warpstone blazed even brighter as the cogs clicked into place and a low rumbling began somewhere within the complicated array of copper pipes, spinning wheels and bubbling glass canisters. The slaves backed away, eyeing the cannon with a mixture of excitement and fear as the rumbling sound grew. Within a few seconds the whole barrel was trembling with the force of the vibration. Rivets began to ping from the metal plates, whizzing past the slaves' heads and causing the device to emit a deafening rattling sound.

"Now!" screamed Ratchitt, pointing at a second lever, fixed on the side of the first. "Fire-fire!"

If the slaves could hear him over the deafening cacophony, they gave no sign of it and continued to back away nervously from the jangling pile of metal.

Ratchitt fumbled beneath his armour for his pistol and when he looked up, the slaves were dashing across the rocks away from him. "Fire-fire!" he screamed again, trembling with rage at their cowardice and looking back at the cannon. It was now shaking so violently that it could only be a few more seconds before the whole thing collapsed. Snapping down his goggles against the blinding glare, Ratchitt rushed towards the machine. He screeched in pain as he remembered that the lenses were broken and, as he pressed down the second lever, tears were flooding from his eyes.

A thunderous boom echoed across the rocks and for a brief second the night was replaced by a dazzling, emerald dawn.

Agony tore through Ratchitt's skull and he knew no more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Caladris felt the wall beneath him shudder and grabbed onto the ramparts to steady himself. For several seconds a thick column of light arced over the heads of the skaven army and lashed against the wall's gates. The old stone rippled and buckled and finally exploded backwards into the small courtyard behind. The force of the blast was so intense that as the gates crumbled, the rest of the wall began to shift and slide too.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the light ceased.

As the echo of the blast faded the elves held their breath, waiting to see its effect. For a few seconds there was nothing; then, with a terrible heaving groan, the whole wall began to slump slowly backwards.

"Down!" cried Prince Stormrider, launching his griffon from the ancient stone and rising up over their heads. "Abandon the wall!"

Even with the ground collapsing beneath their feet, Bladelord Kalaer and the others refused to show fear. As a deafening eruption of dust and stone exploded all around them, they jogged silently towards the crumbling steps that led down to the courtyard and the isthmus.

As soldiers rushed past him, crowding around the quickly disintegrating escape routes, Caladris uttered a spell of binding and channelled his magic into the crumbling stone. For a few minutes he felt the whole weight of the structure pressing down on him. Sparks of power crackled between his fingers and ran between the stones like mortar, as the soldiers continued to hurry past him and down the steps. Then, finally, he let out a cry of frustration and leapt from the wall, leaving the whole edifice to collapse behind him. His eyes flashed with a white fire as he drifted gracefully down towards the distant flagstones of the courtyard. Upon landing, he turned to look back up at the tumbling wall. The skaven weapon had left a hole the size of a house and as the elves fled, the huge turrets began to collapse in an avalanche of rocks and mortar. Caladris noticed with a mixture of pride and horror that dozens of the guards had made no effort to reach the vanishing stairs. The crush of bodies meant it was impossible for everyone to escape, so they had simply remained at their posts—waiting patiently to die, so that others might have the chance to live.

Caladris rushed out onto the thin strip of land that led back to the temple. Once he had reached a safe distance he turned to see a new wall rising in place of the old one. This one was made of colossal, rolling plumes of smoke and it was rising even higher than the original. The huge curtain of dust spared him the sight of the dying elves, but their screams sliced into the mage, causing him to flinch and stagger as he edged back across the narrow bridge of rock.

Groups of dust-shrouded soldiers began to emerge, ghostlike, from the haze, unable to disguise their shock at the level of destruction they were witnessing. The wall had stood for thousands of years; built by unknown hands, before even the time of Aenarion. None of them had ever dreamed it would fall.

Caladris saw Bladelord Kalaer, striding calmly through the smoke and shepherding his swordmasters through the chaos. He gestured over to the mage and cried out a series of commands. The soldiers rushed to obey, forming themselves into neat ranks and making a protective circle around Caladris.

Caladris peered through the debris at the approaching figures and sighed with relief. Captain Althin was there, leading a group of his sea guard, and they were followed in turn by Eltheus in his plumed helmet and the lithe shapes of his Ellyrian reavers.

“Further back!” cried the prince from overhead.

They all looked up to see a blur of tawny feathers and gleaming gold armour, as the griffon cut through the clouds of dust.

“You’re still not safe!”

Caladris looked back towards the wall of smoke and saw towering shadows looming through the haze.

“He’s right. Something’s coming,” he muttered, gripping his staff in alarm.

“Do as the prince commands!” cried Bladelord Kalaer, levelling his two-handed sword back across the isthmus. “Make for the temple.”

As the elves rushed to obey, Caladris saw the huge silhouettes emerging behind them from the smoke. As their hulking shapes were fully revealed, the mage reeled in shock. The monsters that strode over the shattered wall were unlike anything he had ever seen. They resembled grotesquely oversized skaven, but they seemed to be sewn together from the body-parts of several other creatures. Their heavily muscled limbs reached out from a jumble of mismatched fur and crudely stitched flesh and their scarred muzzles were contorted with a mixture of pain and frantic bloodlust. As they pounded through the rubble, they gorged themselves on the bodies of fallen elves, cramming whole limbs down their misshapen throats and clawing at each other in their eagerness to advance. Smaller figures rushed around the feet of the rat ogres, lashing and prodding at the monsters’ legs with an array of cruel weapons in a desperate attempt to control their lumbering movements.

As Bladelord Kalaer reached Caladris’ side he looked back at the advancing enemy and could not hide his shock. He quickly drew himself erect however, and gave a brisk nod. “Very well,” he snapped, turning to the mage. “You and the others must do as the prince says.” He waved his sword at the monsters. “But these things are moving too fast. If they’re left unopposed they’ll tear us apart as we flee. I’ll hold them here for a while so you and the others can reach the temple and make a proper defence.”

Caladris shook his head fiercely, but the knight was already ordering his swordmasters to advance.

There was immediate confusion. The soldiers who had been following the prince’s order to pull back paused at the sight of Kalaer forming a defensive line.

There was no sign of the griffon, so Caladris held his staff aloft and briefly lit up the bridge with a flash of light. “We must fall back to the temple,” he cried. “The swordmasters will buy us time!”

Captain Althin and the others nodded in reply and continued to rush back across the narrow bridge, dragging their wounded with them as they went.

Kalaer led his swordmasters to the narrowest point of the bridge-like neck of rock. It only took ten of them, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, to block the way of the advancing rat ogres. Without a single word of command, the rows of elves formed their long, two-handed swords into a bristling, gleaming thicket of steel.

As the twitching giants loomed up over them, the terrible scale of their deformity was fully revealed, but the elves showed no sign of fear and began swinging their swords in a series of graceful, deadly arcs. Despite being crushed so close to each other, they sliced into the monsters with incredible speed and accuracy. Decades of training gave them an almost preternatural ability to sense each others’ movements and they weaved around each other with a silent, easy grace.

The rat ogres roared with frustration as the spinning, gleaming figures danced easily out of reach. Fresh wounds began appearing over their thick hides and however they lunged at their slender opponents, they were unable to land a single blow.

A broad shape glided through the darkness and one of the rat ogres reeled backwards, slamming into the others as it tried to stem the blood that suddenly erupted from its thick neck.

“The prince,” cried Kalaer, with a grim smile, as the griffon sank its claws into its struggling prey.

The wounded rat ogre let out a low, liquid groan as Stormrider drew his lance from its neck and thrust it deep between its shoulder blades.

“For the Phoenix King!” cried the prince, as the monster crashed down onto the skaven at its feet. There was a chorus of screams as it slammed onto the bridge with a final, guttural belch.

Before the other skaven could surround him, the prince launched his griffon back into the air, with the rat ogre’s blood trailing from his lance like a pennant. “For Aenarion!”

The swordmasters were unable to hold back their smiles at the sight of the dead rat ogre, but Kalaer’s face remained stern. As the creature fell it created a brief gap in the wall of crudely stitched flesh, revealing the incredible size of the horde rushing towards them. “There are so many...” he muttered, lowering his sword for a second.

For the first time in his life, Bladelord Kalaer began to feel afraid.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Captain Ulthrain rushed across the deck of the *Pride of Finubar*. “What do you mean?” he cried, struggling to raise his voice against the flapping of canvas and the howling of the wind.

“Look,” replied his navigator, pointing out into the fierce storm. “We have a new friend. And see how fast she’s moving.”

The captain shielded his eyes from the spray and looked out across the tumbling white-tops. Several ships were following in their wake. Most of them he could name quite easily, but one left him slack-jawed with shock. It was far behind the rest of the fleet, but hurtling across the ocean with impossible speed. Its tall sails were swelled by an unnatural wind, blowing in direct contradiction to the prevailing weather. As the mysterious vessel powered relentlessly towards them, it seemed to be travelling on the breath of Asuryan himself.

“The prince’s eagles must have sent messages further afield,” he cried. “There’s no need to be alarmed. That ship is clearly from Ulthuan—look at its colours.”

The navigator squinted at the distant banners. It was hard to see clearly through the spray, but he thought he could just about make out the design: a white sea hawk on a blue field. “Aye,” he cried back. “I had no concerns as to their fealty. I’ve just never seen a ship move like that.”

The captain nodded and looked back at the navigator with a glint in his steel grey eyes. “Can you feel it, Meniath?” he asked, with a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips.

The navigator frowned. Then he wiped his sodden hair from his face and smiled back. “Yes, captain. I feel it. Something’s in the air.”

The captain gripped him by the shoulder. “We’re on the edge of history,” he cried. “I’ve felt the gods watching over us ever since Prince Stormrider ordered us to set course for this island. Whether for good, or ill, I do not know, but this day will be inscribed in the annals of our people. I’m sure of it.” He looked back at the fast-approaching ship. “Something momentous is about to happen.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“We cannot win,” breathed Caladris as they dashed through the temple gates.

The elves congregated in the courtyard that surrounded the inner sanctum and looked at each other in shock. None of them had expected this. They were the heirs of Aenarion. How had they found themselves fleeing from such verminous rabble? Dozens of them carried wounds but it was the sting of defeat that twisted their faces with such anguish. There were nearly a hundred sea guard still standing but the collapse of the wall had shocked them all deeply and they peered back through the falling dust in confusion. They were flanked by almost as many of Eltheus’ riders, but they too looked unsure what to do next. There was no chance of a cavalry charge on such a narrow, uneven strip of rock and they had been forced to leave their horses in the stables and fight on foot.

Captain Althin strode across the uneven flagstones to Caladris’ side. His face was white with pain and the sea drake on his shield had vanished behind a spray of blood. “Can’t you help them?” he asked, gesturing back along the isthmus to the embattled swordmasters. His voice trembled with an unusual note of passion. “They can’t hold back those creatures indefinitely. Surely all your wisdom and scholarship can be of some use?”

The mage shook his head and frowned, but gave no reply. He was clearly lost in thought and barely seemed to register Althin’s words.

“Will you do nothing, then?” Althin snapped, grabbing Caladris’ robes. “Are you afraid?”

Caladris snatched back his robes and glared at the captain. “No, soldier,” he snapped. “Not afraid; just endowed with a little reason.”

“How dare you,” growled the captain, striding forwards with a rattle of armour. “You scholars are always so quick to denounce the rest of us as fools.” He flexed his sword hand, obviously itching to fill it. “I have put up with...” His words trailed off as he remembered himself. He looked around at the shocked faces of his soldiers and shook his head. “Forgive me, mage,” he said, stepping back with a stiff bow.

Colour rushed into Caladris’ cheeks and he glared down his aquiline nose at the captain, but when he replied, it was in carefully controlled tones. “If I go out there now I will be certainly be able to aid Bladelord Kalaer. Maybe even for several minutes. Then, when the creatures realise my power, their warpfire will tear me apart and, after butchering you and the others, they will stroll unhindered into the temple.” He pointed at the convoluted pile of spires and buttresses crouched behind them. “Do you,” he hissed, “have *any* idea of what that would mean?”

“Then what?” growled the captain, straining to lower his own voice to the same level as the mage’s. “We just wait here and watch Kalaer die?”

“I must speak with the prince,” muttered the mage, seeming to forget all about the captain. His eyes widened as his thoughts reached a terrible conclusion. “There’s only one hope now.”

Caladris dashed back towards the crooked arch that led into the courtyard and looked out along the bridge of rock. The dust from the ruined wall was starting to settle and he could clearly see the swordmasters’ blades flashing in the moonlight. “My prince,” he whispered, lifting his sentience up above the battle and into the clouds.

He gasped in horror as he looked out from behind Prince Stormrider’s eyes. From his lofty vantage point, the prince was surveying the full weight of the army rushing towards them. Countless thousands of the hunchbacked wretches were boiling and scampering across the island towards Kalaer’s narrow, silver line of defence. It was not just the numbers of skaven that made Caladris gasp, however—it was the awful invention of their war machines. Huge, wooden wheels trundled over the foothills, powered by glowing rocks of warpstone and the frantic energy of thousands of rats; massive, motorised iron spheres hurtled down crevasses, laden with terrifying arrays of whirring blades; teetering, rune-inscribed pulpits lurched from the forests, swinging smoke-billowing censers, and countless other arcane machines approached from every direction, flashing through the dark like baleful, rattling spirits.

“What hope do we have?” thought the prince, sensing the mage’s presence in his mind. “There are so many of them.”

“What of the rest of the fleet?” replied Caladris.

Prince Stormrider steered his mount up through the clouds and pointed his lance at the beaches to the west of them.

Caladris gasped in delight as he saw a group of tall ships approaching the jagged coastline. “They’re here!” he thought. “Then surely we’re saved.”

“Not quite,” thought the prince, pointing his lance a little further inland at another huge column of skaven rushing to join the main force. This new army was almost as big as the initial one and was placed directly in the way of the elven reinforcements. At their head was another ruinous war engine: a huge, wheeled scaffold, from the top of which dangled an enormous bronze bell.

Caladris’ heart sank. Three grey-robed figures were huddled beneath the bell and he felt their malignant power as clearly as he felt the wind on the prince’s face. “They have great sorcery at their command,” he thought. “And that bell—there’s something terrible about its manufacture. It was forged in agony and death.” He shivered. “I fear it more than anything else here, my prince.”

“Then I must stop it!” cried Stormrider, raising his lance and steering Sharpclaw down towards the lumbering engine.

“No! Wait!” thought the mage. “There’s only one way we can stop such a multitude.”

The prince reined in his mount and allowed it to hover for a moment, steadying himself as the sickly breeze buffeted them. “Speak your mind quickly, Caladris.” He gestured back at the tiny group of swordmasters holding the bridge against such impossible odds. “We have very little time.”

“Remember what I told you about the Phoenix Stone?”

“I remember you told me that it had no use as a weapon, yes.”

“That’s true. As a thing unto itself, it’s useless; but think of what it holds back.”

The prince shook his head. “What are you suggesting? You told me that the amulet safeguards a weak link in the vortex. Are you saying that we unleash the daemonic hordes? Our ancestors died to hold back those forces.” He rose up in his saddle and cried out to the wind. “Have you lost your senses, Caladris? That’s just what we came here to prevent!”

Way down at the temple gates, Caladris grimaced at the prince’s words. “I beg you to understand me, lord. I’ve not lost hold of my reason. My plan is not to *remove* the amulet, but to join my mind with it and channel the powers it holds in place. If I can tap into such a well, even for just a fraction of a second, I would have more power at my command than you could imagine. I could lay this entire horde to waste.”

The prince groaned with despair. “It’s madness, Caladris. Can’t you see? Your mind would be torn apart.”

“It’s our only hope, prince. But Kalaer would need to hold the skaven back long enough for me to complete the necessary wards. That’s why you must leave the bell and fly to the bridge instead. With you by his side, I’m sure that Kalaer could hold them back for long enough.”

The prince looked down again at the huge column of skaven reinforcements and saw that there was no hope other than the slender chance that Caladris was offering. He groaned again and slammed his lance against his golden armour with a *clang*. “Can you really do such a thing?”

“You have my promise,” thought Caladris as he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bladelord Kalaer died with a howl of disbelief.

As the grunting rat ogre tore his body in two, the blade-master's greatsword stayed locked in his grip, as though he were unable to accept that he had fallen to such an unworthy foe. The creature held Kalaer's broken torso at arm's length, spraying blood across the other elves as it lifted the corpse over their heads. Then it hurled the elf from the bridge, sending him tumbling down towards the distant waves below.

The remaining swordmasters continued to fight with the same silent determination as before, but as Kalaer fell to his death, they realised they would be soon to follow. The narrow strip of rock had prevented the skaven army from throwing its full weight against them, but even so, their muscles were screaming with exhaustion. For every skaven they hacked down, another scrambled to replace it. They had already killed countless hundreds of the things, but they knew it was hopeless. All that was left for them to do now was to die with as much dignity as possible.

The rat ogre that had slain Kalaer strode towards the other swordmasters, sending dozens of skaven plummeting to their deaths as it lumbered towards the elves. It drew back the mangled piece of iron it was using for a club and tried to swing it down towards its foes, but the crush of bodies around its feet was so great that the monster stumbled forwards with a grunt.

Several of the elves danced gracefully along the edge of the piece of metal and plunged their blades deep into the monster's crudely sewn chest. Then they shoved it from the bridge, consigning it to the same abyss that had just swallowed Kalaer.

As the rat ogre tumbled from view, Stormrider's griffon banked down from the heavens once more. As his mount glided over the heads of the struggling combatants, the prince leapt down amongst the struggling elves. "You cannot die yet," announced the prince calmly as he ran towards the elves. "This bridge must hold."

The golden, winged helmet of the prince acted like a beacon to the remaining elves and as he pressed forwards, they surrounded him with a dazzling shield of whirling swords. They were not so deluded as to believe they could defeat the entire army, but with the proud, gleaming prince leading them, they felt all the ancient glory of their race swelling their chests and strengthening their sword arms. Death was certain, but so was their place in history.

The prince held his sword aloft and howled victoriously as dozens of the skaven suddenly fell to the ground with white-flecked arrows embedded deep in their narrow chests. He whirled around to see Althin and his sea guard, crouched behind the swordmasters and loosing arrows over their heads. Beside them stood Eltheus and his riders, horseless but hurling their spears across the bridge with grim determination.

He yelled back at them. "Fill the sea with their stinking hides. I forbid any of you to die until we've cleansed the world of this filth." As he hacked and slashed at the arrow-infested shapes, the prince called back over his shoulder. "Captain Althin, have you seen Caladris?"

"He had no stomach for the fight," cried the captain, firing another arrow. "The last I saw of him, he was heading back into the temple."

The prince nodded. "That boy is braver than you imagine, Althin," he muttered under his breath. "Braver than any of us."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Caladris dashed through the empty chambers of the temple, his pulse began to race with fear. “Where would it be?” he muttered, shoving aside drapes and peering down the winding, gloomy corridors. During his long years of study in the White Tower, he had always been fascinated by the legend of the Ulthane. Their forgotten, selfless act spoke to him across the centuries. To die so far from home, and then bind their souls to the very rock, offering themselves as eternal guardians... It humbled him to think of their bravery. But, despite poring over countless texts on the subject, he could not for the life of him remember where exactly the Phoenix Stone was located. His instinct told him to make for the heart of the temple. The elves had positioned their barracks and stables around the outer edges of the building and Caladris imagined that they would like to sleep as far as possible from the ancient rift. As he ran, several barred doors blocked his way, but Caladris barely paused as he blasted them aside with a muttered word and a flick of his wrist, leaving smouldering planks of wood and glowing shards of metal in his wake.

He reached the top of a narrow stairway that led down into the bowels of the rock. The walls here were even more twisted and asymmetrical than the rest of the building and he sensed a current of dark power oozing from the stones. His doubt left him. The amulet lay at the bottom of the stairs, he was sure of it. As he climbed carefully down the uneven steps, he allowed a soft yellow light to shine through his staff. It glimmered off the moist stones and threw long shadows into the cracks, creating the illusion of bloated, elongated mouths leering across the walls.

At the bottom of the stairs he reached another locked door. As before, he muttered a quick spell and stepped forwards. This time, however, his words simply echoed in the shadows. He frowned and closed his eyes, probing the door with his mind. “I’m on the right track,” he muttered, as he sensed a complicated set of magical wards tracing through the grain of the wood. A few short years ago, such ancient sorcery would have baffled him, but Caladris’ powers had recently surpassed even that of the loremasters who taught him. With a nod of approval, he spread his hands over the gnarled wood and sang a faint, mournful tune. The thick, iron locks slid back with a satisfying *clunk* and he shoved the door open.

The next corridor was even more roughly hewn than the rest of the temple. The elves had made no attempt to disguise the ugliness of this part of the building and as he tasted the heavy, damp air, Caladris had a suspicion that he was the first person to breathe it for centuries. The island’s usual muggy temperature was replaced down here by an even more stifling heat and the mage found himself gasping for breath as he hurried onwards. It was not just the air quality that made him gasp. As Caladris stumbled along the corridor, the rock began to play tricks on him, seeming to lunge and feint as his light washed over it. He clutched his staff a little tighter as a chorus

of unintelligible voices began to mutter at the back of his thoughts. Although he could not distinguish the words, the menacing tone made his skin crawl. It felt like a thousand daemons were oozing from the rock, rushing up through his pounding feet and sinking their malice into his feverish brain.

As the passageway progressed, it degenerated into a broad expanse of loose rocks that seemed to be an underground hill of some kind. Caladris allowed more light to pour from his staff and saw that he was in a vast natural cavern and that the undulating incline stretched far away into the distance. It seemed that the whole building was built on top of a wide subterranean peak. There was a clear path leading to the pinnacle; a trail of gleaming white bones led up to a shallow crater at the top of the slope. As Caladris clambered past the remains, he considered what terrible forces could have led to the deaths of these poor souls. He could not dwell on the morbid subject for long; the voices in his head were growing to such a volume that he feared his mind would soon collapse beneath the torrent of jumbled curses.

As Caladris reached the crater he hesitated and considered the terrible power of the artefact he was about to behold. Then, remembering Kalaer and the prince, he steeled himself and stepped forwards, peering into the shallow stone crucible.

It was empty.

Caladris cried out in alarm. "I've come to the wrong place," he gasped, placing his hand over the crater and filling it with light. As his fingers moved over the rock, the light flashed on a smooth surface which dazzled him briefly with its brilliance. He stooped closer and peered into the hole. Almost indistinguishable from the black stone that cradled it was a small obsidian amulet. If the light hadn't glanced across it in such a way, the thing would have been invisible to the naked eye. Caladris held his breath and reached out to touch the small, unassuming-looking thing.

As the mage's fingertips brushed against the amulet a powerful nausea wracked his body. He collapsed to the ground with a cry of pain and vomited violently into the darkness. "By the Gods," he groaned as a shocking pain knifed through him. For several minutes he could do nothing but cry out in fear as his body juddered and twisted into a foetal curl.

Once the fit had passed, Caladris wiped the vomit from his mouth and sat up. His head felt sickeningly light and every muscle in his body ached, but he knew he had to move. The voices in his head were now a screaming cacophony of snarls and screeches. He somehow managed to find the strength to climb weakly to his feet and as he leant against the pinnacle of rock he looked with newfound respect at the Phoenix Stone. "I must try," he groaned and edged closer. This time, he reached out with his mind instead, searching the surface of the amulet with his thoughts and easing himself into the fabric of the rock. The nausea washed over him again, but this time he clung fiercely onto the edge of the crater and managed to stay on his feet.

He shook his head at the enormity of the task. Even by just letting his thoughts glance over the stone, he could immediately sense the huge weight of hatred bearing down on it. It felt as though all the evil in the cosmos was straining against this one, tiny amulet. He realised with disgust that the voices screaming in his head were the daemoniac beings held back by the Phoenix Stone. They were clawing at his mind and demanding with every ounce of their will that he unshackle them. He tried to block them from his thoughts and delved a little deeper into the amulet. Then he rocked

back on his heels and retched again. It was impossible. The loathing that flooded his mind was overwhelming. "I can't," he groaned, dropping to his knees and letting his head fall against the rock. "It's too much."

As Caladris realised the full consequences of his failure, tears began to roll down his face. He thought of Kalaer and the prince, sacrificing themselves at his request. The prince had put all his faith in him and now he had failed. He slumped forwards and allowed the light to fade away, hiding his shame beneath a deep shroud of darkness.

Caladris was so wracked with guilt, that for a few seconds he failed to notice the sounds emerging from the shadows. Then he stiffened and held his breath. Someone was approaching. He heard several pairs of feet moving up through the darkness towards him.

He grabbed his staff and whirled around, flooding the chamber with light.

"By Asuryan," he gasped as he saw the nightmarish shapes that were clambering up the rocks. The ancient bones he had passed had somehow reassembled themselves and were lurching awkwardly towards him, like a group of dusty, rattling marionettes. As the light of his staff flashed over the bleached, gleaming bones it was reflected in fierce flames that burned in their eye sockets.

"Stay back!" he cried, jabbing his staff towards the horrors.

To his amazement, the skeletons clattered to a halt. Then one of them stepped forwards and held out a crumbling three-fingered hand.

Realisation washed over Caladris. Ancient remnants of elven armour still hung from their torsos, and rusted circlets rested on their shattered brows.

"You're the Ulthane," he whispered, lowering his staff.

The skeletons gave no reply.

Certainty gripped Caladris. As the storm of hatred and corruption battered at the edge of his mind, he felt the purity of the Ulthane's souls shining out like a beacon. He lowered his staff and held out his hand.

The strange figures continued to clatter towards him. As Caladris' eyes widened with awe, they formed a circle around him and placed their gnarled, ivory digits on his trembling shoulders.

Visions flooded the mage's mind. He saw the Ulthane as they once were: proud, beautiful and doomed, fighting back unimaginable foes and pouring their souls into the obsidian amulet. With their memories came incredible power. Caladris felt it racing through his veins and flooding his heart with unbelievable vitality. Light poured out of him with such ferocity that he became incandescent with power, burning like a sun as he turned back to the crater.

With the souls of the Ulthane reaching through him, he grasped the Phoenix Stone firmly in both hands and poured himself into it. He fell like a comet through the writhing, screaming shadows that surrounded him and allowed himself to become one with the powerful tides of magic that surrounded them. As his thoughts entwined themselves with the impossible rush of energy, Caladris began to laugh with relief and ecstasy. Finally he had the strength to hold back the cries of the daemons and begin the complicated set of incantations that would bind him to the stone.

Time became abstract as he quickly muttered his spell and drew burning shapes in the stale air. Only seconds had passed, but he felt as though Ulthane had been with him for centuries, lending him all their wisdom and strength so that their ancient vows would not be undone.

As the spell neared its completion, something tugged at the edges of Caladris' mind, something metallic and harsh that rippled through the dazzling runes he had drawn. He tried to ignore it, desperate to complete the ritual now that he was so close, but the disturbance grew in magnitude, scattering his thoughts and causing him to cry out in frustration. He reluctantly pulled himself back from the swirling abyss and turned his focus on the jarring intrusion. It was a bell. Tolling like the end of the world. *Doom*, it cried, shattering his spells with its rolling, ominous tones. As the sound pounded against Caladris' mind, he clutched at his temples, forgetting his purpose and dropping to the ground with an agonised scream.

The mage's staff clattered away across the stones and the chamber was flooded with darkness once more.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Morvane winced at the sight of his master's suffering. The mage's twisted body was trembling with pain as he rose up from the white marble floor and his hands were clasped firmly down over his ears.

"Can I help?" thought Morvane, reaching out towards the frail figure with his mind.

The mage did not answer as he looked out once more at the clear, Sapherian skies, but seemed to speak to someone else instead. "Brother," he muttered, letting his voice carry across the sea breeze. "They have so little time. You must silence the bell." The ancient mage nodded in answer to a silent reply. "I understand, but you must abandon them to their fate. The sacrifice is unavoidable. Only the white heat of Sunfang could silence such music."

At the mention of Sunfang, Morvane let out a gasp of shock. He rose to his feet just in time to catch his master as he toppled back from the window.

"I sent him too late," groaned the mage, freeing himself from his acolyte's grip. "The bridge will fall before my brother can reach them." He shook his head as he looked around the bright, sunlit chamber, as though seeing it for the first time. "What have I done?" he whispered. "What have I done?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Crush-kill!” screamed Warlord Verminkin, levelling his halberd at the few remaining elves. The tolling of the great bell had driven his army to new levels of frenzied bloodlust, but it filled him with dread. Such powerful magic was only wielded by grey seers and he could not allow them to reach the stone before he did. “Slash-hack!” he howled, clambering up on the backs of his stormvermin and kicking furiously at their crested helmets. He shook his head in disbelief. The elf-thing in the golden armour was holding back the entire army almost single-handed. A few wounded soldiers were standing with him, their backs pressed to his as their long, two-handed swords flashed back and forth; a few feet further along the narrow bridge of rock, there were a couple more, firing their remaining arrows into the advancing horde. “Kill them,” he roared, punching the metal of his own helmet in frustration, unable to believe that such a tiny group were in danger of mining his carefully laid plans.

He looked back at the horde trying to cram onto the narrow bridge. None of the faces rushing towards him seemed familiar. Then, to his absolute horror, he saw the scab-encrusted snout of his treacherous chieftain, Spinetail. “Traitor!” he screamed, pointing back at the advancing skaven. He kicked out at his stormvermin again, but this time he turned them back towards Spinetail. “Stop him!” he cried, shoving his guards back away from the elves. “Kill the traitor!”

The sound of the awful bell pealed out again as the frenzied skaven turned on each other. Verminkin and Spinetail hurled orders at their clanrats, but the whole scene quickly degenerated into complete chaos. As the air reverberated with the sound of the unholy bell, the skaven army tore into itself in an orgy of slashing claws and flashing teeth.

“Ratchitt!” cried Warlord Verminkin, trying to heave his bulk out of the toiling mass of swords and fangs. “Kill him!” he screamed, spying the engineer crouched on a rock at the side of the bridge. “Use your pistol, you worm-runt!”

The engineer nodded eagerly in reply and drew the strange, long-barrelled gun from his robes, lifting it up with obvious excitement.

Verminkin turned back towards Spinetail and grinned triumphantly. “Die, you filthy traitor! I’ve been waiting for—”

His words became a confused mumble as blood suddenly filled his mouth. He looked back at Ratchitt in confusion and saw the engineer was not pointing his gun back along the bridge, but at him. The sound of its blast had been lost beneath the tolling of the approaching bell, but as Verminkin looked down at his chest he saw a blackened, fist-sized hole in his breastplate.

“Ratchitt,” he gurgled, before tumbling back off the bridge and spinning away towards the waves and rocks below.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“We must reach the temple,” cried Captain Ulthrain as he dragged his sword from another screeching skaven. The elven reinforcements had barely made it down onto the beach and they were already mired in the bewildering, fluid mass of the skaven army. The ships’ gangplanks had poured a host of proud warriors onto the island’s unforgiving rock: archers, spearmen, silver-helmed nobles and riders from the Ellyrian plains had all rushed down onto the beach, eager to join the fray. Even by moonlight, they could see the beleaguered temple. The peninsula was less than half a mile along the coast from where they had landed and the structure looked close enough to touch, but as the dread tones of the bell rippled through the frantic vermin, the elves found it impossible to advance. Captain Ulthrain realised with horror that if he didn’t do something, they might all be butchered within sight of their own ships.

“Captain,” gasped a soldier fighting next to him. “Look.”

Ulthrain looked back out to sea and cried out with delight.

The strange ship that had been following them had reached the shore. Before its ivory prow had even scraped the shingle, a barded, snorting warhorse leapt into the waves and galloped up onto the beach. Its grim-faced rider was clad in gleaming blue and gold armour and carrying a four-foot long sword that blazed with white hot runes. He wore a dragon-crested helmet with tall ivory wings and a crimson gem mounted above the nose guard. As the knight charged past them towards the skaven, the elves began to mutter a name; it rushed through their ranks almost as fast as the knight himself, swelling in volume and certainty until it became a deafening chant that even rivalled the tolling of the bell. The knight moved so fast that it was hard to make out his face, but his regal posture and beautifully crafted armour were unmistakable.

Ulthrain shook his head in wonder and laughed as he joined his fellow soldiers in their rousing chant. “Tyrion!” he cried, as the figure stormed towards him. “Tyrion!” He cried, repeating the name again and again until the syllables burned in his throat and pounded in his heart.

The knight did not pause to acknowledge the tribute as he sped on, smashing into the frenzied skaven as calmly as if he were still riding through waves. He was moving so fast that by the time the skaven had registered his arrival, he had already carved his way through several ranks of them and reached the side of the struggling captain.

Ulthrain looked up from his sword to see a dazzling vision of elven nobility by his side. Awe gripped him and for a few seconds he could do nothing but stare at the majestic figure. As the other elves surged forwards with renewed fury, Ulthrain tried to regain his composure. He clanged his shield in salute and tried to bow as he fought. “Prince Tyrion?” he gasped, doubting the words even as he spoke them.

The knight looked down at him from his beautiful steed and nodded in reply.

Ulthrain flinched from Tyrion's gaze. The prince's eyes burned into him with such terrifying bloodlust that for a moment the captain thought the prince was about to execute him. Then Tyrion turned back towards the skaven and tore into them with a brutal series of sword strikes.

"You will not be able to reach them," said Tyrion as he dragged a skaven up by the scalp and rammed his sword through its throat. His voice was low and thick with hatred and Ulthrain was unsure if he had heard correctly.

He looked around and saw that his soldiers were now forcing back the skaven in their eagerness to reach Tyrion. Alongside the ranks of gleaming spears and fluttering banners, he saw columns of golden chariots and dazzling squadrons of armoured knights, filling the beaches with light and movement as far as the eye could see. He gasped at the beauty of it. It seemed for a moment as though the sea had spawned an army to rival the hosts of the very first Phoenix Kings. "Lead us, my lord," he cried, trembling with emotion. "With you by my side we will—"

"I cannot," said Tyrion simply.

Before the captain had chance to reply, Tyrion drove his horse on into the skaven, letting out an incoherent roar as he charged straight for the heart of the enemy forces.

"Wait!" cried Captain Ulthrain, trying to steer his own mount after the quickly vanishing rider; but it was no use. However hard he fought, the captain could not follow, and with Tyrion gone the elves soon found themselves being once more driven back towards the sea. "My Lord!" cried Ulthrain, hacking wildly at a forest of serrated blades and drooling snouts. The bell tolled again, even louder than before and he groaned in agony, clamping his hands down over his ears. "Tyrion! Don't desert us!"

Tyrion was deaf to the entreaties of his countrymen, flashing and turning as he slipped silently through the murky ranks. His speed was so great that many of the creatures barely had time to notice his passing, but his movements did not go completely unobserved. His destination was clear: the lumbering, wheeled altar that housed the bell, and the three grey-robed figures perched on its wooden frame. As Tyrion's warhorse thundered across the black rocks towards them, the grey seers screamed furiously at the skaven nearest to them, shoving them towards the elf with their staffs.

Tyrion's horse leapt clean over the heads of the cringing guards and its hooves clattered onto the wooden boards that surrounded the bell.

This close, the ringing was deafening, but Tyrion paid it no heed as he levelled his sword at the hooded skaven.

The grey seers backed away and simultaneously raised their staffs, sending a crackling stream of green lightning hurtling towards the elf.

Tyrion raised his sword flat in front of his face, as though paying homage to the cringing seers. The runes that ran along the blade flashed even brighter as the warfire slammed into it and refracted, lancing out across the battlefield in a lethal fan of emerald light. All around the scaffolding, skaven erupted into flames and toppled to the ground, surrounding the tower with a thirty-foot circle of scorched flesh. The screams of the dying were so loud that they could even be heard over the ominous tolling of the bell.

Tyrion leapt from the back of his horse and beheaded one of the grey seers with a single swipe of his sword.

As the head bounced from view, the other two priests clambered desperately up the rickety tower, cursing and hurling blasts of light down at their enemy.

Tyrion dived clear of the blasts and they engulfed the base of the tower, lighting up the wood with green fire and causing one of the wheels to collapse in a shower of flame and splinters. The force of the explosion rocked through the whole structure and the bell pitched wildly out to one side. The rat ogre that had been swinging it was hurled from the altar and without its muscle for ballast the full weight of the enormous bell was unshackled, sending it smashing through the tower and crashing down onto the rocks with a final deafening *clang*.

As Tyrion's steed leapt clear, he wrapped his arms around its neck and swung up onto its back. The horse landed several feet away from the disintegrating war machine and clattered to a halt. Tyrion looked up to see thousands of glinting red eyes staring at him in shock, as the skaven struggled to comprehend the silence he had created. Then, with an ear-splitting chorus of screams they sprang forwards.

As Tyrion vanished behind a wall of blood and teeth his laughter rang out over the clamour, echoing across the rocks as the skaven bore down on him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As he staggered back and forth across the bridge, Prince Stormrider could not be sure if the bell had really been silenced. The awful, droning sound still rang inside his head and as he reeled away from the victorious skaven, each funereal clang seemed to stop his heart. “Too late,” he muttered, as he realised the tower really had been destroyed. His shoulders sagged and his chin dropped as despair flooded through him. “We’ve already failed.” His once beautiful golden armour was now hanging from him in shards. His winged helmet had been torn from his head and his refined features had vanished beneath a mess of ragged claw marks. Mounds of butchered elves surrounded him and a little further back lay the scorched remains of his beloved griffon, Sharpclaw.

He was the last.

His slight, battered frame was all that remained between the skaven and their prize. As the prince stumbled back from the jeering multitudes, even his exhaustion could not fully numb him to the horror of their defeat.

As the skaven advanced towards him they called out in their quick, chattering language, taunting him with their screeched, incoherent cries and rattling their short, curved swords against their shields. From a few rows back, their cowardly leader shoved them forwards with its sword. The prince had singled it out a while ago. The monster’s hide was even more repulsive than that of the others, pock-ridden and moist with disease. The prince had also noted how careful the creature was to position itself well away from the frontline, keeping several of the larger, more heavily armoured soldiers in front of it at all times.

As the next wave of creatures loped towards him, the prince scraped the tip of his sword up from the floor with a weary moan. “You spineless filth,” he muttered as he forced his aching limbs into a fighting stance. As the skaven edged closer, thrusting their drooling muzzles towards him, he saw no sign of understanding in their bestial eyes, but he carried on speaking all the same. “I have strength in me yet,” he gasped, raising his sword to strike.

Before the creatures could attack, their leader called out to them with a short, gurgled command. They cringed at the sound of its voice and crouched low to the ground, backing quickly away from the prince.

The diseased skaven signalled to another diminutive figure, crouched on a rock a few yards back along the bridge. This one wore a leather mask and a pair of cracked, broken goggles. At its master’s command, it stretched its hunched, sinewy frame up from the rock and pointed a long pistol at the prince.

Stormrider looked from the creature with the gun and back to its master.

The scab-encrusted skaven glared back at him. Even the thick, battered helmet pulled down over its snout could not hide the excitement that flashed in its beady eyes.

The prince noticed that once the skaven leader had turned its gaze away from its underling, the wretched thing changed its aim and pointed the weapon at the back of its deformed leader. Its lips curled back from its fangs and a low chuckle rattled in its scrawny throat. Then it pulled the trigger.

As the gun detonated the diseased skaven chieftain roared victoriously, waving its sword over its head. Then it shouldered its way to the front of the army and let out a howl of rage as it saw that the prince remained in the centre of the bridge, swaying slightly with exhaustion, but still blocking their way.

The chieftain turned back to the figure with the gun and screamed a garbled torrent of curses at it.

The creature with the pistol was as confused as its master. As it looked down at the crumpled lump of metal in its paw, it seemed completely unaware that the recoil had dislodged a thick shard of glass from its broken goggles, and that it was now embedded deeply in its left eye. It was only as a mixture of blood and vitreous fluid began to wash over its muzzle that it let out a terrified scream.

The chieftain roared again, shoving its guards towards the screaming wretch, but before they could act, the creature with the pistol dropped its ruined weapon, leapt from the rock and sprinted from the bridge. Within seconds it had completely disappeared from view.

Prince Stormrider allowed himself a bitter laugh as the monsters turned back towards him. "If you hadn't been so busy fighting yourselves, you could have finished this hours ago," he spat, wiping a thin trail of blood from his mouth and lifting his sword once more.

As he prepared to attack, the mutated skaven chieftain let out a gasp of fear and crouched low to the ground.

Stormrider staggered towards the cringing figure, raising his sword to strike. Then he noticed that even the armour-clad guards were shuffling back in fear. Only seconds before, they had been snarling and spitting victoriously as they watched him growing weaker; now they seemed too afraid to attack. Something else was strange; the constant twilight that covered the island was lifting. He realised that the skaven were not cowering away from his sword, but from the new dawn blossoming behind him.

He looked back and squinted into the light. His eyes had become so used to the perpetual gloom that he had to shield his face with the flat of his sword before he could see anything at all. Then he reeled back in shock. Striding from the temple gates was a group of dazzling, haloed figures. The light was not from the sun at all; it was pouring from the spectral beings marching out towards the bridge. As they approached, the prince realised that they were elves, but elves like none that he had ever seen. Their insubstantial flesh shimmered and flashed with power and their noble faces shone with a god-like glory that utterly humbled him. In the face of such terrible beauty, his strength finally left him and he dropped to his knees in an act of stunned genuflection.

One of the figures seemed a little more corporeal as he strode ahead of the others, and the prince gasped as he recognised his face. “Caladris?” he gasped, squinting into the blaze.

The mage was deaf to his prince’s words. His flesh was wreathed in power and lightning sparked in the folds of his diaphanous robes. His eyes had been replaced with a pair of stars, burning with such ferocity that Stormrider found it impossible to meet his gaze.

The skaven nearest to the dazzling figures tried to flee, but with thousands of their ratkin crushed behind them, there was nowhere to go and a desperate struggle began. Their leader, meanwhile, was shaking its head in furious disbelief. It was so shocked and enraged, that it forgot its fear and began to stumble towards Caladris.

Before the skaven had got very far, the young mage raised his staff and spoke. The incomprehensible words that echoed around the rocks did not come from one throat but many. The ghostly figures behind Caladris intoned the phrase at exactly the same moment, lending his spell a terrible power.

Light poured from the bodies of the elves, channelled itself through Caladris’ staff and streamed over the head of the kneeling prince.

At the front of its army, the diseased chieftain took the full impact of the blast. Its wiry limbs shivered and danced as the energy tore through its body and spread to those around it, leaping from creature to creature and linking them into a great shimmering mass. The magic spread through the army with incredible speed, lighting up the whole coastline with a carpet of twitching, screaming shapes.

As the power enveloped it, the chieftain’s body began to stretch and bloat. Its patchy fur bulged with dozens of nascent limbs that writhed beneath its flesh, straining to be free. At first, the skaven’s eyes were filled with horror, but as its body continued to grow, it let out a giggle of pleasure. New muscles rippled over its back and it rose up above the jerking heads of its soldiers with a shiver of excitement. Within seconds it went from five foot to six foot; then seven; then ten. As the magic flooded through its body, it quickly found itself towering over even the lumbering rat ogres. Its armour exploded from its undulating muscles and its talons curled around its paws in long, bloody arcs. It glared down at the elves, exultant with power. With a roar that split the heavens, it flexed a forest of muscled arms and leant back on its heels, preparing to smash down its fists on the tiny shapes at its feet.

The skaven’s flesh could not maintain such violent growth however and as it moved to strike its fur began to split and shred. There was a wet tearing sound as its multiplying organs burst from its chest and its pendulous arms tore free of their sockets. The nest of eyes that had spread across its face rolled briefly with panic, then the whole, twisting mass of its flesh collapsed into itself, splashing blood and viscera across the bridge and down into the sea below.

With the fall of the chieftain, Caladris’ magic shone unhindered into the smouldering shapes behind. A beautiful tide of cerulean fire flooded over them, incinerating everything in its path, burning through the skaven horde. Flesh erupted like kindling and the huge machines teetered and collapsed in on themselves with a series of booming thunderclaps. For a brief moment, the clouds that perpetually shrouded the island rolled back and writhed up into a whirling vortex of light. It looked to Prince Stormrider as though the gods themselves were funnelling all their

vengeance and might down onto the heads of the scrabbling, shrieking figures that covered the island.

For a long time, Prince Stormrider lay on his back, dazed by the incredible display that had flooded over him. Even after several minutes, he could still feel the afterglow of the spell, crawling over his prone limbs, sparking between his teeth and jangling in his temples. Then a hoarse cough dragged his thoughts back to the bridge and the pile of cooling bodies that was his bed. He lifted his head with a groan and looked back towards the temple. The dazzling figures had vanished and the temple had been plunged back into darkness, but he could just about make out a slight figure, hunched and trembling as it crawled across the ancient stone towards him.

“Caladris?” he muttered, sitting up and reaching out a hand into the shadows. “Is that you?”

The mage collapsed next to him on the mound of scorched flesh and shattered shields. His face was drawn and grey but his eyes were filled with zeal. “The...” he croaked, struggling to form words with his scorched vocal cords.

The prince gripped him by the shoulder and nodded. “I know,” replied the prince. “The Ulthane.” He wiped the ash from his face and tried to smile. “I saw them. You held your promise, Caladris.”

The mage nodded weakly and slumped against him. Neither of them had the strength nor the inclination to say any more; so they simply sat there in silence, their backs together, as they watched the fire and smoke rippling across the blackened remains of their enemy. Slender, pale shapes were already picking their way through the corpses; the crews of the elven ships were finally making their slow approach towards the temple.

As the distant figures glimmered faintly in the twilight, they reminded Caladris of dispossessed spirits, searching endlessly for a home they would never see.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Warlord Verminkin peered out from the tunnel and sniffed the cool night air. For a few moments his snout twitched and bobbed at the threshold, until he was sure he was alone. Then he scampered out and rushed up onto the clifftop to look back across the sea. He flinched at the sight of the distant fires that still covered the island. Even from the safety of the mainland, he could smell the acrid stink of burning fur. He shook his head in awe at the scale of the destruction. “Dead-dead,” he muttered. “All of them.” As he pondered this fact, he began to giggle. “Dead-dead,” he repeated, with a little more enthusiasm. Green light flashed through the hole in his armour as he began scuttling back and forth along the edge of the cliff. The mangled talisman beneath his breastplate was still throbbing with power, despite having Ratchitt’s charmed shot embedded in its centre.

“Dead!” he screamed triumphantly at the distant fires. “You’re dead, Spinetail! You! Are! Dead! And Clan Klaw is mine!” The fact that he might be the clan’s only survivor did not seem to concern the warlord as he danced and sprang across the rocks. Then he paused, drumming his claws against the remnants of his helmet as a thought struck him. He spun around, looking for something, then clambered a little closer to the edge of the cliff.

The Warp-Diffusion and Discontinuity Escapement Chamber was just as they had left it. The battered brass of the cabinet was emitting a low hum and the wan light of the sphere was still pulsing over the rocks.

The warlord hesitated for a moment, eyeing the sphere with suspicion as it lit up the twisted remains of Ratchitt’s assistants. Then he let out roar of defiance and launched himself at the machine. His armour-clad bulk slammed into the metal casing, snapping the guy ropes that held it in place and sending Ratchitt’s lovingly crafted masterpiece spinning out from the cliff top in a spray of shattered glass and rotating gears. It seemed to hang in the air for a second, flashing with renewed brilliance; then it plummeted down towards the rocky shore below.

Verminkin grunted with satisfaction as the machine exploded in a ball of fire that painted the whole cliff face a sickly green. As the flames died down, he squinted out across the waves towards the island. For a few minutes nothing happened and the warlord began to fidget and mutter to himself. Then, far in the distance, a single red light pulsed into life. Verminkin gasped as another lit up, and then another. Soon, a boiling red mist surrounded the whole island. The warlord backed nervously away from the edge of the cliff. As he peered through the thick haze, he thought he could make out long, stern faces, surveying the crimson tides below. Fear gripped him and for a few seconds he was unable to move. Then he grinned and threw back his head. “You’re all dead-dead,” he screamed, levelling his meat cleaver at the island. “And Klaw is mine!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a music career so disastrous it landed him in court, Darius Hinks decided a job in publishing might be safer. Since joining the Black Library he's worked on such legendary titles as *Inquis Exterminatus* and *Liber Chaotica* as well as writing *The Witch Hunter's Handbook* and short stories for several of the Black Library's anthologies. Rumours that he still has a banjo hidden in his loft are fiercely refuted by his lawyers.

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