



WARHAMMER®

GLOTTKIN

BOOK I



GLOTTKIN

The End Times - Volume II

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I have seen the doom of man. It is written in the stars, an omen borne upon the twin-tailed comet that blazes bright across the firmament.

The barbarous tribes of the north will see it as a sign of their final victory over the world. Yet the children of the Heldenhammer shall look upon it in hope and fear alike. Hope, that it heralds the return of their most glorious champion. Fear, that it signals the death of all their kind has achieved.

And they are right to do so.

In the north, foul hordes flock to the banner of the Three-Eyed King. Like blood pulsing from a wound in the world's crown, they march south to bring the touch of Chaos to all. The Everchosen's warlords shall plunge their blades deep into the civilised realms, looting fallen empires for their own glory.

Brothers three shall bring low the Empire of Man. It is they who will muster the plague-kissed in their master's name. It is they who will cast the curse of unbound life, a curse that will bring primal disorder to a world of hard-won progress.

United, the lords of disease shall bring the Old World to the brink of ruin — ruin from within, and from without. All things clean and true shall sicken and fade. The gods of man shall fade with them, until only death holds the key to salvation.

These are the End Times.

THE SHADOWS CAST LONG

No mortal man has ever received a greater sign of the Dark Gods' favour than Archaon, the Three-Eyed King. The breach in reality that pulses at the top of the world flares brightly. One by one four great daemonic hosts are forming up before the Everchosen's throne, each led by a greater daemon exalted in its patron's sight. These immortal lords of Chaos have bent the knee to Archaon, a potent sign of the destiny that awaits.

Despite the blessing of all four of the Ruinous Powers, Archaon is content to bide his time. The tribes of the north have flung themselves headlong at the Old World before, and though they take a great tally of skulls with each invasion, they have always been broken and turned back. The Everchosen knows well that the disparate clans of the northern wastes will swear allegiance only to an ascendant leader, and that should he fall, his armies would swiftly dissolve.

The greater the signs of the coming apocalypse, the more likely the armies of the civilised world will unite against the forces of the north, and the more likely Archaon's warlords will meet their end before the time is right. With the ancient races of elf and dwarf fighting alongside the armies of the Old World, victory is an uncertain proposition. Only by isolating each of the civilised races can the Dark Gods win their true prize, and only by laying low the race of man can this world-changing feat be achieved.

This is perhaps Archaon's greatest challenge, for he is not the only mortal agent of the divine. Just as the Ruinous Powers have their champions, the deities of the Old World have their own prophets and pawns. Through dreams and visions they visit their faithful, and through omens and portents they guide the fate of the worthy. The gods that men call Sigmar, Ulric, Shallya, Taal, and the

Lady of Bretonnia make their plays, helping the civilised world to fight the powers that would claim it. This is no idle game intended to while away the centuries, for the very existences of these deities are at stake. Through the conquest of the material realm, Archaon seeks to weaken and even slay the gods and goddesses that would defend the world of order against the brutal reign of Chaos.

The Three-Eyed King is not fool enough to think he can achieve this mighty task alone. His masters expect him to grind the world beneath an iron heel, and he does not intend to fall to overconfidence as so many of his predecessors have before him. Though the magical winds rage across the world fiercer than ever before, his daemonic allies cannot be sustained indefinitely in the mortal realm, so he has marshalled a sprawling vanguard of savage hordes from amongst the maniacs and monsters of the north. His muster includes veteran warriors beyond counting, for men can be trusted where daemons cannot.

Before he rides forth, Archaon intends to weaken the Empire with the cursed magics of misrule, sending Nurgle's most gifted cursebringers to pave the way for his conquest. His plan is to drown the realm of man in plague, stealing away order wherever it can be found. Only once this entropic crusade has weakened the veil between the worlds will he strike, his daemon armies behind him.

A great and solemn geas has been placed upon Archaon – to ensure the boundaries between mortals and gods are blurred, and usher in a new age of disorder and death where the laws of nature no longer apply. His fervent desire is to plunge the world into that new age, dooming it to an eternity of madness and terror. The prize at stake is the total annihilation of the world, and he intends to seize it.

Across the Empire, wild-eyed prophets cry out that the End Times are here. Each night, the sky shimmers green-black with strange energies. Morrslieb hangs low, lending credence to the doomsayers' claims. Even the most rational scholar finds himself dwelling upon the rants of the frothing zealots roaming the roads.

There is something unsettling in the air, something indefinable. It plucks at the senses of the gifted and the dull alike. A sense of imminence pervades the Empire; imminence tinged with fear. Riders have come to the Imperial Court from every corner of the Old World and beyond. Each bears tidings more evil than the last. Tilea and Estalia are lost, swallowed up by a tide of vermin that walk as men. The sheer speed with which the southern nations have been overrun hints at an invasion long planned and pitilessly executed. The lords of Altdorf have been forced to admit that not only are the rumours of verminous rat-men likely true, but that their warrens sprawl for uncounted miles beneath the Old World.

Sylvania, a province that has always played host to unholy powers, has been consumed entirely by darkness. Little did those crusaders who marched to Sylvania's salvation realise that its doom was but a single stage of a far greater plan. In a plot to restore their master Nagash to glory, the Great Necromancer's Mortarchs lured nine priests and priestesses into their clutches and used the potency of their blood to conduct a great ritual of resurrection. In this manner the horror of Nagash was released once more upon the world.

Nagash's first act as monarch of the dead was to absorb the howling gales of death magic raging around Sylvania. Heading south across the Worlds Edge Mountains, the Great Necromancer used his newfound

power to subjugate and destroy his old foes, the Tomb Kings of Nehekhara. In his absence, Nagash's Mortarchs tighten his vile grip upon the Empire by raising undead across its reaches. Yet all nine Mortarchs have agendas of their own. Both Mannfred and Vlad von Carstein, for their part, would each see the realms of man obedient to their master, with them as the power behind the throne. They will stop at nothing to ensure it.

Still the Chaos-worshipping tribes of the north pound relentlessly against the borders of civilisation. They have torn down Kislev, stained countless acres with innocent blood, and slaughtered their way from one side of the Ice Queen's realm to the other.

The armies of the Elector Counts have mustered to repel the invaders in the far north, led by the warrior priest Luthor Huss and his protégé Valten. The Empire's armies have anchored their defences upon the Auric Bastion, a great wall raised not by the toil of masons, but by the artifice of wizards and priests.

Yet, as impressive as this wall has proven to be, it cannot hold back the winds of plague. With the faith that provided its mortar eroded by the dark energies swilling on either side, the Auric Bastion has weakened, and the armies of the Dark Gods have made haste to break through. Only the valiant deaths of thousands of men have held them back, and even then, only for a time.

As has always been the way, the victories won against the northern hordes have been bought at a high price. Karl Franz himself led the Reiksguard in their final assault, taking a deadly toll on the northmen's ranks. But the Emperor's bravery was his undoing. At the climax of the battle, Karl Franz was impaled by the sword of the vampire duellist, Walach Harkon. To the dismay of his armies, he fell from the saddle of his griffon to the earth, and is now thought lost.

The Reiksmarshal, Kurt Helborg, made haste back to Altdorf in the hope of restoring order in his master's absence. When he reached the Imperial Palace, he found the Emperor's advisors fighting tooth and nail in pursuance of their own agendas. Graf Boris Todbringer would turn every sword in Middenheim to the destruction of his nemesis, Khazrak One-Eye. The Supreme Patriarch, Gregor Martak of the Amber College, claims the beastmen are a far wider threat than even the Graf realises. Counts Ludenhof and Liebwitz counsel aid from the Elves, the Dwarfs, the Bretonnians, even the Halflings of the Moot, whilst the Cult of Sigmar believes that faith alone can hold back the encroaching darkness. Only dimly do the nobles of the Empire realise that, by standing divided, they weaken the realm they hope to defend.

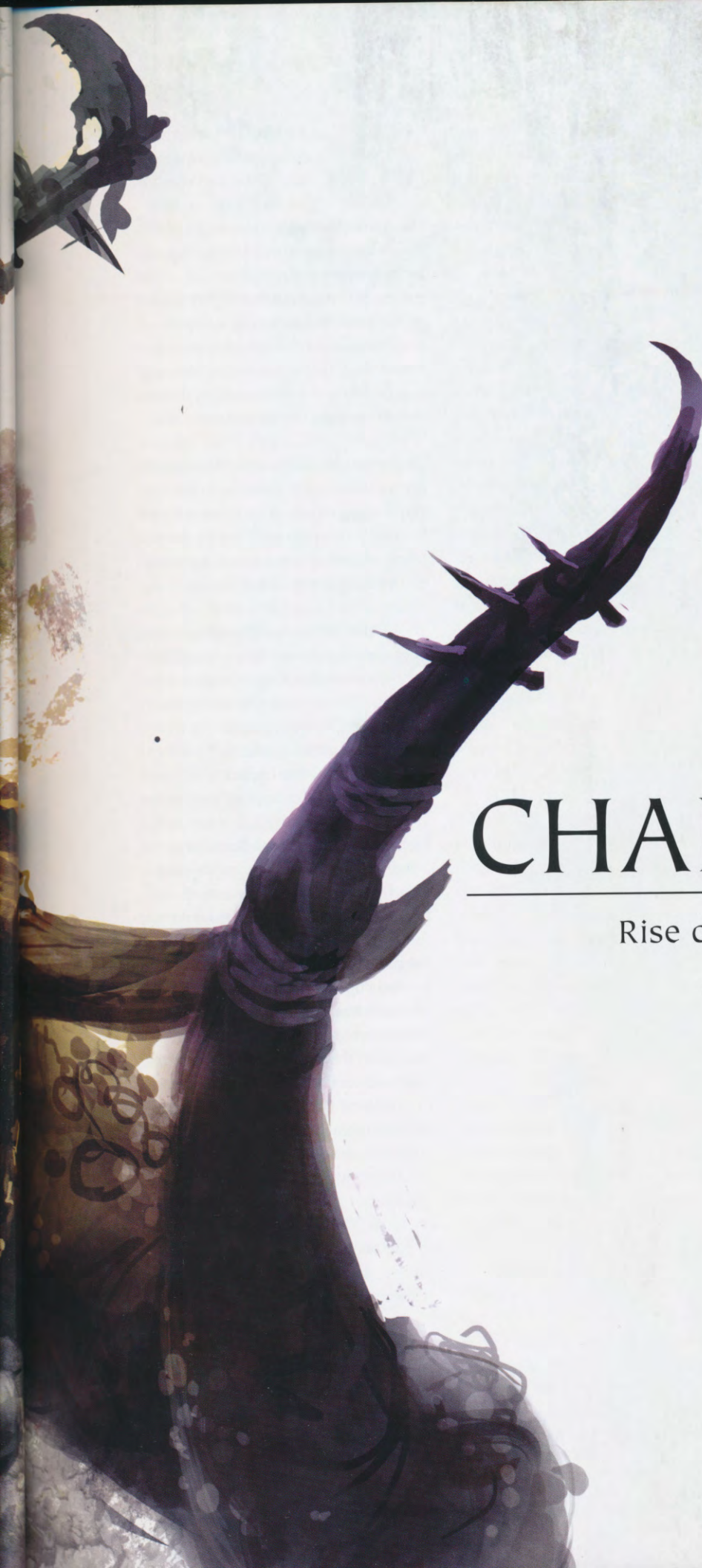
The forces of evil have been repelled before, as every minstrel loves to tell. But the armies of the Empire are spread thin, for the battle is waged within as well as without. Cultists and wizards hearken to the whispers of daemons, parasitic sorcerers work to the ruin of the cities that hide them, and bestial shamans summon their own grotesque allies to the coming feast. Every night the pyres of the Witch Hunters burn bright. Yet the righteous can do little more than prune the tree of heresy that has taken root in their realm, for the reach of the Dark Gods is long indeed.

As the citizens of the Old World struggle against the violence within, the north broods beneath the thunder of wars yet to come. A twin-tailed comet blazes across the arctic skies, leaving flickering runes that spell portents of doom in its wake. For once, the fractious northern tribes stand united, for even the basest shamans and soothsayers can feel change on the wind.

This is a war of life and death, though not in the way the Empire suspects...







CHAPTER 1

Rise of the Glottkin

Spring 2525



As Morrslieb swelled full in the night skies above the northern wastes, a thousand shamans chanted and shrieked in ragged unison. The chant was taken up by a million-strong choir of daemons, shrouded by the blizzards of the north yet yearning for battle nonetheless. Each host sang praise to the Dark Gods, the whole blending together into a mind-numbing discord that bedevilled the mortal mind.

These fell chansons were borne south on invisible winds, drifting to the slumbering minds of all those who felt the touch of unreality. One by one the seeds of lunacy were sown, nurtured by the light of the Chaos Moon.

The trickle of madmen heading north became a flood, and many found their way to the ranks of the savage tribes beyond. The traitors and turncoats within the Empire were uniting with the hordes without, and, with every new addition to his hordes, Archaon's grand plan grew nearer to completion.

Each of the four Chaos Gods has adopted human champions in order to further his earthly interests in the Great Game. Across the world there are those who have given themselves utterly to their god and earned supernatural favour in return. Archaon knew well that there were whole armies of such individuals abroad in the north – hordes of brass-clad warriors whose souls belonged to the Blood God, hosts of sensation-seekers who cared only for what their Dark Prince could deliver them, and cabals of cultists that worshipped the Changer of the Ways regardless of his form. Though these men claimed to pay obeisance to the Everchosen's throne, Archaon knew they only truly respected those of a similar mind.

In order to better harness these blasphemous faithful, the Everchosen raised up warlords in his own image and sent them south – lieutenants who were dedicated wholly to a single

power, but could be trusted to bring ruin to the mortal world even should Archaon himself be slain.

Khorne's own swordmaiden, the Gorequeen Valkia, already assailed the icy wastes of Naggaroth at the head of her Bloodied Horde. Upon the shores of Kislev, Sigvald the Magnificent impressed his master Slaanesh with ever more imaginative acts of slaughter and debasement. Those armies devoted to Tzeentch were led south by the twisted twin, Vilitch the Curseling, though in truth neither Archaon nor Vilitch was sure who was pulling whose strings in the webs sewn by the Architect of Fate. Only the followers of the Plague God lacked a war leader, directionless since the death of Festak Krann at the Auric Bastion. Yet Nurgle's entropic might and boundless vigour had to be harnessed if Archaon was to bring about the doom of the world.

The Everchosen understood the Great Game better than most, perhaps better than any mortal alive. Without a dedicated war leader to represent the interests of Nurgle, the fourfold union he sought would soon be torn apart. It was vital he find a champion worthy to represent the Lord of Decay.

Gathering the fastest riders the horse-tribes could provide, Archaon sent hunters searching for a champion with might enough to bring eternal glory to Nurgle. Every day came rumour of a new warlord, each more putrescent than the last. Yet their ambitions were pedestrian, limited to physical conquest and battle alone. A true believer was needed for the coming era of war.

It was no mortal messenger that brought Archaon the force of destruction he sought. As Morrslieb shimmered green upon the ice and the twin-tailed comet blazed bright overhead, Ku'gath Plaguefather appeared before the Everchosen's throne. He bore gifts from the Lord of Decay himself; three ceramic jars that

each contained a plague that would not only affect men, but the substance of the lands and the skies above.

In the wake of Ku'gath's surreal visitation, Archaon made haste into the wastes. The Everchosen now knew exactly which mortal champions had the eye of the Plague God – the strange triplets known as the Glottkin.

A complex plan coalesced in the labyrinth of Archaon's mind. He would send the Brothers Glott into the Old World, accompanied by the most ambitious warlords he could find. Those hot-headed tribes too restless or disobedient to wait any longer would form the vanguard armies. The Glottkin would be given overall command of the initial invasion. At the heart of each invading army would be one of the three plague jars that Ku'gath had given into the Everchosen's care. These would be carried into the Empire by Nurgle's blessed armies, and their contents used to assail the nation.

With this vanguard invasion of Nurgle worshippers, Archaon would test the civilised world's defences. With disease ravaging their realm, the scions of order would be forced to show their hand and lose countless lives along the way. In this they would open the gate that led to the conquest of the entire world, for the race of man has long been the binding force between the races of Elf and Dwarf.

If the Brothers Glott were too successful in their cause, Archaon would swiftly head south and deal the killing blow to the Empire himself. If the triplets were instead repelled by the defenders of the south, they would leave the Empire a plague-riddled shadow of its former grandeur, a shattered realm ripe for conquest.

With visions of worldwide devastation whirling in his mind, Archaon climbed upon the back of his steed, Dorghar, and rode out to find the chosen champions of Nurgle.

Deep in the sewers of Altdorf, a lone figure sloshed its way through the muck. As fat-bodied and repulsive as the giant leeches that writhed beneath his robes, the figure sang little snatches of Nordlander nonsense rhymes.

'Bleeders without blood-holes,' he mumbled, stroking the leech curled around his neck like a slimy scarf. 'Lesions, coughs and nasty sneezes, handkerchiefs and bad diseases.'

'Good diseases!' bellowed a disembodied voice.

An antlered head the size of a boulder rose slowly through the sewage. It was followed by glinting black eyes and a grin that drizzled rot.

'Antlers...' said the robed figure. 'Art thou Ku'gath Plaguefather?'

'Thus!' boomed the Great Unclean One, as if pleased by the answer to a riddle. 'Doctor Fest, I well presume!'

'It's Festus, dear fellow,' said the doctor, sketching a small curtsy. 'At your service. It is well that I finally meet my generous benefactor.'

'It is indeed a wellspring! I bring glad tidings. I propose a posy of flesh blossoms, sniffled by the noses of the north.'

'Do you indeed? And who carries these new plagues?'

'Triplets! Gifted lobes a-three,' said Ku'gath conspiratorially. 'Glottkin, they are called. I have gifted the Everchase with their name – and as a treat, three jars abrim from father's attic. Time to spread wide the banquet of life!' He threw his immense arms open, spraying Festus with brown slop.

'And my part?' said Festus, wiping ordure from his eye.

'My leechling, we must prepare this stifled city. A riotous garden it shall become!'

Festus smiled, the seed of a new vision planted in his soul.

Another wave of tribesmen surged up the boulder-strewn hill towards the three figures silhouetted against the sky. From the flagstones of the shrine cresting the peak, Otto Glott grinned down at the blood-covered masks growling up at him. A carpet of tattooed corpses lay sprawled between the shrine's pillars, each one a gratifyingly messy kill. He scratched lazily at the warts on his wattled neck.

'Come forwards, my battle-hungry friends,' he boomed. 'It is a fine day, and my brothers and I will gladly help you to your graves!'

Otto chuckled fondly. These so-called Red Reavers clearly thought the Glottkin would tire; that eventually Nurgle's favoured grandchildren would let themselves be overwhelmed. The marauders were sorely mistaken.

Otto rested his rust-pocked scythe against his shoulder, took off his helmet and spat a bloody clot of infected phlegm toward the largest of the tribesmen below. It hit home in the champion's eye with a fat slap. Enraged, the bloodstained brute bounded up from the ranks of his fellows with a roar of anger.

'Predictable,' chuckled Otto, replacing his helm and sweeping his scythe low. The Reaver's head popped off like a cork from a bottle of bad wine. Spurting blood, it bounced off a spiked pillar and disappeared into the throng.

More tribesmen followed close behind. Their muscular torsos were laid open to the spine as Otto swung his scythe in a powerful arc.

'You believe your simpleton blood god is stronger than Father Nurgle himself?' shouted Otto. 'Today we Glottkin will teach you that it is Khorne who is truly weak!'

Otto set his feet and prepared to meet the tribesmen he had goaded forward. Beside him, his brother Ethrac raised a gnarlwood staff.

'Blood must pulse, in death convulse,' the sorcerer whispered from the thin slit of his mouth. 'Mouldered bone and nothing else!'

Moments later a knot of tribesmen charging towards Otto stumbled to a halt and shivered hard before exploding in a shower of gore. Splinters of rotting bone flew out in all directions, sinking into the flesh of the northmen crammed in close.

'Ghurk, show them your gifts,' said Otto. A moment later the giant, muscular hulk that was Ghurk Glott slammed down into the massed survivors, his misshapen arms flying left and right as he crushed warriors into the dirt. Otto's brother might have been a boulder of rotting flesh with the temper of a wounded bull, but witnessing him putting his dread strength to use always put a hideous smile on his brother's face.

Otto shoved a pair of charging tribesmen down the boulder-strewn cliff as Ghurk snatched a wheeling horseman from the saddle and smashed him head first into the ground. The enemy fell back in confusion, and Otto smiled wryly to see the hand of another would-be champion of Khorne sticking out from beneath his brother's buttocks.

'Let us ascend, my brothers!' he said, motioning to his brother Ethrac to join him. Otto stepped onto Ghurk's broad shoulders and swung his scythe blade low, cutting open the chests of a handful of Reavers that were trying to bar their path.

'ENOUGH!'

The booming voice rang out, its thunder loud enough to shake the scree from the shrine's sides.

Otto blinked in shock, his knees buckling as the Red Reavers stopped and lowered their axes. Somehow the irresistible authority of the newcomer's command had blown away the clouds of their battlelust.

As one, the tribesmen shuffled and parted, their eyes cast down. A heartbeat later, the causeway to the shrine's top was clear. At its far end, Otto could see a figure of such undeniable majesty that all three of the Glottkin knelt in deference.

Archaon, Lord of the End Times, had come.







The Glottkin returned to Fjordlingtribe just before dawn. Though they had sought the gaze of the gods at Dead Man's Shrine, they had instead found the blessing of Archaon himself. The triplets were to lead a threefold invasion into the heartlands of the Old World, a plague-filled jar entrusted not only to the Glottkin but also to the warlords of two other armies. All that remained was to gather the tribes for war and set sail.

Riding through the Fjordlingtribe's camp upon Ghurk's shoulders, Otto beheaded his would-be usurper Eofric the Giant as soon as the warrior emerged from his tent. The warlord impaled his rival's severed head upon the point of his scythe and hoisted it up, tying it by its snow-white braid to the haft. Ghurk gobbled down Eofric's decapitated body whilst the rest of the tribe's elders looked on. No one raised a single blade against them.

Word of the Glottkin's return to the fjords of Norsca spread quickly. It did not hurt their cause that each tribe's rune-casters and shamans had seen visions of their coming. They supported their claims to leadership, preaching that the Glottkin were god-touched by Nurgle, and had the blessing of the Everchosen himself. Many tribes united behind them without a second thought, smelling blood on the wind. Dozens of warbands devoted to Nurgle also bore down upon Fjordlingtribe, rejoicing in the vile gifts they would bestow upon the clean-limbed wastrels of the south. Seen from above, the trails of stained snow and bloody slush that converged upon the Glottkin's fjordmuster looked very much like an eight-pointed star.

The triplets were only too happy to gather new allies to their side. Much as the brothers loved each other, they often fell to argument upon the road, and the company of fresh blood was a welcome prospect. Ethrac spoke in riddles half the time, delighting in the use of terms and words he knew

his brothers did not understand. Otto was the most senior of the three, and never let his siblings forget it, despite having come from his mother's womb mere seconds before his brothers. He believed himself the true leader and visionary of the Glottkin, much to Ethrac's annoyance.

Ghurk was another matter, for he made little more than feeding sounds these days. Once the smallest of the three brothers, he had grown so large on his constant diet of raw flesh that lately his siblings had taken to riding him into battle as a steed. The mirth they shared at Ghurk's fate was often strained, though, for before giving his soul to Nurgle their brother had once been a handsome young man, his easy smile the bane of womenfolk from Urfjord to Whale Island. That time was long past. Since Nurgle had embraced him, Ghurk had become a monster with an appetite to match.

Despite their frictions, the brothers gathered the tribes soon enough. Score upon score of warbands and tribes swore fealty to the Glottkin, hammering three nails – one to represent each triplet – into their staves and bannerpoles as a sign of their allegiance. Setting out from Fjordlingtribe, the Glott brothers forged an alliance with Gutrot Spume, the Lord of Tentacles, by dragging a captured mutalith to the titanic ribcage that formed his lair. Spume sacrificed the vortex beast to Nurgle on a great pyre, claiming it would see his ships sail with a favourable wind in the voyage to come. This was welcome news, for though Gutrot Spume had several thousand warriors at his command, it was his fleet that the Glottkin needed most of all.

It had long been said that there were more ships in Gutrot Spume's fleet than ice trolls in the Clawfjord. They stood at anchor in the Sea of Claws, which was well for the Glottkin, for the invading armies would need every vessel they could get their diseased hands on in the coming weeks.

It was less than seven days before the Norscans made ship. The tribes that had followed the Glottkin to the shale beaches were too numerous to count. Graelings, Bjornlings, Skaelings, Vargs, Baersonlings, Aeslings, Sarls; the list went on. Ethrac made a great show of knowing every banner and sigil by name, though in truth, by the end of the fjordmuster even he had to employ a measure of guesswork. By the look of it, every tribe within a hundred leagues had mustered to the Glottkin's side.

Last to arrive were the maggoth riders of Icehorn Peak. Borne to the fjords by the eyeless monsters that haunted their mountainous homes, they were few in number, but mighty in aspect. Their favour in the eyes of Nurgle was obvious, writ large upon the flaccid folds of the riders' faces and the mould-pocked horns that stretched from their skulls. If any were left in doubt, the opened guts and vomit-drooling mouths of their riding beasts made their allegiance plain.

At their head rode the living legend that was Orghotts Daemonspew, a horned warrior famed for having the ichor of the damned flowing through his veins. The Glotts were so impressed by the deadly potential of the Icehorn riders that they offered Orghotts Daemonspew command of the third of the armies, destined to take the Empire from the east. The maggoth rider spat a sizzling gobbet of sulphurous blood into his palm, shaking Otto's bloated paw. In the process, the Glotts completed their triumvirate of plaguemasters – one for each of the lobes of their patron's fly-symbol.

As the tribes boarded the vessels at Fjord's Edge, it became obvious that not only were Gutrot Spume's warships ugly and rotten, they also stank to high hell. It made little difference to the scions of Grandfather Nurgle, for the worship of their deity had given them a fine appreciation for the scent of decay.

At the diseased heart of the Lord of Tentacles' armada was the plague ship *Rotten Beast*. That evening it carved through the waves at the head of the fleet, leaving a thick trail of seaborne filth in the waters behind it. From his vantage point on the deck of the *Greenwolf*, Otto swore he could see something fleshy pulsing in the gaps that had been torn in the *Beast's* sides.

The Sea of Claws had long been full of perils, infested with abyssal beasts that could hole a galleon's timbers with the flick of a tentacle. More dangerous still, in recent decades it had played host to mist-wreathed fleets from Ulthuan. The agents of Finubar the Seafarer, most gifted of all the world's admirals, purposefully hunted down the wolf ships of the north whenever they strayed into the oceans of the world.

By clinging to the coastline the plague fleet could avoid losses of manpower to the ever-vigilant Elves, but in doing so, they would put themselves in range of the sea fortresses and cannon-studded watchtowers that protected Nordland's coast. Otto and Ethrac advised a cautious crossing, attempting to evade Ulthuan's navy if at all possible.

The Lord of Tentacles would hear none of it, however. His was the mightiest fleet in Norsca, supported by fell magicks of its own, and it would not bow before the mere spectre of Elven cunning. Summoning his own sorcerous companions to his side, Gutrot Spume muttered an arcane incantation that even Ethrac did not fully understand.

As the fleet crossed the deepest part of the Sea of Claws, clouds of white mist began to roll across the waves towards them. Svelte shadows slid through the thickening fog, the hulls of Elven eagle ships barely visible as they prowled in the distance. A series of low thuds cut through the creak of rigging and the moans of disease-wracked oarsmen, and the gunwale of

the *Greenwolf* sprouted a trio of Elven bolts as long as spears. More bolts sailed overhead, impaling the lookouts in each crow's nest.

A foul reek filtered through the mist that was slowly consuming their fleet, its scent so pungent it was almost tangible. Seven pillars of thick grey-green smoke billowed up from Gutrot Spume's flagship and began to writhe with a life of their own, questing through the white mists like the tendrils of an undersea predator.

The Glottkin watched in appreciative silence as the tentacles of green smoke grew more and more substantial. A series of muffled commands came from the elven fleet, and a moment later volleys of bolts whistled out at the tentacles writhing and snaking through the mist. They passed through them without inflicting a scratch, disappearing into the waters beyond.

In return the greenish tendrils wrapped themselves around the crews of the enemy fleet, suffocating them with their gaseous forms until the decks of the elven warships were littered with corpses.

One of the Ulthuani vessels sailed in close for a boarding action, but it found itself caught by a lashing nest of pseudopods that burst from the *Rotten Beast*. Its masts were snapped clean in half and its decks splintered by foul-smelling tentacles, tumbling dozens of desperate elves into the frothing seas. One of the tentacles reared back, severed by a flashing blade, and the others thrashed all the harder. As the sleek boat was broken to tinder, its fellow vessels swiftly turned about and melted away into the distance.

The Glottkin held up their blades in salute to Gutrot Spume's sorcerous victory. So much for the vaunted navy of the elves. No doubt the Empire's defenders would be in for an equally unpleasant surprise.

The day after the plague armada had bullied its way through the elven navy, it separated into three distinct fleets. The first contained a teeming host under the command of the Glottkin, and its ships headed around the coast for the merchant city of Marienburg. The second, comprised of the elite warriors of Gutrot Spume, headed straight for Nordland – they were to take the Old Dwarf Road, fighting their way due south to Altdorf. The third force sailed towards the Gulf of Kislev, for its commander, Orghotts Daemonspew, intended to land near Erengard and lead his maggoth riders deep into the Empire.

With this tripartite invasion and the plague jars they carried, the Glottkin would not only send a wave of disease spreading out across the lands, but also split the Empire's armies across a wide front. Once they had fought their way through the thinned-out armies of Karl Franz's realm, the Glottkin intended to drive their invasion right into Altdorf itself, all three of the hordes converging on the Empire's capital on Geheimnisnacht. Ethrac suspected that the Lord of Decay himself had a hand in this plan, and that his most trusted agents were working to bring it to fruition from within the city as well as without. Nurgle coveted the city of Altdorf – and what it represented – most highly.

As the cruel winter turned to the spring of 2525, the Glottkin's fleet sailed around the Norscan coast and began to seek land. Soon their lookouts spotted masts and steam-cranes dotting the horizon, evidence of Marienburg's merchantmen sailing the trade routes to Lustria, Ulthuan and beyond. It would be a simple enough matter to sack those ships, looting them and tracing their passage back inland.

Nearing the Marienburger vessels, the invaders chanted and beat their weapons against their shields in anticipation of the carnage to come.

War-bells rang out all across Marienburg's famous sprawl as the masts of the Glottkin's fleet crested the horizon. Scores of storied guard detachments mustered in the streets and plazas shoulder to shoulder with hired swords and militia companies, banners fluttering in the foul-smelling wind that bore the plague fleet inland.

Out in the bay, the captains of the cityport's merchant fleet fired volleys from their gun decks, hoping to buy time for the Marienburger armies massing on the quays. Their cannon fire blasted through many of the rotten hulks bearing down upon them, but the plague ships proved uncannily resilient, and few craft sank outright.

On the waves as well as on dry land, the Glottkin were unstoppable. Their flagship, the *Greenwolf*, ploughed straight through the poorly-organised blockades that attempted to slow its passage. Behind them the plague fleet hammered its own disparate cannonades into the merchantmen coming about to stop it.

Steam-cranes captured from the merchant ships seized in their approach were unslung, their



greathooks and hempen ropes loaded into crude siege catapults. One after another each crane-hook was flung outward towards the Marienburg ships. Most missed their targets, but a handful crashed through the timbers of the warships cordoning the bay. With a terrible slowness, the plague ships began to winch the enemy vessels closer like fishermen bringing home their catch. Naval cannons barked their protestations, filling the air with roiling gun-smoke. Wherever their roundshot struck home, the hulls of the plague ships would ooze a thick, slimy caulk that dried quickly to seal over the splintered wound.

The barnacle-encrusted ships drew their prey in close with the treacle-slow pace of a nightmare. Even the most hard-bitten sailor was little match for the armoured champions of the north, and wherever a boarding plank was finally lowered the waves below it soon turned pink with the blood of the fallen. Predatory fish thrashed and spasmed in the froth, but even these vicious beasts soon became victims of the fleet's pollution, their distended white bellies turning upward as they succumbed to the vileness around each warship's hull.

Aboard the *Greenwolf*, the Glottkin frowned at the sea wall of Marienburg that lined the horizon. This was a measure of defence they had not foreseen, for the word in the north was that Marienburg was a city of weaklings ripe for the sacking. Yet the wall was as thick and resolute as the dwarf masons that had crafted

it so long ago. Behind the docks it protected, the cityport soared upward, a vast island of glorious civilisation in a bay of marshlands.

The only way into the city was through the gap in the dwarfen sea wall known as the Ostport, and even that was lined with enough cannons to arm a fortress. The wall was so well designed it had stood firm against all the horrors the ocean could throw against it over the centuries.

Puffs of smoke appeared from the ramparts of the sea wall, and cannonballs roared towards the Norscan fleet a heartbeat later, tearing sails, holing hulls and smashing smaller vessels to flinders. A captured outrigger drew in close, its crew hurling grapnels onto the edge of the formidable sea wall. Before a single man had climbed onto the ropes, a salvo of helblaster fire stitched a line of geysers in the seawater that tore the vessel in half and sent its passengers flying.

Ethrac mumbled strange syllables as he carefully loaded the first of Archaon's plague urns into the largest of the *Greenwolf's* siege catapults. The sorcerer turned to his brother, eyes twinkling with joyous malice. All three of the triplets were looking forward to seeing what Nurgle's generosity had bestowed upon them.

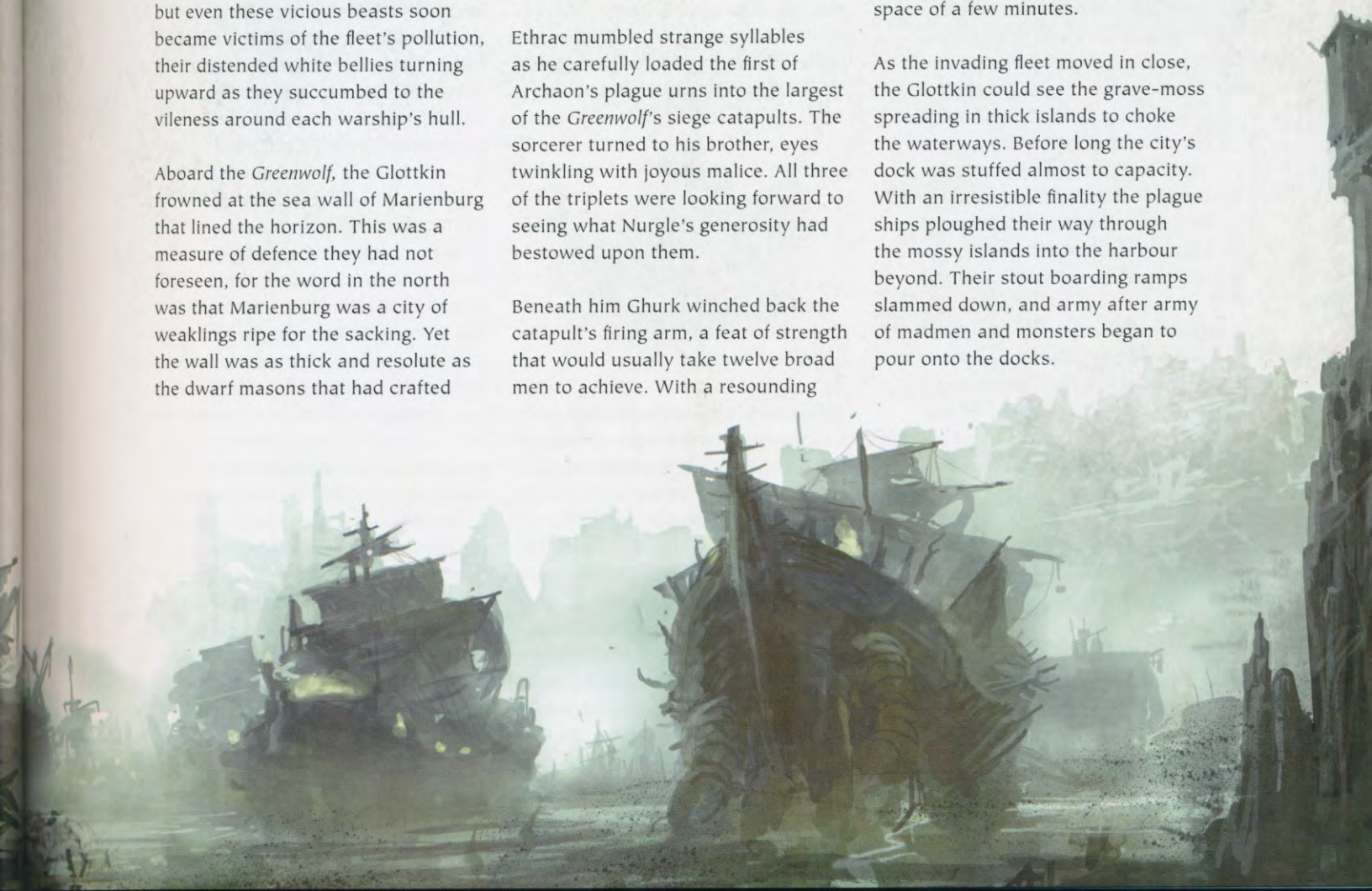
Beneath him Ghurk winched back the catapult's firing arm, a feat of strength that would usually take twelve broad men to achieve. With a resounding

twang, the urn was fired. It sailed high over the stone of the sea wall, leaving a thick trail of corruption in the air before disappearing from sight.

The sudden stench of mouldering vegetation filled the air as the jar burst open beyond the wall. Ethrac giggled softly, Otto guffawing at his side as Marienburg's defences turned black with growth. Something dark was claiming the brickwork with frightening speed, spreading out like a lifetime's growth condensed into a few seconds. The invaders could smell the peaty scent of grave-moss over the salty tang of brine.

The invaders watched in disbelief as the dwarf-made sea wall began to sag a little, and then to crumble away. Incredibly, the moss-plague had inveigled its tiny roots into the invisible cracks between the dwarf masonry. There the black moss grew thick with irresistible urgency, splitting the stone and doing the work of several millennia's erosion in the space of a few minutes.

As the invading fleet moved in close, the Glottkin could see the grave-moss spreading in thick islands to choke the waterways. Before long the city's dock was stuffed almost to capacity. With an irresistible finality the plague ships ploughed their way through the mossy islands into the harbour beyond. Their stout boarding ramps slammed down, and army after army of madmen and monsters began to pour onto the docks.



All across the sprawl of the Suiddock, steel flashed in the streets. Regiment after regiment of infantrymen trampled down the vile-smelling growths of grave-moss that had sprouted across their city as they took up position in the mouth of each road and alleyway. Behind them was a tangled network of winding streets and cobbled plazas that led to mercantile halls and the guild-houses of the phenomenally rich.

The plague fleet's advance toward the cityport had been unstoppable but slow, and the merchant princes of the city had been afforded plenty of time to organise their defences. On the edges of each dock the shrill sea-whistles of Marienburger captains blasted out, marshalling pockets of order as brightly uniformed reinforcements shored up the cityport's defences. Behind them came soldier companies by the score, each bearing a proud standard that proclaimed its skill in the arts of war. There were plenty more of them bobbing in the streets beyond, fanning out across the city to block the incursion's progress should it break through the thick defensive lines that had been formed across the quayside. By the time the Norscan tribes had stormed onto the quayside, the dockyards had been quarantined by a wall of blades. Yet against the savagery of the north, order could only stand inviolate for so long.

After being cooped up for weeks, each of the northern tribesmen that stormed out onto the Marienburg docks was hungry for battle. The warriors of the north charged forward in an undisciplined rabble, their axes and voices raised to the glory of the gods. The first few hundred were killed within seconds as handguns and great cannons alike blasted them into the sea.

Behind the first wave of attackers, more plague ships crunched bodily onto the harbourside with every passing minute. Tribesmen spilled

over their gunwales like broth from a boiling cauldron, a tide of flesh pouring onto the dockyard planks that mouldered below. Those not broken by the fall picked themselves up and charged forwards, only to be spitted upon a forest of spears that pressed them back wherever they struck. Even when the heavily-armoured champions of each tribe stormed into the fray they were met by thickets of lowered halberds, their visors pierced and guts opened by the punching polearms of their foes.

Standing tall on the deck of the *Greenwolf*, the Glottkin ordered their jarls to bring up their newest weapon – a set of writhing, translucent sacs they had collected from the bilge-prison that had held Ghurk during the sea voyage. Each sac's inhabitants had once been a man, before the mutant Glott had swallowed them whole and passed them back out as something much worse. At Otto's command the dockyard cranes on the deck of the *Greenwolf* were detached from the siege catapults. The Ghurk-sacs were loaded into the firing arms of each artillery piece, jarls struggling under the weight of each fleshy pod.



With a series of resounding thumps the catapults discharged their cargos. The sacs sailed over the front lines, splatting down into the gutters behind. Only a few Marienburgers were caught by the bombardment, knocked into the dirt by the strange missiles or broken under their gross weight. With their attention fixed on the scene ahead, the defenders that marched through the Suiddock streets ignored the piles of tangled limbs that had thudded down into their midst.

It was a fatal mistake. Those of the sacs that had splashed down into the red-brown sludge of the gutters hungrily absorbed the filth that flowed around them, swelling dramatically until their inhabitants burst from their glistening prisons in explosions of flailing limbs. Wet mouths opened in the monstrosity distorted spawn that tumbled forth, each gutterling screaming its outrage to the uncaring skies before falling upon the rear of the Marienburger lines in a frenzy.

A great roar of bloodlust resounded across the waters of the harbour as the massed vanguard of the north redoubled their attacks. Hundreds of armour-clad murderers brought hooked halberds of their own into the fray, and crowds of howling tribesmen smashed flails into those foolish enough to stand before them. The confusion that the gutterlings' attack had inflicted was a weapon in itself, just as the Glottkin had surmised. The chorus of screams that rose above the cityport's rooftops caused the defenders to waver – and then, as a massed charge of Nurgle's chosen plunged into the fray – to break. Disorder and confusion reigned on either side of the Reik's great watercourse as accursed mutant warriors and bloody-eyed tribesmen threw themselves into battle. Everywhere the invaders were breaking through, filling the streets with a barbaric tide of flesh that showed no signs of stopping. The soldiery of the south thrived on discipline, but after the unstoppable force of the Glottkin's assault, there was precious little left.

Ethrac shivered with the effort of casting a spell. The sorcerer threw his head back and screamed, a cloud of green-black murk pouring out from between his bloodied lips. The cloud grew thicker before billowing out towards the Marienburg docks. Nodding his approval, Otto stamped three times on the planks with his iron-shod foot. A moment later, Ghurk burst out from the hull of the

Greenwolf in a spray of splintered spars and lumbered onto the creaking timbers of the dock. The mutant had grown even in their passage across the Sea of Claws, now easily the size of some of the fisherhouses that dotted the harbour.

Calling down a warning, Otto vaulted over the gunwale of his ship and landed heavily between Ghurk's mighty shoulders with his scythe raised above his head. His lumpen brother grunted his displeasure, but Otto ignored him, motioning up to Ethrac. The sorcerer drifted down as if carried by an ethereal hand to settle next to Otto on Ghurk's back.

Up ahead, Ethrac's conjured cloud began to rain nameless black fluids onto the uniformed troops marching down Suidstrasse. At first, only a handful of southerners dropped to their knees, coughing up blood. A few moments later a scattering more had fallen, then a crowd. Those that had succumbed to the cloud's vile contagions found clusters of boils bubbling across their skin, blistering their tongues and gumming their eyelids shut. The regiment's champion shouted hoarsely in an attempt to restore order, but it was no use.

His brothers holding on tight to the horns sprouting from his hackles, Ghurk hit the Marienburger line with the force of a rolling boulder. Half a dozen diseased soldiers were bowled out of his way in a moment, swept aside by great flabby limbs. The mutant's tentacle-arm carved through shop fronts and ranks of soldiers alike, pulverising the helmeted veterans that were trying desperately to get past. One of the men sailed into the ranks of the mercenaries behind, and the newcomers recoiled in horror at the blood heaving from his lungs.

Otto locked his leg around one of the horns protruding from Ghurk's back and leaned out wide. He swung his scythe in an arc that took one man's head and opened the throat of

another. As his nocked blade ended lives left and right, Ethrac's foul cloud moved onward, drizzling its brackish fluids across rooftops and cobbles as it went. The barking coughs of the infected were spreading fast across the battlefield, but the Glottkin had ears only for the word screamed by the mercenaries scattering before him. Plague, they called – a single word, and yet more effective a weapon than any number of catapults or cannons.

As word spread of the disease the invaders had brought, the rearmost lines of the Marienburg defenders began to waver. Worse still, the graveyard had been driven into a new frenzy of growth by Ethrac's spell. It had started to grow not only on the clothes and scabbards of the city's defenders, but also upon their flesh, covering their skin with a network of black veins and hairy growths.

As if linked by some invisible accord, the companies that had come to reinforce the front lines lost the will to fight. No amount of gold was worth enduring the diseases of the north. First in twos and threes, then in a great flood, Marienburg's warrior companies left the docklands and fled through the city gates in search of cleaner wars.

Without their mercenary auxiliaries to support them, the Marienburger troops were as good as dead. A chorus of shouts echoed over the city as panic spread. Otto and Ethrac rode their brother through the streets, Marienburgers scattering before them. Scenes of disorder flowed into one another, making the dockside battleground seem like a madman's nightmare. The scent of fire drifted in from the west, accompanied by the dull boom of far-off artillery. In the distance, the colours of an Imperial army crested the horizon above the Altdorf road. The Glottkin strode on, ready to fight a dozen of Karl Franz's military hosts. Yet it was not the armies of the living that came to bar their path.

The roar of battle and the crackle-snap of fire drifted across the rooftops to reach the peak of the Marienburg townhouse. Carried on rot-scented winds, the distant clashes of steel that reached up to Mundvard the Cruel were pierced by screams and bellows of raw panic.

'Disorder,' spat the vampire, his face as wrinkled as a dried prune. 'How I hate the sound. We cannot permit it.'

'As you say, dearest.' A hideous yet well-postured lady stepped out of the shadows toward him. 'Though is there not a certain appeal to the idea of saving the city? To the joy of seeing your hordes revealed, albeit to northern eyes instead of southern?'

'No there is not!' hissed Mundvard. 'The time is not right for my grand coup, and you know it. It irks me greatly to summon my armies now, as it should you, Alicia. Do not torment me further. Even my patience has limits.'

Time was of the essence. The scent of burning timber was growing stronger, and the strange black moss the Norscans had brought had even begun to grow in the shadowed recesses of the roofs. Mundvard beckoned his consort forward impatiently, and she held out the unremarkable safe box that kept their greatest treasure. She stepped back respectfully as Mundvard withdrew the grimoire known only as the Black Tome.

'Once the deed is done, master, should I summon the White Ladies?' said Alicia. 'Or... perhaps... the Beast?'

'Both, my dove,' replied Mundvard, gravely. 'Summon them all. Though it galls me to say it, the time for subtlety is over. Now is the time for war.'

THE ARMY OF THE GLOTTKIN

The Glottkin took the quickest route of all into the heartlands of the Empire, striking at the cityport of Marienburg. Though the island city had long seceded from Karl Franz's empire, to capture it would give them a direct route along the Reik to the capital of Altdorf.



THE GLOTTKIN

The triplets that led the Norscan invasion of the Empire were truly hideous to behold. Though they invariably fought as a single force, with the two more intelligent brothers borne into battle upon the mutated back of their idiot sibling, each of the three was a powerful champion of the Dark Gods in his own right. When Otto's warrior skill was melded with Ethrac's arcane power and Ghurk's sheer might, the Glottkin became a force of nature that rightfully earned a place in the favour of Nurgle.



THE RED REAVERS

Devotees of Khorne, the Red Reavers were once deadly rivals of the Glottkin until Archagon commanded them to fight under the triplets' banner. Their new loyalty was soon rewarded by more slaughter than they had ever been offered before, and they served the Glottkin willingly.



THE TRIBE OF THE BLOODSHOT EYE

The savages known as the Tribe of the Bloodshot Eye sought the favour of Nurgle by staring nightly at the great orb of Morrslieb. It was said that those who could maintain their gaze upon the Chaos moon until dawn would find themselves degraded in mind and soul, but gifted with uncanny stamina.



THE ACCURSED

Grotesque half-men that had long since lost their grip on the slippery slope to daemonhood, the Accursed were seen as gifted by their tribesmates and cursed by everyone else. The ugliness of these forsaken warriors was matched only by their raw fury and resilience in battle.

THE GREAT VANGUARD

Numbering over twenty different tribes from Norsca and beyond, the horde collectively known as the Great Vanguard was made up of countless warriors sworn to the Plague God, veterans of wars with the south.



THE GUTTERLINGS

The Gutterlings were once men of the north. Every one of them fell foul of the Glotkin, and as was so often the fate of such individuals, they were eaten whole by Ghurk. They were slowly twisted into terrifying spawn of Chaos in his guts, their twisted flesh echoing the mutations of Ghurk himself.



The Glotkin
Otto and Ethrac riding Ghurk



The Tribe of the Bloodshot Eye
Three hordes of Marauders with the Mark of Nurgle



The Red Reavers
One horde of Marauders with the Mark of Khorne



The Accursed
One warband of Forsaken with the Mark of Nurgle



The Gutterlings
Twelve Chaos Spawn with the Mark of Nurgle



The Urson Tribes
Eight hordes of Marauders



The Brethren of the Scab
One tribe of Chaos Warriors with the Mark of Nurgle



The Cataracted Eye
One warband of Chosen with the Mark of Nurgle



The Lordless Hordes
One warhost of Chaos Warriors



The Cult of the Frozen Fate
One warband of Marauders



The Crow Brethren
One tribe of Marauders with the Mark of Nurgle



The Ever-dying
One horde of Chaos Warriors with the Mark of Nurgle



The Grue
One horde of Forsaken with the Mark of Nurgle



The Sea Wolves
Six tribes of Marauders



The Listless
One warband of Forsaken with the Mark of Nurgle



The Rotpack
One pack of Chaos Warhounds



The Slavermaws
One pack of Chaos Warhounds

THE HIDDEN DEAD

The armies of Mundvard the Cruel had long been lurking in the derelict buildings of Marienburg, ready for their master's signal to seize the city. The Glottkin's invasion forced Mundvard's hand, however, and the dead rose to form the cityport's best hope of survival.

MUNDVARD THE CRUEL

A vampire lord of subtle but immense power, Mundvard had ruled Marienburg's underworld for over four centuries. Known to the people of the city only as the Lord of Shadows, Mundvard had been buying loyalties and manipulating fates for so long that half of the cityport danced to his tune. Mundvard was present during Mannfred's invasion of 2133, but after the von Carstein's mishandling of the Reiklander counter-attack, he went to ground and was not seen openly again until the arrival of the Glottkin. Their invasion forced him out of hiding, and hence invited his slow but potent wrath.



ALICIA VON UNTERWALD

Alicia von Unterwald had sought influence at Mundvard's side from the time he dwelt in Sylvania, centuries before the Glottkin arrived. Immortality brings great perspective, and Alicia was content to marshal her own armies in the dark and forgotten spaces of the cityport until the time was ripe to strike. Even the patience of vampires can fray, however. Alicia was only too pleased to hear of the city's invasion, for it had been too long since she wet her fangs in anger.

THE HIDDEN

Thanks to Mundvard few in Marienburg conducted their business further than a few feet from a hidden cadaver. When the northern tribes invaded the cityport, Mundvard imbued these dormant corpses with dark magic and pulled them into the light from their hiding places, blocking the passage of the invaders with a wall of dead flesh.



THE BEHOLDEN

Though they were originally sent to claim the vampire's soul by a rival vampire count, the haunting laughter that preceded the hexwraiths' attack gave Mundvard sufficient warning to fashion a circle of protection using nothing more than salt stolen from a butcher's shop. Whilst they prowled outside the magical barrier, Mundvard prepared a second spell, binding the spirits to his will for all eternity.



THE SUIDDOCK BEAST

For years the grisly murders that haunted the dockyards of Marienburg were ascribed to a figure nicknamed the Suiddock Beast. Many suspected the ogre called Blut Hans, for the victims were bodily torn apart. Others claimed to have seen a winged monstrosity flit through the skies before each kill, and that the shrieks of the dying were so loud they shattered glass. Few suspected that those screams were the calls of a giant terrorgeist, servant of the Master of Shadows.

THE WHITE LADIES

Liliet van Mariense was notorious for her debaucheries, and there were whispers that she dabbled with dark powers. In truth she was the doyenne of the White Ladies, three Lahmians that plucked the strings of Marienburg's social elite. They were so practiced with their magic that they could enchant a man with a pout of the lips or bind a departed spirit with a whispered phrase. In battle all three of the White Ladies would combine their powers to the ruin of their foes.



Mundvard the Cruel
Vampire Lord



Alicia von Untervald
Vampire



The White Ladies
Vampire and Pallid
Handmaidens riding
Coven Throne



The Suiddock Beast
One Terrorgeist



The Hidden
Six hordes of Zombies



The Beholden
One coven of Hexwraiths



The Debt Repaid
One coven of Cairn Wraiths



The Cold Men of Oestdock
One horde of Zombies



Mundvard's Reserve
One horde of Zombies



The Frozen Dead of 2306
One horde of Zombies



The Cobbled
One mob of Zombies



The Meathooked
One mob of Zombies



The Thawed
One mob of Zombies



The Catacomb's Harvest
One horde of
Skeleton Warriors



**The Suiddock
Disappeared**
One horde of
Skeleton Warriors



**The Wights of
Warehouse Six**
One regiment of Grave Guard



Nexus Cadaveron
One Corpse Cart

THE BATTLE OF MARIENBURG

Though Mundvard's displeasure was usually as deliberate and slow as poison, he had been roused to a cold anger by the mayhem that had suddenly enveloped his city. The dockyards seethed with violence as the northerner ships poured their savage cargo into the streets. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Marienburgers had died in the last hour before the city's armies abandoned it. Bitter fighting had consumed his realm from end to end. So numerous were the tribes spilling into the city that it had been lost in the space of a few hours. With the spectre of disease haunting the streets, it was folly to believe the living would protect it any longer.

An unprecedented number of warships had penetrated the harbour's defences. The lapping waters of the harbour were thick with corpses, and the coppery tang of gore hung heavy in the air. The scent of so much blood was electrifying for a vampire, even one as self-controlled as Mundvard. It had been several decades since he had given himself to the joys of unbridled violence – centuries, even. The vampire found his fangs lengthening in anticipation of red vengeance, his battle-form threatening to burst free as he strapped on his armour plate by plate.

If the living would not hold back the tide of Chaos, then the dead would have to hold the line instead. After all, plague was of little concern to one already the wrong side of the grave.

The vampire screwed shut his beetle-black eyes in frustration. It had been neither cunning wizard nor zealous witch hunter that had forced Mundvard's hand, but the unsubtle brutes of the Chaos Wastes. He would have laughed at the irony, had it not been his own beloved plans that were paying the price. Even the elves of Aislinn's armada had not attacked with such sudden aggression.

Mundvard made his way up to the roof of his townhouse with his consort Alicia in tow. Perched high above the streets, the ancient vampire chanted the words of power he had long ago gleaned from Vlad von Carstein's most precious tomes. With Alicia adding to the chant, their effect upon the ethereal winds was instant.

Across the length and breadth of the cityport, paving stones shook and cracked, cellar doors banged open and concealed passageways dislodged the dust that hid them from sight. Legions of dead men pushed their way free from countless hiding places, a tide of corpses bursting out from

hollow plaster walls, spilling from attics, and crawling from warehouses whose falsified inventories had hid them better than any vault.

The press of dead flesh that lurched through the streets towards the invaders was a sickening sight, but the Norscans were too preoccupied with cutting down the last of the Marienburger stragglers to see it. Only when the Suidstrasse filled from end to end with moaning cadavers did the Glottkin realise that the road ahead was packed full of the undead.

The Glottkin were surprised at the grisly tableau approaching them, but not altogether unappreciative. The shades of decay on display had a strange beauty to the worshippers of Nurgle, and the triplets were true connoisseurs. Some of the walking corpses looked much like men caked head to foot in plaster dust, some were desiccated and saggy of skin. Some on the left flank were the purple of preserved meat, and some on the right little more than skeletons shrugging off remnants of flesh. One and all, they were heading in the direction of the Norscan raiders.

The roads on either side of Suidstrasse were also heaving with undead. Ethrac whispered his



suspicions to his brother, that a talented practitioner of the dark arts had much invested in the cityport of Marienburg, and sought to defend it.

Yet with the sheer number of warriors they had at their behest, even a city full of unquiet dead would do little to slow the progress of the invasion.

Bounding past the triplets came the Accursed, a host of once-mighty warriors whose mutations were so severe they had more in common with Ghurk than with Otto. The warlord halfheartedly gestured them forwards with his scythe, but Ethrac's evil chuckle made it clear his brother's pretence of command was fooling no-one. The Accursed were slaves to their own destructive instincts, and had long since stopped heeding the words of men.

The mutant horde ripped into the press of dead flesh with a terrifying roar, laying about themselves with clawed pincers and horn-encrusted fists. On they went, advancing one step after another, scrabbling over corpses and shrugging off grasping hands as they shouldered and barged and bit through the ranks of the dead. They pushed on and on into the mass of bodies, pallid limbs flailing and clawing at them from every direction. A moment later, they had disappeared completely, lost in a maze of rotting flesh that saw them covered in noisome grave-fluids to a man.

Howling out of the next street came the Red Reavers, each of their number covered almost entirely from head to toe in gore. Five different Marienburger banners were hoist aloft in their midst, bloodied trophies held high to catch the eye of the gods. They slammed into the flank of the skeletal warriors at the edge of the undead host, laying about themselves with blades, shields, and fists. Yet for every Reaver there were a dozen skeletons, and more clawed their way out from beneath the broken cobbles with every passing minute.

The Glottkin were loath to see their new allies expended piecemeal. Otto kicked Ghurk hard in the back of the head, urging him forwards into the fray. At his side, Ethrac mumbled one of his strange chants, and a moment later a handful of the zombies that were stumbling towards them fell away like ash from a spent fire. It had little impact. The horde still thronged the street as far as the eye could see.

The Red Reavers cut their way through the undead battle line in a whirlwind of violence, their axes shattering bone left and right until they found themselves fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Accursed. Limbs flew and stale blood splashed, a sight to please the most ardent of killers. Ghurk stormed in to join them, crushing Norscans and corpses alike with the violence of his

charge. His pendulous limbs lashed left and right, acidic bile drooling from his jaws as his supernaturally distended gut prepared for the feast to come.

Not to be outdone, Otto swung his scythe in broad arcs, taking heads from necks with the ease of a gardener cutting weeds. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of the corpses pressing in upon their position, but the men of the north were born to fight, and the killing lust was in them. There would be no stopping them this day.

A flicker in the skies made Ethrac cry out a warning, pointing a crooked finger at a swirling apparition that was drifting across the rooftops towards them. It looked for all the world like a southern queen's palanquin, though it was borne through the skies by a small army of spirits. The stone steps and silken cushions of the strange conveyance held not one but three regal-looking females, pale as a winter dawn. Each of the women was a vision of beauty that would have been almost hypnotising to one who had not left his humanity behind long ago. Ethrac, however, had been gifted a measure of witch-sight by his Grandfather, and he saw them for what they truly were – dead things, held to a mockery of life only by dark magic.



As the ethereal construction drifted across the rooftops, a bellowing champion of the Red Reavers flung himself bodily from the second story of a nearby bankhouse towards it. Just as it seemed he had misjudged his leap, his blood-slicked hand caught on the railings of the airborne palanquin. Rocking the carriage crazily, he pulled himself upright at the base of its stone steps. Shouting praises to Khorne, he raised his axe to strike.

The tallest of the three pale women whispered something in a voice like wet silk sliding over a grave-slab, her kohl-rimmed eyes blazing. A moment later the Khornate champion sat down by the feet of the strange vampiresses, as docile as a whelp at the teat. The two lesser females pulled out lace kerchiefs and held them to their noses, their sweet white faces twisting in disgust as their queen slit the warrior's throat open and pushed him into the street below with a shove of her petite foot.

Heedless, Ghurk plunged on further into the swampy morass of limbs that clutched at him, Otto happily carving apart those corpses who climbed his brother's rotting bulk. At his side, Ethrac fired down bolts of entropic energy wherever the dead milled thickest, reducing the resurrected to sticky pools of black sludge. Yet for all the progress they were making, the corpse-crowd that assailed them was quickly being reinforced by those recently-slain Marienburgers that dotted the cobblestones.

Though the northerners invading the city had at first seemed like an unstoppable tide, every warrior that fell diminished the Glotkin's armies a little more and bolstered those of their foes. There was no shortage of the dead; even those that had been cut apart were slowly stitched back together by the necromantic forces swilling through the streets. Some of the slain tribesmen were even

standing straight back up to fall upon those they once called brothers with clawing fingers and biting mouths. It was an equation of life and death that the triplets could not allow to continue. On the Glotkin went, wading through the undead horde in search of whatever fell power was animating the endless numbers of dead bodies thronging the streets.

Back at the dockside, in the shadow of the plague ships, the moaning spectres Mundvard had long ago bound to his service slashed their scythes through the blubbery hide of the gutterlings the Norscan advance had left behind. The lumbering things lashed out left and right, desperate to end the cruel punishment the wraiths were meting out upon them. Their thickly-muscled limbs passed right through the mist-thin forms without causing the slightest harm. Low and pitiful moans rose up from the Ghurk-spawn as they were cut apart one by one, their filthy blood spilling over the quay into the sea.



From the decks of each ship, more warbands of Norscan warriors clambered over the gunwales to join the fight. The sun's rays were blotted out for a moment, and a vast, bat-like skeleton flapped down to perch on the prow of the *Greenwolf*. It stooped down to the wharf and opened its bony jaws unnaturally wide. The strange power of the beast's scream washed over the docks, shattering every window in a mile radius and tearing apart the minds of those close by. Spawn and northern tribesman alike flopped to the cobbles, spasming like a trawler's catch before falling deathly still.

The sound of the terrorgeist's shriek was the signal the Glottkin needed. Otto and Ethrac shared a meaningful look as they both reached the same conclusion – this was no normal creature, but an undead monstrosity with potency enough to change the flow of the battle. There would be no reinforcements from the plague ships until the thing haunting the docks was slain, and if the Glottkin were cut off from their fellows, the vanguard of their invasion would lose momentum fast. None of the brothers, not even Ghurk, wanted to grind their best hope of victory into an early grave.

However, the deafening shriek signified a chance for a quick victory. Where such a powerful thrall-beast attacked, its creator would not be far behind, and the Glottkin were

well aware that the undead attacking them were being guided by an unseen master. It was a logic that all northern warlords were familiar with – cut off the head of an enemy force, and the body will die.

At a whispered suggestion from Ethrac, Ghurk belied his way out of a crowd of moaning, stabbing dead and stomped through the corpse-strewn streets towards the wastelands that led to the docks. In their wake came a dozen tribes still hungry for a fight.

As the Glottkin closed on the grey wasteland near the harbour, they were confronted by a wide wall of undead flesh and mouldering bone. Above it flew clouds of black bats that blotted out the sun, the giant skeletal form of the terrorgeist amongst them. At the flank were the glowing forms of spirits cheated of their rest, and there in the centre of the battleline was the crimson-armoured form of a vampire.

The Norscan tribes needed no further enticement than the sight of the foe. They charged forward, voices raised to the glory of the Lord of Decay. Almost immediately, they were met by a storm of bats that buffeted and bled them but could not stop their charge. Bony fingers thrust up from the packed earth of the wasteland, buried criminals awoken from their deathly slumbers to serve Mundvard once more in undeath. The Norscans stamped and crushed and hacked. Their ferocity held back exhaustion for a time, but slowly – and fatally – they were beginning to fail.

Into the fray stormed the Glottkin, the barrelling force of Ghurk's charge smashing the summoned skeletons to scatterings of bone. The vampire sent his captive cairn wraiths arcing in from the flank to intercept them, but Ethrac had seen this eventuality coming, and worked a spell of unbound life that broke the curse of the grave. Within their ragged cloaks, the bodies of the screaming wraiths became steadily more corporeal until the grave raiments fell away, leaving only frail-bodied wizards blinking in their place. A warband of Norscans charged, and before the astonished mages could enjoy the second lease of life bestowed upon them, they were hacked into mere chunks of flesh.

Suddenly Mundvard was there, hacking and slashing at Ghurk's gut. Otto swung his scythe low, but the vampire was serpent-fast, and driven by a cold rage. His blade bit deep – too deep, because the bile that gushed out of Ghurk's guts blinded Mundvard for a critical moment. Otto punched his scythe's tip through the vampire's neck, holding him fast long enough for Ghurk to pick him up in his great tentacle. With a roar, the mutant goliath hurled the vampire far out to sea. Bereft of his guidance, the army of the dead crumbled to the cobbles.

Even as the Glottkin rallied their men once more, brave clarions sounded out on the edge of the city – Empire reinforcements come to fight back. Otto hefted his scythe, his brother tending to Ghurk's wounds as they prepared for another gruelling battle. They would fight through a dozen armies if it came to it, for the legend of the Glottkin was just beginning.



THE REIKLAND IRREGULARS

The advance of the plague armada was unstoppable but slow. After the Empire received word of its advance from the elves, the Reiksmarshal Kurt Helborg ordered an army from the western provinces to march to Marienburg's defence. They arrived only hours too late...

GENERAL ALDRED VAN CARROBURG

Aldred van Carroburg was a man who found irritation in almost everything. He was annoyed beyond measure when Kurt Helborg posted him to the defence of the western Reik, for he would far rather have patrolled the courts of the capital than the mosquito-ridden swamplands bordering Marienburg. He was incensed when his Deathknell Watch bore the message that he was to reinforce Marienburg immediately, and absolutely enraged when his subsequent march revealed that the cityport's defenders had already given up hope and fled. His anger and frustration lent him strength, but robbed him of vision.



THE GOLDEN PINIONS

The proud halberdier regiment known as the Golden Pinions were veterans of a dozen border wars against the mercenaries, militias, and bandit gangs that hovered around Marienburg's wealth like flies around a corpse. They relished the idea of going into battle against another nation – until they saw the invasion with their own eyes.

THE NOBLE SONS ABROAD

These gentlemen lived lives of ease in the Gold Quarter of Altdorf, and were sure that life was a great game for their amusement. Their families, eager to be rid of them, sent them into the wider world, where they either toughened up quickly or died. Those riders who survived from the original Noble Sons Abroad kept their name and their pistols, but gained perspective and no few battle-scars.



THE BORDERMEN

Uniquely amongst van Carroburg's armies, the Bordermen preferred life in the gnat-infested wilds than in the comfort of the Reikland barracks. They took great relish in hunting down the mutant tribes that haunted the marshes with their wondrous repeater handguns, cantering away should the enemy get too close before cutting down another swathe of foes. With their guns fired in anger almost every day, the Bordermen were experienced and reliable troops indeed.



THE PALE BLADES

Named for the white of their uniforms, the Pale Blades had a long record of military excellence. It was said that they could wield their greatswords with the ease that a cook wields a carving knife, and that they were the best zweihander regiment in the Empire, save one. Only the famed Carroburg Greatswords were considered superior, a point of much bitterness amongst the Blades' ranks.



THE CARROBURG GREATSWORDS

Perhaps the most famous infantry regiment in the Empire, the Carroburg Greatswords had fought to defend the realm for centuries. Ruthless killers, the Carroburg men have felled minotaurs, trolls, giants, even daemons in their storied history. Those fighting under the same colours in Karl Franz's reign were seconded to General Aldred's army, a stout backbone to his force.

-  **General Aldred van Carroburg**
General of the Empire
-  **The Golden Pinions**
One regiment of Halberdiers
-  **The Noble Sons Abroad**
One cavalry brigade of Pistoliers
-  **The Pale Blades**
One regiment of Greatswords
-  **The Carroburg Greatswords**
One regiment of Greatswords
-  **The Bordermen**
One cavalry brigade of Outriders
-  **The Reiksmarch Brotherhood**
One regiment of Swordsmen
-  **The Einhand Elite**
One regiment of Swordsmen
-  **The Screaming Minstrels**
One regiment of Spearmen
-  **The Poleaxed**
One regiment of Halberdiers
-  **Reik Patrol Eight Western**
One unit of Archers
-  **The Carroburg Marshers**
One band of Archers
-  **Reed's Red Men**
One band of Archers
-  **The Hard-Bought**
One mob of Free Company
-  **The Gnat's Banquet**
One mob of Free Company
-  **Aldred's Last Muster**
One mob of Free Company



Aldred van Carroburg rode at the head of the Reikland Irregulars to the outskirts of Marienburg. The sooty tang of fire was borne upon the wind howling up from the coast. Fire, and something worse.

Though he made a great pretence of rage at the ignominious fate that had been thrust upon him, van Carroburg's anger was little more than a shield against the fear that the Reiksmarshal had sent him to his death. In total his army numbered just over two hundred men, and though it was resplendent in the colours of Altdorf and the Reikland, it was a pitiful force next to an enemy invasion that had sacked one of the Old World's richest cities in a day.

All around the frowning general, the grim-faced warriors of the Reikland Irregulars marched on, keeping pace with the drummer's beat. They closed upon the marshy wilderness that ringed the cityport, casting about for any signs of the enemy. Just as the message had said, the cityport had been invaded by an army of daunting size. The scent of blood was still fresh in the air, though the ruined city looked like it had fallen years ago.

Carrion birds wheeled in the air, avoiding the pillars of smoke that reached up towards the dimming skies. Every now and then the wind carried the stench of death and the tang of decay, causing murmurs of concern to ripple through the ranks. The message from the Reikland Watches had said the invaders brought disease, a word that struck unease into the stoutest warrior heart. Every one of the Reikland Irregulars had a kerchief soaked in vinegar ready to tie across his face at the slightest hint of plague.

The Irregulars passed one sign of devastation after another as they made their way along the city's outskirts. There was the Great Temple of Manann, its stained glass windows shattered and its famous scaled dome

smashed through. There was the road to Rijker's Isle, its fortress gates wide open and prisoners presumably long gone. Statues and gargoyles lay smashed in the streets, corpses too torn to recognise strewn in their midst. Veiny patches of black moss sprawled across the cobbles and crawled up stone walls, their texture spongy and unpleasant underfoot. The city seemed to have been afflicted by a hundred years of entropy in the space of a single day.

The relief army marched onward around the city's border, seeking a section of the city that was worth fighting for. Barking an order, van Carroburg brought his men up short and listened hard. There it was – a low chanting, coming from the docks to the west. At the captain's command, the drummer of the Golden Pinions gave the beat to form up. The Irregulars fanned out into a broad front that crossed the wasteland with blades drawn and eyes peeled.

A horde of roaring northerners spilled around the ramshackle buildings at the end of the Suidstrasse. Upon seeing the Altdorfer troops, they spread out into a loose battle line, beating their axes and mauls upon their shields. Lumbering behind came a living mound of rotting flesh, two hideous Norscans clutching the horns that soared from its shoulders as it crunched towards them.

Van Carroburg shouted the order to hold, the tiredness that dragged down his limbs a fading memory. His men roared in response, locking their halberds and spears against their lacquered heraldic shields before surging forward in a tight wall of metal. They struck the charging horde of northerners in perfect unison, spitting and beheading unarmoured bodies even as the axes of the Norscans slammed through collarbones and raised shields alike.

A bloated champion clad head to toe in rusting metal elbowed his

way through the press, gurgling an unintelligible challenge. Van Carroburg's heirloom greatsword glimmered with silver light as he wheeled and lunged forward with a perfectly executed Schwarzhelm Thrust. The blow punched through the champion's faceplate, but the Norscan kept on coming, his muscular body careening into van Carroburg's aide Hensa and bearing him to the ground as blood squirted out from the deep gash in his horned helm.

On the far right of the battle, the young nobles covering van Carroburg's flank opened fire, their pistols hammering silvered shot into the flailing mutants that staggered towards them. They gave a good account of themselves, blasting the outstretched arms and moaning heads from the gods-forsaken horrors that were chasing them before turning their horses and fleeing for cover.

Unfortunately for them, their nimble evasion tactics drew the eye of the robed Norscan atop the giant mutant. The stooping figure muttered unintelligibly, and a moment later the pistoliers found their horses sicken, turn brittle, and then collapse in a pile of snapping bones. The mutant Norscans were on them a moment later, claws snapping and mouths biting at the throats of the fallen.

As the cavalry that guarded their flanks sought in vain to stay at arm's reach, the infantry at the heart of the Irregulars line fought to hold against the massed horde crashing into them. Survival was the only thing on the Irregulars' minds, survival and the dogged standing of ground. Their only hope was to stand fast, to weather the storm and hope the invaders would smash against them like waves against a cliff. With each of their regiments fighting in concert and the Carroburg Greatswords anchoring their line with their rivals the Pale Blades, they still had hope that the ramshackle attack of the Norscans could be blunted, and perhaps broken.

Towards the right flank, the Golden Pinions had taken heart at the determination and skill with which the greatswords were cutting down their foes, and the light of Sigmar burned in every man's eye. This was true war, not some border cull, and some part of the Empire soldiery that fought that day had always longed for it.

At their captain's shouted command, the wall of uniformed soldiers that formed the centre of his battle line braced and surged forwards, pushing their muscles to the limit as they fought against the howling Norscan raiders that sought to break their ranks. Van Carroburg gritted his teeth and drove his warhorse forward into the press, cutting down the tallest and most heavily-muscled targets with his ancestral sword. Flails and hammers glanced off his armoured legs and hips, maiming the flanks of his horse and causing it to stumble. Grimacing in agony, he fought on, his face splattered with the hot blood of the Norscans and the crimson smears of his own wounds. They were not beaten yet – far from it, in fact. Slowly, incredibly, the halberdiers and greatswords forced the Norscans back. The precision weapon drills of the Empire had prepared them for just such contests, and skill and solid footholds counted for just as much as brute strength.

The Irregulars pushed and pushed, driving the Norscan hordes back step by painstaking step. Those tribesmen pressing in behind only hindered their colleagues, preventing them from setting their feet in their haste to push to the front line. Van Carroburg roared in battlelust as he tasted victory on the air, driving the point of his sword into the face of a mutated thug trying to pull him from his horse.

However, a terrible twist of fate was to steal the victory from the Empire at the last. In pushing the Norscans back, they had driven further towards the docks, and in doing so, they found themselves slipping on cobblestones

slick with blood and soggy patches of grave-moss, and cluttered with hacked-open cadavers.

First one, then a handful, then a score of state troops slid and slipped as the sodden remains of the dead city brought them low. It was the opening the Norscans needed. With a hungry bellow that shook the Irregulars to their core, the tribesmen raised their weapons high and renewed their frenzied attack.

Whilst the battle lines held, the discipline and training of the Empire's troops was a potent weapon that allowed them to even the odds against the brute strength of their foes. In the chaos of a rolling melee, it was next to useless. The savagery and bloodlust of the Norscan tribes boiled over as the battle on the outskirts of the city turned into a slaughter. Spilt intestines and disembodied limbs tangled the legs of those still standing upright, preventing escape.

Slamming down into the roiling brawl came the boulder-like bulk of the giant mutant, its tentacle-arm lashing back and forth to pulverise Norscans and Altdorfers alike. The blank-helmeted warlord atop it laughed as he cut heads from necks with the blade of his scythe, occasionally spraying gouts of intestinal fluid into the enemy ranks from the coiling loops that hung from his gut. This was the kind of war the Norscan savages loved most of all – dirty, anarchic, and foul.

Though the Bordermen fought a valiant fighting retreat as their comrades were swallowed up by the Norscan tide, they were the only Irregulars to survive the battle in the Marienburg wastes that day. The rest of the army was cut to pieces. The Carroburg Greatswords were the last to die, fighting to the last against waves of hacking axes and stabbing, rusted swords. The cityport had fallen, and the Empire had its first taste of the entropy and woe that was to consume it in the coming months.











Glowing with the satisfaction of a job done well, the Glottkin surveyed the aftermath of the carnage that had consumed Marienburg. Otto rested his scythe against the moss-covered wall of the Oestdock Temple, picking a growth of black fronds from the folds of his stomach. The moss-plague was so rapid and invasive it had broken down the city's walls and even infected its citizens, breaking the cityport's defences with the bow wave of panic it had spread. The Glottkin owed much of their success to it. Otto tore a long strip of the stuff from a nearby wall and held it across his chin like a Sigmarite zealot's beard, leering over at Ethrac. His brother just shook his head and continued gathering corpse-trophies to use for his spells.

For all its glamour and bright colours, the southern cityport had fallen in the space of a single day. The sheer numbers and unstinting force of the fleet-borne invasion had smashed Marienburg's defences wide open, and once their lines had been broken, the southern fops had proven no match for the might of Norsca. Admittedly the unexpected appearance of several thousand undead had stalled their advance badly, and there had been times when the Glottkin had thought their invasion was doomed. The last thing they had expected was for the dead to come to the aid of the living.

Yet Marienburg had fallen, and fallen hard. Grandfather Nurgle was as capricious with his blessings as he was generous. The living had put the undead back into the cold embrace of the grave, where they belonged. Both northerners and southerners now lay alongside them, their fates entwined in an orgy of violence that had left the streets carpeted with fresh corpses. Yet it was all part of Nurgle's plan. All around the Glottkin the city burgeoned with new life, fat flies buzzing happily as they laid their eggs left and right. Such was the mysterious glory of the Great Cycle – it could be interrupted, even reversed for a time, but never stopped.

Ghurk grunted like a happy pig as he scoffed down yet another corpse. There were at least twelve unfortunates roiling in his gut by now, by Ethrac's count. Those that had met his stinking insides whilst still alive would be reborn as gutterlings, as desperate to kill as to end their own tortured existences. This gruesome quirk in Ghurk's metabolism highlighted how far he had fallen from the ranks of humanity, but whilst he grew heavier under Nurgle's touch, the triplets could not be far from the Plague Lord's favour.

All across the wharfs behind the triplets, the Norscan tribesmen were hard at work. Their violent urges sated for a time, they were stealing the best weapons and armour they could find from the fallen. No few of them picked up the weapons of dead southerners, biting down to test the worth of Altdorf steel and swinging Carroburg zweihanders in great experimental arcs. Here and there brawls broke out, but other than the odd squabble, the thousands-strong horde was content to listen to the next stage of the Glottkin's plan.

As the sun set over Marienburg's burning eaves, the triplets outlined the sacred crusade that underlay their conquest. Not only did they intend to kill the worthless weaklings of the south and put their cities to the torch, but also to breed new life in their wake, spreading all manner of things wild and foul across the lands. The suffocating order of Karl Franz's realm had been existed for too long. Now was the time of life unbound, and of glorious disorder made flesh.

The Norscan hordes bellowed their approval, shaking their weapons in the air. With the power of plague on their side, the Empire would be ripe for conquest within weeks. Even Ethrac had no idea what strange gifts lay inside each of the plague urns carried by their fellow warlords. Still, with Nurgle's fond and fatherly gaze upon them, how could they fail?

In the realm of dreams, a wild-haired god strode through an unimaginably vast forest. He was so tall that his antlered crown plucked at the clouds, so mighty that the canopy of ancient oaks below parted around his calves like the waters of a verdant sea. He was stronger than his young warrior ally Sigmar; deadlier than Morr, gloomy guardian of the afterlife; more ancient than white-haired Ulric, god of wolves and winter. He was Taal, Lord of Nature, and he was on the hunt.

Upon the horizon was a storm that was infecting the amber of the spring sunset with the sickly pallor of a toad's gut. Wherever it lashed the forest, trees sickened and twisted into strange, waving tendrils.

Taal cared little for the fate of men, but nothing drew his ire more than the corruption of his rustic paradise. The nature god broke into a run, lakes born in his footprints. As he neared the storm on the horizon, Taal spied an obscenely fat figure at the storm's heart.

'Get thee hence from my skies!' roared the nature god, lightning crackling around his stag-skull helm. 'I banish thee, impostor, from my realm!'

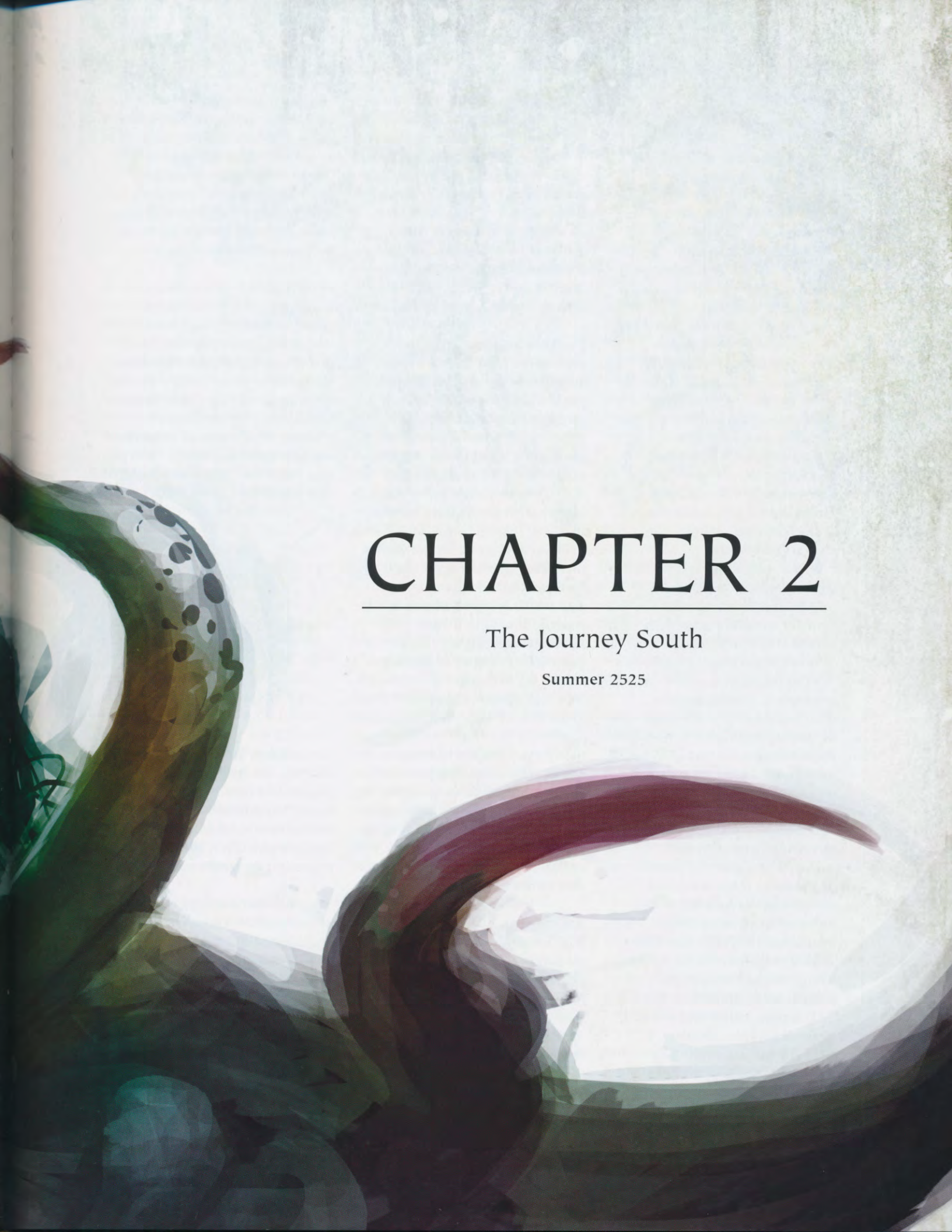
'The true impostor is you,' came the distant reply, a susurrant like the buzzing of a billion flies.

Taal felt his skin itch, and looked down, eyes wide. Discoloured spots were spreading across his skin, black moss sprouting in patches from his limbs.

'No! Cease this at once!' shouted Taal, gouging furrows in his flesh in an attempt to rid himself of the disease.

The only reply was a low, booming laugh, sounding for all the world like the thunder of storms yet to come.





CHAPTER 2

The Journey South

Summer 2525

Gutrot Spume looked up at the soaring cliffs of the Nordland coast from the prow of the *Rotten Beast*. To either side of the mighty galleon, Spume's plague ships lowered stout timber ramps that splashed into the seawater. Each ship was large enough to rival Marienburg's finest, and down each ramp came Chaos knights, gorebeasts, dragon ogres, chariots and warshrines borne by the mutants of the far north.

Spume's featureless helm dipped once in approval at the sight. The nest of pseudopods that comprised his left flank rubbed against each other in anticipation as his headsman, Eogric the Vile, stomped up to his master's wide to watch their armies debark onto the beach.

'No southlings,' intoned the executioner sombrely.

'Hmm. A stark contrast,' replied Spume. 'Last time I brought war to this coast, their Emperor attended the battle in person to turn us back.'

'How?' asked Eogric bluntly.

'With the aid of the Kislevite snow witch,' replied Spume. 'Karl Franz fled to hide behind her skirts, begging her to freeze the sea around my hordes. What manner of man lets his woman do a warrior's work?'

'A coward,' said Eogric.

'A lucky coward. This time... this time will be different.'

There was a groan of timbers as a massive tentacle reached out from the *Rotten Beast's* hull and curled its tip around Spume's waist. The kraken-limb carried the warlord to the horde below, setting him upon the palanquin his mutants carried.

'This time,' called the Lord of Tentacles over his shoulder, 'I shall kill the fool myself.'

Spume raised his pitted axe high. To the blares of a hundred war horns, the great procession rode out.



Whilst the Glottkin were sacking Marienburg, Gutrot Spume's fleet made landfall upon the shores of Nordland, just as they had years before. This time, the elven ships they had expected to harass them were conspicuously absent, and no Imperial armies waited upon the beach to bar their path. Warning beacons flickered unheeded on the cliffs as Spume's armies poured out.

The Blade Brethren, a tribe that counted itself amongst the more adventurous warbands of Spume's grand muster, were eager to show their knowledge of the Nordland terrain. Every summer they were amongst the tribes that raided the villages along the coast, pillaging as much as they could before Karl Franz's armies drove them back to their wolf ships. Acting as the spear tip of the sprawling column that wended its way along the cliffs, the Blade Brethren followed the coastal road west until it veered south through the wastelands towards the Laurelorn Forest. Strange bleating calls and dancing fires flickered in the forest's depths, but few of Spume's warbands were fool enough to investigate them. Those that did were never seen again.

Before a day of travel had passed, the spined grass of the cliffs gave way to shrubs, and then to wasted forest. A sea of trees covered the horizon from end to end, nameless things winging through the air above its canopy. The coastal road wound towards it, and then turned south to follow its eaves.

The rough path following the forest's edge led along Nordland's border all the way to Marienburg. Spume had no intention of reaching the cityport, for like as not the Glottkin would have sacked it by the time he arrived. Instead the invading host would follow the forest's edge for two day's travel, whereupon they would penetrate the dark woods of Middenland and fight their way on a south-easterly heading towards Altdorf.

The plan that the Glottkin had outlined was for each of their fellow warlords to lead their disparate armies to the Empire's capital by Geheimnisnacht. Yet Spume had ambitions of his own, and planned to reach the city earlier than his peers, sacking it and claiming the glory of the conquest for himself.

By leaving the Empire's roads and plunging south into thick forest, Spume risked the strange reaches of a land so overgrown that even the sun's rays shunned its depths. Such was his confidence in his own ability and that of his armoured elite that he believed he could fight his way through whatever he encountered in the forest and descend upon Altdorf's north gate long before the Glottkin had lumbered their way to the capital.



Unfortunately Spume's plan had a fatal flaw, for the deep woods of the Empire were not to be trespassed lightly. The armies of the north, more used to open tundra and pack ice, had little idea of just how dense and malevolent the terrain would become.

The paths that led along the edge of the Laurelorn Forest were wide enough, and at first armoured knights and even heavy chariots made their way along them without incident. Here and there, an Empire patrol or roadwarden would spy the advancing warhost and send messengers riding off to warn their masters. All but one of these parties were spied in their turn by the sharp-eyed outriders of the mounted host. The nomad tribes of the

north were natural horsemen, each mounted upon the hardiest of steeds, and after brief, blood-pounding chases the tribesmen inevitably ran the fleeing southerners down. Each time the riders returned with the severed heads of the messengers they had killed, their gruesome banners stained afresh.

Yet there was one man patrolling the Laurelorn Forest who escaped the notice of the invading tribes – Markus Wulfhart, renowned hero of Middenland. The veteran scout darted through the beast-trails of the forest, skilled enough in the ways of stealth to remain unseen, until he reached the Elsterweld Crossroads. There he rode hard to the sprawling forest camp of Boris Todbringer, where he delivered the message that a vast army of Chaos worshippers was on the march.

To his astonishment, Graf Todbringer told him that he already knew. Ambassadors from Ulthuan had visited the Elector Count the previous night, though he had sent them away soon enough. The Graf maintained that he could not ride out from the heart of the forest to the Great North Road, not when he was so close to finding and killing his nemesis, Khazrak One-Eye, and hence ending the threat of the beastman tribes once and for all. Todbringer insisted that invaders from Norsca were not unusual at this time of year, and that the coast had weathered far worse.

Wulfhart took pains to describe the sheer scale of the armoured columns he had seen riding south, but Todbringer's mind was set. Something glinted in the Graf's only eye, something unhealthy and dangerous that threatened to burst into violence at any moment. Wulfhart decided not to press the matter, and instead made speed to Altdorf, hoping his warnings would be taken more seriously by the Imperial court.

By the time the Huntsmarshal's message made it to the Imperial Palace, three of the Empire's surviving Elector Counts were demanding audience with the Reiksmarshal, Kurt Helborg. The borders of the Empire were in turmoil, and Karl Franz's armies spread thin. Though several of the Electors had pledged their swords to defend the realm directly, the more politically-minded of their number squabbled in the sumptuous rooms of Karl Franz's palace.

Electors Gausser, Haupt-Anderssen and von Liebwitz were all shouting at once, their voices ringing loudly around the perfect acoustics of the Grand Atrium. The servants and aides of the three Counts had long since retreated, leaving their masters and mistress to their war of words. Only Kurt Helborg, the strong right arm of Karl Franz's rule for longer than he cared to remember, had stuck around long enough to hear their debates.

Helborg had come to hate the trappings of Imperial rule over the last few months. Since the disappearance of Karl Franz at the northern border and the loss of Volkmar to the Stirland night, precious few men were left with seniority enough to quell the forceful personalities of the Elector Counts. Every day the flamboyantly dressed politicians were reduced to shouting and prodding each other in the chest, each thinking themselves the ideal candidate for the position of steward in Karl Franz's absence. Yet such talk was worse than useless in times of war. The Empire needed warriors and healers far more than politicians.

Over the last few days, more and more omens of disaster had been brought to the Imperial Court. A smattering of new diseases had begun to haunt Altdorf's streets, each outbreak small but virulent. Incidents of blood-cough and lungblight had risen sharply, and every plant in every bed and window box was now fly-infested and foul. The populace was becoming stricken with paranoia, and many of

its districts had been quarantined, leading to several incidents of civil unrest that Helborg himself had been forced to put down.

Rumours persisted that Marienburg had fallen, and that the western Reik was choked with strange islands of grave-moss, a thick and hardy vegetation that had polluted the great river as far as the walls of Carroburg. The news from the east was just as bad. A patrol from Bechafen had galloped all the way across the Empire to deliver reports of the restless dead massing in every lonely copse and ruin, rising in great number however hard they were beaten back as the energies of undeath saturated the lands. To make matters worse, a giant plague ship had been sighted in the Gulf of Kislev, making its way towards the coast.

Helborg had fought the powers of darkness for too long to dismiss these reports as the fancies of common folk. The Empire was being assailed from end to end, not merely by a conventional army but by a supernatural one. Drastic measures would soon be required if he hoped to maintain order.

According to the impassioned speech that Markus Wulfhart had delivered to the entire Imperial court, Altdorf's problems were only just beginning. The armies of Chaos were on the march through the Reikland and Nordland alike, and judging by their path, they sought to converge upon the city within the year.

The Huntsmarshal's tidings were not the only warnings to reach Helborg's stewardship. A scroll lay ripped to pieces in the Reiksmarshal's quarters, the initials V V C curling at its end. It had borne not only a warning, but an unthinkable proposition.

Perhaps, if Kurt Helborg had realised the insidious nature of the chaotic forces that were corrupting his city from the inside out, he would have paid the message more heed.

The vaulted cellar under the abandoned hospice was warm and quiet, just how Doctor Festus liked it. The dark apothecary sang in a resonant bass that would have done Detlef Sierck proud as he bumbled over to a glass-strewn bench. Carefully decanting an alembic of pus primaris into a bowl of simmering crow's blood, he turned his head away and took a deep breath that should be sufficient for the next verse. The tune was a nurdling's ditty he had picked up during his time in his master's Great Garden. He hadn't been able to get it out of his head ever since. Not that he minded – he'd even added a few verses of his own these last few days.

'Rumpety-tum, tiddle-eye-po, boil the blood and in you go...'

Festus happily sniffed at the vile stench that emanated from the seven-gauge copper saucer. Close to perfect, but still a ways to go yet before the Sixth Ingredient was complete. Still, now he was back in civilised lands he was confident of success.

It had been next to impossible to do any proper research in the icy wastes of the far north, with all that wind, sleet and hail buzzing about. As much as Festus loved the dizzying variety of test subjects up in the north, more than one concoction had frozen solid before he could force-feed it to some lucky recipient. His leeches had moaned on and on about the constant cold, and he risked his equipment shattering or cracking every time he tested his poisons in battle. In the end he had packed up his tools and headed south to Altdorf, a city so busy that even one as foul as he could escape detection. To his great pleasure, he found his reserve hospice pretty much as he left it. He had set up his laboratory in the cellar that same night.

The doctor's time amongst the brutish northerners had been very informative, and he'd obtained some vital materials, but ultimately his little holiday had only diverted him from the Great Work. One could not bring boundless life to the world whilst walking in the shadow of death. To foster true abundance meant forsaking the world of the killer for a time, and for a man of learning such as Festus, that was just fine. Scooping up the top half of a corpse and holding its arm outstretched, the Leechlord danced clumsily across his laboratory.

'Fiddle-de-deem, wriggle and scream, nibble the fingers and taint the cream...'

Propping his dancing partner against a dunking-stool, the doctor twisted the keg-tap inserted into the neck of one of the corpses that hung upside down from the cellar's arches. A lumpy grey liquid oozed from the corpse's open mouth, and Festus filled a generous glass vial to the brim before wiping away the overspill with a fat finger. He couldn't resist tasting it afterwards, looking around guiltily to see if any of his corpses were watching. Naughty but nice, and anyway, who could begrudge him? He'd always wondered if his fellow apothecaries would yield the best ingredients on the inside as well as the out. Sure enough, they tasted splendid. His mind wandered to a different tune.

'Distri-bute the poxes, in the window boxes, tummy-dum, tickle the tum...'

There was a series of bubbling pops from the cauldron in the centre of the cellar's seven benches. The noise startled Festus into silence. He'd not yet lit the fire pit today, he was sure of it.

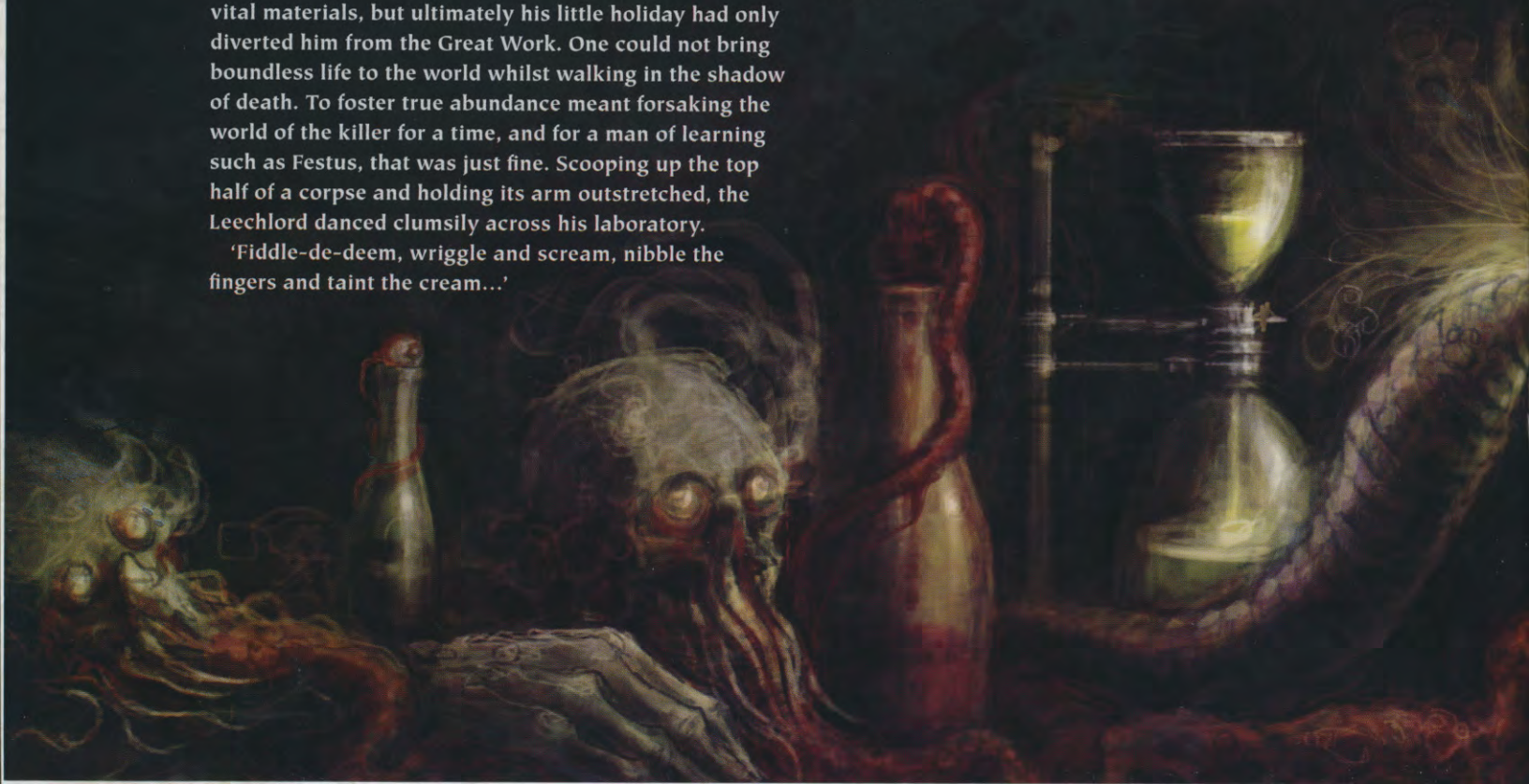
The doctor heard a low and sibilant hiss. Every corpse in the room turned to him, mouthing his name. The room filled with an indescribably powerful stench he had smelt before, back when he had still been human.

'Ah,' said the doctor, slowly and carefully placing his glassware on the counter. Cold sweat began to appear on his flaccid jowls.

His fear dissipated somewhat when a tiny antlered head poked its way out of the cauldron, its rot-drizzling grin reminding Festus of an old friend of his.

'Wellspring!' it squeaked.

'And wellspring to you too, little one,' said Festus cautiously. He looked around, but the corpses had turned back to normal. The ugly little daemon squinted at him for a moment, bit its ragged lip, and the cauldron bubbled again.



'Eye bring newts!' it cried, raising its tiny, misshapen arms in celebration.

'Then tell of it,' replied the Doctor, 'By your antlers, I'd say you have a message from Ku'gath, correct?'

'Corrept! He say, doctor doctor, burn-me-quick!'

'Burn you, little one?' said Festus, his brow furrowed. 'Why in Nurgle's name would I want to do that?'

'Driplips come, lordling-gourd! Driplips marching fast!' the daemon said earnestly. Another two antlered daemon mites rose from the bubbling cauldron on either side of it and nodded like serious children.

'Driplips... do you mean the triplets? The Glotts of Norsca?' The antlered nurgling nodded vigorously in response. 'The Glotkin are nearing Altdorf already,' pondered Festus. 'I rather doubt that...'

'Two Altdorf! Stew Altdorf!' they sang, 'Shroudlings make a New Altdorf!'

'Hmm. Interesting. And are you three... shroudlings, then? Is that why Ku'gath wants me to burn you?'

The first nurgling squinted its eyes and nodded happily. Evil-smelling bubbles burst up around it, leaving grey puffs in the air. 'Smog!' it declared.

'I think I see,' said Festus. 'By burning you, little one, we can make the city more to our liking. Is that right?'

'Two Altdorf! New Altdorf!' the nurglings shripped, paddling around the cauldron and splashing each other.

'Yes, yes,' said Festus. 'Well, the closer we get this gloomy old city to the glory of the master's garden, the happier we'll all be.' The doctor glooped a gallon of gunk out of the cauldron with a large glass bowl, plopping out several nurglings in the process. 'Right my selfless little friends. Time for you to go in the fire...'





As Altdorf's luminaries vied for power amongst themselves, Gutrot Spume's tireless armies were busily cutting their way through the thick undergrowth of the Drakwald forest. In order to make better speed, the entire procession had broken formation and dismounted, the dragon ogres in its midst hacking a path for Gutrot Spume's palanquin. Soon enough the Lord of Tentacles too was reduced to travelling on foot, for the forest was alive with curling vegetation, its tendrils snaring the legs of man and monster alike.

Before long Gutrot Spume's horde, which had made such good time along the forest eaves, had slowed to a crawl. The Empire's forests were proving a far more effective barrier than any mortal army. Days drifted into nights and back into days, the occasional bellows and roars from the deep woods ahead hinting at a dark fate awaiting the trespassing tribes.

As the northern warbands became ever more disoriented and dispersed, the Drakwald Forest slowly swallowed the invaders up. Those that Spume sent to scout ahead were never seen again, claimed by nameless monsters or skulking herds of beastmen that lured them to a gory death. The knotted canopies of giant oaks obscured the stars, cutting Mannslieb to intermittent slivers and reducing Morrslieb to a dim glow. In the middle distance, strange fires burned and creatures howled at the Chaos moon.

As Spume's armies pushed further and further into the dense mass of the Drakwald, the warriors at its vanguard cut down a curtain of dangling moss to reveal a cave network hidden in the foothills of a forest peak.

Without warning something monstrous burst out from the largest of the caves, blood drizzling from its bearded maw. Part toad, part insect, part dragon, the thing was so vile that even Spume's elite warriors stumbled

backwards at the sight. A clawed tongue shot through the air where the largest of their number had stood a heartbeat before stumbling away, the sticky appendage retracting with a snap. The drooling monster gave a guttural roar that attacked the mind from within. Several of the armoured warriors cried out, smashing axes and mauls into their own helmets in an attempt to escape the raw hideousness assaulting their senses.

At the sound of the creature's roar, scores of beastmen revealed themselves from the tumbled rocks above the beast's lair. Many of the smallest creatures had arrows nocked to bows, whilst the largest stared imperiously down, two-handed axes hefted in their gnarled hands. More of the feral things emerged from the woods around Spume's vanguard.

Several of the beasts cried out as one as the Lord of Tentacles made his way through the ranks towards the commotion. Some of the more hideous creatures raised their hairy arms high, chanting in a bastardised form of the Dark Tongue.

One of the beasts' number, a shaman with a trinket-hung braystaff, pointed toward Spume and gabbled excitedly in a series of gulping barks. The shaman brought his gnarled hands together in front of his barrel chest and made a shaken double fist, a gesture of unity that transcended barriers of language or geography.

As if reading the sign's intent, the repugnant beast that had burst out of the caves to threaten the vanguard withdrew once more, multicoloured mist snorting from its crusted nostrils as it slunk back into its cave. Spume gestured for his armoured bodyguard to form up, approaching the shaman in the beastmen's midst. It was plain that the creature wanted to talk rather than fight, and the Lord of Tentacles was inclined to let it. Some allies who were familiar with the Drakwald's reaches could be very useful indeed.

Gutrot Spume strode through the root-strewn mulch of the Drakwald, his armoured escort close behind him. Beastmen filled the forest in all directions, their beady eyes glittering like a swarm of fireflies trapped in shadowed amber. In their midst was the shamanic beast that had hailed him in its mangled version of the Dark Tongue. The creature's slitted eyes glowed as Spume approached.

'A strange welcome,' said Spume, his tentacles writhing slowly at his side. All around him, the bipedal beasts of the brayherd rustled and murmured, axes hefted and legs braced.

The beast-shaman replied in a series of guttural barks.

'As you say,' replied Spume. 'But my companions are not so quick of wit. Are you able to speak the words of man?'

The shaman took a filthy vial of pink liquid from his robes. With exceptional care, he dispensed a single drop of it onto his rough tongue before flexing his mouth in a manner that reminded Spume of an ox chewing cud.

'When Harbinger need to,' the shaman replied grudgingly, leaning upon his staff.

'Excellent,' replied Spume, inclining his head. 'Let us talk of the downfall of the Empire.'

'You, you are Tentacled One. Champion of Urfather, fire-told by Crowfather this last moon.'

'It is true. I am the true chosen of Nurgle,' replied Spume. 'I do my lord's bidding by bringing his bounty to the south, and you shall help me, Harbinger, or let me pass.'

'Then Crowfather told true,' said the shaman in awed tones, kneeling in the leafy mulch.

Behind his helm, Spume's milk-white eyes widened as a thousand beastmen raised their blades high in salute.

The beastman tribes that had joined them led Spume's armies through the woods, picking out paths that the northerners would never have spotted on their own. As the hours wound on, the giant oaks of the forest became even more crooked and strange. Dark greens and browns gave way to greys and whites as the trees became choked with spiderwebs. The forest around them had grown silent. Many of those making their way through the undergrowth wondered why until they saw beaks and talons poking out of the knots of spidersilk. Here and there were larger bundles big enough to hold a human corpse.

The trespassing tribesmen did not quail at the sight; if anything, it reinvigorated them. A good fight against a common enemy would unite the tribes of man and beast, and it was high time they gave the gods something to occupy their attention.

Suddenly there was a chorus of ululating shrieks. The mass of cobwebs all around them thrummed with activity. From every shadow crawled a grotesque spider, a forest goblin mounted upon its back. Each greenskinned rider was pierced through with bones and feathered quills. At the heart of the swarm was a lanky goblin chieftain wearing a feather-fringed mask. The goblin's eyes glowed green in the gloom as the gigantic grey spider it used as a steed picked its way across the webs above.

Glimpsing open ground through the trees ahead, Gutrot Spume plunged headlong through the forest, calling for his men to follow. In the claustrophobic confines of the woodlands his cavalry would be robbed of their advantage, but if they could make it to the clearing, the tables would be turned. Armoured Norscans crashed through the undergrowth after their lord, arrows bouncing from their armour. Shoulder to shoulder they barrelled through the trees, unaware that worse creatures than goblins were closing in.

THE RUSTING BROTHERHOOD

Hoping to eclipse the Glottkin, Gutrot Spume surrounded himself with the fiercest warriors he could find. Much of his elite force fell prey to the terrors of the Drakwald, though an alliance with the beastman known as the Harbinger saw its numbers swell once more.

GUTROT SPUME

Spume fought his way to lordship over the fjord tribes many decades ago, and amassed a fleet of captured vessels that he was only too pleased to lead to war. The self-styled Lord of Tentacles was a proud warrior, known to the north by the set of pseudopods that bristled across the left side of his body. Many claimed these appendages to be the signs of Nurgle's favour, for they numbered seven, a numeral beloved of the Lord of Decay, and they often seemed to have a life of their own. The extra limbs afforded Spume an unusual edge in battle, allowing him to entangle several foes at once before striking them down.



EOGRIC THE VILE

The masked brute who acted as Gutrot Spume's chief executioner was feared across Norsca as a relentless killer. He rarely spoke, but his axe bore a potent message – regardless of size or status, those who Spume marked for death quickly found their heads parted from their bodies. The terrible stench that emanated from Eogric's open guts often gave his victims advance warning of his approach, but once the executioner had begun his relentless advance, nothing could stay his hand.

SONS OF THE LAST PLAGUE

Connoisseurs of pestilence, these redoubtable warriors were tireless in their pursuit of new plagues to sample. They constantly vied amongst themselves for the most glorious of disfigurements and bone-twisting mutations. In battle the Sons of the Last Plague were a powerful force indeed, able to shrug off the most vicious of blows as if they were no more than a mild inconvenience.



THE HARBINGER

The most powerful bray-shaman in the Reikwald, the beastman known as the Harbinger rose to prominence after conducting a ritual of summoning so powerful it shattered the Ripper-horn herdstone and left a portal to the Realm of Chaos in its wake. The Harbinger's ability to forge pacts with daemons was well-known in the Reikwald, and he was respected by monster and beast alike.



THE ROTTING RIDERS

Though the rust-gnawed armour that protected Spume's infamous knights appeared on the verge of collapse, the riders that wore it had flesh as hard as oak and a truly vicious temperament.



THE TUSK AXES

Spume's armies believed the Tusk Axes were lured from their mountain lairs by the simple promise of slaughter. The real motive behind their aiding the armies of Nurgle was more sinister. The souls of these Dragon Ogres were sworn to the Dark Gods many thousands of years ago, and they would do anything to escape their oath – including working to hasten the apocalypse...



THE BLOOD OXEN

Grotesquely muscled and foul of temper, the Blood Oxen only ever answered to the Harbinger – only those possessed of magical abilities could hope to calm the violent rages of these minotaurs for long.



THE WALDERBEASTS

Those of the Drakwald's beastmen that worshipped Nurgle were the most foul-smelling and putrid of their kind. Clad in rusted scraps of armour and covered in revolting growths, these savage tribes were known as the Walderbeasts, and revered the cycle of life in its most disgusting forms.



Gutrot Spume, the Lord of Tentacles

Riding Warshrine



Eogric the Vile

Chaos Lord with the Mark of Nurgle



The Rotting Riders

Warband of Chaos Knights with the Mark of Nurgle



The Blackhoof Tribe

Warband of Chaos Knights with the Mark of Nurgle



Sons of the Last Plague

Warband of Chosen with the Mark of Nurgle



The Tusk Axes

Warband of Dragon Ogres



The Harbinger

Great Bray-Shaman



The Mangelders

Warherd of Bestigor with the Mark of Nurgle



The Walderbeasts

Warherd of Bestigor with the Mark of Nurgle



The Skulkers in the Gloom

Horde of Gor with the Mark of Nurgle



The Bonecrackers

Horde of Ungor with the Mark of Nurgle



The Everstunted

Horde of Ungor with the Mark of Nurgle



The Blood Oxen

Herd of Minotaurs



The Bellowing Beasts

Herd of Minotaurs



The Roaring Eye

Cygor



Four-ax

Ghorgon



Gibberscuttle

One Jabberslythe

THE DEEPWOOD THRONING

The greenskins of the deep Drakwald were an anarchic bunch that fought amongst themselves as often as they battled against the Empire. When Spume's armoured invaders strayed into their midst, orc and goblin alike converged upon them with deadly intent.

THE MASKED CHIEFTAIN

The goblin known only as the Masked Chieftain had the ability to speak the chittering language of spiders, a gift from the Spider God that marked him out as a favoured leader of the forest tribes. He led the Poisoned Feather tribe to war on the back of Gribb, a thorn-limbed Grey Biter that even Arachnaroks gave a wide berth.



TINITT FOUR-EYES

The goblin shaman Tinitt Four-Eyes rode atop the beast he called the Black Bigness, the magic of his sacred spider shrine forcing the branches of nearby trees to twist in revulsion at his passing. The ivory scalp of the Black Bigness was a much-feared sight in the Drakwald, for it heralded not only an imminent Arachnarok attack but also the deadly shamanic energies that crackled out from Tinitt's wizened hands.

GROKKA GOREAXE

The whirlwind of violence that was Grokka Goreaxe was almost certainly insane. After the once-curious orc gobbled down an entire patch of bloodfungus, he embarked upon a rampage across the Drakwald so relentless that several tribes of savage orcs came to revere him as an incarnation of Gork. The goblins of the Drakwald had their own legend, believing that Grokka was a force of raw destruction that would cease to exist if the blood on his axe ever dried. With all manner of trespassers straying into the Drakwald, their theory was never tested.



THE GROKKAMOBS

Though the savage orc tribes that followed in the wake of the god-touched Grokka once had their own individual totems and traditions, the sheer momentum of the Goreaxe's rampage drew them together like waves following a leviathan. Whether they tended to storm into battle barefoot, launch howling ambushes from primitive tree huts or ride daggertusk boars through the forest, all of the Drakwald tribes simply came to call themselves the Grokkamobs, hoping that some of whatever greatness had touched Grokka would somehow rub off on them.





STOMPIN' COBB

The massive blue spider known as Stompin' Cobb got its name from its habit of bringing its chitinous legs down point-first upon its victims. As it marched through the forest, the beast left a trail of red ruin behind it.



RED GOBBET

The Red Gobbet was a truculent beast. Only one goblin ever succeeded in placating the enormous spider enough to bring it into the tribe – the legendary Scalper Boggins, whose flinger-catapult adorned the arachnid in battle.



THE FEATHERED SCUTTLAS

The small but spiteful gobbos that called themselves the Feathered Scuttles infested the western Drakwald. When something threatened their cobwebbed stretches of territory, the spiders would emerge from tree boles and webs in their hundreds, forest goblins clinging to their backs with their long green toes as they shot poisoned arrows into the intruders' ranks.



The Masked Chieftain

Forest Goblin Chieftain riding Gigantic Spider



Tinitt Four-Eyes

Goblin Great Shaman riding Arachnarok Spider



The Feathered Scuttles

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



The Hollow Fangs

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



The Venom Axes

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



The Moon Spidas

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



The Forest Fangs

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



The Deepwood Biters

One tribe of Goblin Spider-riders



Red Gobbet

Arachnarok Spider



Stompin' Cobb

Arachnarok Spider



Grokka Goreaxe

Savage Orc Warboss



The Snakeskins

One mob of Savage Orcs



The Green Grinnas

One mob of Savage Orcs



Da Goreaxes

One mob of Savage Orcs



The Daggatoofs

One mob of Savage Orc Boarboyz



The Tuskamob

One mob of Savage Orc Boarboyz



Da Green Stampede

Three mobs of Savage Orc Boarboyz

WAR IN THE DRAKWALD

Gutrot Spume led the vanguard of his army crashing through the forest and out into the massive clearing ahead. To the left, his headsman Eogric led the lumbering mutants that still carried Spume's warshrine on a parallel course. The looming slave-creatures used the palanquin's stony bulk to smash through twisted branches and thick ropes of spider silk that were blocking their path, warherds of bleating beastmen running and leaping past them as they forged their way forward. Nearby, dragon ogres and minotaur herds brought their massive axes swinging down again and again, hacking through vegetation, goblin and spider alike as they bullied their way through the ambush closing around them.

Both the Norscans and their goblin attackers realised that the only hope the Chaos invaders had of acting as a cohesive force was to form a battle line out in the clearing ahead. There they could fight on their own terms rather than in the dark woodlands favoured by their foes.

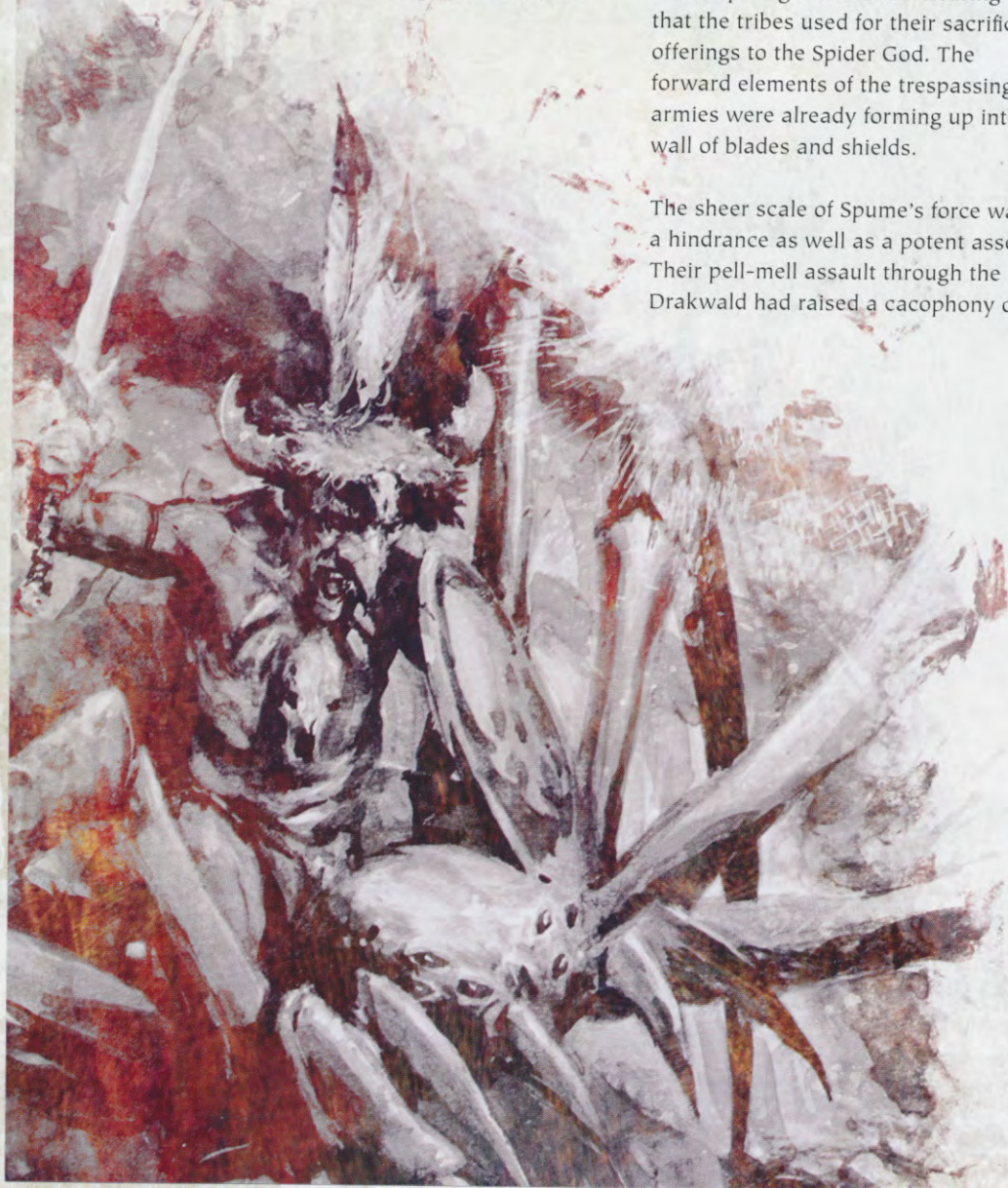
The Poisoned Feather tribe's cunning ambushes had laid low whole armies in the past, for the Drakwald took a toll on the bodies and the souls of those who attempted to pass through its depths. Yet the goblins had never encountered foes quite so hardy and tenacious as these. A horde of heavily armoured killers had stormed right through the heart of their chieftain's webs, spilling out into the clearing that the tribes used for their sacrificial offerings to the Spider God. The forward elements of the trespassing armies were already forming up into a wall of blades and shields.

The sheer scale of Spume's force was a hindrance as well as a potent asset. Their pell-mell assault through the Drakwald had raised a cacophony of

screams and bellows, and the din of battle had attracted more than mere goblins. Stomping through the woods on the other side of the massive clearing came tribe upon tribe of savage orcs, brandishing primitive flint axes and bone-hung spears. A giant of a greenskin sprinted across the moon-dappled heart of the clearing at their head, tongue lolling and eyes rolling back as he roared in battlelust. Though the orcs were still some half a mile distant, the Norscan invaders were soon to be fighting against not one enemy army, but two.

All around the invaders, spiders were falling like hail from the forest eaves. The twisted vegetation underfoot swarmed with tiny arachnids whilst chitinous cavalry pounced down from nearby boughs to form battle lines of their own. Javelins, feather-fletched arrows and crude spears thudded into the muscular flesh of the beastmen rushing to intercept the goblin horde, but for every missile that took its target down, three more were brushed off or clanged from rusted armour plates. The scent of blood in their nostrils, the warherd hurtled undaunted into the ranks of the spider riders. Though many of the goblin-beasts skittered out of reach, wherever the charge struck home the crude axes of the gors and bestigors hacked into the scrawny bodies of the goblin cavalry until all the air was misted with greenskin gore.

An orgy of bloodshed was erupting all across the clearing, a chance for the devotees of Chaos to earn the favour of their gods. Gutrot Spume shot out a trio of tentacles and grabbed a feather-crested goblin from its arachnid mount as it scuttled past. Hooking his axe on the lip of the warshrine borne alongside him, the warlord swung himself up with his remaining pseudopods and gained his feet. He slammed the goblin champion down hard onto the sacrificial altar



at the palanquin's head, calling out praise to Nurgle as he cut the squealing creature's guts from its torso and held them up to the skies. Thunder rumbled in response to his cries, and a strange black cloud began to circle above the clearing.

Emboldened by the appearance of their savage orc allies on the other side of the clearing, the forest goblins renewed their attack, falling upon the Chaos battle line from all directions at once. Jabbing speartips and chitinous legs found gaps in armour to pierce the hard flesh of Spume's armoured infantry. Poisoned fangs bit through the unguarded necks and backs of rampaging minotaurs, which flailed and grabbed at their cunning persecutors, snatching them up and breaking them upon the ground. The arachnid riders were being killed by the score, each greataxe or clubbing mace turning goblin and spider alike into a confusion of broken limbs.

What the goblin warriors lacked in quality they more than made up for in sheer quantity. The eaves of the clearing were still dark with skittering bodies dropping down from the trees to scuttle into the fray. Though Spume's army boasted over a thousand warriors, the Drakwald's greenskin tribes had ten times that number and more. A war of attrition would ultimately end with the bones of the Chaos invaders littering the webs of the Drakwald's denizens.

In the centre of the Chaos battle line, Gutrot Spume urged his warriors to fight on. He swept his axe around him in great swings, his tentacles lashing at those spiders that leapt over his weapon's deadly arc. Despite his elevated position atop the warshrine, the warlord's situation was worsening fast. With every passing second, more foes dropped down from the forest eaves above to pounce onto the warshrine's platform or sink poisoned fangs into the misshapen brutes that held the stonework aloft.

The warshrine's bearers lumbered on, hoping to escape the arachnids that bit at them. In doing so they carried their burden under a thick section of the outstretched forest canopy. A high shriek split the air, and dozens of goblin cavalry crawled from their hiding places to fall upon Spume's palanquin. Claws and speartips sank into the warlord's elbow, the nape of his neck, even the rubbery meat of his tentacles. It did little more than make him angrier, for Nurgle had blessed Spume with a resilience that mere flesh wounds could not overcome.

To the warshrine's right a carthorse-sized spider fired ropes of sticky silk from its abdomen and yanked the axe from Spume's hands with a twitch of its fat behind. The warlord shot out his longest tentacle and seized it right back, catching its haft with a gauntleted hand and decapitating a shrieking goblin that was jabbing at his helm with a spear. Distracted for a second, Spume was caught out by the spider rider crawling up behind him, the dirty tip of its blade plunging into the back of the Norscan's knee.

As the battle lines clashed around him, Gutrot Spume punched, kicked, and headbutted the chitinous bodies that threatened to drown him. A spear slammed hard into his helm, bursting his boil-encrusted lips and flooding his rotten teeth with blood. The point of another polearm punctured his thigh. More spiders leapt at the tentacled lord, burying him under dripping fangs and shiny black bodies.

The slow trickle of venom seeped into the warlord's bloodstream like melting ice water, but it did not lay him low. Instead, the spiders that had punctured his skin fell away, spasming in clusters of upturned legs as the supernatural diseases lurking in the warlord's bloodstream ravaged their bodies. And still the beasts came on, biting and clawing.

A great buzzing came from above the battlefield, and the spiralling black

mist above the clearing coalesced into a storm of slime-slicked flies. The insects flowed together to form a gigantic, wide-mouthed face that filled the sky above the clearing. As Spume fought below, the apparition opened its vast maw and vomited out a thick swarm towards the beleaguered Norscan. The fat-bodied insects dived down in such numbers that they knocked the warlord's assailants from his palanquin, leaving Spume bleeding but defiant atop it.

There was an ear-splitting screech as four titanic spider legs ripped through the webs that concealed the east of the clearing. The great limbs impaled two of the rust-armoured beastmen that had been making to flank the approaching savage orcs, the sudden attack scattering their herdmates in disarray. Out of the forest eaves came a night-blue spider that could have straddled the *Rotten Beast*. Two similar monstrosities came crashing behind it; one russet, one black. On the backs of the giant arachnids were branch-bound howdahs that held hooting, hollering greenskins.

A war horn sounded, and a thick knot of bestigors boiled out of the forest to hack at the foremost arachnid's legs with their crude axes. The immense spider simply strode through the Walderbeasts as if they were no more impediment than smoke. Two blood-covered minotaurs flung themselves into the beast's path, axes raised, but the creature's mandibles scythed one apart even as it impaled the other on a massive, spear-like leg. The Harbinger's guttural syllables rang out as the russet spider closed in on the Chaos warriors, the crude catapult mounted on its howdah firing bundles of sticky webs into the enemy ranks. As the bray-shaman's chant finished, the monster slowed, then veered, then splashed in panicked spasms in the boiling cesspool that had risen from the ground beneath it. The giant arachnid floundered, goblins spilling from its howdah to disappear into the quagmire below.

To the right the Tusk Axes crashed through the forest towards the largest of the giant arachnids, barging aside their beastmen comrades in their haste to join the fight. The largest of the Tusk Axes leapt bodily over the ragged group of greenskins that sought to block its path, the shartak's fellow dragon ogres trampling and hacking the goblins down in his wake. The shartak hooked both of its axes onto a low-hanging bough and used its momentum to swing all four of its scaly legs forward into the massive arachnid with a crash of splintering timber. The spider-thing went over in a jumble of limbs, but the shartak did not relent. Roaring, the dragon ogre hacked off one of the spider's great forelegs in a fountain of white fluid.

The creature skittered back behind two massive Drakwald oaks, its malevolent eyes flashing as its abdomen curled. A moment later a wad of spidersilk hit the dragon ogre champion full in the face. Blinded, the shartak reared up, axes flailing wildly. The arachnarok took its chance, darting forward and scissoring the warrior in half with a clasp of its razored mandibles. The gigantic spider pressed on into the dragon ogres behind, bowling two of their number over with the bloated mass of its abdomen. It stabbed down again and again with its chitinous legs, each pointed tip driving deep into scaled flesh and bursting out the other side.

Witnessing the spider's rampage, the Harbinger raised his arms to the sky and gave a shivering bleat. In answer the giant sky-face above the clearing gave another belching roar. Swarms of daemon flies buzzed out like tendrils of smoke, each questing tip finding the spiracles of the giant arachnid and funnelling inside. The immense spider immediately stopped in its stabbing rampage, its poisoned stinger poised quivering over a fallen dragon ogre. Every one of the beast's sunken eyes glittered wide. Then it shuddered, squealed like a boiled crab, and fell over dead.

Its death squeal was echoed by a bellowed war cry so loud it drowned out all else, as the Grokkamobs charged in. They fell with flint axes and spears upon Spume's Sons of the Last Plague, but their weapons were expertly parried or blocked by thick armour plates and shields. The orcs' true weapons were not the primitive tools of destruction they brandished in each clawed hand, however, but thickly-muscled physiques and a maniacal battle frenzy. In their headlong assault, very few of their number left time for the Norscans to level a riposte. Slowly but inexorably, Spume's warriors were pushed back by the storm of blows towards the teeming spider-tribes that had come from the other side of the clearing.

Upon the flank, a hundred-strong mass of boar-riding orc warriors thundered into the bestial warherd that was moving in to reinforce the Sons. The force of their impact raised an audible thump as the daggertusks slammed into the unarmoured torsos of the Walderbeasts, the tattooed greenskin riders adding to the tally of the dead by stoving in horned heads and punching spears through chests wherever they could find an opening. The beastmen fought back hard, but such was the strength of the orc attack that the first rank fell, then the second. The warherd wavered, turned, and broke, leaving their armoured Norscan allies to their fate.

At the heart of the carnage was Grokka Goreaxe, blood drizzling from the edge of his chipped-flint choppa. The savage orc whirled left and right, the ranks of the Chaos worshippers so dense around him that his weapon could not fail to find its mark. Norscan steel cut into his arms, his chest, even his face, but instead of cries of pain they merely drew bellows of fury. The greenskins around the warboss drew strength from their leader's rampage, hammering the Sons into the dirt. Then Eogric the Vile shouldered his way through the throng and took Grokka's head from his neck.

Incredibly, the decapitated orc fought on, claiming another two Norscan lives before another blow from Eogric's axe cut the cadaver in two. The champion stooped over, his distended gut sighing foully, and picked up the savage orc's head before brandishing it at the skies. Thunder rolled overhead, thunder that sounded more like a low belly laugh than the threat of a true storm.

It was then that the Rotting Riders hammered into the fray. Having been out of the saddle for the best part of a week, frustration lent them strength. Dozens of broad-bladed spears and ensorcelled blades punched through the naked torsos of the savage orcs, the sheer momentum of the charge grinding the flank of the greenskin army into a morass of disembodied limbs and trampled corpses. Warhorses stamped and bit as their riders expertly took heads from necks and hands from wrists. The zealous fury that had seemed to drive the orcs dissipated and then vanished altogether, leaving them easy prey to Spume's veteran warriors.

The giant black arachnarok spider that was stomping through the ranks of Spume's battle line crouched for a moment before soaring through the air towards the Chaos knights. It landed with a ground-shaking thump, its poisoned stinger jabbing through rusted armour plates to turn the flesh beneath into suppurating black rot. Atop the creature's howdah a diminutive shaman gibbered in the strange high tongue of its kind, waving a feathered staff over its head. The air in the clearing grew oppressively thick as the shimmering form of an impossibly vast spider formed of pure moonlight manifested above the battle. The whirling storm of flies that had aided Spume burst apart and scattered, terrified into hiding by the shimmering spiderform.

Wherever the moon-spider's legs touched the warriors of Spume's alliance, they would burst into

ghostly green flame that turned the fighters to desiccated husks in a single heartbeat. Vaunted champion and lowly ungor alike were transfixed by shafts of spider-moonlight before falling away to ash, the capering goblin shaman atop its black-carapaced steed giggling in maniac glee as the moon-curse did its work.

Suddenly a horrible snorting bawl rang out across the clearing. Attracted by the strange moonlight that had lit the clearing, the Harbinger's jabberslythe flopped into the fray, its greasy bulk slamming a trio of ungor into boneless mush as it passed. The air itself shimmered and writhed at the foul beast's presence as it loped into the ranks of the savage orcs. All around it greenskins shivered and shook, hacking at their own bodies in fits of raw madness as the creature's indescribable aura worked its strange magic. The jabberslythe opened its bearded maw wide, shooting its sticky, grasping tongue high to pluck the goblin shaman from its cobwebbed perch. The shrieking greenskin was yanked into the beast's mouth, vanishing with a wet smack of rubbery lips. Almost immediately the vast moon-spider looming above the battle shimmered, thinned, then disappeared entirely.

At the centre of the battle line, Spume was fighting blade to blade against the masked goblin chieftain that led the spider tribes, the greenskin's chittering steed drooling poison as it skittered in low. The giant spider leapt, all eight legs ready to stab down. Seven tentacles shot out, each grabbing one of the vile beast's limbs so that only one spear-limb hit its mark. Even that clanged from the warlord's breastplate, leaving little more than a scratch. In response the Norscan warlord brought his axe down in a killing arc, embedding the weapon in the spider's skull. The grey arachnid began to shake violently, trying to dislodge the axe even in its death throes, but the rusted blade was stuck fast in its bulbous head.

Climbing over the creature's shuddering thorax came the masked goblin. Knee braced on its dying steed's neck, the chieftain brought a vicious-looking flint spear stabbing down towards Spume's helm. The warlord jerked himself to one side, avoiding the deadly thrust by a hand's breadth. He caught the polearm with two of his tentacles, snapping it contemptuously and casting it over the side of the bucking warshrine.

Shrieking, the masked chieftain lunged bodily forward and bit deep into Spume's unarmoured shoulder. Tentacles wrapped around the goblin, but this time they held their victim close rather than tossing it away. As the goblin's fangs imparted his own weak poison into Spume's body, some of the warlord's infected blood flowed back into the masked chief's mouth.

The favour of Nurgle was upon Spume that day, and the Lord of Decay had ever been generous with his blessings. The goblin's eyes blazed white as it threw its head backward, squealing like a harvest pig cut from neck to belly. It began to swell, slowly and grotesquely, as the blessings of Nurgle worked their magic. More and more of the Plague God's unlovely fecundity billowed through the goblin's body as it blew up like a ball-mushroom after the rain. Green flesh bubbled and surged. The goblin's features bulged comically across a face too distended to hold together a moment longer.

Then, with a horrific wet pop, the chieftain burst.

A knot of the closest greenskins cried out and fled into the forest like insects scattered by torchlight. The panic spread throughout the goblin horde like a virus. As quickly as they had arrived, the spiders and their forest-dwelling masters retreated into boles, hollow trees, and muddy warrens until they were completely hidden from sight. Even the howdah-bearing spiders that stalked the edge of the clearing turned and fled.









There was a chorus of cheers from Spume's armies, the most blood-hungry of their number giving chase and cutting down those goblins too slow or too wounded to escape.

With the forest goblin tribes gone, Norscan invaders and beastmen alike renewed their attack on the savage orcs that still crashed against their shield walls. The greenskins had lost much of their momentum with the loss of their leaders, and this time it was they who were pushed back, beaten bloody and hacked down into the mud. With a despairing wail that spread through their ranks like a tangible wave, the orc tribes turned and ran headlong into the depths of the Drakwald.

Spume ordered his warshrine forward. His mutant servants obediently lurched close enough for him to leap onto the thorax of the trapped arachnarok half-submerged in the Harbinger's magical quagmire. He raised his axe high, calling out all seven of his master's favoured names, before bringing his blade down into the giant spider's skull. The creature's cranium cracked open with a sound like a cannonshot.

In its death throes the beast convulsed sharply, hurling Spume from its body and slamming him hard against the rear of his palanquin. There came a rough crash of ceramics, and a smell so terrible that it turned the stomachs of even the most devout worshippers of Nurgle.

Drizzling out from the rear of the warshrine was a grey-brown liquid that poured and poured, far exceeding the capacity of the earthenware plague jar that had contained it. Wherever it splashed upon the ground, thick tendrils of thorny vines burst outwards in a profusion that defied all logic. The strange thorny vines sought out the dead bodies that lay scattered across the clearing and sank into them before bursting out once more with even more vigour.

The Norscans watched in stunned silence as the vines bore the corpses of fallen humans and greenskins alike into the air, thousands of bodies hanging like obscene fruit from the twisting grey-brown thickets that sprouted around the clearing. The magical vegetation grew from coiling shrub to copse to forest in the space of a few minutes, forming a giant dome of entwined vines above the cheering Norscans. A temple to Nurgle's boundless life had been born from the field of corpses that Spume's men had scattered across the sacred heartlands of the Spider God. With the slaughter of the forest tribes and the death of the greenskin shaman that led them, all of the magical power that the forest goblins had harnessed in the sacred site had been captured and transferred to Nurgle instead. It was truly a gift fit for a god, a feast of elemental energy that empowered the Lord of Decay in this realm and his own.



It was the Norscan belief that such a triumph would not go unrewarded by the gods. Sure enough, the great sacrifice had pleased Nurgle mightily, and his gifts to Gutrot Spume's armies were just beginning.

Across the blood-slicked clearing hundreds of greenskin guts were opened by swords, axes and knives, their stinking offal held high in celebration of the glorious foulness that births new life.

'A sacred sight,' said Gutrot Spume, his tentacles cleaning themselves of clotted gore.

'Indeed,' said Eogric, his bass tones resonating behind his one-horned helm. 'Yet this forest has vegetation enough. Our passage remains barred.'

Almost as soon as the axeman had finished his sentence, the throttlevines at the south of the clearing writhed with life. Intertwined with the branches of the Drakwald's native foliage, they constricted to pull apart the twining boughs and undergrowth until they formed the walls of a wide, vine-vaulted corridor that headed due south.

'Offer greatness to the gods, and they will offer gifts in kind,' said Spume, his chest puffed out.

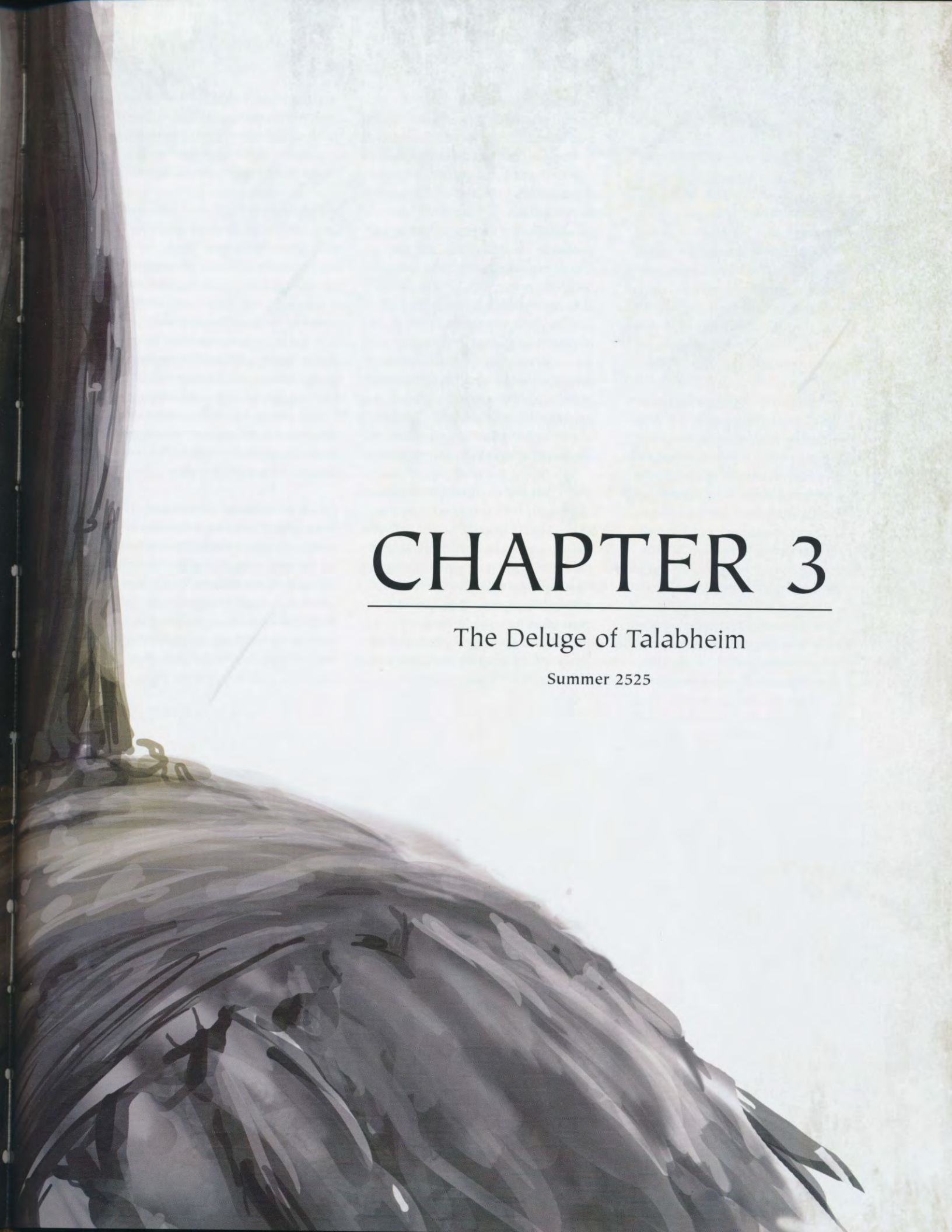
'If that leads where I think it leads,' said Eogric, 'we may yet outpace the Glottkin.'

'I am sure of it,' said Gutrot Spume, clanging the edge of his axe against the side of his warshrine until his men gave him their undivided attention.

'Today we have provided for our father, and he has provided in kind!' shouted Spume, his words resonating around the vine-walls of the gigantic temple. 'Witness how his hand shapes us a path to the throat of our prey! This day we have won a great victory, but it is a mere prelude to the glory we shall win in the streets of Altdorf!'

As one, the Norscan army raised its voice in a deafening cheer, as the throttlevines shivered with strange glee.





CHAPTER 3

The Deluge of Talabheim

Summer 2525



Far to the north, the shattered ice floes of the Gulf of Kislev parted before the prow of a single massive warship. This was no ordinary vessel, but the *Vulfbite*, a once-grand flagship that had been sunk off the Ostland coast. The rotten vessel's remains had been pulled from the sea bed by the mighty limbs of kraken in the service of the Lord of Tentacles, and deposited on the beach for the Glottkin's allies, the champions of Icehorn Peak, to press into service.

For time immemorial the barbarians of Icehorn Peak had given worship to Nurgle. They were no strangers to the otherworld in which their master dwelt, for the Realm of Chaos ebbed and flowed across Icehorn Peak with each passing decade. The warriors that lived there were so toughened by their ordeals that they fancied themselves the equal of a dozen lesser men, and many were right to do so.

Amongst the Icehorn tribe's leaders were three men that bore the especial favour of the Lord of Decay. All were blessed with such unnatural

resilience that they had reached several centuries of age, their bodies now surreal confusions of plague made flesh. The first amongst them was Orghotts Daemonspew, known in the north as the Bastard King because of his half-daemonic nature. Second was the maggot-infested shell known as Bloab Rotspawned, the lord of the daemonflies, who had cast his foetid maggot-spells at Orghotts' side during the Battle of Kislev's Gate in 2303. The third of their number was Morbidx Twiceborn, master of nurglings, a jovial warrior accompanied by swarms of daemonmites at all times. Given a chance at conquest by the Everchosen, these champions were anxious to claim the southern lands in their master's name.

Otto Glott had charged these three champions with reaching Brass Keep in the Middle Mountains and enlisting to their cause the Nurgle-worshippers that garrisoned it. Orghotts was eager to accept this duty, keen to further cement his place in Nurgle's favour. By leading a daring invasion into the heart of the Empire, he hoped to shrug off his lingering mortality and become a fully-fledged daemon.

Hungry for glory, and ill-inclined to share it with the rest of their tribe, the three champions rode out on the long-limbed pox maggots they used as steeds and swiftly made ship.

The *Vulfbite*'s hull had seen far better days, but it was sound enough for Orghotts' purposes. Bloab Rotspawned's sorceries wove together the ribs of its hull, growing thick walls of noisome meat upon them, whilst fresh sails of mammut-skin were raised in order to harness the fierce winds. Spume's kraken-beasts saw the vessel safe around the coastline of the northern wastes, even attacking those Empire galleons and elven eagle ships that strove to intercept it. Within the space of a week the *Vulfbite* had made landfall in the Gulf of Kislev.

Where the Glottkin armada had thousands of tattooed tribesmen in its holds, and where Gutrot Spume had led the armoured elite of his Norscan followers, Daemonspew's force was comprised of but three warriors. Yet they were men whose homelands were so far north, so close to the ever-shifting Realm of Chaos, that they were suffused with its power.



With only a single ship at their disposal, Orghotts and his men gave the cannon batteries boasted by Ostland's coastal fortresses a wide berth. Instead they braved the Gulf of Kislev, for much of that once-proud land had already been brought low by invasions in recent years.

Once they had debarked from the *Vulfbite* near embattled Erengard, the riders headed straight past its gilded domes, heading south-west towards Talabheim. After cutting through the Ostland forests, crossing the Middle Mountains and seeking reinforcements at Brass Keep, the Icehorn riders intended to converge upon Altdorf from the east, bypassing many of the Empire's defences and attacking at Geheimnisnacht.

As Orghotts' warriors made tracks across the tundra west of Erengard, the scouts of that battered city reported their presence to their boyars. The Kislevites captains opted to let the strange wanderers pass rather than give them battle, lest they invite a plague upon the citizens they were sworn to protect.

With the veterans of Erengard looking to their own defence, Orghotts Daemonspew's riders were free to cut through the Middle Mountains towards the heartland of the Empire unimpeded. By following the Gulf of Kislev to its southernmost point, they had bypassed not only Ostland's coastal defences, but also the dense forest of its northern reaches.

Though Orghotts hoped to reach Altdorf by the autumn equinox in time for the Glottkin's grand attack, the chieftain could not wait yet another season to shed blood. Rather than waiting for Geheimnisnacht, he intended to bring war and despair wherever he could – as soon as he had bolstered his force with the men of Brass Keep, the killing would start in earnest.

With only two chieftains at his side, it was an ambitious prospect to assail a single town, let alone one of the Empire's great fortress-cities. And yet ambition was something that Orghotts had in great measure – ambition, and a determination to prove himself as powerful as any true daemon.

In the humid miasma of Festus' subterranean laboratory, a cauldron of molten flesh bubbled hot. A grotesque face rose above it, toad-like in its warty width and the croaks that issued from between its blubbery lips. The vision burbled and muttered as Dr Festus cut up a human hand on a nearby bench, taking the care of a gourmet chef preparing a feast for the Emperor.

'Slops-a-gravey, beggar's crumb,' rumbled Ku'gath in the steam.

'Finger-more and skip the thumb.'

'Yes, yes,' said Festus, waving away the apparition's concern. 'I have spent over a year studying the Seventh Ingredient, you know.'

'But be your recipe shroudling-spiced, nearly-dear?'

'Not as yet, Ku'gath. Though the little fellows are helpful enough.'

'They oughten-beam. My glovely hand hath ensured it,' said Ku'gath.

'They have worked a great deal of Nurgle's magic thus far,' said Festus. 'The Altdorf streets are choked with shroud-smog, and slimelife breaks out everywhere. After eventide, the shadows writhe most pleasingly. I can almost smell the garden.'

'A grapeful truth, beseecher-leech!' replied Ku'gath. 'All-hordes congeal, Glotts and Spumelings, snail-slow no more – not since Father's vinely tunnels yawned. I have ensnored even Daemonbleeder hath mustard in his path.' Ku'gath's grin grew smug, a pair of glistening bubbles popping in his eyes. 'O-ho, yes – the Tallyman is expectorant!'

'So... Daemonspew should... expect a muster, eh? And with Epidemius the Tallyman? Then all shall be well! Assuming, that is, you stop your babbling and let me finish my work in peace.'

Ku'gath's hideous visage twisted into a sulky pout. 'Aghast, then, I shall belabour no more!' he said, his image vanishing with a wet pop.

'Many thanks,' said Festus, plucking a ladle from the cauldron. 'Now then, little shroudlings,' he crooned, holding the utensil near the flagstones. 'Come to Festus...'



As the riders of Icehorn Peak infiltrated the north of the Empire, the Mortarch Vlad von Carstein followed the course of the Stir Road upon his skeletal steed. The cloaked rider's noble features were twisted into a mask of distaste. Only a few days hence, Vlad's spies had told him that the invading armies harrying the north of the Empire were lost in the mountains or the reaches of the Drakwald, and hence the forces of the Plague God neutralised. Yet upon his return from the Auric Bastion he was shocked to find the forests of his ancestral lands had been transformed.

Where there were once stretches of shadowy forest in which a soul could hide from prying eyes, there was now a massive tangle of throttlevines so thick they all but hid the eaves completely. They spilt over the paths and roads like a nest of creeper-plants, crawling over themselves in their haste to claim more land. Some of the thicker vines even stretched slowly towards Vlad as they sensed his passage, black tips tasting the air and seeking his flesh. Grimacing in disgust, Vlad kept his distance from the questing tendrils. The vampire had no wish to engage in an undignified struggle against a mere plant, nor to end up like the corpses that dotted the forest of vines.

Here and there decomposing bodies hung in the mass, dangling by the dozen like a hangman's dream. The long-dead were present in great number; Vlad even recognised the signs of his master Nagash's influence upon many of the corpses. Mere weeks after the energies of undeath had spilled across the lands, they had been stymied by a supernatural plant that polluted more of the forest every day. A great magic had been set loose, and the chaotic forces of life were claiming the lands from the dead.

It was a prospect that sat ill with the vampire, even if the living had fallen foul of the strange growths alongside the dead. Some of the cadavers were

more recently deceased – peasants and roadwardens, by the look of it. There were even the corpses of beast-headed mutants here and there. No great loss to the masters of undeath, for the bestial tribes were unruly at the best of times. Yet the implications for the future were severe.

Every one of the bodies hung in the mass of vegetation had a constricting vine wrapped tight around its neck and a tendril pushing into its mouth.



Those that were the most recently deceased had several vine-tips sunk into their flesh. To one such as Vlad, it was obvious that the unnatural vegetation was feeding on its captives in the manner of some great bloodsucking parasite. The act was a mockery of the vampire's curse. Even though Vlad had managed to transcend the worst limitations of his condition via his feeding-sword, it was still most offensive to his eyes.

Incanting a short phrase in Nehekharan, Vlad became as insubstantial as mist. With an exertion of will, he floated from the road and drew in close to the tendrils. This time, they ignored his presence altogether, busying themselves with their slow but constant growth. Intrigued, Vlad pulled the shadow-form of his sword Blood Drinker from its scabbard, and cut one of the thickest branches of the colossal throttlevine that choked the forest. A vile-smelling sap leaked out, its poisonous stench so powerful that Vlad recoiled even in his spirit form.

This was not the magic of mankind – to achieve such raw foulness would take something far more powerful. Unbound life, spreading uncontrollably, consuming and taking over those who tried to impose order on the world. It could only come from one source – the agents of Chaos.

Floating backwards to the roadside once more, Vlad ended his spell and mounted his steed, spurring it north once more with a flick of his mind. Though Sylvania was likely resistant due to the malefic magic grounded there, the rest of the Empire was in danger of being entirely consumed by Chaos. Though it galled him to leave his lands behind after so many centuries of careful cultivation, Vlad resolved to fight for his adoptive realm instead. A greater prize was at stake – order itself. From the reports of his agents, the plague of throttlevines was not the only curse affecting the provinces.

Incredibly, it was becoming obvious to Vlad that the war for the Auric Bastion had been but a decoy. Whilst the attention of the scions of order was focused on the Kislev border, the real attack upon the Old World was coming from within. Unknown agents were stealthily weakening the entire Empire in preparation for the grand invasion to come. Action would have to be taken, lest the dullards of the civilised world realise their peril too late, and allow their realm to fall into the hands of the Dark Gods. Should that happen, he would likely never find his lost love Isabella. Worse still, obedience and control would become outmoded notions – a fate contrary to everything Vlad had strived for.

The skeletal steed halted in the centre of the road. Vlad looked back at the tangled atrocity that had claimed his ancestral lands. It was time to strike back. The vampire pulled a small parchment from his surcoat, pricked a vein with a long quill, and penned a second offer of alliance to the Empire's mortal lords.

Reikscaptain Hans Zintler struggled to keep pace as his master Kurt Helborg strode through the smoky corridors of the Imperial Palace. The hilt of the Reiksmarshal's sword was dripping blood, as was the back of his gauntlet. Following the trail of ruby droplets in Helborg's wake were thirty Reiksguard, a reserve that Zintler had mustered from the latter-barracks.

The Reikscaptain could still hear the dull roar of outraged citizens outside over the clangour of warning bells that rang out from Glockentor. Many of his knights had their burnished plate marred by the wet impacts of rotten cabbages or hurled street-soil. Others had faces smeared with blood, and gore coated many a scabbard.

On Zintler's right, the freckled young envoy Gunthold scurried along with a sideways gait, trying to keep up with Helborg as he held up a long vellum parchment.

'The missive appears to bear the seal of the... of the von Carstein family, my lord. And the initials V V C...'

His face dark, the Reiksmarshal spun to face the envoy. The young man flinched backwards under the force of his commander's iron gaze. Zintler had felt that furious focus several times over the last few days; only old Volkmar had boasted a more intimidating stare.

'Don't keep us waiting, then,' Helborg hissed, turning and striding into the throne room. The last of his knights shut the ornate double doors behind the company. 'Let's hear what that blood-sucking opportunist has to say for himself this time.'

Silence descended as Helborg's men waited expectantly around the throne room. Zintler was the first to break it. 'Surely it cannot be... Vlad, my lord.'

'An impostor, perhaps,' the envoy said, 'or a bluff.'

'Actually, I doubt it,' said Helborg, his expression cold. 'The von Carsteins never stay dead for long. Gunthold, stop soiling yourself and read the damn thing.'

The envoy nodded hurriedly before pulling the scroll tight. 'My dear Elector Counts,' he began, his voice timid. 'Or whomsoever the current incumbents may be.'

Helborg snorted in dark amusement at that. It was as close to an affirmation of the Reiksmarshal's self-appointed stewardship as Zintler had heard yet.

'It has no doubt come to thy attention,' continued the young man, his voice growing more confident as he read the von Carstein's words, 'that our beloved realms have been assailed from within. Plague infests the lands, from Marienburg to Kislev. Even my beloved Sylvania is threatened by unfettered growth. We find ourselves embroiled in a new war; one that mere bladesmen are ill-suited to fight.'

'That much he has right,' muttered Helborg, but the young man read on, talking over his master.

'It seems our lands play host to northern invaders of far greater subtlety than we have come to expect,' said the envoy, his tone imperious. 'They and their plagues must be repelled if order is to be restored to our realm.'

The young man's accent was becoming thicker and

deeper with every sentence, his spine straightening and his chin sticking out as he read on.

'To that end, I propose a temporary truce. More than that, I propose an alliance. We must ensure that these Chaos-loving dogs,' - at this the envoy spat blood in contempt - 'are put down, and their leaders shown their place. Only then can order be restored.'

The youth's tone was authoritarian and strange. Zintler shared a worried glance with Helborg, his hand straying to his sword hilt. The Reiksmarshal slowly shook his head, subtly motioning for Zintler to be still.

'Think well on it,' the steward continued, his every syllable thick. 'I do not expect an immediate answer, for I know you mortals still fear death, as the infant fears the darkness. If our thoughts are in accord, light a flame from thy tallest tower upon the hour of midnight. Thy folk will have no more to fear from the forces of death. If such a signal is withheld, however, the fates shall be less kind. One day we shall discuss the matter in detail, on this side of the grave or the other.'

Till then, thy fellow lord and monarch of the blood... Vlad von Carstein...'

As the last word left the envoy's lips, the young man staggered backwards, sucking in ragged breaths as if released from a strangler's grip. Blood trickled from his nostrils. Zintler stared in disbelief, blinking at the transformation that had overcome the youth. His skin was white as a trout's belly, his eyes bulging in panic above blue-grey lips. From brow to chin, his freckled face was seamed like that of a hag.

'Burn the letter immediately,' commanded Helborg. 'Burn it, and get this poor fool to the Temple of Shallya, even if you have to cut your way through those bloody fog-lepers first. Tell the sisters he's a priority case.'

Zintler nodded and snapped his fingers for his men to obey. As the haggard envoy was carried from the room, Zintler fiddled with his moustache and scratched the back of his neck. 'This letter, sir... do you suppose it really is the work of the Count von Carstein?'

The Reiksmarshal snorted like a rebellious stallion, but Zintler knew his mask of anger hid a good deal of distress. 'I care little whether this damned scroll was from the quill of Vlad himself or the prank of some dispossessed buffoon from the Amethyst College,' said Helborg. 'I'll be damned before I fight alongside the undead. This matter is at an end. Now get out there and do whatever it takes to restore order. Draw your blades if you have to. That should give those muck-slinging peons pause for thought.'

Zintler bowed smartly and motioned for his men to leave. Looking over his shoulder as he left, the captain saw the Reiksmarshal slump onto the steps at the base of Karl Franz's throne. A dozen sleepless nights were weighing him down like furs soaked in blood.

'Hans?' called Kurt Helborg, his voice choked and strange. 'Just... Just do whatever it takes.'



As spring turned to summer, word began to spread of terrible curses affecting Karl Franz's

realm. With grave-moss choking the rivers and throtlevines claiming the forest roads, strands of rumoured strife were being stitched together into a tapestry of disaster. The villages and towns that had previously thrived behind tall walls and palisades were now in the grip of progressively viler maladies. Even the greediest merchant feared to venture into reaches haunted by disease, and boatmen used the greatest of caution when the land was in the grip of plague lest they inadvertently spread it further.

Those unfortunates who had drunk from the Reik soon became covered in grave-moss themselves, sickening and dying within a matter of days. With the exception of the Sisters of Shallya, those that rushed to their aid found themselves in the grasp of the same curse. The Reik flowed black, and the Talabec was turning darker by the day. The flesh of those that lived by the riverbanks turned dark too, and the moss-lepers spread the curse even further as they searched for help. Those who fled for safer territory were soon snatched up by the throtlevines that choked the roads and forests across the land.

Sheer terror spread alongside the plagues, for the dead had not slept easy since Nagash's resurrection, and with so many fallen to sickness the act of proper burial was a distant memory. As the effects of dark magic mingled with desperation, outbreaks of cannibalism spread across the provinces. Before long the citizens of the Empire were falling upon themselves in hatred and fear, villages and townships warring with each other as the traumatic effects of the plagues claimed far more lives than the diseases themselves.

* As for the knights of Bretonnia, they too had learned of the terrors that assailed the Empire. Louen Leoncoeur

had returned from Silverspire at the height of springtide, bloody but defiant after his defeat and near-death at the hands of Mallobaude, to serve at the right hand of the Green Knight. Barely had the stale blood been cleaned from his armour before Helborg's plea for aid reached his quarters. Louen spent many hours in prayer to the Lady before strapping his plate armour on once more, gathering every able-bodied knight, and riding out to relieve the Empire from the dark forces that assailed it.

As Bretonnia's champions marched upon Altdorf, Orghotts Daemonspew and his champions forged a path through the snow of the Middle Mountains. They were assailed by iceshard blizzards, white-furred chimeras and flocks of screeching eagles, but were not deterred. Converging upon Brass Keep shortly before the height of summer, they crossed blades with the foetid garrison of that fell citadel, a tribe whose own journey had long ago seen them swear allegiance to Nurgle. Orghotts' daemon-tainted blood was proof enough of his favour in the eyes of their mutual patron, and he soon lured them to his cause with promises of a land ruled by disorder and strife.

The midsummer of 2525 saw the twin moons clash in the heavens. A terrible ritual took place below them as thousands of beastmen writhed in the strangled forests. Bleating, bleeding, and feasting en masse, their orgiastic din reverberated across the lands. In the heavens, Mannslieb's face was partially hidden by the Chaos Moon, a ring of light with a heart of blackness. Coordinating the dark celebration was the Harbinger, standing with arms raised atop a dolmen covered in spidery runes. Behind him was the tallest corpse-mound in the Drakwald, the herdstone at its heart hidden by a putrid thatch of torn limbs. The smell that came from the mass grave was unbearable to most, but to the bray-shaman, it heralded only the glory to come.

When the eclipse reached its zenith, the Harbinger took a vial of daemon-blood from his robes and transferred three drops to his pointed black lips. A moment later he convulsed and gabbled the Dark Tongue in a glottal stream, its syllables more torn free than given voice. Blood squirted from between his teeth and dribbled down the tangles of his rat's tail beard.

High above the orgy, something writhed in the centre of Morrslieb's face. Thin tendrils of green-white light shimmered into being, squirming from the skies like sickly serpents emerging from a pit. Each one descended to a separate part of the forest, the thickest of their number coiling downward to touch the corpse-mound at the clearing's heart.

The world turned monochrome as the monolith inside the mound blazed a startling white for long seconds, before exploding with a wave of tectonic force. A titanic boom resounded across the Drakwald as over a hundred herdstones detonated simultaneously, each to be replaced by glowing portals to the otherworld.

A pulsing warmth emanated where the herdstone had once stood. As the ringing in the beastmen's ears slowly subsided, the droning of immortal voices rose in its place. Dull bells rang in celebration and a million fat-bodied daemon flies whirled as they gushed out into reality. Sight returned to the beastmen at the edge of the clearing first. Their slack mouths agape, the beastmen chuntered, then brayed, then roared their praise to the gods at the procession before them.

Score after score of bandy-legged, fat-bodied daemons were loping out from the herdstone-shaped hole in reality which had been conjured by the Harbinger's ritual. Their number was endless, and their stench was incredible. Each of the horrible things had one eye, one horn, and one purpose – to usher in an age of plague that would never end.

Gregor Martak moaned softly as he slept in the urine-sodden hay. After the war council, he had been assigned a suite in the Imperial Palace – a luxury befitting a Supreme Patriarch, and one that had been gladly grasped by his materialistic predecessor Gelt. Martak had left in disgust, striding down to sleep in the stables instead. The Amber wizard was more at home with the stink of manure, the itch of fleas, and the prickle of hay.

And yet Martak's sleep had been wretched. His dreams tonight were fitful and intense, more akin to visions or parables than the still fog of true rest.

In his mind's eye the wizard saw an immense figure, heavily muscled and clad in armour of ancient bark. He lay sweating upon a bier of fallen willows, his milk-white eyes darting after phantoms that only he could see. The titan's legs were covered from foot to groin by thick black grave-moss. Glowing black warts dotted his rugged physique, and his torso was bound tight in black throttlevines that constricted like the coils of a hungry snake.

Standing at his side was a sky-maiden of surpassing beauty. Her innocent visage alone could heal the heart, and her gentle touch could mend the worst of wounds. Behind her shimmered an open cage, a twisted sphere of pitted black iron with its gate wide.

The goddess knelt by the bier, sobbing in anguish at the fate that had befallen her lover. She laid her hands upon the fallen titan's tortured flesh, but the agues afflicting it were beyond even her power to heal.

'Taal,' she pleaded. 'Taal, my love, be strong...'

In the stable back in Altdorf, Gregor Martak thrashed and cried out in his sleep. The beasts of the stables cried out with him.

Orghotts Daemonspew rode down through the Middle Mountains at the beginning of the autumn of 2525. Accustomed to the Icetooth Peaks, where reality itself is often under siege, his champions made light work of the forbidding mountains that rose from the deep forest of Ostland. Their maggots dug iron-hard claws into the ancient stone, negotiating the craggy terrain with the ease of great apes swinging through the jungle. Scree tumbled here and there, sometimes starting small avalanches, but the pox maggots were always one step ahead. They bore not only the lords of the Icehorn tribe, but the warriors known as the Repugnauts they had recruited at Brass Keep. Each had his blade dug into the insensible hide of the maggot that bore him to keep him steady, their Nurgle-given stench ensuring the ravenous beasts did not simply devour them.

Daemonspew's small force set a tireless pace through the Middle Mountains. Just as the Glottkin had anticipated, there was no better force in all of Norsca for negotiating the mountains at the Empire's heart. Though they were at one point spotted by sharp-eyed Ostlander scouts, the Icehorn riders' small numbers kept them from any major retaliation by the already hard-pressed Empire. Their route of approach, which no sane general would even have considered possible, saw the maggot riders reach the woods that ringed Talabheim in a matter of months. A normal army would have taken the best part of a year to make the same journey.

Talabheim is known as the Eye of the Forest, for it is a pocket of safety in the midst of a thrashing, monster-infested wildwood. A city built within the caldera walls of a giant, inactive volcano, it is a natural fortress to which only one entrance exists; a winding tunnel guarded by the fortified settlement known as the Talagaad. Since the rise of undeath across the lands and the widespread

rumours of plague, the Talagaad had been manned by a great portion of the city's state troops and a large detachment of the Elector Count's personal guard. It was shut, barred and even magically sealed against the terrors abroad in the forest, for Talabheim had its own farms within its crater walls, and its people were quite content to survive on their own whilst the storm of disorder raged.

The defences made little odds to Orghotts and his men. With war-beasts such as theirs, the Icehorn riders simply waited until nightfall, and then spurred their maggot steeds up the gigantic crater's outer wall towards the battlements at its top. When they reached the underhang of Talabheim's battlements, the maggot riders lay in wait until the changing of the guard, and then sprang their attack.

The soldiery manning the walls were ill-prepared for the ensuing bloodbath. Morbidx Twiceborn's maggot, Tripletongue, bowled along the crater wall, flinging its defenders to a rocky doom. Rotspawned's own steed vomited sprays of daemonic vitriol over any who attempted to flee. Orghotts roared praise to Nurgle as his Rotaxes sank into necks left and right, each decapitated head bouncing down into the shanty towns below.

Within a matter of minutes the Icehorn riders were skidding down the inner walls of the Talabheim crater, the Repugnauts of Brass Keep close behind them. The unexpected suddenness of their attack had caught many of the city's defenders unawares. Yet, earlier that day, the Talabheim Caldera Guard had been forewarned by the Celestial Wizard Gerovangion of a possible attack that night. Barely had the maggot riders reached the shanties at the city's edge when crossbow bolts and arrows whipped towards them.

As the force barrelled through the city streets they found entire regiments of

state troops forming up to bar their path. At first, the soldiery provided little impediment, for when Orghotts' devastating charges were twinned with Bloab's maggoty conjurations and Morbidx's slashing scythe they proved impossible to stop. Monster and man alike felled their foes by the dozen, the maggots raking deadly claws through shieldwalls and spear formations wherever the state troops sought to block their path.

Yet even the Icehorn tribe had its limits. Every stabbing spear, every cutting halberd sapped a little more strength from their headlong assault. Though they had left a rich landscape of corpses behind them, populated by nurglings that had risen in Morbidx Twiceborn's wake, the riders had awoken the city to their presence.

The streets were slowly barricaded by fire or by blade. Cavalry charges from the city's knightly orders felled many of the Repugnauts rampaging through the Temple District, their front ranks pierced by a dozen lances even as their reinforcements were shot down by the famed Bronzeball handgunners. The remains of the fallen were immolated on improvised pyres by the city's witch hunters, the greasy stink sending a message that the invasion could be stopped.

With his auxiliaries slowly falling around him, and one of the Empire's largest cities united against his meagre invasion force, Orghotts Daemonspew sounded the signal to fall back. Several of Brass Keep's warriors ignored him, too preoccupied to pay heed to his calls. The remainder followed him away into the night, scrambling back under heavy fire to swing over the city walls and escape. Barely half of the invaders made it back to the tree line, though when they did, they were confronted by a very welcome surprise.

Marching through the forest around Talabheim's border was a procession of plague daemons so numerous that

the air above them was choked with flies. The rough clank of leper-bells and the droning buzz of counting plaguebearers filled the night air as the carnival of plague marched through the woods. The most senior of their number urged their rot fly mounts forward in skittering, many-legged lurches, forgoing the skies in favour of an approach shielded by the forest's thick canopy. Slug-like beasts of Nurgle gambolled and lurched between the tree trunks, leaving puddles of ammoniac slime behind them in their excitement. At their head was the Maggot King Epidemius, borne upon a palanquin of nurglings.

Grinning widely, Orghotts Daemonspew steered his maggoth towards Epidemius. He bowed his head as he approached, apologising for interrupting the Tallyman's work, but warning him of the city's many defences. The region was fortified and ready for battle, and its walls high. Foot troops, even those of a daemonic nature, would be of little use in its conquest. It was likely the Tallyman's hordes had marched upon an impossible quarry.

Epidemius put down his quill with exaggerated slowness, peering at Orghotts as if seeing him for the first time. In deep, sonorous syllables, the scribe posited a riddle. If Talabheim could not be overcome, he said, how could they force its citizens to come over to them?

Descending from his palanquin, Epidemius lumbered around Orghotts' maggoth in a wide circle, making notes on a skin-parchment as he went. He reached up to the bundle in which the Glottkin's plague jar was kept, and tapped the cloth with a long nail. Inside was the key. Fill the city with plague, and Talabheim's defenders would come to them.

Before the moons had reached their zenith in the skies, Orghotts had overseen the building of a great pyre outside the Talabheim walls,

the wet and rotting wood used in its construction giving off a great deal of smoke. Such fires were commonplace to the Icehorn tribe – until, that is, their master tipped the contents of his plague jar onto the burning wood. Then the winding column of smoke became a maelstrom of thick white cloud that billowed higher and higher until it formed a thunderhead above the forest eaves. The pregnant clouds unleashed a spattering storm, and then – as off-white liquid hammered out from the clouds – a deluge.

Epidemius laughed long and low as vile squalls of pus and infected blood thrashed the roofs of Talabheim and horrified those who had thought themselves safe within its walls. The phenomenon was so intense, so unrelenting, that the people were driven into panic. As the crater city's sewers and drains overflowed, Talabheim's self-contained nature was neatly turned against it. The outer districts were soon clogged with screaming citizens, and the streets of the city began to fill up, inch by inch. In no time, the yellow-white fluids that flooded the streets reached ankles, then covered knees.

The smell of the infected liquids alone was vile enough to sap the courage of many of Talabheim's people, and many upstanding citizens turned on one another in their confusion. Yet the greater number resorted to that most basic of instincts and fled, climbing the walls of the crater to escape the horridness below.

The military leaders of Talabheim, rightly presuming that the cause of the deluge was the work of the invaders they had just driven off, marshalled as many regiments as they could for the next clash. Sounding their battle clarions above the thunder of the storm, they emerged en masse from the Talagaad to hunt down and destroy their persecutors.

In doing so, they marched straight into the jaws of Epidemius' trap.



THE DAEMONKIN

The timely intervention of Epidemius allowed Orghotts Daemonspew to salvage his abortive attack upon Talabheim. By using the power of his plague jar, the maggoth rider drove the crater city's armies from behind fortress walls out onto the blades of a vast daemonic host.

ORGHOTTS DAEMONSPREW

At the head of the maggoth riders who invaded Talabheim was Orghotts Daemonspew. Those who pierced Orghotts' bloated skin found burning ichor spraying onto their own flesh, polluting their bloodstream and thoroughly corrupting their bodies. Orghotts' foes often collapsed even before the maggoth rider's blades cut them to pieces.



EPIDEMIUS

Epidemius was high in Father Nurgle's favour, and so was always given the respectful silence he needed to catalogue the demise of those who felt the kiss of contagion. Even the maggoths ceased their growling and slobbering in his presence, the only sounds around him the scratching of his quill and the screams of the infected.



BLOAB ROTSPAWNED

The sorcerer Bloab bore so many gifts from Nurgle that the only part of his anatomy that he shared with his former self was his skin. Even that husk was leather-tough and covered in insect bites, for the daemon flies that hatched from his maggoty body would give him affectionate nips to show their gratitude for bringing them into the material realm. These same swarms were a potent weapon on the field of battle.



MORBIDEX TWICEBORN

Morbidex took great pleasure in the spectacle of war. When the Master of Nurglings rode to war, the combination of Chaos champion, pox maggoth and daemon-mite horde could bring low a small army in its own right. As well as the horrifying appearance of such a combination, the high-pitched tittering that accompanied Morbidex's every blow was enough to leave many foes reeling in revulsion.



THE TALLYMAN'S BLADES

The main body of Epidemius' host was comprised of thousands of plaguebearers. Each was once a mortal soul who succumbed to Nurgle's Rot, only to be reborn as something infinitely more foul. Given release into the mortal realm by the Harbinger's great ritual, they hoped to catalogue the diseases afflicting the Empire, but had little hope of achieving their goal; they themselves were vectors for countless afflictions.

THE REPUGNAUTS OF BRASS KEEP

The veteran warriors that gathered to Orghotts' banner at Brass Keep were daemon-touched one and all, for they had previously walked the foetid paths of Nurgle's garden. Much like their new allies, they would do anything, no matter how foul, to see the mortal realm reformed in the image of their master's noisome paradise.



THE BOUNDERBEASTS

In the wake of the plague host, the slug-like monstrosities known as the Bounderbeasts flounder along, each attempting to make new friends amongst the mortal realm. Unfortunately, their disease-riddled bodies inadvertently kill the objects of their affections.

THE FESTERWING DRONES

These high-ranking plaguebearers helped the Tallyman to complete the trickiest of censuses. Their aerial viewpoint made them excellent observers, but also lethal foes, for they would dive onto those who spurned their foetid gifts and bite or stab them to death.



MORBIDEX'S MITES

Though Morbidex himself knew fewer than two dozen nurglings by name, the carpet of impudent daemons that cheered him into battle seethed in numbers uncounted. Joined together, they could down the greatest of prey.



-  **Orghotts Daemonspew**
Riding Pox Maggoth
-  **Bloab Rotspawned**
Riding Pox Maggoth
-  **Morbidex Twiceborn**
Riding Pox Maggoth
-  **The Repugnauts of Brass Keep**
One tribe of Putrid Blightkings
-  **Epidemius, the Tallyman of Nurgle**
-  **The Tallyman's Blades**
One host of Plaguebearers
-  **The Rotting Chanson**
One horde of Plaguebearers
-  **The Noxious Blades**
One horde of Plaguebearers
-  **The Grotesquerie**
Four hordes of Plaguebearers
-  **The Carnival Putrescent**
Six hordes of Plaguebearers
-  **The Slimebringers**
Three Beasts of Nurgle
-  **The Bounderbeasts**
Seven Beasts of Nurgle
-  **The Festerwing Drones**
Three swarms of Plague Drones
-  **The Thrice-infected**
One swarm of Plague Drones
-  **The Noxious Mites**
One swarm of Nurglings
-  **Morbidex's Mites**
One swarm of Nurglings
-  **The Frolickers Bubonic**
One swarm of Nurglings

TALABHEIM'S VENGEANCE

The men of Talabheim, sodden with nameless fluids and hot with infection, fled the walls of their drowned city, though they did not intend to relinquish it. Fierce hatred for the daemonic scum outside their walls beat within every heart and fuelled every swordstroke.

ADRIC GREENWOOD

The hermit known to Talabheim's shanty towns as Adric Greenwood was a powerful shapeshifter. Though he spent much of his time sitting in trees in a state of meditative stupor, when roused to anger by those who would harm his habitat he would take the form of a manticore or chimera and rip the offenders to shreds.



REBAN GREISS

Greiss was surly and bad-tempered at the best of times, and the Great Deluge drove his mood from foul to apoplectic. Though his grumpy demeanour and no-nonsense approach won him few friends during his rise through the ranks of the Talabheim military, it only enhanced his reputation as an effective commander.



ENGINEER COMMANDER VON STREIHOFF

The steam tank *Miragliano* was in Talabheim's Engineer School when the Great Deluge began. Taking his chance, the rogue engineer von Streihof stole the contraption and drove it through the refugee crowds at the city's gate to join the defiant armies massing on the plains outside.



THE BRONZEBOLLS

The handgunners who patrolled the caldera walls were known as the Bronzebolls, after the metal of their bullets – though they usually maintained otherwise. They were led by Lutiger Swift, a veteran of the Sylvanian crusade.



THE TALABHEIM CURS

Vulgar and foul-smelling to a man, the Curs had a long tradition of being the most numerous – and despicable – regiment in Talabheim's grand muster. However, their rough camaraderie kept them fighting in circumstances when more refined gentlemen would have fled long ago.

SOOTSON'S GUNS

The legendary artilleryist Bennec Sootson, upon his return from the Sylvanian crusade, impressed upon the Talabheim gun batteries how best to destroy the dead as well as the living. Each of their cannonballs and mortar shells was inscribed with the holy symbol of the Heldenhammer and chased with thrice-blessed silver.



THE CRATERBLADES

Each regiment in Talabheim had their own banner and traditions, but the bulk of them were referred to collectively as the Craterblades. During their proud history they saved Talabheim from a Waaagh!, giant vermin, and the magma beasts of the Chaos dwarf sorcerer Korakagrakk.



THE WILD-EYED WALKERS

Bare-footed mendicants had been traipsing Talabheim's streets for the months prior to Orghotts' attack, preaching that the world's end approached. Even as they shouted at their fellow Talabheimers that they were drowning in the filth of their own sins, every one of them marched out to protect the crater city.



Reban Greiss
Empire General



Adric Greenwood
Battle Wizard of the
Amber College



Breutus von Streihof
Engineer Commander riding in
steam tank



**Talabheim I-XII, 'The
Craterblades'**
Thirteen companies of
state troops



**The Talabheim XIII,
'The Bronzeballs'**
Three regiments of handgunners



**Talabheim Grand Artillery
Battery, 'Sootson's Guns'**
Four great cannon batteries, three
mortar battery, one helblaster
volley gun battery



**The Talabheim XIV, 'The
Talabheim Curs'**
Three regiments of spearmen



The Wild-Eyed Walkers
One congregation of flagellants



The Heimgate Marshals
One company of greatswords



**The Talabheim XV
'Waldjaegers'**
One band of archers



**The Talabheim XVI
'Caldera Guard'**
Three companies of spearmen
with two halberdier detachments



**The Talabheim XXIII 'East
Tower Halberds'**
One company of halberdiers with
one handgunner detachment



**The Talabheim XXIV
'Temple Marchers'**
One regiment of swordsmen



**The Talabheim XX
Marksmen,
'The Redbarrels'**
One regiment of handgunners



**The Crater Street
Cardsharps**
One free company



The Steel Maidens
One free company



The Sodden
One free company

THE BATTLE OF TALABHEIM

The vanguard force that hurried out of Talabheim included over a thousand hardened warriors. Amongst its number were the artillery batteries taken from its crater walls, sodden mobs of zealots; even a rogue steam tank. And still it seemed shockingly inadequate when compared to the daemoniac host emerging from the woods. A moaning, chanting flood of suppurating flesh, the plaguebearer army all but surrounded the western side of the crater city, flowing out to envelop its defenders. Its cyclopean warriors raised broken-nailed hands and rusted blades to the glory of the Urfather, rejoicing in the rain of pus that drizzled from the heavens.

Those daemons towards the rear of the noisome phalanx held their hands cupped, methodically counting out the diseases blossoming in the unclean fluids that gathered there. Those towards the front stalked forward at a bandy-legged but unstoppable pace, stolid determination on each disturbing visage. At their head rode the maggoth riders of Icehorn Peak, laughing at their change in fortune and swinging their blades through the air in anticipation of the battle ahead.

Trapped between the crater walls they sought to defend and an army of daemonkin, the Talabheim army had no choice but to fight. They stormed forward through the watery mud, locking spears and shields in place as the plaguebearer host gathered pace.

When the host hit home it was not the frenzied charge of the northern berserker or the orc, but a press of rubbery flesh and jabbing, triangular blades that forced the Empire battle line back step by step. The spears of the Talabheim Curs found their mark, each tip pushing deep into noisome flesh with squirting sprays of vile fluids. A few soldiers found their foes bursting whole to leave nothing but ectoplasmic mist and a

vile smell. For the most part, however, the plaguebearers still came on. The front ranks pushed themselves forward, impaling their swollen guts and sunken chests further and further, the tips of the polearms protruding and then bursting through their backs in a shower of rotten organs. Still they came on, their droning voices sapping the sanity of the state troops as the daemons counted out the skin diseases rippling across the faces and hands of their enemies. Their proximity was a weapon in itself, and here and there a soldier began to cough, to vomit, or to scream.

The battle line wavered for a moment until a loud, commanding voice rang out, ordering the men of Talabheim to stand fast. Reban Greiss shouldered his way to the front line, hacking into the mass of daemonflesh with a sword that flickered with violet fire. Wherever the blade cut, wherever its point stabbed, the daemons simply ceased to exist, disappearing in a puff of magenta flame. The spearmen around Captain Greiss took heart, setting their spears under their armpits and shouting for their comrades in the fifth and sixth ranks to stand down hard on each polearm's end. With their spears braced by three dozen good men, the state troops in the front ranks drew daggers to stab at the plaguebearers that were willingly pulling themselves along the length of each shaft. Steel points sank into cataracted eyes, and many a daemon was banished back to the festering realm from whence it came. Smaller regiments of swordsmen and halberdiers lapped around the edges of the daemon host, and what had begun as a desperate crush turned into a mud-sodden massacre as the jaws of the Empire army closed.

A full tenth of Epidemius's host had been banished in the first hour of the battle, and the ground underfoot was fouled with ichor.

The Bronzeballs, from their raised position on the edge of the crater's wall, fired shot after shot into the giant fly-daemons hovering towards their position. The handgunners' sergeant, Lutiger Swift, called each volley, his men aiming for eyes, for wing joints, for the heads of the plaguebearers perched atop each insectoid carapace. Though most of the bullets thudded home without noticeable effect, in some places marksmanship made all the difference, and rot flies spiralled out of the skies like sycamore seeds falling to earth.

Then the plague drones were upon them. Serrated daemon-limbs lashed and stabbed, rusted swords lanced down to sink into scalps and faces. In return the Bronzeballs fired point-blank blasts or used their handguns as clubs to beat away the lumpen monsters hovering overhead. At the centre of the melee, a large and gnarled rot-fly lowered its wide-ended proboscis to close over Lutiger Swift's head. The stretching mouthparts slowly ingested him in the manner of a snake consuming a goat. Their sergeant's muffled screams ripped away what was left of the Bronzeballs' courage. As three more giant daemon-flies droned in, the handgunners broke and fled.

The insect-daemons came after their fleeing victims, rubbing their long, bladed forelimbs together in anticipation of the guts they were soon to open. As they rounded an outcrop of rocks, however, Bennec Sootson's deep bass voice came from a hidden embrasure on the crater's lower edge, and a series of cracking booms rang out over the storm. A moment later a volley of cannonballs hurtled through the skies to plough into the loose swarm of rot flies, bursting half a dozen of their number in explosions of white fluid and stolen body parts.





Then Sootson's helblaster volley guns spoke, and another rain of flesh dropped out from the rapidly diminishing swarm of rot flies. The grisly mess pattered down onto the steam tank *Miragliano*, splattering from the steam tank's ironclad sides as it powered through the rubble to the front line. The *Miragliano's* own cannon boomed in a cloud of steam, and a cannonball whistled over the heads of the crush. It slammed into Morbidex's maggoth, Tripletongue, ripping off an arm and laying its ribcage open at the shoulder. It loped on nonetheless. By the time the pox maggoths had charged into the Empire battle line, Tripletongue's wound had already begun to heal, a new skeletal arm waving lamely from its pinkish stump.

Around Morbidex, Bloab and Orghotts hit home, their maggoths ripping and tearing into the chanting Sigmarites that were attempting to hold them back. Flails battered and hacked at the pale giants, some even catching the legs of the riders, but the devotees of the Plague God had borne far worse blows in their time. Morbidex brought his scythe-like polearm down into the ranks in great sweeping motions that often impaled more than one zealot at a time. Those that survived each pass were swiftly consumed by a tide of gibbering nurglings. At his side, Bloab Rotspawned sent clouds of voracious eater-flies into the Sigmarite ranks, the swarms stripping his foes to loose mounds of bloody bone. Nearby, Orghotts' twin Rotaxes rose and fell, each blow hacking down one of the flagellants that clawed and stabbed at the monsters in their midst. His maggoth, Whippermaw, shot out its sinuous tongue, pulling its foes close so the beast could gobble them down with its twin mouths.

Within minutes, despite all of their frenzy and fervour, the mob of flagellants had been reduced to scraps of cloth and ruined flesh. Daemonspew and his riders stormed on in search of new prey.

They were soon to find it in the form of the Amber wizard Adric Greenwood. Up on the crater's wall, a spindly human figure swelled with arcane power, growing in size and spreading a pair of massive wings. Suddenly a roaring manticore swooped down to rip into Orghotts' back with its sword-like talons. Orghotts roared in outrage as his flesh was laid open to the spine, jabbing his axes back overhead as he tried to dislodge the ferocious predator. Orghotts' maggoth spun round with such speed that the manticore had to fly up into the air to avoid the whip-like tongue that lashed out for its legs.

Morbidex Twiceborn charged forward, scythe raised to strike. Snapping its leathery wings, the manticore lurched upward out of reach, only to dive down once more upon Bloab Rotspawned. The manticore snatched up the sorcerer's loose skin in its rear limbs and pulled upward hard. As Bloab's sac-like body vented sprays of daemonfly larvae, his maggoth vomited a great geyser of bile that splashed upward to hiss against the manticore's skin. The beast lurched away, and, nearby, Morbidex cried out in triumph, hurling his scythe in a sidelong sweep so that it spun end over end towards the monster's head.

The manticore swooped low, the scythe cutting its tail but doing little else – yet in doing so the creature brought its belly close to the Repugnants of Brass Keep. One of the armoured warriors planted his boot in a Talabheim swordsman's face and pushed upwards, bringing his sickle-blade round in an overhead swipe that punched right through the manticore's breastbone with an audible crunch. The beast screamed, blood gouting from its chest. Taking his chance, Orghotts wrenched a halberd from the hands of a state trooper below and hurled it upwards like a spear. It shot out with the force of Slaupnir seeking a new throat, and this time the projectile struck true. The heavy point of the halberd slammed into

the manticore's left eye socket, and the beast shimmered for a second. Where a great winged beast had been a moment before, a bloodied Amber wizard dropped to the ground. A tide of nurglings closed over him, and he vanished, never to rise again.

Watching the carnage unfold was Epidemius, scrabbling to record the plagues that were blossoming in the wake of his legions. His nurgling-borne palanquin bore him towards a trio of beasts of Nurgle that were bounding towards Talabheim's steam tank. The war machine was grinding its steely bulk through the ranks of plaguebearers, leaving little more than ectoplasmic mush in its wake. Epidemius gave a stern command, and with a great bellyflop one of the beasts of Nurgle draped its fleshy bulk over the front of the *Miragliano*. A moment later the excitable daemon was blasted apart by a cannonball.

Epidemius tutted in disapproval and gestured once with the feathered end of his quill. His nurglings swarmed forwards, clambering all over the steam tank's metal bulk. One of the mites wedged his fat buttocks into the *Miragliano's* cannon, giggling and picking its nose. A moment later a beast of Nurgle careened towards the steam tank, and the machine's cannon boomed. This time the tank itself came apart in a thunderclap explosion of steam and metal debris. Jagged pieces of steel flew outward, scything down the Talabheim troops that had used the tank as their rallying point. One of the shrapnel daggers stuck right through Reban Greiss' neck, ending his stream of invective forever.

With the death of their captain and the demise of their most powerful war machine, the nerve of the Talabheim troops was finally broken. They turned and fled back to the Talagaad, joining the mass of refugees that was flooding towards Altdorf in their panic. Rejoicing in their victory, the daemonkin and their conjured storm followed close behind.







Whilst the refugees of Talabheim fled along the River Talabec for the dubious safety of Altdorf, a fat-bodied figure shuffled through the unclean mists of that once-fair city's night, humming a merry tune in his deep bass voice. As the figure drew close to each townhouse window, the daemon-mite perched upon the figure's shoulder scooped a ladleful of bubbling liquid from the apparatus strapped to his back. The figure carefully took the noisome concoction from his diminutive assistant and transferred it to the windowsill before bumbling off again. In his wake reality shimmered, coils of poisonous smog twisting and writhing like the snaking tendrils of some daemonic plant.

A hundred leagues to the west, the Reik seethed black with grave-moss. Up on the riverbank, three strange figures looked upon the polluted waters with parental pride. Two were solidly-built men clad in rotting plate and ancient cloth, the other was a mound of flesh the size of a townhouse. On the horizon behind them was the smoking wreck of Carroburg, a riverside city that had held out for long months, but ultimately been overwhelmed. Upriver, tribe after tribe of tattooed Norscans made their way towards Altdorf, not on barges or flotillas of rowboats, but on foot. The islands of grave-moss that had choked the water from Marienburg to the heart of the Reikwald had grown so thick that most had blended together to form a thick skin like mould on sour milk. Here and there the burnt-out husks of once-bright rivercraft smouldered in the gloom, islands of death in a river choked with life. Even fully armoured warriors were walking the moss-capped watercourse as they made their way eastward, murder in their hearts and blood drying on their blades. Captured banners were hoisted aloft as they marched closer and closer to the city walls, and the threat of total war hung in the air.

In the Grey Mountains to the west, a king nearing his hundredth year but with the look of a man in his prime rode his hippogryph at the head of an armoured column wide enough to fill the mouth of Axe Bite Pass. Above the king, pegasi churned the eventide skies with graceful white pinions, and around him the finest knights of his generation rode proud. Their ancestral colours were already matted with the blood of one battle too many, but they would not be found wanting in their allies' hour of need, for honour ran in their veins as sure as blood.

Daemonspawn spilled from the sloshing white floods of Talabheim's streets, emerging to clamber over the city's crater walls. The maggoth riders had won many allies with their latest victory, amongst them the minotaur tribes of the forest. The horde's scent-trails were still strong. Slowly at first, but with gathering surety, the newly arrived daemons followed the half-mortal warlord and the metallic tang of the brass bull whose tribe he had enlisted with the promise of carnage. Behind them followed a tapestry of terrors held together only by the essence of Chaos. The time of violent celebration was near.

A tall southerner prowled through the Ostland wastes, his priceless runesword bound away from sight. A tangled beard disguised his regal features. His aching bones were slowly healing, though his faithful griffon companion was still a way from being able to take to the skies. The southerner wore his determination like a suit of gromril, and the fire in his belly was hot enough to see him through a dozen Kislevite winters. He would return to his rightful place at the head of the Empire's armies and force his enemies to pay, even if it killed him.

Atop a windswept fjord north of the Sea of Claws, a warlord clad in baroque plate sat astride a daemon steed shaped from pure ferocity. The warrior king looked out across the

bay as a hundred Kurgan wolf ships headed south, their brine-glittered oars rising and falling like the slow pulse of fate. Though his expression was hidden from his legions behind his horned and cyclopean helmet, the corners of the warlord's mouth twitched upward in a smile as cold as the deep sea.

In the writhing depths of Nurgle's garden, a mound of rotting flesh settled back into his favourite quagmire. It was the end of another long day of helping the fates burgeon into a form more pleasing to his patron, but in some ways the work was its own reward. Bubbles of flatulence caressed his sore-ravaged back and played fitfully across his ruined spine. The daemon closed his eyes and dreamed of a mortal realm made infinitely more vile.

A thin wedge of armoured cavalry led an army of maniacs and beasts through the Drakwald. Their progress, once a struggle for every metre, was as easy as if they crossed the open plain. The roof of the hidden corridor was an arch of tangled vines, and as they came on, new reaches opened in front of them with the sound of snapping timber and wrenching vegetation. At their head a Norscan lord stood proud upon his warshrine, his tentacles writhing in anticipation.

Three fine ladies, their silks as white as their hearts were black, hissed their displeasure at the vine-choked forests of the Drakwald. The armoured magister at the head of the procession motioned irritably for them to be quiet. Not only did they risk embarrassing him in front of the greatest of the von Carsteins, but also the displeasure of Nagash himself. With the godlike presence of their master close at hand, the reward for disobedience would be utter annihilation. The magister could not afford such losses, not now. In the grave-cold calculus of war, an asset was an asset, and the vampires had a part to play yet.

In the realm of dreams, stars shimmered in the maiden's flaxen hair. Meteorite tears glittered as they fell from her long lashes, lighting the mortal skies with the power of raw grief. Two tall figures watched the figure's tears fall from a distance – one a mother clad in green, the other a white-bearded man wearing a wolf's head hood. Their own faces were solemn, but they did not move to intervene. Nearby, the maiden's godly lover writhed in the grip of a threefold fever, yellow daemon-pus spilling from his mouth as he gasped and moaned. With every new convulsion the Old World trembled. In the mortal realm, patriarch and peasant alike cried out in their troubled dreams.

Sleepless once more in his quarters, a warrior lord looked out into the dense smog that had turned his proud city of Altdorf into a living nightmare. Amongst the constellation of lanterns and window-lamps were the brighter glows of bonfires. Some had been set by his own men to burn away the ever-growing mountains of diseased cadavers, some were the result of deliberate rebellion. The veteran warrior drew his dwarf-forged sword out from its jewelled scabbard, sheathed it, and drew it once more, but it could not vanquish the coughing moans of plague victims filtering up through the gloom.

As the bells of the nearby Glockentor struck midnight, the despairing cries of a mother rang out in counterpoint to the chimes. Before they had faded away, another tremor shook the high tower, a hint of earthly upheavals to come. From the old man's desk, parchments and missives scattered to the floor.

The old warrior straightened, breathing in deeply through his white whiskers. Grabbing a torch from the graven sconce at the door of his chambers, he made his way to the spiral stairway that led to the highest lanterns of the Imperial Palace and the deadly compromise they represented.

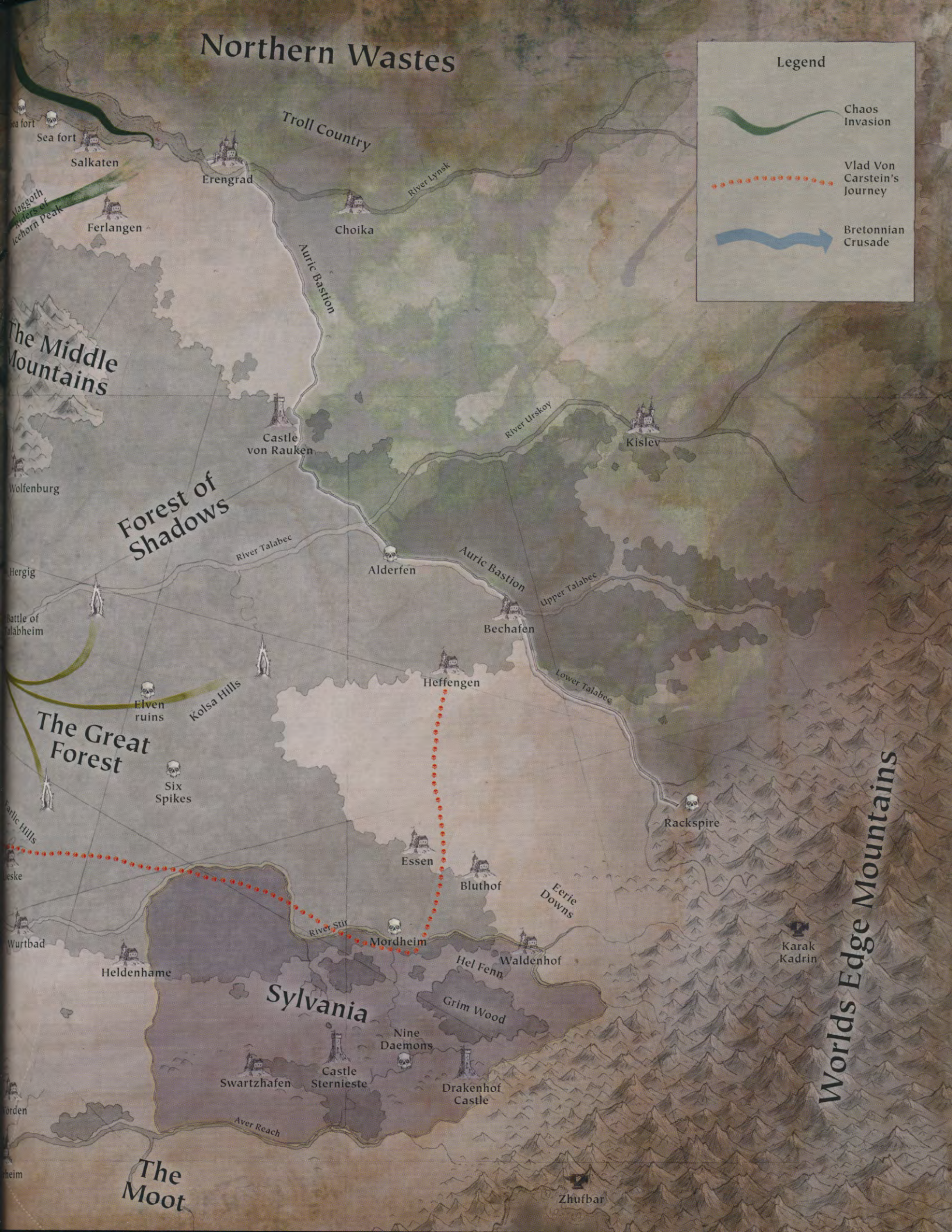




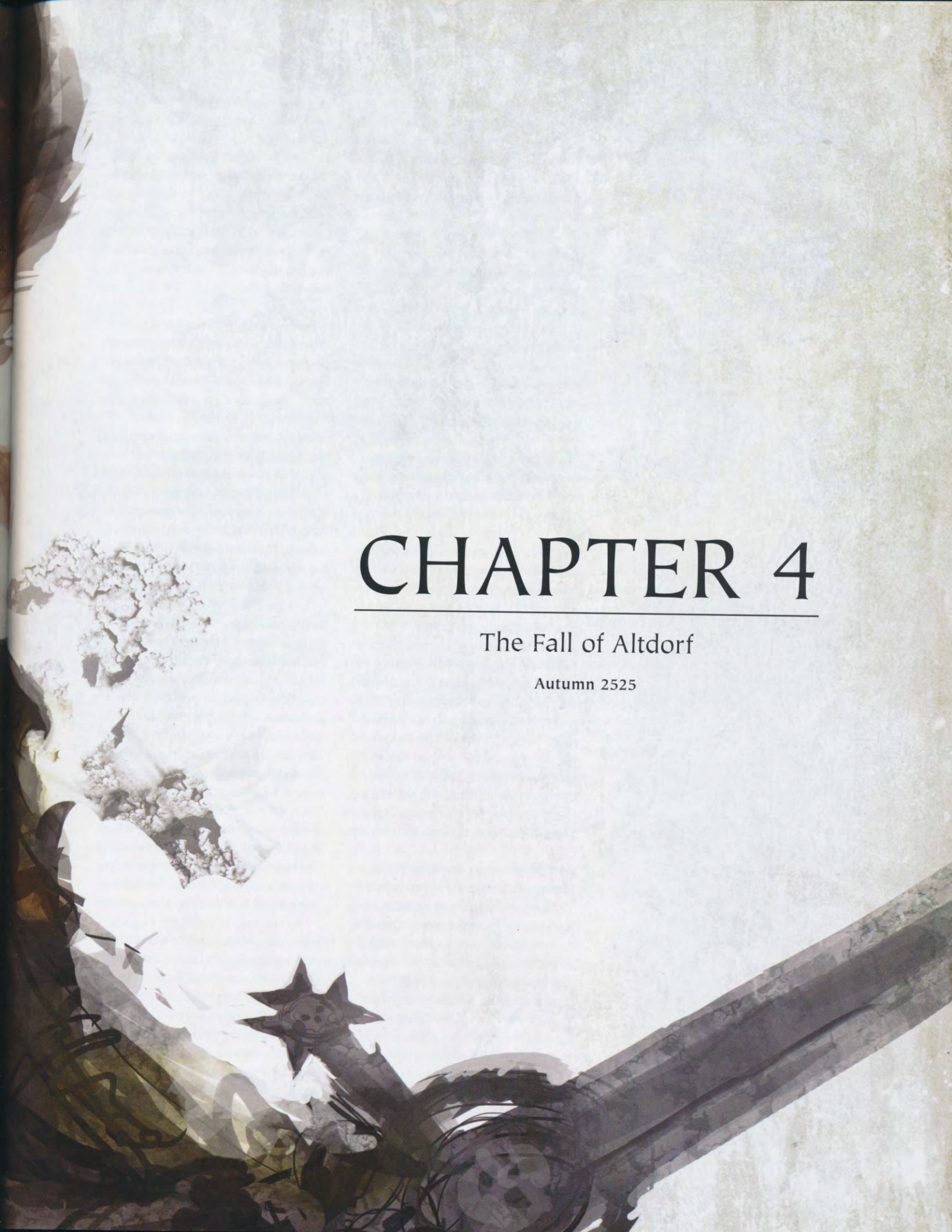
Northern Wastes

Legend

- Chaos Invasion
- Vlad Von Carstein's Journey
- Bretonnian Crusade







CHAPTER 4

The Fall of Altdorf

Autumn 2525



With every passing night, the greenish-yellow fog that permeated the streets of Altdorf thickened a little

more. By Sigmarzeit it had grown so thick it had become common practice for families and even military units to hold tight to a length of rope so that none of their number became lost in the mists. Shambling figures and stalking, spider-like forms haunted the alleyways, but wherever a soldier or guard sought to catch them, they would fade away. Across the city the doleful toll of bells rang out with every passing hour, the sound more reminiscent of a leper's warning than a watchman's all's-well.

The fog sapped the energy of those who took it into their lungs and rendered sickly even the strongest constitution. Many of the elderly and the infirm faded away forever. The Reik itself was foul and stinking beyond measure, clotted with black moss and the plague that it brought. So many gnats, flies and mosquitos buzzed through the night it was all but impossible to get any sleep. Even the sprightliest maiden was ground down by exhaustion until she shuffled and croaked like a hag. The Reiksmarshal and his captains made increasingly frantic efforts to locate the source of these strange maladies and prevent them from taking their city from under them. Yet nothing could be done, for these men of action were ill-suited to fight an invisible foe.

Kurt Helborg was not a man to sit idly by whilst his city fell to ruin. Thus far, his brutal suppression of the riots that had erupted across the poorer districts had sent a message to prince and peddler alike – keep a low profile, or die like a dog in the gutter. Order had been restored, though many innocent citizens lay dead in the streets as a result. In less troubled times, this heavy-handed tyranny would most likely have seen the Reiksmarshal stripped of rank, if not sent to the hangman's noose. Yet, with the nation on the brink of total

collapse, the steward's sword was the only thing holding back utter mayhem. Outraged rants from guilders heads and overprivileged noblemen were levelled at Helborg's Reikscaptains with every new audience denied. From Gallows Square to the Grand Courts, an undercurrent of resentment bubbled throughout the city. The number of Helborg's detractors doubled by the day.

Whenever unrest or mutiny threatened his rule, the Reiksmarshal simply snorted in contempt. His outriders had journeyed far and wide, and upon their return each had reported a different strain of disaster. Those provinces not raddled with some bizarre strain of plague were beset with herds of rampaging beastmen, armoured northmen or hosts of daemonspawn whose advance had proved slow but unstoppable. Worse still, it looked as if no fewer than three distinct armies were all converging upon Altdorf.

Fearing a coming siege, Helborg had gathered every armed regiment he could find to the shelter of Altdorf's walls. Talabheimer refugees that had travelled west by river barge rubbed shoulders with stubbly Stirlanders, and Carroburg survivors shared ale with the capital's own guard. The Reiksmarshal had sent formal requests for aid to Kislev, Marienburg, Tilea, Estalia; even to haughty Bretonnia and the reclusive dwarfs of the World's Edge. As yet, no reply had been forthcoming. The prevailing opinion was that the old allies of the Empire had forsaken them altogether.

After one sleepless night too many, Helborg sought aid from stranger sources. Firewood had been stacked high at every junction, and the entire Bright College had been put to work scattering enchanted embers that would flare up again at a simple shouted chant. Every stretch and statue of the city's walls was thrice-blessed by the warrior priests of the Sigmarite cult. The acolytes of



the Light College burned away the thickest fog using rays of pure magic, Grey wizards brokered deals in the darkness, and Celestial astromancers cast their divinations to ascertain the precise hour the worshippers of Chaos would strike. The healer-priestesses of Shallya set up a shantytown of tents, beds and stretchers around their humble temple, ready to receive the wounded and return them to the fight. Even the city's ghosts could be seen sharpening their swords in the gloaming, conjured from beyond the veil by the dispossessed spirit-wizards of the Amethyst College.

The tension was as palpable as the fog, and it grew thicker each night until it was all but unbearable. In every street, mansion and hovel, the citizens of Altdorf prepared for war. Helborg's most recent edict, for the Altdorfers to concentrate on shoring up the city's defences instead of burying those already dead, had been regarded as inhuman at best and insanity at worst. Yet none argued too fiercely, for they were more concerned about their own graves than those of their departed friends and family. Unbeknownst to all but the Reiksmarshal and his closest advisors, the scattered cadavers in the street were to be a weapon in the coming war – tools to be used by the one ally who had replied to Helborg's pleas for aid.

As the troubled days slid past, the time divined by the Celestial college as the Great Reckoning drew closer. The twin-tailed comet blazed bright in the cloudy skies, throwing the city into a strange twilight even at the small hours of the morning. A sense of timelessness and unreality suffused the city as day bled into night, conspiring with the ever-present fog to make Altdorf seem more like some haunted etheric realm than a thriving centre of civilisation. Regiment upon regiment of state troops peered out into the mist from the towering city walls, cauldrons of pitch and fish-oil were boiled atop the battlements in

readiness to pour on the foe, and the College of Engineers ensured their artillery batteries were primed and readied. The words of warrior priests and captains rang out into the gloom, putting steel into the hearts of their charges for a time.

Many itinerants, traders and faint-hearted citizens fled south in search of sanctuary, hoping their numbers would protect them from the dangers of the wild. As soon as they made camp and went to sleep, their throats were claimed by throttlevines, their corpses hauled upward to become more grisly fruit in the terrifying orchard that had grown around the city. Those who refused to abandon their capital girded themselves to endure the coming storm, even though a dark flower of doubt blossomed within every heart.

Altdorf stood upon the precipice of disaster, bereft of allies and with little in the way of wholesome food or potable water with which to withstand a protracted siege. Be they soldier, wizard, shopkeeper or priest, not a single Altdorfer could shake the suspicion that the Empire was already all but beaten, and that no matter how hard they fought, it would not be enough.

A lone figure in full armour knelt in the heart of the Reikstemple. Around him giant statues of Sigmar's twelve warrior chieftains rose into the gloom, effigies so vast the candlelight barely reached their knees. A weak shaft of sunlight filtered through the stained glass window high in the temple's dome, throwing a distorted image of Sigmar Ascendant across the flagstones. It shimmered weirdly, its dappled shades lending colour to the white hair and drawn features of the warrior genuflecting far below.

Taking his runefang from its scabbard and placing it point down in front of him, Kurt Helborg gulped down his pride and prayed to Sigmar for the first time in decades.

Deep in a hermit's cave outside Altdorf, two tall men slumbered uneasily around a spent fire. Their rocky refuge echoed to the low snores of the enormous griffons that took up most of the cavern's rear. Slowly, hesitantly, the dawn chorus chirruped across the lands below. Light filtered in, wan and anaemic. The sunrise was a sickly thing that spoke of another troubled day about to unfold over a cursed empire.

Karl Franz was the first to sit up, awoken by the troubled sleep of the nearby Gregor Martak. With the aid of his avian spies, the Supreme Patriarch had finally tracked down the missing Emperor and his griffon Deathclaw. Borne upon a winged steed of his own, the Amber wizard had used his beast-magicks to heal Deathclaw's broken wing and restore the griffon to its former might. Yet Martak himself had a wound that could not be healed so easily, a mental scar that caused him to thrash and cry out in the night. Karl Franz shook him gently awake.

'Karl,' panted Martak. 'Karl Franz, are you still alive?'

'I'm here,' Karl Franz replied.

'I... I had another dream. Taal himself came to me, but... but he was horrific, Karl! Covered in the spoor of plagues!'

'I see,' sighed the Emperor.

'He... he said he was dying, Karl, and mortals held the key to deliverance. Only the true sons of Sigmar can save him.'

'Then save him we shall.'

'But... but there is a price...'

'Go on,' replied Karl Franz.

'My liege... Taal... he said that be they prince or be they pauper, those who fight for Altdorf will die in agony.'

Karl Franz looked out at the sunrise for a moment, his face grim, before gathering his things and waking Deathclaw.

The stinking, feculent waters of Altdorf's sewers cast strange reflections across the crumbling archways stretching away into the gloom. From a great well-like opening in the slaughterhouse district above, the green eye of Morrslieb stared down with the fevered intensity of a voyeur at a keyhole.

In the algae-slicked atrium far beneath, Doctor Festus muttered as he fussed over a gigantic cauldron heated by a driftwood bonfire. Nearby a great stack of plague cadavers was piled against the central pillar of the atrium, each bearing the marks of a slow demise. The soiled victims of lunatic's dysentery lay piled atop those whose flesh was covered in grave-mould, and bodies that had fallen to the grey flux were draped over corpses with slowly writhing strangleveins under the skin. Fat-bodied leeches writhed in the shallows, latching onto the vermin that got too close and draining them of all their vital fluids.

'Fiddle-the-fee, shroudslings three, cover the city and pass it to me,' sang Festus softly, scooping a trio of daemon mites from his cauldron and dumping them into the crackling fire beneath. A thick, stinking column of smoke rose up towards the moon above, adding to the smog that was choking the city.

In contrast Festus felt his own inner flame burning low. He had spent months of long nights planting the seeds of Nurgle's garden across Altdorf. His muscles were burning, and his eyelids drooped with the effort of staying awake. The great summoning would require a great deal of mental and physical strength. Though he would never admit it – not even to his leeches – he wasn't sure if he had the gumption left to do it.

As Festus' tune dwindled to silence a distant trickle of liquid filled the atrium. The doctor listened with head cocked, his eyes glazed over for a moment. It sounded more like vomit or curdled gravy than water, but that was still music to what was left of his ears. Such beauty Nurgle had given to the world.

When Festus turned back a large bubble had risen in the middle of the cauldron, growing larger by the second. He gazed in puzzlement as his own reflection rose distorted in the depths, as broad as Morrslieb and twice as ugly. Something shimmered within its oil-slick surface, something big.

The bubble swelled to fill the giant cauldron before bursting with a loud pop to reveal a boulder-sized head, slumping shoulders and a pair of flabby arms each as thick as an ogre's gut.

'Wellspring!' boomed Ku'gath Plaguefather, a grin splitting the rotten mound of his face.

'Or "Well met", as we say here in Altdorf,' said Festus with a tired smile. 'For a few more hours, at least.'

'In deeds!' nodded the Great Unclean One, jowls wobbling. 'In a great many deeds! The garden must grow, and so it has. Our father sneezes great promise inside thee, little doctor. He bethinks thee... a change

of careen. Perhaps green fingers rather than red, hmm? Perhaps the paradise beyond awaits you?'

'I would be honoured,' said Festus, slow wonder spreading across his ravaged face. 'And harvest time is close. A seed dwells in the throat of every street corpse I could find.' The fat doctor motioned upwards to the thick smog boiling into the city above.

'You have done welldeeds. And so has the bold bumblebeast before thee, belittle-me-not! Three swordling-hordes approach, my friend, a-dancing to my tune. The carnivals of life converge, from west and east and north; one tattooed, one behorned, and one a plaguey host.'

'The Glottkin are close, then?' said Festus, his eyes alight. 'The timing is critical to the recipe. It has to be tonight, on Geheimnisnacht, when the moon is low.'

'The triplets are in sight of the western wallflowers, dear leechling,' the daemon boomed. 'As Lordling Spume completes his march, Daemonspewer lopes closer still, the Tallyman behind. Fevermore, Epidemius brings a storm of plaguey drizzling, pregnant clouds all ready to drop their tiny wetlings. All is set, small friend, so please be-rest your mind.'

Festus blew out his cheeks and gave a long exhalation of relief at the news, the tension in his shoulders relaxing for the first time in days. He had invested a great deal in the events of the next few hours.

'Now these... these lovely flowerbods,' leered the Plaguefather, gesturing towards the pile of plague bodies with an arm like a giant sausage stuffed with dead pigs. 'Many a tallymite yearns for such sights. Are they second helpings?'

'They are helpers of a sort, yes, though they know it not. The air is thick and the veil between worlds thin. The seeds of misrule are planted and smog fills every street. The time for burning shroudslings is at an end; these are here as more... earthly offerings. Yet I fear I have not the strength left to lift them, to open the garden's gate alone.'

'No need for plinking heartstrings, doctor, my minstrel-viol I left behind!' laughed Ku'gath. 'We will see fate to thy doorstep, fear thee not. The triplets Glott have played their lives well. Blades aplenty march upon this soon-fair nest.'

Grinning indulgently, the Plaguefather hauled his impossible bulk out of the cauldron with a great surge of effort, toppling it and spilling the gruesome brew across the flagstones in the process.

'Gloops!' said Ku'gath, biting a rubbery lip the size of a Reik eel. 'Pray for glibness, doctor, I have splayed your nurgling-pond.'

'It matters little, the brew is spent,' said Festus, waving away Ku'gath's frown with a fat-fingered hand. 'Now if you really don't mind a bit of earthy toil,' he said, trudging over to the pile of plague victims. 'Let's get these juicy fellows onto the fire.'



When the bane of Altdorf arrived, it came not from without, but within.

In the slaughterhouse district by the Reik's edge, the great well that led down to the sewer-atrium began to smoulder, then to smoke. Those citizens yet to flee the city watched in horror as the well belched out grey and greasy smoke. It smelled not of choking, phlegmy smog, but of burning human flesh. Up and up the pillar went, the cylinder of foulness so thick that it seemed like the trunk of some godly tree supporting the canopy of the clouds above. Its stench was such that only those with truly iron constitutions could approach within half a mile without doubling over and slicking the cobbles with the contents of their stomachs.

As the column of smoke continued to foul the air, the masses of cloud above grew as pale as a cataracted eye, thickening into spiralling cords. They were drawn into the smoking pillar, reinforcing the impression of a colossal tree stretching over the city, though they recoiled from the area of the skies in which the twin-tailed comet blazed.

Murmurs of confusion and concern rippled out as those soldiers and priests stationed on the city walls watched the occult skies change above them, but none wanted to be the first to break ranks, and those messengers they sent to investigate returned only with conflicting reports of imminent invasion. From the grand muster in Altdorf Square, Kurt Helborg ruled that the mystical phenomenon above them was little threat compared to the hordes approaching the city. It was an error that would cost more than mortal lives.

As the foul smoke billowing upwards from the sewers mingled with the clouds above, a dire rain began to fall. At first it pattered drip by spattering drip, milky and horrid, yet feeding little more than suspicions. Soldiers looked uneasily at one another as

drops of the discoloured fluids pinged from their vambraces and helmets. A low but powerful thunder rolled across the city's reaches, sounding disturbingly like the laughter of a looming god.

And then, as Grandfather Nurgle tipped his cauldron into reality, the storm broke.

When the milk-white rain hit the corpses that lay scattered in the streets, their bodies burst apart with terrible force, twisted flesh-trees erupting through them to reach the rooftops in the space of a few heartbeats. Empty streets were suddenly thronged with an unutterably foul jungle thick with sticky-haired vines. Droop-legged daemonflies wound through the grotesque vegetation, gluttoned on the nectar of decay. Many a lingering citizen was caught in the groping tendrils of the unnatural plants, drained of his vital fluids and lifted off the ground by the ankle like an apprehended urchin. The foetid jungle was thickest at Altdorf's heart. There the streets and buildings began to shimmer and fade, replaced completely by the daemon realm that was Nurgle's garden.

As the howling masses outside Altdorf charged across the flood plains towards its walls, the pillar of smoke at its heart whipped around and around with gathering pace. It grew larger and larger, becoming a giant white tornado that dominated the skyline across the entire Empire. Booming voices rumbled in the skies over the sound of hammering rain, their bass tones in contrast to the shrieking of a million tormented souls.

Then, at the hurricane heart of a tempest that had once been a simple curl of smoke, reality buckled, split, and tore apart.

From the sickly wound in reality, the daemon legions of Nurgle strode forth in all their vibrant and revolting glory.

To the south of the city, the grand cavalry armies of Bretonnia were a pair of rich tapestries unfurling across the lands. Though their horses were mud-spattered and lathered beneath their bright caparisons, each nobleman sat bolt upright in the saddle, resplendent in shining armour and heraldic cloth. With Louen Leoncoeur's return to Couronne, thousands of knights had answered the call to war, making the long journey across the Grey Mountains towards the heartlands of the Empire.

Less than a year ago the Bretonnian nation had been wracked by the direst of civil wars, the fabric of its society all but torn apart by the necromantic pawns of Nagash. It sat ill with many of the land's nobles that they should

go to war again so soon – especially in the defence of a nation not their own. Yet Louen, in his role as High Paladin of the Breton Court, had made his position abundantly clear. Any knight who would look to his own fortunes whilst their allies in the Empire fell to the ravages of Chaos was not worthy of the title.

Fifteen days of near-constant travel would have brought a normal steed to the brink of exhaustion, but not so the noble stallions of Bretonnia. Under Louen's authority the crusade had continued apace even through the night, the knights taking it in turns to slumber in their saddles, the better to raise their chances of reaching their allies in the Empire before it was too late.

As they neared Altdorf the trees seemed to rustle and whisper at their approach, but much like the denizens of the Grey Mountains, no tribe nor predator was fool enough to test their might against so many knights in the full raiment of battle. Every dawn and dusk Louen led his knights in prayer, thanking the Lady for lending them speed and asking her to give their destriers the strength to bear them to battle in good time.

So it was that the cavalry columns stretching towards Altdorf neared half a mile in length. It was the greatest Errantry War seen outside the bloody sands of Araby; only the Grail Knights remained behind in Bretonnia, maintaining their ceaseless vigil over the sacred heartlands of their realm.



Yet despite the clear passage of the knightly armies, as they approached Altdorf it became obvious they had not been quick enough.

Louen's vanguard crested Bloodpine Ridge upon the eve of Geheimnisnacht. The Bretonnian crusaders were confronted by a vista choked by the powers of Chaos. The city itself was under siege from the skies as well as the earth. Everywhere clouds of flies swirled like smoke and tattered banners flapped in raging, foul-smelling winds. The once-verdant plain that surrounded the capital city of the Empire was filling with hordes of Chaos worshippers, so great in number that the sprawling metropolis seemed an island in a sea of greens and browns.

To the west, thousands of Norscan tribesmen were pouring along the Reik as it wound its way into the docks and canal networks of the city – not just on the river's banks, but even across its moss-crusting surface. The Glotkin led the charge, two brothers perched atop the fleshy boulder that led the avalanche behind. Armoured killers formed the front of the giant wedge, their canine hunting beasts running before them. Tree-trunk rams were carried in the midst of the tribal horde, each thick with furry black grave-moss. At the wedge's rear, monsters flailed, bellowing for the hot release of the kill.

To the north, a sea of beastmen swelled out from a dark arch in the eaves of the Drakwald. At their head was a blunt column of Norscan cavalry, their rusted but elaborate armour distorting their silhouettes into those of daemons. Dragon ogres and minotaurs alike vied for position in the headlong charge towards the North Gate. In the midst of this terrifying vanguard came Gutrot Spume, the Lord of Tentacles, standing proud atop a warshrine of grandiose proportion and shouting at the skies as he demanded the attention of Father Nurgle.

The army that came from the east was foulest of all. Orghotts, Morbidex and Bloab Rotspawned barrelled out of the forest, smashing through the palisade walls that had been raised in an attempt to keep the Drakwald's denizens from the city's reaches. Sharpened stakes scattered and rolled before their pox maggoths as the giant creatures bounded towards the city, long tongues tasting the raw entropy upon the air. Slouching out from the forest behind them were thousands of plaguebearers led by the tallyman, Epidemius, each chanting praise to the Plague God as they took in the noisome spectacle of the city ahead.



It was not only the great hordes of Chaos that were girdling the city. The miasmatic storm inside the capital's walls had lashed down hardest of all upon the battlements, making it all but impossible for mortal men to remain there and robbing them of their great fortress walls in the carnage to come. Yet the city's defenders would fight nonetheless.

Marching out from each gate came regiment after regiment of brightly-armoured state troops, orders of knights in shining armour, conclaves of battle wizards, even artillery batteries and steam tanks protected from the lashing rain by canopies of canvas. The primary colours of Altdorf were arrayed alongside the soiled red and white of Talabheim and a dozen other uniforms besides.

The Reiksmarshal and his captains ensured that his armies took up positions outside the Altdorf walls with grim efficiency, defending each

gate with enough men to break a dozen tribes. Even in the absence of their Emperor, the warriors of Karl Franz's realm were not giving up their city without a fight.

Behind them, the walls of Altdorf rose up, many of their convolutions and statue-dotted crenulations already discoloured by grave-moss. A roiling tornado of the raw stuff of Chaos soared up into the heavens from the heart of the besieged capital, a conical storm of grey-green energy that spun wildly into the skies. It fanned upwards and outwards to join a great thunderhead that crackled and pulsed with sheet lightning.

The fearsome energies boiling above the roofs of Altdorf illuminated an indescribably foul face several miles in diameter. A yawning mouth that could eat the world grinned impossibly wide as the thunderheads below coalesced into fat fingers, and nails of broken cloud tore open the skies. Unclean concoctions spilled forth, splashing and splattering into the mortal realm. Wherever they fell they nourished the seeds of disorder sown in the streets over the last few months. Twining tendrils burst from the streets and snaked high into the air, waving and shifting like drownweeds reaching for a victim to pull under the water.

High above the maniac landscape, the twin-tailed comet blazed brighter even than gloating Morrslieb, despite the fact the Chaos moon was fuller than ever on this most fateful of eves. The comet's wild, crackling fire illuminated the whole scene, rendering every sore and pimple of the armies below visible to any with the stomach to look.

The city of Altdorf stared into an abyss from which it could never return, its fate balanced on the blades of those massed around its walls.

Across the field, man, daemon and beast raised their war horns and sounded the advance.

THE REALMS UNITED

With the majority of the city's inhabitants long gone, only the brave remained to defend their city. They took hope at the sight of the Bretonnians arriving unbidden to join them. Here, outside the Empire's greatest city, the men of the Old World would stand or fall.

KURT HELBORG AND THE REIKSGUARD RESERVE

Though many of the Reiksguard had perished in the wars south of the Auric Bastion, the Reiksmarshal was still able to muster some three hundred horsemen. Helborg sent Captain Hans Zintler to lead the charge in his stead, while he remained to coordinate the battle to come.



THE EMPIRE'S BLADES

Though the state troops of the Empire were famous for their bright heraldry, the warriors that emerged from the ravaged city were sodden and filthy, and their ranks already resounded to sneezes and coughs, but their determination to fight to the last for their city was undiminished. Led by the proud Company of Honour, the state troops filed out to form shieldwalls and spear thickets that would repel men and monsters alike.



THE KNIGHTLY ORDERS

Every one of Altdorf's knightly orders yielded up their finest knights for the coming battle. They would give their all in defence of the city, and if they proved themselves more capable horsemen than the Bretonnian knights into the bargain, so much the better.



THE IMPERIAL ENGINEERS SCHOOL

The Imperial Engineers School defended their city en masse. Armed with all manner of death-dealing inventions, the Engineers filed out onto the plains to help a massed battery of artillery take up position on either side of Altdorf's main gate. Then the four steam tanks that the Engineers were able to push into operation shook the earth as they trundled faster and faster towards the barbarous hordes.



HIGH PALADIN LOUEN LEONCOEUR

Released from the duties of kingship by the return of Gilles the Uniter, Louen Leoncoeur focused every shred of his effort on wielding the knightly armies of Bretonnia as the finest of lances against the foe. Outside the walls of Altdorf he would break the power of Chaos with one fell strike, smashing through the hordes to break their cohesion and strike down their mortal champions in the name of the Lady – by the dozen, if he could.



THE CRUSADERS OF BRETONNIA

In stark contrast to the filthy, blood-stained soldiers filing from the gates of Altdorf, the Bretonnian cavalry that crested Bloodpine Ridge were still as resplendent as the day they had left their castle. Bright caparisons and shining steel glowed radiantly in the light of the twin-tailed comet ahead, and the spirits of those who wore them glowed brightly too, buoyed by the chance to uphold the virtues of their realm. The corrupt and the evil would die on the points of a thousand lances, and the Empire would be rescued, forever in grateful awe of the brave riders that had come to their aid in their darkest hour.



THE SKYHOST

When the Bretonnians rode to war, they filled the sky as well as the lands with the majesty of their approach. High Paladin Louen Leoncoeur rode his hippogryph at the head of a wedge of eighty Pegasus Knights, many of them promoted from Parravon's finest sky-jousts or Couronne's famous Tournament Celestial. Each of the knights rode tall in the saddle of his winged horse, fearlessly plunging towards the storm that raged above Altdorf. They brought doom for those monstrous warriors who had trespassed on the realms of civilised man, for their sagas would come to an end on the tip of a lance.



Reiksmarshal Kurt Helborg



The Reiksguard Reserve

Eight regiments of Reiksguard knights



The Knights of the Setting Sun

One regiment of Knights of the Inner Circle Two regiments of Empire Knights



The Knights of Sigmar's Blood

One regiment of Knights of the Inner Circle Three regiments of Empire Knights



The Knights of the Blazing Sun

One regiment of Knights of the Inner Circle Three regiments of Empire Knights



The Knights Panther

One regiment of Knights of the Inner Circle Two regiments of Empire Knights One regiment of Demigryph Knights



The Knights Griffon

Two regiments of Empire Knights Three regiments of Demigryph Knights



The Company of Honour

One regiment of Empire Halberdiers



The Grand Altdorf Garrison

Forty-eight regiments of Altdorf state troops, nineteen detachments



The Talabheim Refugee Corps

Six regiments of Talabheim state troops, three detachments



The Middenheim Displaced

Three regiments of Middenheim state troops, two detachments



The Imperial Engineers School

Thirty Imperial Engineers, fourteen artillery batteries, four steam tanks



Louen Leoncoeur

High Paladin of Couronne



The Crusaders of Bretonnia

Fifty-three lances of Bretonnian Knights of the Realm, thirty-two lances of Knights Errant, thirteen lances of Questing Knights.



The Skyhost

Twelve lances of Pegasus Knights

THE GREAT CHAOS HOST

The armies that descended upon Altdorf at Geheimnisnacht were comprised of men, beastmen, and daemons in roughly equal number. Their forms were dizzying in their variety, though they were united one and all in their devotion to the Lord of Decay.



THE MAGGOTH RIDERS OF ICEHORN PEAK

Orghotts Daemonspew and his chieftains attacked Altdorf from the east, smashing down the meagre defences at the edge of the Drakwald so the allies they had won in Brass Keep and outside Talabheim could make their approach.



THE TALLYMAN'S HOST

Epidemius had long suspected that a great task awaited him at Altdorf, though he had not anticipated quite such a vista of disease. Upon emerging from the Drakwald, his rotten heart almost burst, for the skies bore his master's image. The Tallyman would not allow himself to fail before the god that had given him form.



THE GLOTTKIN

Swollen with the favour of the Urfather, the triplets that led the charge from the west had timed their invasion to perfection. Guided by the light of Morrslieb and not a little help from their divine master, all three of the plague armies had arrived at the appointed hour. Ambitious though it was, the Glottkin's plan had destroyed any chance Altdorf's defenders might have had of driving off the invaders piecemeal. Now all that remained was for the triplets to kill the leaders of the Empire and run their broken armies into the wilderness.



THE TATTOOED TRIBES

Though several of the tribes that formed the great vanguard of the Glottkin's armies were scattered, broken or amalgamated into others, a great many still remained. Such was the speed of the triplets' crusade down the banks of the Reik that many of them were upon the edge of exhaustion when they approached Altdorf, but the sight of their patron's sky-spanning smile above the city filled every muscle and sinew with renewed energy for the slaughter.



GUTROT SPUME, THE LORD OF TENTACLES

Gutrot Spume's calamitous decision to plough straight through the Drakwald cost him the opportunity to be the first to Altdorf's walls, but his pride was somewhat restored when he saw the sheer number of beastmen who had been drawn to his army. Determined to win glory, Spume led his vanguard in a massed charge.



THE HARBINGER

The wizened bray-shaman known as the Harbinger was the unseen hand behind the muster that assailed Altdorf. The beastman had not only brokered Spume's alliance with the forest warherds, but also sacrificed the herdstones of the Drakwald in order to form portals for the daemon minions of Nurgle.

THE DRAKWALD BEASTS

By the time Geheimnisnacht fell, dozens of brayherds had fallen into the wake of Gutrot Spume's invasion. The stream of gor and ungor that poured down the tunnel of throtlevines seemed to have no end. The warherd that had mustered at the head of the invasion were fanatically devoted to Nurgle, convinced that Spume was a prophet sent to lead them into the holy realm of their master – and in a way, they were quite correct.



THE MONSTROUS HORDE

The armies of the north brought all manner of nameless things to war – some from Norsca, others attracted from the wilds by the smell of blood and carnage. They were to be hurled at the defenders of the city wherever their lines were thickest, breaking them apart in a flurry of talons.



The Glottkin

Otto and Ethrac riding on Ghurk



Orghotts Daemonspew

Riding on Pox Maggoth



Bloab Rotspawned

Riding on Pox Maggoth



Morbidex Twiceborn

Riding on Pox Maggoth



The Repugnauts

One tribe of Putrid Blightkings



The Tattooed Tribes

Eighteen tribes of Marauders and Chaos Warriors



Epidemius, the Tallyman of Nurgle



The Tallyman's Host

Seventeen Plaguebearer hosts



The Bounding Beasts

Thirteen Beasts of Nurgle



The Giggling Horde

Eighteen swarms of Nurglings



The Skyblight

Four Plague Drone swarms



Gutrot Spume, the Lord of Tentacles

Riding Warshrine



The Metal Fist

Three Chaos Chariots



The Harbinger

Beastman Great Shaman



The Drakwald Beasts

Forty-six warherds of Gor and Ungor



The Bloodgluttons

Three herds of Minotaurs



The Monstrous Horde

Thirty-five Chaos Spawn, six Chaos Giants, two tribes of Dragon Ogres, three Ghorgons, two Cygor, and one Slaughterbrute.

THE FALL OF ALTDORF

The trumpets of the Bretonnian army sounded over and over as massed cavalry charged over Bloodpine Ridge and across the flood plains of the Reik. The force was formed of two great columns of chevaliers, one driving through the storm towards the tattooed tribes coming from the river to the west, the other thundering off to intercept the daemon host emerging from the woods. The air around them shimmered with protective energies, for they had spent the hour before the charge in fervent prayer to their graceful goddess. Though the storm raged fiercely, not a single one of the Bretonnian knights had been touched by the foul rain – the whitish droplets simply evaporated with a tiny hiss a finger's breadth from their armour.

A great cry of battle lust rang out as the blessed knights came thundering down the gentle slope towards the Chaos-worshipping filth. As Otto Glott bawled orders from atop his brother Ghurk's broad shoulders, his axemen shuffled and turned, stepping into ranks and locking their shields with a semblance of military discipline.

With sledgehammer force the cavalry charge hit home. A dozen lance points, then a score, then a hundred thumped into chests and burst out of backs in sprays of stinking blood. The Glottkin's shieldwall splintered and broke like a wooden fence hit by a herd of charging bulls. Shouting in exultation, the Bretonnians stormed through into the lines beyond. Those whose lances were still intact took new foes in their guts, in their throats, in their black and rotten hearts.

To the east the story was much the same. A thick wedge of knights drove home their charge against Epidemius' horde, those plaguebearers spitted on blessed lances and swords bursting apart like overripe boils. At their head Louen Leoncoeur dived down upon a moss-draped cygor that had shambled from the woods, his hippogryph striking with such predatory force that it bore the monstrosity to the ground.

For a moment Louen stood tall in the saddle, a legend given life, the Sword of Couronne raised and glinting in the light of the comet above. He twisted in the saddle, shrugging off the cygor's great mauling hand. Taking advantage of the roaring beast's lunge, Louen

drove his glowing sword hilt-deep into the brute's single eye. As the giant sank backward into the dirt, the High Paladin remounted his hippogryph with astonishing agility. The noble steed sprung back up into the air, its pinions snapping as it scanned the battle for its next prey. Louen's forehead was cut, the wound drizzling liquid light in place of blood, but such was the Lady's favour upon him it was already healing over.

To the west a swathe of Norscan bodies lay scattered in the wake of Bretonnia's finest, but with the sight of their great god upon them, every one of the tribal host would rather die in glory than break and flee. The nobles of Bretonnia were cutting down the foe by the dozen, but they had abandoned their lances in favour of swords drawn for closer work.

Soon the corpses being trampled underfoot bore Bretonnian sigils as well as pitted, rusting armour. The momentum of the knightly charge was spent, and they had penetrated but a quarter of the distance they needed to cover if they wished to stand blade to blade with the defenders of Altdorf.

One hundred and thirteen times had Jhared charged into battle on the back of Estrien. The thrill in his veins, in the muscles of his arms, in the gallop of his steed... it was bliss, of a sort, even before impact. Behind him came a long column of knights, thundering towards the Norscans barring his path. By the Lady's virtue, there were a lot of them.

'Lock your shields, then, you unclean scum, see what good it does you!' roared Jhared. He caught a glimpse of Louen Leoncoeur flying overhead on his hippogryph, an arrowhead of pegasus knights carving the air behind him. Jhared briefly raised his blade in salute.

Suddenly, a wedge of rust-armoured horsemen thundered towards the Bretonnian column.

'A worthy foe in size, if nothing else,' murmured Jhared grimly. He directed his steed towards the largest of the enemy knights. The stallion dipped its horn-

tipped helmet and brought it back up sharply so that its unicorn spike pierced the throat of the Norscan's steed. Jhared leaned under the rider's counterthrust before taking off the knight's head, the falling corpse unhorsing the Norscan behind him in a clatter of plate.

'A proper saddle might be a good idea,' laughed Jhared.

Above him, Louen flew over the Norscan shield wall, his voice as clear as a clarion.

'Skyhost, up and over the walls! We are needed inside. Jhared, the earthbound foe are yours!'

Jhared raised his sword high in acknowledgement. Leoncoeur disappeared over the walls of Altdorf and into the storm, his pegasus knights close behind him.

Jhared suddenly felt cold. He could not shake the notion that would be the last time he ever saw his liege.

The Bretonnian attack had been an unexpected complication for the Glottkin, and one they could ill afford after the costly battle they had fought against the Carroburgers as they had made their way along the Reik. Only with the principal cities of the Empire broken and left in ruin could the realm of Karl Franz be broken apart, and with it, the mortar that bound the barrier of men, elves and dwarfs together. It was imperative that the defending armies be slaughtered for the great work to achieve its goal, regardless of what nation had thrown their soldiers into their path.

Otto Glott knew this fact well and fought with a cold, determined fury to ensure it. His brother Ghurk merely knew that the scent of horseflesh was strong here, and that meant a feast to come. The giant mutant bawled in glee as his enormous tentacle smashed brightly-caparisoned stallions and their armoured riders into the mud. Ghurk's other arm, a lamprey-like maw with a long whipping tongue, started the feast early. He smacked the gaping appendage into the flank of a warhorse, gnawing its torso to the bone even as Otto took the rider's head from his neck with a flick of his scythe. On the Glottkin went, breaking the Bretonnian wedge kill by kill, an unstoppable force that had met worthy prey at last. Here and there a knight would fight back hard, plunging a glowing blade or lance into Ghurk's blubbery mass. They might as well have been stabbing a glacier for all the good it did.

Ethrac delighted in such resistance, picking the choicest spells in his extensive repertoire and granting the Bretonnian heroes one grisly death after another. Here a knight swelled out of his armour, pink and bristling, to crush his own horse under his morbid weight. There a proud paladin simply sank into the ground, crying out to his goddess as the earth below his steed turned to a quagmire of boiling pus.

As the Glottkin forced their way through the stalled Bretonnian charge, the tattooed hordes behind them took great heart, thudding axes into the horses in their midst and pulling knights from the saddle to punch daggers through visor slits and neck joints. When the armoured elite of the tribal horde closed in the killing intensified even more. A storm of steel erupted where the battle lines clashed, and the greater mass of the horde thundered into either flank of the doomed knightly column.

To the north of the city, the forest disgorged the bestial tribes that Gutrot Spume had drawn through the Drakwald. From the shadow of the North Gate, Kurt Helborg watched with mounting horror as not only a spearhead of heavy horse, but herd upon herd of baying beastmen spilled out of the strange arched corridor of vines that had opened in the northern eaves. The terrible truth of their sheer numbers was a weapon in itself.

The Reiksmarshal knew that a decisive strike needed to fall, and fast. Ordering his envoys to sound the signal to the knightly orders, Helborg put his plan into action, bellowing for the first of his armies to advance and intercept the oncoming cavalry. The skies rumbled overhead as the men of Altdorf and Talabheim took up position side by side, setting their spears and their halberds solid in preparation to receive the charge.

The vanguard of the Lord of Tentacles' host spread out as they came, hitting the Empire line across a half-mile frontage with the force of a tidal wave. Chaos knights crashed through thickets of spears in explosive storms of splinters, spitting soldiers on jagged lances and enchanted blades. Dragon ogres hacked and pounded the halberdiers moving to intercept them, the strange lightning which played across their scaly skin crackling out to stun those soldiers to their flank.



In the shadow of the twin statues of Ulric and Sigmar looming outside North Gate, Kurt Helborg prepared to meet with death.

Eighteen hundred good men were lined up in the mud at the north of the city, half of their number already embroiled in battle against the beastmen army that had poured out of the forest. The rest waited close to the walls, amongst them the Reiksguard's hardest veterans, ready to reinforce the line should their comrades begin to buckle.

Helborg scanned the stubbly, sour, sweat-smeared faces of the troops around him as the din of war raged above the storm. The gnawing feeling in his gut returned. These were good, honest soldiers, men fighting for the sanctity of their homelands and the survival of their families. Who was he to lead them? The great and powerful Reiksmarshal – exhausted, desperate, a man married only to the sword. Perhaps he had less right to lead than the weakest of them.

For it was he who had made a pact with the undead.

Stretching to the limit of vision on the battlements of the North Gate were rank upon rank of cadavers, each motionless and stinking in the humid air. They ranged from slack-jawed skeletons the ochre of Reikmud to gore-covered zombies for whom death had been but a momentary respite. Almost every one of the corpses on the walls was an Altdorfer; Helborg could even pick out the primitive armour worn during the city's early days upon some of them.

Though his ally in the darkness had arrived with but five companions, his necromantic skills had proven potent enough to wrench the dead from every street and graveyard across the city. Now Altdorf's inner perimeter teemed with the ranks of the unliving.

And then there was Vlad himself. The Reiksmarshal's men could not help but cast wary glances towards the von Carstein noble standing in the shadow of the North Gate, lank black hair framing a wry smile that twisted across his haughty features.

'Helborg,' the vampire called out. The Reiksmarshal bridled at the commanding tone, but kept his peace. 'Your front line wavers. I can smell their cowardice on the breeze. Time for a pretty speech, methinks.'

The three white-clad vampiresses in the darkness behind Vlad laughed silkily. To one side of the trio, a bald, armoured vampire in the colours of Marienburg stroked the skull of a bat-like Terrorgeist.

'We're ready, von Carstein,' Helborg growled. 'My men are giving their lives out there in defence of this city while you watch, skulking in the darkness.'

'You will not find me on the walls of Altdorf this day, Helborg,' Vlad looked up at the battlements, rubbing his breastplate absently. 'I still have... uncomfortable memories of a wooden pike not so far from here. But trust me; living or dead, my puppets will not be idle...'

On the left flank, a tribe of minotaurs lowered their great horned heads and stormed into the fray. Their flesh was cut to ribbons by disciplined volleys of bullets from the massed ranks of handgunners that stood before them, and good half of the giant beastmen stumbled and fell, eyes rolling back, into the dirt. The rest ploughed into the gun lines with brutal force, hacking and trampling right through the regiments at the front and barging into the Reiksguard knights behind. The Reiksguard fought back hard, their rear echelons breaking away and countercharging from the flank to drive their lances home into the dense flesh of the rampaging minotaurs.

The vanguard of the Chaos army had taken the bait, as Helborg had known it would, and in the process they had outdistanced the beastman tribes running forwards in their wake. The knightly orders, as per the Reiksmarshal's plan, rode hard to the north-west, carving out wide as if fleeing from the fight. The men outside the North Gate could hear the bleats of derision coming from the warherds. Yet the jeers soon faded when the knightly orders looped around in a wide arc, coming not for the beastmen nearing the lines, but for those at the mouth of the throttlevine tunnel.

The grand masters of the knightly orders raised their voices as the charge gathered momentum, calling out to Sigmar, to Myrmidia, to Ulric and to Morr. The ground at the edge of the Drakwald shook as close to a thousand knights of the Empire charged headlong into the brayherds that were forming a battle line in the shadow of the forest. Despite their great number, the beastmen did not stand a chance, for even a dwarf shieldwall would be hard pressed to break the charge of the finest cavalry in the Empire.

Lances smacked through rusty armour to burst out of bent backs, cavalry hammers caved in the skulls of musclebound minotaurs, and swords took the heads from milling ungors uncertain of whether to fight or flee. The sheer, sudden violence of the Empire charge made up their mind for them, and a full half of the bestial army took to their heels, bounding over the mud in a chorus of bleats and screams. A trio of ghorghons burst from the woods, roaring as they smashed Knights Panther into bloody hunks of flesh with their cleaver-like limbs. Yet the orders still had power to spare, dozens of demigryphs pouncing upon the new prey to rip and tear great furrows as their riders hacked at the faces of the giants with their tall cavalry halberds. As the last ghorghon fell, clutching its ruined skull, the staggered charges of the Knightly Orders drove the beastman horde into flight. Trumpets rang out from each cavalry unit, and the cavalry spread out to block the mouth of the throttlevine tunnel leading deep into the Drakwald. If the beastmen tribes running down the corridor wanted to join the fight, they would have to redeploy on a far wider front. Helborg's gambit had severed the vanguard of Spume's army from its near limitless reinforcements, and bought his men a precious few hours.

To the east, Orghotts Daemonspew made straight for the hissing wedge of steam tanks that was trundling towards his lines. The engines of the metal contraptions roared against the fury of the storm as they gathered pace, one of the machines venting a great cloud of steam from its boiler. A cannonball hammered into Tripletongue, tearing away half of the maggoth's eyeless head. The thing stumbled, falling forward and nearly unsettling its rider, before hauling its bulk upright to lope unsteadily onwards. Orghotts grinned evilly, clashing his axes together in anticipation of revenge.

The pox maggoths gathered speed, easily dodging the juggernaut charge of the steam tanks as the machines ploughed past. Rotspawned's maggoth, Bilespurter, grabbed the turret of the nearest tank and pulled with all its might, wrenching the metal cupola off and vomiting a great stream of daemonic bile into the tank's interior. It rumbled on for a few more seconds before coming to a halt in a cloud of foul-smelling steam.

The other three steam tanks ground on into the plaguebearer host beyond, forcing Epidemius to shuffle his palanquin sideways in order to avoid sharing the fate of his minions, who were crushed into a grey-green paste. The Tallyman tutted in irritation and raised a winding finger to the skies. Chanting in a doleful tongue, the herald peeled off a thin cyclone of pus-white cloud that crept slowly downwards, its funnel grounding on the top of the steam tank. The armoured engine wheeled around slowly, then span about its centre with gathering speed, eventually toppling onto its side and venting boiling water and scalding steam in all directions. The scalded engineer crew, crying out in agony, attempted to climb clear, but they were quickly hacked apart by the plaguebearers milling in close.

On the daemons marched, oblivious to the damage the East Gate artillery was wreaking upon them. Cannonballs ploughed through their ranks, bursting apart a handful of daemons with every shot. Helstorm rockets thundered down from overhead, detonating with punitive force to leave nothing but smoking craters where they fell. Mortars stitched explosions across the tree line, blasting the rearmost phalanxes apart in an attempt to deter further reinforcements. Yet this was the day of the plagueborn, and such petty concerns would not stop them.

On every front the armies of the Empire were embattled as the grand armies of Nurgle closed in. Blades flashed, tentacles thrashed, maws bit and lances hit home as a hundred grisly tableaux played out, a banquet of carnage for the greedy god watching from above. Every one of the warriors battling below the rumbling skies knew it in his heart – the fate of the city, and in truth the Empire of man, would be decided by their actions in the coming hours.

Vlad watched Reiksmarshal Helborg bristle, the knight's ridiculous moustache quivering with unseemly emotion.

'Stay in the shadows then, as befits your kind,' said Helborg acidly. Behind him, Vlad sighed. Humans were so impatient.

'I shall,' said Vlad. 'It suits my ladies' complexions better.' He scraped his cheek with a dagger, an echo of mortal grooming he had never quite lost.

'So be it,' spat Helborg. 'Though their presence here is still a mystery to me. I struck a deal with you alone, because you are part of this realm, whether I like it or not. Not with these other... lineages. I certainly did not expect a freakish thing like that at my gates.' He gestured at Mundvard's giant pet.

'It matters not what you *expected*,' replied Vlad. 'My master Nagash would rather the land of mortals remained pliable. What good is corporeal power if the material world is replaced by pure chaos?'

The vampire opened his hands wide, a slight smile revealing his fangs as he continued. 'We are here to deny the Dark Gods their ultimate prize, Helborg. By the look of what has become of your city, it is a battle you are ill-equipped to fight.'

Helborg spun on his heel to face Vlad down, his face red. He looked ready to fight.

'If you take issue with my master's plan,' said Vlad, 'you could follow Volkmar's tracks into Sylvania and explain your reservations...'

'Enough of this,' muttered Helborg, drawing his blade and pointing it at Vlad. He took a deep breath.

'By the authority vested in me as the steward of Karl Franz's realm and the rune-fang I hold, I hereby declare you, Vlad von Carstein of Sylvania, an Elector Count in extremis,' announced Helborg. Vlad grinned modestly, but his mind filled with an unholy joy. Behind Helborg, Altdorf troops shared disbelieving glances.

'From this day forth the realm of Sylvania is a new province under your rightful command,' continued Helborg. 'And now, as an Elector Count of the Empire, it is time for you to do your part. Your forces do not fear the plague. Kindly put them to the business of taking back the streets. I have men enough to hold the walls.'

Vlad drew his sword and made an elaborate salute, turning to stride through the North Gate. The dead filed into the streets behind him. He could hear the words of his new pawn resounding in the air.

'Men of the Empire!' the Reiksmarshal bellowed, turning and raising his arms to address the army stretching in front of the gate. 'Today is a day that started in ill omen, but by Sigmar, it shall end in glory! Put aside your doubts as I have, and think only of victory. In the name of the Griffon Emperors, of the Heldenhammer, and of Altdorf itself, advance!'





Doctor Festus sauntered through the quagmires of New Altdorf, Ku'gath Plaguefather thudding along by his side. An honour guard of seven plaguebearers riding rot flies kept a respectful distance, each in awe of the mortal who had transformed the inert jewel in the Empire's crown into a lively, festering hellhole. Behind them came a slouching procession of plaguebearers that stretched all the way back to the howling white cyclone at the city's heart.

Since Nurgle's apothecaries had finished their great spell in Altdorf's sewers and opened the Gate Between Worlds, the city was much more to their liking. Wobbling fronds and thick-necked lianas grew uncontrollably, bursting through windows and invading mildewed doorways. Curious tendrils wound around broken statues of yesteryear's Emperors, grave-moss draped bronze icons of Sigmar, and crusty lichen lent carven theogonists surreal beards that twitched in the stinking breeze.

Underfoot the streets were covered in sprawling patches of grave-loam. A dizzying variety of plants suckled their sustenance from the corpse-rich soil, each stranger and more beautiful than the last. Bursts of colour punctuated the greys and greens, the yellows and reds of orchids bright as any pimple and just as full of pus. Swarms of daemon insects hummed joyous refrains, nurglings frolicked and played in the mud, and rivers of slurry gurgled happily along every gutter and canal. Everywhere vegetable, fungal and daemonic life of all conceivable sizes abounded, from the miniscule to the titanic.

It was a sight to gladden the soul of any devotee of the Lord of Decay. Festus positively glowed with power, seven times the man he had been an hour ago. With Nurgle's favour so fully upon him, he was closer to immortality than he suspected. Ku'gath, as much a part of his godly master as the daemon-plants claiming

the city, saw the truth of things as clear as ever. He took an avuncular pleasure in seeing his mortal comrade on the threshold of being taken into Nurgle's inner court. The doctor deserved it, after all – his long labours to cultivate the Great Garden should be rewarded most copiously.

Though Altdorf's former rulers were fighting hard to reclaim it, the streets were all but theirs. The exception was the Temple of Shallya, the domed building and the streets around it a blemish of purity in a landscape of corruption. Should that fall, the garden's boundless life would spread to every corner of the city and claim it completely before Geheimnisnacht was out. Altdorf's mortal fabric had been infected by the blending of the material plane and the Realm of Chaos. Only those who could wield the winds of magic had any real hope of driving back the unnatural forces.

To their credit, the battle wizards of Altdorf were doing their best to hold back the tide. On the edge of what had once been the River Reik, the masters of the Gold College wove a great spell that covered their chimneyed fortress in a veneer of inert goldsteel that spread out into the city street by street, upon which the plants of Nurgle could take no hold. However, even metal must concede to the forces of decay: the thin plate soon rusted away, crumbling to reveal tiny pushing shoots and pockets of swelling fungus.

The Light Order, their pyramidal sanctum sequestered away in the aether, ventured forth in great number into the jungle-choked streets. Chanting in the ancient tongue of southern kings, they conjured a second sun of pure white energy that banished the daemon hosts slouching towards them. Soon, though, the ritual phrases of the acolytes became disrupted by sniffles and coughs, and then by sneezing fits, and the banishing orb dispersed in the gale of entropy that raged above.

The wizards of the Jade Order, who wield the energies of life, found themselves most afflicted of all by the garden's spread. Their neat and wondrous arboreal college had sprouted into a grotesque parody of itself, whilst the wizards of that order were slowly but irresistibly transformed into strange fleshy trees, damned faces screaming in horror from knots in their trunks, and brittle fingers contorted in agony at the end of their twisting branches.



Only the wizards of the Bright Order proved fierce enough to hold back the spread of the encroaching jungle. Transforming themselves into beings of living flame, the pyromancers attacked en masse, bodily tackling daemons and floral growths alike and burning them to ash with their incendiary touch. For six long hours the Bright College blazed radiant and pure, the blackened wastes around it lit by the fires of defiance. Then came their demise. The tempest grew fiercer and fiercer above the College, hammering down with such intensity that the deluge of milky pus doused the glorious fury of the fire wizards defending their home. One by one their fires went out, and they fell, shivering and covered in sticky fluids, to the cobbles.

As for the Shallyans, Festus and Ku'gath were en route to deal with that particular travesty in person. The two apothecaries grew further from the tempest of magic they had brewed in the slaughterhouse district, and as they wound through the streets the intertwining vegetation and boundless fungi of Nurgle's garden became ever more sparse. The din of battle echoed from the fronts of trader shops and temples, and the bellying clouds above were lit orange and red by a fire of great magnitude.

Sure enough, as the companions turned the corner of Fleischmarkt, they were confronted by a scene from a demented general's nightmare. Armoured soldiers wielding ripple-bladed zweihanders cut into a seething mass of plaguebearers that pressed in from all sides. Cyclopean heads flew from necks as the veteran swordsmen took their toll. Behind them, a cadre of tall-helmed knights mounted on griffon-beasts were rounding the flank, their squawking steeds stamping with leonine feet and ripping with sharp beaks at the daemon heralds seeking to cut off the streets on the far side of the square.

On the other side of the plaza, leaping flames conjured by the last of the pyromantic battle wizards burned back the pack of slug-like beasts lolloping towards them. The firelight turned the blood of the fallen warriors around them from deep red to inky black. Walls of living flame were advancing methodically along the streets on either side of the market square, burning back the garden's surreal flora, popping the nurglings swarming the streets and incinerating wooden buildings with equal fury. Yet the storm clouds came in low, dumping gallon after gallon of vile liquid onto the fires until they were extinguished completely.

Ku'gath lumbered across the city square, lifting a great flabby fold of his flesh and pulling a squealing nurgling from under his rotten nipple. He lobbed the fatted daemon-mite into the ranks of the greatswords, and as the unit's champion intercepted it with his blade, the creature burst apart, spraying acidic digestive juices into faces and over hands. Discordant screams rang out, making the lumbering apothecary chuckle fondly. His waddle gathered pace until he barged belly-first through the reeling swordsmen like a rolling boulder, Festus huffing in his wake. Their line broken, the zweihander swordsmen were easy prey for the plague drones that flew in low to scabble and stab.

The two apothecaries ploughed on through the streets, all but unopposed. Few of Altdorf's defenders had remained in the city, and even fewer had the nerve to attack a greater daemon. A muttered bloat-spell from Festus dealt with a knot of soldiers and citizen militia stupid enough to bar their path. In the overgrown remains of Candle Square they saw a trundling steam tank grinding plaguebearers into mulch. Its hissing cannon poured scalding vapour at Ku'gath until the scowling daemon flipped the machine onto its side with a heave of his fat arms. In Sigmarsen Street they saw a coven of light wizards blasting magical light at the plague drones hovering overhead with a confection of prisms and lenses. Festus gestured dismissively at them, conjuring a swarm of winged leeches that reduced the wizards to exsanguinated husks in moments.

On the companions trudged, the bullets of marksmen stationed in the belfries and temple domes mere irritants that the regenerative blessings of their patron swiftly soothed. Here was the supremacy of Nurgle made manifest, the unbound creativity of Chaos prevailing over the suffocating order of mankind. Even death had little power in such a realm, though the goddess of healing still clung on to her stubborn purity.



Sure enough, as the apothecaries made their way past the algae-slicked caryatids of Unterwald Bridge, the Temple of Shallya rose up ahead. Not a single stain covered its alabaster surface or the bone-dry flagstones of its courts; even the sky above it was crystal blue instead of the unhealthy hue of rotten milk. Awnings and stretchers dotted the domed temple's perimeter, and white-robed sisters hustled from bed to bed.

Ku'gath yanked free the blunt bronze sword from a nearby statue of Emperor Magnus and barrelled forward with a roar, smashing a healing station and its occupants into an unrecognisable mess with his first blow. Festus stood well back and gave a long, operatic belch of words in the Dark Tongue. Black gas billowed from his open mouth, snaking through the air to push into the mouths and nostrils of those sisters desperately trying to escape.

An old woman in a white wimple strode right up to him and struck him hard across the face, the dagger in her other hand sinking deep into his flabby guts. Festus frowned for a second before breaking a potion of disassembly on her forehead and breathing in the rich gases of her rapid decomposition.

From high above them their plague drone escorts dropped wax-sealed death's heads into the throng, the splashing fluids having no effect on the sacred sisters but eating away the flesh of those injured state troopers that were mustering into a battle line at the temple's perimeter. Ku'gath smashed and crushed everything in his reach, a dark and unnatural force roused to terrible wrath.

Then, from the courtyards on the far side of the temple, came a great moaning and clattering of bone. Moments later, serried ranks of the dead pushed forwards from a dozen streets and alleys at once, converging on the column of daemons that had followed Ku'gath and Festus. At their head was Vlad von Carstein, his finger testing the tip of his blade and a grim smile on his pallid, twisted features.

There came a screeching cry from above, the blast of a horn, and the battlecries of Bretonnia's finest. The blue skies above the temple turned dark with feathered wings.

As one, the living and the dead charged in.





THE HALF-DEAD ARMY

The wounded state soldiers still able to stand were inspired to protect the Shallyans who watched over them. Though they could barely believe their eyes, they were reinforced by not only the winged court of Louen Leoncoeur, but also the dead men of Altdorf's violent past.

ELECTOR COUNT VLAD VON CARSTEIN

The von Carsteins had always had designs on the Imperial Throne, long considering themselves the rightful rulers of Sylvania, and of Stirland itself. By offering a chance of survival, Vlad wore down Helborg's contempt and eventually forced him to agree to a dark bargain – the title of an Elector Count in exchange for Vlad's aid.



EMPEROR WILHELM THE FIRST

Vlad had found a fitting leader for his forces in Emperor Wilhelm the First, a tyrannical ruler from the dawn of the Empire. Wilhelm had insisted that he be buried with gold coins pressed into his eye sockets instead of the traditional pennies paid to Morr, and the death god had long ago refused to take such a proud man into the afterlife.



THE SHAMBLING DEAD

Shuffling through the streets around the temple were the undead citizens of Altdorf, summoned back from the grave to defend their homes. Those buried in unconsecrated graves had clawed their way to the surface and stumbled through the jungle that choked their homes, thronging in ever-greater numbers as they closed on the nexus of dark energy that was Vlad von Carstein. Undead shopkeepers, yeomen, stevedores, teachers, beggars, grocers, urchins and thugs alike moaned and staggered out to surround the daemon host, defending in death the city that their living counterparts had all but abandoned.



THE LAST REMNANTS OF TRIBE UNBEROGEN

Amongst the corpses that languish in the catacombs beneath Altdorf were the bodies of the Unberogen tribe. Led by the Heldenhammer himself in life, these noble barbarians were buried under the sign of Sigmar, not Morr, and were therefore within the reach of the vampire count's necromantic skills. Vlad saw a pleasing irony in forcing them to attack under his direction. Sigmar had slain Nagash in single combat many thousands of years ago, but now it was the powers of the Great Necromancer that proved the last line of defence for the city founded in the Heldenhammer's name.



THE WALKING WOUNDED

A rough assemblage of state troops, mercenaries and militiamen clambered from the pallets and stretchers of the hospitaller tents, taking up their swords with groans of effort and standing shoulder to shoulder in a thin line across the plaza. Too wounded to flee, with infections in their wounds and phlegm filling their lungs, they resolved to give their lives in defence of those priestesses who had braved contagion and death in an attempt to restore them to good health.

-  **Elector Count Vlad von Carstein**
-  **Emperor Wilhelm I**
Wight King
-  **The Shambling Dead**
Three hordes of Zombies
-  **The Last Remnants of Tribe Unberogen**
Three hordes of Grave Guard
-  **The Walking Wounded**
Four scratch companies of State Troops
Three Free Companies
-  **The Sons of the Comet**
One congregation of Flagellants
-  **High Paladin Louen Leoncoeur**
-  **The Skyhost**
Eleven lances of Pegasus Knights



THE SONS OF THE COMET

Scattered about the Shallyan shantytown were those doomsayers and prophets who looked to the twin-tailed comet for salvation. Because the Shallyan temple was the only area in the city still bereft of the touch of Nurgle, the Sons of the Comet fought hard to defend it. Tolerated by the priestesses so long as they kept to themselves, they had no intention of leaving the city just as Sigmar's sigil struck home to take the blessed and the faithful into its fiery heart.

LEONCOEUR'S SKYHOST

Though his diving strikes had reaped a high tally of champions from the Norscan host, Louen Leoncoeur realised that the otherworldly danger assailing Altdorf from within was worse than the earthly forces outside its walls. He had spied a small zone of sanctity in the poor district of Altdorf, and led his pegasus knights to defend that last pocket of purity, hoping that by keeping it from Nurgle's clutches he had a chance of reclaiming the city.



THE JOYFUL THRONG

Ku'gath and Festus closed on the final obstacle to their plans with single-minded fury, but the daemons in their wake could not have been happier. Here they were in the mortal world, yet their forms were as solid and permanent as if they walked in their master's garden.

FESTUS EMPOWERED

Doctor Festus had completed his great quest to brew the seven ingredients that would allow Nurgle's realm to break the bounds of reality and infest the mortal world. Now Festus stood on the threshold of daemonhood, a single act of devotion away from immortality.



KU'GATH PLAGUEFATHER

Ku'gath was enraged by the revelation that the goddess Shallya, after all the delicious plagues his master had visited upon her, was ungrateful enough to impede his Father's plans. The greater daemon was ready to smash her temple to powder with his oily fists if he had to.



STEMCUTTER

One of the giant half-daemon machines that Nurgle used to tend his garden was known as Stemcutter, a being whose crab-like legs carried him sideways along the winding paths of the garden. As he went, he would prune those plants that threatened to occlude Nurgle's favourite evening walks, applying the care of a master artisan. Having strayed through the Gate Between Worlds, Stemcutter used his giant piston-driven claws with wilful abandon, cutting the life from everything he found without any risk of incurring his master's wrath.

THE SUPPURATING HOST

When the gateway to Altdorf opened in their master's realm, thousands of lesser daemons crowded towards it. Excited beyond words but desperate to show professional detachment, they justified their exodus however they could – surely the diseases, poxes, agues and afflictions that were about to spread throughout the realm of man would need a great host of observers to catalogue them all?



PUTREFEX BLISTERTONGUE

The command of Nurgle's daemonic armies was given to Blistertongue, a daemon possessed of such a perceptive and numerate mind he even could keep count of the boiling nurglings that flowed in the wake of his hosts. If there was one daemon who would ensure the maximum amount of disruption and confusion was brought to bear upon those foes left standing in their way, it was Putrefex Blistertongue.



Festus Empowered



Ku'gath Plaguefather



Putrefex Blistertongue
Daemon Herald of Nurgle



The Angels of Decay
Seven Plague Drones



The Suppurating Host
Seven hordes of Plaguebearers



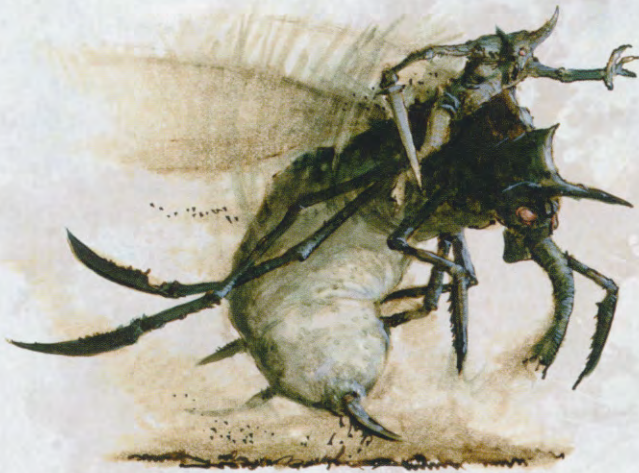
The Frolicking Swarm
Three swarms of Nurglings



The Slubberdegullions
Seven Beasts of Nurgle



Stemcutter
One Soul Grinder



THE ANGELS OF DECAY

The plaguebearers that escorted the apothecaries through the streets of Altdorf were the deadliest of all their kind. Each mounted on an ancient rot fly that had supped upon the corpses of the Empire's first settlers, the Angels of Decay had long fought at one another's side as the guardians of Nurgle's manse. Now, with that most fecund of territories spilling out into the material realm, the Angels of Decay found their hunting grounds greatly expanded.



THE FROLICKING SWARM

Caught up in all the excitement, nurglings boiled through the Gate Between Worlds. Upon their arrival in Altdorf they engaged themselves in all manner of serious business; splashing, capering, gurning, biting, farting, playing tug-of-war with their own intestines and generally ensuring the suffocating order and pomp of the Empire's capital was replaced by a riotous celebration of life in all its forms.



THE SLUBBERDEGULLIONS

The nurglings of the garden were not the only ones to thrill with the excitement of a new adventure. Bounding behind the plaguebearers came beasts of Nurgle so exuberant that they had to stop regularly to relieve themselves, each acrid emission dissolving anything it touched. On a day as glorious as this, their tardiness was quickly forgiven.

THE BATTLE AT THE TEMPLE

As the battlelines closed outside the Temple of Shallya, Louen Leoncoeur arrowed from the skies like a living missile. The warrior's challenge rang out, causing Ku'gath to turn and face him, the daemon's hideous face further distorted with rage. Plague drones buzzed erratically through the skies to Ku'gath's defence, but they were too slow. The Plaguefather barely had time to raise his hand before the High Paladin's lance struck home. Its blessed tip sank an arm's length into the daemon's rotting breast, the hippogryph's claws slashing in close behind.

With a speed that belied his massive size, Ku'gath Plaguefather grabbed the lance around its shaft and used it as a lever to hurl both man and beast into the Temple of Shallya. Flailing sidelong, the hippogryph and its armoured rider hit the dome with such force they smashed right through it in a shower of ceramic shards. Luminous blood trickled down the sides of what was left of the curved dome, but the king and his mount had disappeared completely from sight. The greater daemon crushed the lance in his grip and tossed it aside, knocking over one of the state troopers jabbing at his hip with a spear. High above, pegasus knights dived in to slash at the wheeling plague drones that sought to defend their charge, the plaguebearers and their rot fly steeds stabbing back at the proud Bretonnians.

Doctor Festus bowed his way through the ruin of the healers' shantytown toward Ku'gath, slapping his meaty hands together in heartfelt applause as he went. Knowing that any of Father Nurgle's creatures would struggle to touch a holy site of Shallya, the greater daemon had improvised marvellously.

From the western streets a glut of undead emerged into the courtyards,

spilling over the stretchers and stumbling over stools as they closed on the plaguebearer echelons beside Ku'gath. The zombies scrabbled with broken hands and clubbed with improvised weapons at the Nurgle daemons. Usually such feeble attacks would have little effect against the plague-born, but the tallymen were busy counting the beautiful array of skin diseases blossoming across the undead warriors that sought to pull them down. Before long, the front line of the enraptured daemons had fallen. Putrefex Blistertongue honked out a droning command to fight back, and the second rank suddenly came alive as if awakening from a dream, cutting the zombies down rank by rank with their rusted plagueswords.



Yet the zombie attack had served its purpose. With the front lines of the plaguebearer host preoccupied, the real strength of Vlad's armies fell upon their flanks. Hordes of skeletons in the tattered remnants of Imperial uniforms hacked mechanically at the wall of pimpled daemonflesh, while wights in the ornate raiment of the first Altdorfers slashed apart slaving beasts of Nurgle. Vlad himself led a thin wedge of grave guard out from a side street to cut deep into the neck of the plaguebearer column, the vampire a whirlwind of enchanted steel that hacked down daemons as if they were no more substantial than mist. The wights around him attacked with their own jerky, staccato speed as the dark magic trailing in the vampire's wake energised them beyond mortal limits.

The bold attack had hit with such sudden force that Vlad cut his way right across the column and out the other side, his escort turning as one and locking their shields to form a blockade of armoured corpses that cut off the plaguebearer host from any more reinforcements. In one daring strike Vlad had isolated his prey and closed in for the kill.

At the temple's pillared gates Ku'gath loomed over the thin line of state troops and flagellants protecting the white-robed high priestess. Kicking away a half-dozen of the wounded warriors standing in his path, the daemon raised his sword for the kill.

Suddenly Louen Leoncoeur hurtled out of the archway, glowing blade raised. As Ku'gath brought his blunt weapon down in a crushing overhead sweep, the warrior sprang to the side, catching the Shallyan high priestess around the waist with his shield arm and casting her aside onto a stretcher. Flagstones burst into powder where she had been standing a moment before as Ku'gath's blow fell.

Louen leapt up, boosting off an antique table that had been pressed into service as an operating bench and leaping into the air towards his obese opponent. The old warrior's blade arced down in a two-handed blow that opened the lance wound in Ku'gath's chest still further, exposing the greater daemon's rotten heart.

Bellowing in outrage, the Plaguefather turned his head round in a great scoop, catching Leoncoeur in his antler and tossing him straight upwards into the air. The Bretonnian seemed to hang suspended at the apex of his flight before Ku'gath slammed his metal sword right into the knight's midsection, sending him flying over the milling daemons below to crash into the statue of Magnus the Pious. More golden liquid trickled from

Louen's wounds, yet he got to his feet once more, his shield glowing with azure light as he growled a prayer for the Lady to give him strength.

At the back of the daemon battleline, Festus drooled thick spittle as he concluded his favourite rite of abundance. He gestured crookedly at the pegasi riders duelling the plague drones high above him, and the last few of their number swelled, screamed, and burst. The blood of horse and human pattered down like some foul rain. Festus put his hand out like a grocer assessing the weather before licking his palm clean with a malevolent chuckle.

Freed from their aerial duel, the Angels of Decay dived down low, the segmented legs of their rot flies thudding down into the flesh of those flagellants lashing their flails at Ku'gath's back. The doomsayers screamed like madmen, hurling themselves bodily at the daemons buzzing in their midst, ripping at membranous wings with their broken fingernails, even biting down on the evil-smelling flesh of their assailants. The plague drones, used to fighting foes on the brink of fleeing or at least voiding the contents of their stomachs, were caught off guard, and two of their number fell to the sudden counter-attack, their squishy bodies burst open under the hammering blows of the frantic zealots.

Nearby, Vlad's wights were holding the plaguebearer tide at bay, for every time one of the armoured cadavers was struck down, the vampire's spells of resurrection would force it back to its feet to lock shields with its comrades once more. At their heart was the tall figure of Emperor Wilhelm, more resplendent in death than he had ever been in life. The skeletal tyrant was locked in battle against Putrefex Blistertongue, hammering blows against the daemon herald's blade with a sword that glowed white with killing heat. Murmuring curses that

only a plaguebearer could devise, the daemon kicked out at the wight king's knee, snapping off the revenant's leg with an audible crack.

The wight king went down, but in the process his relentless attacks cut low, slashing right through the daemon's hand and fizzing through his sunken chest in a shower of green sparks. As the Emperor Wilhelm rose up once more like a ghost from an opened grave, the daemon herald howled, dwindled, and vanished from sight.



At the temple's front gate Louen Leoncoeur rushed at Ku'gath once more, liquid light drizzling from his close-cropped beard. This time he took the greater daemon's arcing blow on his shield, the crushing impact staggering him badly. He turned his sudden change of direction into a tight roll, clattering under the giant sword's backswing as it smashed an awning to splinters and crushed an unfortunate soldier against the statue's podium. Leoncoeur cut down the daemons pressing in toward him, his glowing sword flashing bright in the light of the comet above. Ku'gath covered his eyes with a flabby forearm, rearing back as if stung.

Out from the shattered dome of the temple came Louen's hippogryph, a mass of bloodied muscle and tattered feathers. The beast screeched down, digging its talons into Ku'gath's rounded shoulders and ripping great chunks of noisome flesh free. As the daemon roared in pain, Festus ran in close and hurled an alembic full of troll's bile at the hippogryph's head. His aim was true; it broke open with

a satisfying crunch, sending the beast scrabbling frantically at its own beak.

Ku'gath recovered swiftly. His over-arm swipe took the hippogryph from the skies, his blunt sword snapping the beast's spine against the flagstones outside the temple. The great creature writhed in its death throes, broken pinions battering over priestesses and injured soldiers alike.

All across the poor district, the unnatural stamina of the daemons was matched against the unceasing, unblinking energies of the walking dead. No human qualms moderated the hacking, stabbing violence that boiled wherever the two battle lines touched. But for every daemon that burst into a puff of flatulent vapour, three, five, even ten undead warriors were left in pieces on the cobbles, for the raw invigorating power of Nurgle was thick across the city. The plaguebearers, tenacious foes at the worst of times, were now attacking with such exuberant energy that they were hacking down the dead even faster than Vlad could raise them up. The cordon of grave guard that Vlad had established across the mouth of the widest street was slowly breaking apart, plaguebearers spilling through and around its edges to join the fight outside the temple.

Elector Count von Carstein had problems of his own. A tide of giggling nurglings had poured between the legs of their larger brethren to crawl and climb up the vampire's legs, boiling over each other in their haste to reach the weak spots of his eyes and throat. Vlad snarled as he slashed at the daemon-mites with his sword, Blood Drinker, some part of him silently grateful that the creatures had no true bloodstreams to trigger the exsanguinatory magics of his blade. Yet, much like the plaguebearers filling the streets, there seemed no end to the number of the nurglings assailing him. By piling atop one another, they were coming closer and closer to his unarmoured neck.

Muttering an ancient Nehekharan spell, Vlad ignited the anger in his gaze so that it burned with black fire. Two beams of dark magic raged out from his eyes, evaporating nurglings by the dozen until they had scoured the daemons from the vampire's armour and left a moat of molten stone boiling all around him. The vampire sniffed haughtily, cleaning his blade on the end of his cloak.

A gigantic claw slammed into the Count's back, its piston-driven strength flinging the vampire across the square. Flagstones cracked under giant metal legs as Stemcutter stormed sideways through the fray, pincers snapping wildly. A knot of injured spearmen charged towards it, cries to Sigmar's glory on their lips, but Stemcutter hoiked a great ball of phlegm and spat it right at them. The repulsive fluids splashed across the state troops, quickly dissolving their flesh until all that was left was a noisome pile of sludge and discoloured cloth.

A great booming cry rang out across the square as Ku'gath staggered backwards, the flagellants hanging from his frame flying through the air as the daemon windmilled his arms and lumbered away from the temple gates. Louen Leoncoeur hung from the hilt of his sword, the entire length of his blade embedded in Ku'gath's throat. The golden blood that was drizzling from the Bretonnian's many wounds was searing the flesh of the daemon worse than any acid, dissolving his corporeal form like embers cast into a mass of fungus. Worse still, it was trickling down into the gaping wound in the daemon's festering chest.

Ku'gath bawled and roared and flailed, but it did no good. The former king of Bretonnia hung on grimly as the greater daemon was eaten away by the very fluids he had spilled, sacred lifeblood that bore the blessing of a goddess even more powerful than Shallya. Swinging and casting about,

the daemon knocked into the podium bearing Magnus the Pious' memorial, and the statue of the great war leader came crashing down. As Louen leapt free, the statue's lumpen metal weight pinned Ku'gath like a wrestler with a winning hold. Second by agonising second, the greater daemon bubbled away into nothingness until all that was left was a simmering stain.

Louen the Lionhearted stood bleeding but proud in place of the former Emperor's statue, blade pointed right at Festus. As the knight roared his challenge and sprang off the podium towards his foe, the apothecary ripped a long-leech from its suckling-space on his back and flung it at the Bretonnian like a bolas. The segmented thing tangled the wounded knight's legs, tripping his charge. As dextrous as an elf, he tucked his shoulder and rolled once more, coming up blade-first to plunge his glowing sword deep into the Leechlord's guts in a blow that would have killed a mortal challenger in a single thrust.

Festus was glugged with the power of Nurgle, however, and pain was an old friend to him. The Leechlord smashed the vial he had palmed a moment before into the Bretonnian's face, boiling daemonic ichor ruining the knight's handsome visage forever. Louen reeled back, crying out in rage and pain. Festus yanked a dirty bonesaw from his belt and leapt forward like a pouncing toad, ripping the serrated blade across the reeling knight's throat. The glowing blood that covered his hands burned worse than any bile, but Festus was still a creature of the material realm, and it did not eat away his flesh as it had Ku'gath's. The Leechlord sawed and sawed like a maniac butcher, the knight convulsing beneath him as liquid light splashed and spurted in all directions. Then, to the utter horror of the Empire soldiery, Festus grabbed the knight's ravaged head by the hair and wrenched it from his body in a spray of golden gore.

The Leechlord stood up with a great shout of triumph, and the storm rumbled overhead, the indulgent laughter of a father proud of his son's antics. Festus was lit from within by a green-white light that poured out of his eyes and mouth, his entire form shaking with the fell energies that were being bestowed upon him. Every daemon around the plaza that was not locked blade to blade with the undead turned and knelt, chanting Festus' name over and over again.

Vlad struck the Leechlord from the side like a black thunderbolt. Bodily slamming the glowing apothecary into a shattered mass of tables, the vampire drew back his ancestral blade for the kill. Before he could strike, Festus spat a phrase of power and blasted the von Carstein's flesh to a cloud of ashen mist. The world held its breath for a moment as an empty suit of Sylvanian armour clattered to the cobbles, a large, jewelled ring rolling away to settle under a mass of broken wood.

Festus chuckled and picked himself up, waving away the undead ranks that were shambling towards him. Everywhere he gestured, the unliving warriors collapsed in on themselves, their flesh boiling with fat daemon maggots that ate them away to nothing in the space of seconds. Bereft of the dark magic of their master, the revenants were failing fast, and even more plaguebearers were spilling into the square.

The Shallyan priestesses had made the most of the time their defenders had bought them. Sisters hurried with urns of blessed water around the inner perimeter of the temple walls, washing away the filth that stained the cobbles and forming a mystical barrier of consecrated ground across which the daemons could not cross. Their circle was almost complete. Festus just sniggered to himself at their attempts to keep him out. A simple gesture from him and the ground itself would heave upwards,

tumbling the temple and shattering their precious circle of sanctity in a single burst of glorious power.

Suddenly the mass of broken tables behind the glowing leechlord exploded upwards, and Vlad von Carstein burst out, a jagged spar of wood held in one hand and his ancestral blade in the other. The ring on his hand glowed bright enough to sear the eyes as the vampire darted forward, his motion almost too fast for the eye to follow. Festus held out a fat hand and caught Vlad's scything blade in a grip as hard as rock, but the wooden stake in the other plunged deep into Festus' chest.

The vampire's intuitive gamble quickly proved correct. Filled to the brim with the burgeoning energies of unbridled life, Festus' body turned the inert wood of the stake into a wild and twisted tree in the space of a single surreal second. Impaled bodily on a majestic Drakwald oak that suddenly sank its great roots into the flagstones and swelled up and up into the skies, the leechlord's chest was slowly pulled wider and wider until he simply burst in a cloud of grey-green ectoplasm. A wail of frustration echoed around the square as the strange mist was caught up by the tempest raging above and whipped away into the Realm of Chaos.

With the Altdorfers ascendant, the daemon host found themselves unable to penetrate the circle of consecrated ground the Shallyans had established around their temple. The few surviving soldiers that had found their way inside were too exhausted to cry out in victory, but as the seconds slid past, they realised that neither undead nor daemon could harm them.

With the inexplicable intervention of the ancient dead, and the selfless death of the Bretonnian lords that had given their lives to protect the temple, the pearl of purity in the poorest district of Altdorf had been saved – and with it, the city's soul.





Outside the city's northern walls, Gutrot Spume's warshrine was carried into the midst of the Reiksguard atop the back of his mutant servants. Bracing his feet, the Lord of Tentacles brought his axe swinging around again and again, each blow taking a knight from the saddle. Hans Zintler rode his horse through the press, the back ranks of his men making way with consummate horsemanship. The Reikscaptain hacked at the gormless mutants holding the shrine aloft, each sweep of his silversword severing limbs and tentacles. With a ponderous slowness, the whole conveyance toppled over, spilling hot coals and coiled guts into the cavalry below.

Spume leapt from the front of the warshrine, his silhouette outlined against the gloating orb of Morrslieb for one brief moment before he slammed down into the midst of the Reiksguard. Six tentacles shot out as he landed, each pair yanking a knight from the saddle. The seventh tentacle raised Spume's greataxe high, and the warlord decapitated the three knights one after another.

Zintler bellowed a Sigmarite oath as he turned in the saddle to slam his sword between Spume's shoulderblades, its tip bursting out of the Norscan's chestplate. Pseudopods whipped out to lash around the Reikscaptain's wrist, and Zintler found himself both pulled from his horse and disarmed in one horrible second as Spume turned around, the blade still embedded in his torso. The warlord laughed wetly, blood drizzling from under his helmet, as one of his coiling limbs reached over and pulled the ancestral blade from his back. The Lord of Tentacles slammed a boot down on the Reikscaptain's chest and rested his greataxe against the corpse of a horse as the pseudopod that had disarmed his foe handed the silversword to Spume's good hand. Zintler struggled, shouting the most terrible of curses, but fell silent as his own sword was rammed through his neck up to the hilt, ending his life.

With the Reiksguard broken by Spume's counter-attack, the Drakwald beastmen poured up to the north wall and began to scale its timeworn facade. Over to the east of the city, the battle line of state troops was holding fast against the repugnant daemons crashing against it. In the midst of the plaguebearer host was Epidemius, counting the deadly infections that spread out from the front line wherever his minions struck. There were so many beautiful gifts here from Nurgle's boundless catalogue of contagion that the Tallyman found himself near frantic.

Epidemius scrambled away with a quill in each hand, his usual fastidious and neat handwriting replaced by a spidery scrawl that he resolved to write up properly once the battle was over. With every scroll he filled, the plaguebearers around him became more energised, and the diseases on their blades more virulent, until the slightest cut or graze caused the victim to fall frothing to the floor.

Nearby, Orghotts Daemonspew and his maggoth riders were charging headlong towards the gun battery that had been wheeled out of the east gate. Despite the sightless beasts having sustained terrible damage, they had made it into the midst of the entrenched artillery. Great cannons rose and fell like improvised clubs as the maggoths took their terrible revenge. Yet there were but three maggoth riders, and several dozen artillery pieces, some of which were pointing directly towards Epidemius.

The ninefold boom of a misfiring Helblaster rang out, and man and daemon alike were torn to shreds as a hail of cannonballs blasted a gory path through the battle. Epidemius looked down at the hole that had cored his torso like a rotten apple, counting the infections that spilled out with a detached interest. Slowly, his quill scrambled to a halt, and the daemon herald faded from the mortal realm like a bad dream.

Outside the East Gate the plaguebearer host ground their way on, but without their leader, their blows were robbed of vigour. Still, the daemons were not the only allies Orghotts Daemonspew had brought with him from outside Talabheim.

Thundering through the bloody scrum of the battlelines came a bipedal bull of living brass, the dark runes on his axes glowing white hot with ruinous energies. Behind him came a stampede of bellowing minotaurs, muscling through the crowds in a great scrum of horn and blooded meat. The spear-block soldiers in their path gave an involuntary moan of fear as the brass giant charged headlong into them. Stout-hafted polearms snapped and splintered on the monster's metallic hide, their wielders skidding back in the mud or breaking ranks in fear. The brass bull's runic axes rose and fell with guillotine force, each blow cutting a man in two.

As more of the horned beasts barrelled in to the ranks of the spearmen, the brazen doombull roared a wacry to the gods above. It was too much for the Altdorfer soldiers. They broke and ran, scattering past detachments that hesitantly shuffled closer to the breach in the line. The minotaurs left in the fleeing soldiers' wake lowered their blunt maws and gorged, feasting on the remains of the dead. Several of them even licked at red-brown puddles in their bloodlust.

Less than a hundred metres away, Mundvard the Cruel rose on the battlements, bald and magisterial, and began to chant. To the flank of the minotaurs rose a second wall – not of stone, but of the dead. Skeletal regiments turned as one with a precision that would have made a palace drill sergeant turn green. They lowered their spears and lunged with such uncanny synchronicity that three of the ox-headed beastmen were killed in the space of a heartbeat.

By the city walls, a crowd of rotten cadavers spilled clumsily from the West Gate, trapping the blood-glutted minotaurs from the front. Frantic with necromantic energy, the massing corpses that did not fall upon the last few minotaurs clambered past one another in their haste to mend the breach the beastmen had forced in the battle line, a growing mound of the dead sealing the gap just as a mob of axe-wielding warriors charged in from the north.

The brazen beast slaughtering its way towards the East Gate fought on with even greater fury. A regiment of Talabheim pistoliers came to meet it. Their close-range volley of pistol fire ricocheted from the thick metal skin of the beast without causing so much as a dent. Then the leaping bronze giant was suddenly in their midst, axes slamming through man and steed alike in a spectacular display of brute force. The monstrous beast threw back its head and bellowed praise to the Blood God.

As the bronze-skinned minotaur cast about for its next kill a thick, black-fletched arrow suddenly stuck quivering from the tiny patch of brown skin on its throat. A thin line of amber light could be traced back from the deadly shaft to the topmost point of the East Gate tower, where the Huntsmarshal stood proud against the skyline. The bronze beast gave a gurgling shout, its eyes rolling in metal sockets, and toppled over dead.

A great shout of defiance was raised as the minotaur fell, the veteran Altdorf soldiers on the front line fighting back hard against the Chaos warriors desperately trying to get through. The battle lines pushed forward, back, breaking apart and reforming as more and more units poured into the fray, yet despite it all, the Empire held the line.

At the West Gate, a different story was unfolding. After the unexpected assault from the Bretonnians, the

Glottkin had little in the way of patience left. Less than a hundred paces from the gate an explosion of masonry burst from the west gate wall, sending dozens of the dead men on the wall sprawling into the dust. Ghurk barrelled straight through in an avalanche of mortar and shattered bone, his roar of triumph loud enough to deafen a dragon. The giant mutant flattened rank after rank of skeletons with his sweeping tentacle-arm whilst his warlord brother cut the legs from the undead troops on the walls. Ethrac flung deadly curses at those too far away for Otto's scythe to reach. Ancient warriors toppled from the walls, covered from head to toe in acidic saliva. The undead warriors barring their path were little more hindrance to them than insects, for the Glottkin could taste the Garden of Nurgle in the air, and their raptures were just beginning.

As a cadre of handgunners leaned from the West Gate's upper towers and readied a point-blank volley, Otto raised a dangling length of intestine and clenched his guts, spraying the marksmen with hissing yellow bile. They screamed, clutching at their smoking faces and clawing their eyes. Riding his brother's heaving mass on the upswing, Otto hooked his scythe's tip around the shoulder plate of one of the unwounded gunners and yanked him over the wall, catching him by the scruff of his neck as he fell. The warlord shook his captive hard, demanding that the soldier tell him the whereabouts of his lord.

The marksman simply stretched out a quaking arm, gesturing in the rough direction of the Imperial palace. Otto thanked him earnestly, then dashed the handgunner's brains out against the tower wall.

In the distance, a pair of griffons shot through the heavens towards the centre of the beleaguered city, the plumed helm of the Emperor stark against the skies. Karl Franz had returned at the last.

The Fall of Altdorf

The Monstrous Horde

The Tattooed Tribes

Road to Marienburg

RIVER REIK

The Tattooed Tribes

Tunnel
throttlevi

Reiks
Ass

State
Troops

Altdorf
Undead

Altdorf
Undead

Altdorf
Undead

Altdorf
Undead

Altdorf
Undead

Altdorf
Undead

Leoncoeur's
Skyhost

The Crusades
of Bretonnia

Road to Montfort

REIKWALD
FOREST



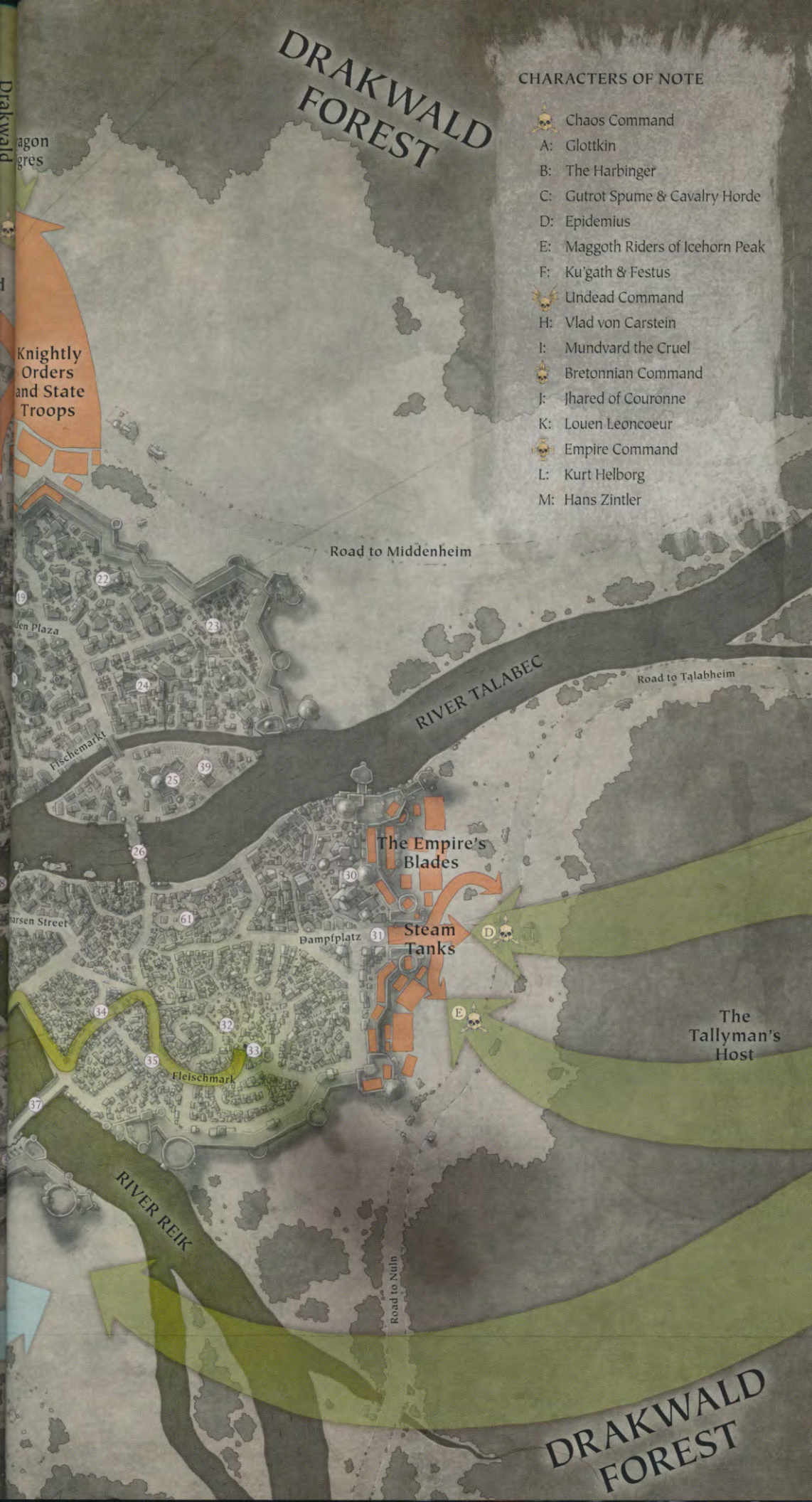
DRAKWALD FOREST

CHARACTERS OF NOTE

- ☠ Chaos Command
- A: Glottkin
- B: The Harbinger
- C: Gutrot Spume & Cavalry Horde
- D: Epidemius
- E: Maggoth Riders of Icehorn Peak
- F: Ku'gath & Festus
- ☠ Undead Command
- H: Vlad von Carstein
- I: Mundvard the Cruel
- ☠ Bretonnian Command
- J: Jhared of Couronne
- K: Louen Leoncoeur
- ☠ Empire Command
- L: Kurt Helborg
- M: Hans Zintler

ALTDORF LOCATIONS

- 1: The Imperial Palace
- 2: The Temple of Sigmar
- 3: The Temple of Shallya
- 4: Knights Panther Chapter House
- 5: The Vaults
- 6: The Arcane Towers
- 7: Jade College
- 8: Light College
- 9: Grey College
- 10: Amethyst College
- 11: Gold College
- 12: Celestial College
- 13: Bright College
- 14: Tower of Volans
- 15: Guild of Alchemists
- 16: North Gate
- 17: Königplatz
- 18: Temple of Ranald
- 19: Guild of Imperial Cartographers
- 20: Altdorf Market
- 21: Knights of the Blazing Sun Chapter House
- 22: Guild of Merchants
- 23: Grandmarkt
- 24: Mercantile Area
- 25: Temple of Morr
- 26: Reaper's Crossing
- 27: The Old Bridge
- 28: The Docks
- 29: Barracks
- 30: School of Engineers
- 31: East Gate
- 32: Slaughterhouse District
- 33: Sewer shaft
- 34: Candle Square
- 35: Market Square
- 36: Unterwald Bridge
- 37: State Bridge
- 38: Temple of Rhya
- 39: Cemetery
- 40: The South Gate
- 41: The Imperial Navy Docks
- 42: Greywatch Towers
- 43: Imperial Zoo
- 44: The Grand Glockentor
- 45: Knights Griffon Chapter House
- 46: School of Navigators
- 47: Karl Franz Park
- 48: Carnival Square
- 49: Reik Bridge
- 50: Griffon Bridge
- 51: Volans Crossing
- 52: Northwatch Citadel
- 53: Cemetery of Old Altdorf
- 54: Gallows Square
- 55: Grand Courts
- 56: Altdorf Theatre
- 57: Morr's Garden
- 58: West Gate
- 59: Knights of the Everlasting Light Chapter House
- 60: Knights of Sigmar's Blood Chapter House
- 61: Paupers' Keep







The Glottkin's men hacked their way into the city through the breach in the western wall, only to find the streets that led away from the West Gate swarmed with the dead. Each corpse-puppet stumbled with arms outstretched towards the triplets leading the attack.

Flying down into the midst of the undead throng was a bald, bat-winged figure in ornate armour, his needle fangs protruding close together over his lower lip as his limb-pinions transformed back into human arms. Not Vlad, but Mundvard the Cruel, intent on killing the savages that had ruined his beloved cityport and now sought to take Altdorf. The vampire preferred his revenge served cold, but time was running out for mortal and immortal alike.

As the terrorgeist known as the Suiddock Beast swooped down from the nearby courthouse belfry, twin streams of dark light shot from Mundvard's eyes. The dark energy struck Ethrac with sizzling force. A second later the necrarch's pet dived at Ghurk, jaws stretched open to release a scream more terrible than an entire chorus of the damned. Ghurk reeled backwards, his hideous features further contorted by a silent roar of pain.

More and more corpses boiled out of the alleys and buildings opposite the Glottkin until a sprawling mound of rotten flesh rose up, a composite monstrosity that could only have been raised by a true master of the dead. Tumbling forwards like a cresting wave, the mound buried the triplets beneath its mass.

Ghurk, staggered by the terrorgeist's scream but far too large to be pinned down by the corpse-heap for long, lashed out with his tentacle. The curling limb caught the Suiddock Beast around the leg as it banked around to attack again. It screeched its hellish shriek once more, and a dozen Altdorfer marksmen that

cowered under the shelter of the West Gate tower nearby turned white, slumping dead to the battlements. Mundvard droned out a resurrection chant, and they stood back up a heartbeat later, using their handguns to batter at the Norscans clambering through the nearby breach.

In the streets below, the terrorgeist glowed greenish-white with eldritch energy as Mundvard reached a claw towards its skeletal frame. Slowly at first, but with gathering pace, the bat-winged monstrosity dragged Ghurk



from the melee by his tentacle. The terrorgeist shrieked as it glowed brighter still, the full length of its massive wingspan beating hard. Ghurk bowled after it like an obese child pulled along by a rebellious kite. Otto and Ethrac had no choice but to hold on for dear life as their brother smashed an ancient wyrdwell to dust and caved in half of Blacksmith Row in his lurching rampage.

Otto pushed away the clawing, clubbing mound of dead soldiers that had clambered atop Ghurk after Mundvard's attack. The warlord spat out a mouthful of dead flesh and yanked his scythe free from the moaning zombies, cutting a corpse in half in the process. A glowing shape descended from the storm clouds overhead, a faint shiver of high-pitched laughter filtering through the patter of milk-white rain.

Beams of dark energy lanced into the top of Otto's head, burning away his scalp until all three of the Glottkin could smell the telltale tang of burning bone. Above them a trio of white shapes leered down over the sides of their ethereal carriage, pretty female faces swimming in the mist.

Roaring in confusion and rage, Otto brought his scythe round in a great arc and threw it up hard. Its reaper curve spun upwards to clip the head from the foremost female figure that had been peering down to watch him die. A pair of horrified screams rang out, and the floating palanquin above Otto drew up into the skies once more, the ashen remains of the covenant's queen washed away by the oily rain pelting down onto the streets. Otto caught his scythe as it spun back down, disentangling himself from the corpses strewn around him in a pool of his own sticky blood. The warlord got unsteadily back to his feet and gingerly felt the top of his head. To his relief, the burned bone was healing fast.

As the Glottkin passed a high-walled temple, a cascade of dead bodies toppled from the crenulated roof like some macabre mass suicide. Ethrac was swiftly trapped under a mound of rotting flesh that flopped onto Ghurk's shoulders, buried by the bodies of the Altdorf dead. No matter how the sorcerer clawed and fought, the corpses would not yield, clawing and biting in their turn. He cried and struggled as his brother Otto started to hurl the corpses bodily back into the street.

There was a sudden blaze of sickly green light and the corpse-mound burst apart in a shower of glowing green maggots. A furious Ethrac stood dripping where a dozen corpses had pressed down on him a moment before. Still the undead came on, teeming through the streets to block the Glottkin's passage towards where they had seen the returned Karl Franz descend from the skies.



Mundvard loomed out from the rooftops, the bat wings that had carried him to the top of a fortified chapel nearby becoming arms once more. Raising his hands, the vampire began an ancient chant to destroy the Glottkin once and for all. Ethrac shook his head and wagged a filthy finger at the vampire before dipping a gnarled hand into a pouch at his side and throwing a handful of black spores onto his magical brazier, smouldering slowly as it jutted from Ghurk's broad back.

A stream of black smoke billowed over towards Mundvard just as he was about to complete his spell, consuming the vampire for a moment, then dispersing. The cloud left nothing behind but a darkened skeleton. As Ghurk barrelled past the sorcerer reached out and backhanded Mundvard's slack-jawed cadaver into pieces, the vampire's mouldering bones clattering into the cobbled streets below.

With its master's death, the Suiddock Beast suddenly found itself yanked to a halt by the tentacle around its legs. Ghurk, his wide trail of devastation stretching all the way back to the West Gate, shook his lumpen head in confusion before looking up at the beast flapping and screaming above him. He tensed his tentacle, still wrapped around the terrorgeist's legs, and smashed the creature into the statue of Sierck that stood in the centre of Playwright Square. The undead thing was still flapping, so Ghurk smashed it into the playhouse instead. Still the thing twitched. Changing tack, the mutant triplet pounded the terrorgeist repeatedly into the flagstones.

Ghurk rumbled happily, the thunderheads above him sharing his mirth. Burning with the thrill of the fight, the Glottkin marched on towards the Imperial Palace and their destiny. Little did they realise that the Empire's most powerful Elector Count – Vlad himself – lay in wait...

ALTDORF'S LAST HOPE

Karl Franz, returning upon Deathclaw to find his realm on the brink of catastrophe, dived through the storm only to be confronted by a shocking sight. The vampire Count Vlad von Carstein was the only thing standing between the Empire and utter ruination.

THE EMPEROR KARL FRANZ

Over the long months since his fall at Heffengen Karl Franz had walked the length of his realm. He had eventually been located by Gregor Martak, who told him of the wider dangers afflicting his realm. Karl Franz's slow anger flared to a burning flame when he saw what had become of Altdorf, and he resolved to slay the architects of this misrule whatever the cost.



SUPREME PATRIARCH GREGOR MARTAK

After witnessing Kurt Helborg's harsh rule in Karl Franz's name, the Supreme Patriarch set out to find the one man who could bind the Empire back together. After communing with the birds and the beasts of the Drakwald, he set out to find the Emperor with the help of an old ally – the two-headed elder griffon known to him as Twinshriek.



ELECTOR COUNT VLAD VON CARSTEIN

The vampire Vlad von Carstein had long sought to bring down the realm of the Griffon Emperors and replace it with his own empire of undeath. Like many vampires, he saw the teeming masses of humanity as little more than livestock – cattle to be bled as and when their superiors needed sustenance. As with all good farmers, Vlad cared more than he liked to admit for the wellbeing of his herds, and would not stand idly by whilst the forces of disorder sought to redefine the realm he had craved for so long. Turning his form to a cloud of bats, he made haste to bar the Glottkin's path to the Imperial Palace. So it was that Altdorf's deliverance fell not to the living Electors, but to the dead.



THE PALACE DEAD

Strengthened by the energies aswirl on Geheimnisnacht, Vlad was able to overcome even the death god's dark grip and raise undead nobles from the violated Gardens of Morr that ringed the Imperial Palace. These unliving soldiers that Vlad thrust into the path of the Glottkin were many centuries old. Yet though their mortal incarnations were of splintered bone and rotting metal, the spirits that inhabited them were vibrant and strong, once-mighty dukes and barons animated by the howling tides of dark magic that raged around their new master.

THE KILLERS AT THE GATE

With the fate of the Empire hanging by a thread, the Glottkin made haste to finish the work their allies had started. When their army of the faithful was intercepted, the favoured sons of Nurgle hefted their blades and prepared to butcher their way to ultimate victory.



THE GLOTTKIN EMPOWERED

With the energies of Nurgle blooming across the city, the Glottkin, already having won great favour in the eyes of their foetid master, practically shone with raw daemonic power. Together there was nothing they could not achieve – even the act of forcing the Gate Between Worlds open for the rest of time...



THE CHOSEN FEW

Though fewer than three dozen warriors from the original muster at Fjordlingtribe still fought at the side of their leaders, those that remained were the toughest and most devout. Individually each of these diseased champions was powerful enough to lead a whole tribe to victory; united, they were worthy of the attention of the gods themselves.

THE CLOTTED

The ragged remnants of the Red Reavers had found their allegiance shifting over the course of the Glottkin's invasion. Though they had reaped skulls in great measure, the slow onset of infection and the runaway energies of decay had turned them to the worship of Nurgle instead of Khorne. The spilt blood of these once-savage warriors had clotted and hardened into infected scabs, giving them a strange resilience to further bolster their zealous rages. Truly blessed is the man who was once lost, but has now seen the light.



THE KNIGHTS ENTROPIC

Through ardent service in the name of the Lord of Decay, those who had begun their voyage through the Empire as drooling half-spawn were now blessed with the minds to truly appreciate the fruits of their violent labours. Calling themselves the Knights Entropic, those who were once forsaken were now ready to enter into the good graces of Nurgle – though their beneficent patron was generous enough to let them keep every last mutation and disfigurement from their former incarnation.

The Imperial Palace was all but covered in daemon vegetation. Fat, white-haired lianas pulsed across ornamental gardens that glistened the pinkish grey of an opened brain. Barely a square metre of the palace's stonework remained untouched by algae or mould. All in all, it was very much to the Glotts' liking.

'If nothing else,' the warlord called over to his brother Ethrac, 'this place will make a very handsome outhouse.'

Ethrac laughed, and for once, no trace of sarcasm or bitterness polluted the sound. Ghurk gurgled happily nearby, swatting absently at a giant flytrap that had wound itself around a statue of Sigmar. In the streets beyond, a wizened bray-shaman led a bleating warband of beastmen towards the palace.

Suddenly there was a pounding of displaced air from above, and the sound of a voice so clarion clear it could only have come from a king amongst men.

'Enough,' said Emperor Karl Franz, his majestic griffon settling down to perch on the dome of the ornamental garden's overgrown folly. 'That's far enough.'

Another griffon cried out as it hovered like a hawk overhead. Otto craned his neck to see the hybrid thing circling above had two heads. A bearded shaman stared down at them over its haunches. Below him, armoured undead massed in the streets, an elder vampire standing with its arms crossed in the front ranks.

'This is our domain, not yours,' continued Karl Franz. 'Return to the north, undo the foul magic you have wrought, and we will let you live.'

'The place is looking a bit untidy, isn't it?' shouted Otto, gesturing his warriors forward. 'You sure you and your hairy lover up there still want it?'

'Leave, or I'll kill you all,' said Karl Franz, coldly.

'You're welcome to try, little prince,' chuckled Otto, raising his scythe and spitting on its blade.

'So be it,' said Karl Franz. The runesword in his grip glowed, a halo of golden light flickering around its tip. In the skies above, the twin-tailed comet was a blazing second sun that threatened to burn the world. Otto felt sure the gaze of the gods was upon him.

'Get fighting, then!' shouted Otto, waving his vanguard of armoured killers forward. The invaders pounded towards Karl Franz and his wizard companion. The first few died to the talons of the griffons before battle was joined in earnest.

The triplets were making their way towards the fight when Otto took a punch to the face that struck him so hard his helmet split open and fell to the streets below. Bats flocked around the vampire he had seen in the streets, now only a few feet away on the sloping roof of the palace's armoury. Ghurk rumbled, keen to get to grips with the Emperor and his winged steed, but Otto bade his brothers wait with a steadying hand. This was his challenge to fight.

'You'll pay for that trick with the scythe, you fat freak,' said Vlad, his noble features twisted. 'The

Lahmian was no Isabella, true. But useful enough.'

'But she was dead!' protested Otto, his surprise and disgust mingling in equal measure as he stepped onto the armoury roof. 'Cold as the grave, and not a maggot to show for it.'

'So am I, many times over,' said the von Carstein, drawing a blade of glinting steel from its jewel-inlaid scabbard. 'Come to that, so are you, whoever-you-are.'

The vampire came in low, lunging like a snake. Otto pulled back just in time to stop the blade taking his hand off at the wrist. He ripped his scythe round, but the vampire swayed laughing out of its reach.

'Ha! You're fighting a duel with a scythe? Really?'

'Really,' said Otto, jabbing forward with the blunt tip of his weapon in the hope of catching Vlad off-balance. It didn't work. The vampire leapt straight upwards, put an armoured boot on the flat of the scythe and came down hard, snapping the blade tip and trapping its curve against the ground. Otto levelled a brawler's punch at the vampire's face. The von Carstein caught the warlord's fist in his palm and twisted, ducking around so that Otto's arm was forced up behind his back.

There was a dull crack, and two feet of ruddy steel burst out from Otto's chest.

'That was... quite good,' Otto gurgled, blood spilling from his lips. It felt like something was pulling at Otto's heart, absorbing him. Drinking him, even.

'No... no fangs, eh?' burred Otto, smiling redly. 'Very... civilised...'

'Thank you, my fat friend,' said Vlad, yet under his studied nonchalance was a strange note of strain.

Otto felt the vampire's sword shake, then convulse. The red blade slid out of Otto's chest, and he turned to see Vlad's hands flying to his throat. Eyes bulging, the vampire gagged, retched, and then vomited a great fountain of stinking, clotted gore onto the armoury roof.

'You broke my scythe, corpse-fondler,' said Otto ruefully. 'She was no fancy drinking-sword, true. But very useful, and easy on the eye. We Norscans like a few curves.'

The warlord brought the broken-tipped weapon up high and slashed its blade down hard towards the retching vampire's neck. A split second before impact, the ruby ring on the vampire's sword-hand flashed white, and Otto's scythe cut through nothing more than a cloud of bats that flitted eastward into the night.

'Name's Otto Glott, by the way!' shouted the warlord, waving cheerily at the retreating swarm. He shouldered his scythe, looking down into the streets with a reproachful tut. The walking cadavers that infested the street, shorn of a guiding will, had stumbled to a halt. 'No staying power, the dead,' Otto muttered to himself.

Whistling a harvest tune, the warlord stuffed a dirty rag into his chest wound and hopped back onto Ghurk's shoulders, kicking him towards the gates of the Imperial palace and the Emperor he was born to kill.

GODS AND MONSTERS

Though the von Carstein's attack from the rooftops had bought his allies time, the Glottkin were ascendant, and their acolytes cheered in their wake. As they neared the Imperial Palace's forecourt, Karl Franz's griffon sprang forward, pouncing like some titanic lion. The beast gouged into the battle line of Norscans, but Ghurk's unfurling tentacle lashed through the air, smacking the griffon backwards in an explosion of feathers. The beast clawed the air, shrieking in rage and pain as its wings snapped out wide.

Martak's two-headed griffon leapt up from the pile of corpses in front of it and dived in low, its talons raking Ghurk's eyes from its socket. The mutant reeled back, flailing blindly for his persecutor, but the beast had swooped on. In the streets below, undead Altdorfers hacked at Ghurk's blubbery mass with long, glowing blades, wounding him further.

Ethrac spat a curse after the two-headed beast that had taken Ghurk's eye, and fur and feathers fell away as the griffon banked around for another pass. Abandoning its attack, the beast flapped unsteadily to a halt atop the Reikstemple's domed roof, where it coughed red drool as it sank in on itself. The wizard Martak hurriedly intoned a chant of nullification, and with a shiver his steed shook off the crippling ague. The Supreme Patriarch then hurled a bolt of blinding amber light at the Glottkin like a javelin, but Otto simply stepped into its path, the light-spear crackling into his gut with a hiss. The warlord shrugged, picking a piece of burnt flesh from his belly and popping it into his mouth.

In response, Ethrac curled his fingers and gibbered a phrase in the dark tongue. The monstrous tendril-creepers around the Reikstemple shook with sudden energy, lashing around the two-headed griffon's legs, wings, and twin feathered necks.

Patriarch Martak shouted a stone-phrase to dissipate Ethrac's baleful magic. It did little more than discolour the air for a second, for he was not just matching his power against Ethrac's, but against the boundless, timeless power of Nurgle's garden itself. Martak's flesh opened in a dozen places as magical stresses wrenched at him before he realised his struggle was futile. He might as well have tried to swallow the world.

The griffon's limbs were stretched, pulled outwards, and dislocated with a series of sickening pops. Twinshriek cawed in animal pain, eyes rolling as Martak jumped clear. Ethrac grinned horribly as the beast was pulled apart in a shower of trailing organs. The tendrils of the daemon plant waved in celebration as the Amber wizard scrambled into the palace interior.

Behind Ethrac, Ghurk was locked in a lethal embrace with Deathclaw. The griffon ripped and gouged, Karl Franz leaning forward in his saddle with his runefang raised. Otto cried out as the dwarf-forged blade swept down to sink deep into Ghurk's flabby breast.

Otto's shout of denial turned into a cry of triumph as the Emperor's killing lunge did little more than enrage Ghurk further. Bellowing, the mutant giant wrestled Deathclaw over and round, slamming it into the pus-choked fountain at the heart of the palace gardens with a mighty crash.

The Emperor, disentangling himself from his ruined saddle, leapt upwards to stand atop the ruined centrepiece with his sword raised. Ghurk barged through a double rank of undead to charge right at Karl Franz, and Otto swung his broken-tipped scythe up and around in a vertical arc.

The Emperor's arm, pulsing blood and still clutching the hilt of his runefang, tumbled to the gravel.







Inside the Imperial Palace, Gregor Martak stumbled through the vine-choked naves that led further into its depths. A trail of bloody footprints stretched back from his position to the battle at the palace gates. The magical duel had cost him dearly.

Bleats and strangely human calls echoed through the pillar-lined corridors, for the Harbinger and his bestial pack had spotted Martak's flight and ran after him in close pursuit, thinking the wounded wizard would make for easy prey. Martak coughed blood into his hand, a terrible exhaustion filling his body as he realised he had not the strength to channel the Winds of Magic.



The patriarch's every muscle burned as he stumbled down the corridors of the palace. The memory of dragonform rippled through him as he tried to change shape, but the frisson of power failed to ignite. Such a feat of magic was beyond him now. Conjuring the amber spear amidst the unnatural storm had taken a severe toll, and now even a cantrip was asking for trouble. Martak knew that a juicy red steak and a safe night's sleep would restore him, but if he tarried too long, it would be his flesh on the menu.

The Supreme Patriarch staggered down the long corridor that led to the zookeeper's den. The entire place had awoken at his intrusion, sensing something was wrong. Arabyc zedonks brayed, Lustrian tiganas hissed, Bretonnian pegasi whinnied and beat their wings.

The Supreme Patriarch risked a look back and saw horned figures pushing their way into the giant arched building. Cloven feet clattered on stone as the Harbinger goaded his towering escort forward, each bestial warrior holding an axe large enough to behead a griffon. They pounded towards Martak, and he redoubled his efforts, limping as fast as he could to the far end.

Behind him, the Harbinger laughed evilly as he realised the menagerie's corridor was a dead end. Martak stumbled against the far wall, bent double and wheezing blood.

The bray-shaman reached into his robes to pull out a small vial, unstopped it, and dispensed a drop of some foul-smelling fluid onto his tongue.

On went the Supreme Patriarch, left; right; left again, hoping to evade pursuit. Yet the beastmen were creatures that sniffed out blood trails every day. There was no way Martak could shake their pursuit.

Suddenly a flock of shadow-crows burst around the wizard, pecking and scrabbling at his face. He covered his eyes with one arm and waved the other to shoo them off, careening down a wide set of stairs into the quadrangle of a gloomy sub-level. As he went, Martak staggered panting past a chiselled ivory sign, his bloody footprints more distinct than ever.

The sign read:
'IMPERIAL MENAGERIE.'

Meanwhile, outside the palace gates, Ghurk locked his tentacle around Deathclaw's neck as Otto Glott leapt down the Emperor. Karl Franz was making his stand, somehow standing bolt upright with an expression of grim determination on his features. The Emperor of the South, holding a runesword in his off-hand as his severed right arm squirted blood onto the gravel. He was pale, but determined to die with dignity.

Otto was about to give his foe a good dousing of bile when a crescendo of galloping hooves gave him pause. He darted to his right, and narrowly avoided having his head bisected as a white-haired warrior with elaborate plate armour hammered past with blade outstretched. The rider rode right the way around the fountain in a spray of gravel, coming up behind his master with a sword almost identical to that wielded by Karl Franz himself.

'No magic now?' the bray-shaman taunted, chewing the words out.

'Please... no...' Martak mumbled.

The Harbinger held up a hand and his axe-wielding tribemates pulled up, glowering down at their meagre prey. The bray-shaman stood up to his full height, knotted horns haloed with power as he drank in the bestial energies raging around him.

'Ah, the man-thing. So close to true beast,' he growled, face twisting into a snarl. 'But what good is beast if beast is caged?'

In response, the bleeding beggar that had once been the Supreme Patriarch just looked over to the shadowed cave to his right and gave a low, looping whistle.

A blast of white-hot fire roared out as the Imperial dragon loomed out of the gloom, incinerating the bray-shaman and every beastman in the corridor with one long breath.

'Good shot, you scaly old sod,' slurred Martak before the darkness claimed him.

The Emperor did not take his eyes from Otto's, even as the warlord's giant brother fought to suppress the manic struggles of Deathclaw. Karl Franz's voice was steely under the pain as he greeted the Reiksmarshal who had galloped to his side, the moustachioed officer also eyeing Otto with wary contempt.

There was a crack of stone as Ghurk smashed Deathclaw into the side of the fountain. The tension snapped, and all three warriors lunged at once.



Otto Glott's scythe arced down towards Karl Franz's chest, all the force he could muster behind it. The Emperor's runic blade came up awkwardly, but he was too slow. It was his bodyguard Helborg that blocked the blow, his runefang hooking around the scythe's wooden neck and wrenching it from Otto's grip to send it spinning across the courtyard. Growling, Otto whipped out the rusted sword at his waist before backhanding Helborg with such force the Reiksmarshal stumbled to the ground.

Bought a precious second, the Emperor plunged his runefang hissing into Otto's chest, but his lunge missed the warlord's heart by a finger's breadth. Otto twisted and kicked, yanking the runesword from his foe's grip and punching his own blade at Karl Franz's throat. The blow never landed. Helborg's hand grabbed the blade tight, blood seeping from his grip as the Emperor staggered back. Otto simply ripped the rusted blade free, severing three of the Reiksmarshal's fingers before lunging

forward. The tip of the filthy sword punched into Helborg's eye socket with such force that it smashed out the back of his skull.

Helborg stuttered out a plea for forgiveness in the name of Sigmar, before his corpse slid from the rusted blade onto the floor.

Laughing, Otto rounded on the one-armed, swordless Emperor, spinning the stolen runefang up in the air and catching it again in a showy display of swordmanship. With the griffon Deathclaw pinned in the fountain by his immense bulk, Ghurk also turned to loom over the southern lord, his eyeless socket dripping blood. Ethrac stood near, chuckling in glee.

Lightning flashed overhead as Otto raised his stolen runefang and swung it down with a roar of triumph. A thunderclap boomed high above as Karl Franz raised his good arm to deflect the blow. The blade severed it without slowing and plunged deep into the Emperor's heart. The world seemed to freeze in fear for a brief second, the tableau outside the palace strobing white in the light of the celestial storm above. Karl Franz sank to the flagstones with the Glottkin triumphant above him.

With his last breath the Emperor called out the name of his warrior god.

And the world was changed forever.

Above the Glottkin, the skies ripped open to reveal a celestial otherworld. A twin-tailed sphere of pure force slammed out from the hole in the sky. It blasted into Karl Franz's corpse, hurling the nearby Glotts through the air with the power of its collision. Tails of blinding lightning curled up into the skies, an incandescent helix that burned away every trace of Nurgle's tainted garden and scattered the white tornado at the city's heart to nothingness. Something coalesced at the heart of the grounded comet – a figure, golden and tall.

Emperor Karl Franz burst unharmed from the fires, a hammer made of pure golden light blazing in his hands. Luminous and terrible, the warrior crackled with raw etheric power as he charged straight at the triplets.

Ghurk growled and lunged out with his tentacle, but the shining apparition was faster than the eye could follow. Karl Franz grabbed Ghurk's pseudopod and yanked hard, pulling the giant in close. The Emperor's hammer of light swung upward in a great uppercut, thudding into Ghurk's gut and bursting it apart to splash unclean fluids across the courtyard. The brute fell, his giant frame opened to the air.

Otto roared and leapt from his brother's shoulders, sword raised. Karl Franz turned, his hand outstretched, and blasted the warlord with a column of lightning. The blazing energy sent Otto flying across the Grand Boulevard to slam into the Reikstemple's walls, his limbs limp. Gravel steaming beneath his feet, the godly warrior strode over to Ethrac as the sorcerer gabbled in panic. The Emperor's golden hammer rose high. Ethrac's spell finished with a shout, and all three of the triplets turned into swarms of fat flies. The hammer fell, and the swarms spiralled into the aether, a foul smell left in their wake.

High above, the clouds parted to reveal a cold but pure winter dawn.





In the realm of dreams, tears streaked Shallya's face as she laid her delicate hands on the shivering, corrupted mess that had once been her proud Lord of Nature. Healing energies flowed out, and for a moment the plagues crippling the fallen god shimmered and faded. Yet Nurgle's power was too strong, and the grotesque marks left by the diseases came back again. Liver spots discoloured the goddess' arms, and pimples rose on her unblemished flesh. She tossed her beautiful mane of hair in anguish, the end of each golden strand turning white and breaking away in a halo of mist.

Behind her, the shining figure of the Lady leant in, her lips pursed in thought. She looked to the shining golden paladin by her side for a moment. Inspired by her faithful warrior's sacrifice, she too knelt down next to the stricken god and placed her hands on Taal's chest. Gradually the spots on Shallya's arms faded, and her flaxen hair returned to its former lustre. Under her hands a lambent white light flowed out, mingling with the emerald energies channelled by the Lady at her side. Taal's mighty chest heaved, his eyes opening wide. Another glowing figure stepped in, a giant of a man with a wolfskin helm and a long white beard. Looking at the stars above for a long moment, the weatherbeaten giant placed his gnarled hands on his fallen friend's chest. Winter had finally come, and with it, a chance for rebirth.

The geomantic power of the three gods mingled, driving the corruption from the nature god's body. A layer of frost crackled across Taal's body, thickening until he was encased from head to foot. Ulric raised his fist and brought it down hard, shattering the icy cocoon into a thousand fragments. Great Taal slowly got to his feet, whole, unblemished, and as majestic as the winter sun.

In the realm of mortals, a great change was taking place. As the sun

of a new dawn crested the horizon, the unnatural storm above Altdorf dwindled away and dissipated, the daemon hosts fading away with it as they were robbed of their etheric powers. The last of Geheimnisnacht's thunder was more a curmudgeonly grumble than a boom of laughter.

Gutrot Spume was the first to realise the moment of conquest had passed, ordering his forces to withdraw into the forest. Orghotts Daemonspew and his maggoth riders were not far behind. With their leaders withdrawing and the daemons of their patron disappearing with the storm, the Norscan armies that surrounded Altdorf were gradually broken and driven off by the disciplined defence mounted by the Old World's menfolk. By noon of the next day, the armies led by Gutrot Spume, Orghotts Daemonspew and the Glottkin had been scattered, and the city had been retaken by its people – hesitantly at first, but then with pitiless vigour.

Across the length and breadth of the Empire, a white fire blazed along each river, stream and tributary. The rippling wave of magic scoured away Nurgle's choking taint as it went, leaving crystal clear water in its wake.

The people of the provinces slowly caught on to the miracle happening in their midst as all the diseases and fevers that had plagued them simply disappeared, farm by farm and hamlet by hamlet. Though much of the Empire had been left in ruin, it was soon washed clean by the first cleansing rains of winter. Before the month was out children frolicked and played in the shallows of the great rivers, their parents looking nervously from the banks before throwing caution to the wind and jumping in after them to splash and dive and drink of the beautiful, ice-cold water.

Deep in the Garden of Nurgle, the rotten, insect-gnawed timbers of the Urfather's manse moaned and creaked as the hurricane of its

master's wrath raged outside. Not even the tiniest beast would roam abroad in the garden today. The Lord of Decay had been denied his prize.

In the shadowed pyramids of the manse's great attic, three newly shaped ceramic jars rattled and clinked amongst the dust, a faint buzzing sussurus coming from within. Two were more or less man-sized, but the third was a massive round urn that could have held a boulder the size of a house.

In the throne room of Altdorf's palace Emperor Karl Franz sat in his rightful place once more. His body had been made whole once more by the raw magical energies that burned inside him, and his soul was a hundred times more powerful than ever before. His throne room was thrown into flickering monochrome by the titanic helix of raw power that curled up from the comet's impact point into the night sky outside. Altdorf had been burned clean of the curses afflicting it by the energies of the twin-tailed comet, yet those same forces raged still, bleeding the power of the stars into the mortal realm.

Despite his narrow victory over the forces of Chaos, the Emperor smiled not at all, and the courtiers and Electors dotting his throne room were as silent as the grave. This was no time for jollity, nor celebration. Roughly half the population of the Empire had died in the last few months, and Bretonnia had expended much of its strength in their defence.

Worse still was the news that the Emperor's Nordlander scrollbearers had delivered to him earlier that day. An armada of wolf ships had been sighted in the Sea of Claws, more numerous than any that had been seen before. Every one of them bore the symbol of the Three-Eyed King upon its sails. Karl Franz crunched the parchment scroll in his fist.

Archaon was coming.

The skies of the arctic north swirled and swam, looking to those beneath like a painter's oils tipped into a whirlpool. To the teeming armies gazing up at the kaleidoscopic whorls, the colour-gheists signalled only change.

To the Everchosen, however, they spoke directly; a pair of avian heads that leered from high above.

'And lo,' sneered one of the two beaked visages. The mirage's voice was the crackle of guttering flame. 'The fecund power of Nurgle did exhaust itself, just as we foretold it would, beaten at the last by the acts of mortal men.'

'The triplets achieved everything I commanded of them, and more,' Archaon called up to the daemons in the skies. 'The Empire of Liars is weakened to the point of collapse. That the Glottkin were banished by the hand of the southern Emperor matters little. It is mine, and mine alone, to land the final blow.'

'Is that so, little puppeteer?' cackled the daemon's second head, the echoing laughter the threat of firestorms yet to come. 'Yet the path ahead shall still be... fraught.'

'The way is prepared, Fateweaver. My sworn legions depart in numbers even you would struggle to count.'

The skies swirled, and the twin heads regarded each other for a moment in silent communion. If their beaks could be said to smile, smile they did.

'The realms of elf, dwarf and man look to their own defence,' continued Archaon, his tone defiant. 'United, they had a chance. But they stand divided. They shall fall.'

'The elder races have been far from idle,' snapped the first head. 'They have harnessed the Great Aethers once more. They have stolen from Great Tzeentch himself.'

'Desperation,' said Archaon. 'They have played their hand, and been found wanting. The Empire will fall, and the rest of the world will follow it. There can be no deflecting the doom at hand. Not this time.'

'Lands shall burn,' agreed the second head, nodding sagely. 'Gods shall die. This much we have seen, Everchosen.'

'It will take more than the princeling of the south to keep me from my destiny,' growled Archaon, his eyes narrowing.

The prophet in the sky shimmered, spiralled, and faded, its parting words fizzing to nothingness on the arctic winds.

'It is no mortal man that you should fear...'



