

— TIME OF LEGENDS —



NAGASH IMMORTAL

The undead will rise...

MIKE LEE

A WARHAMMER “TIME OF LEGENDS” NOVEL

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Nagash - 03

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(An Undead Scan v1.0)

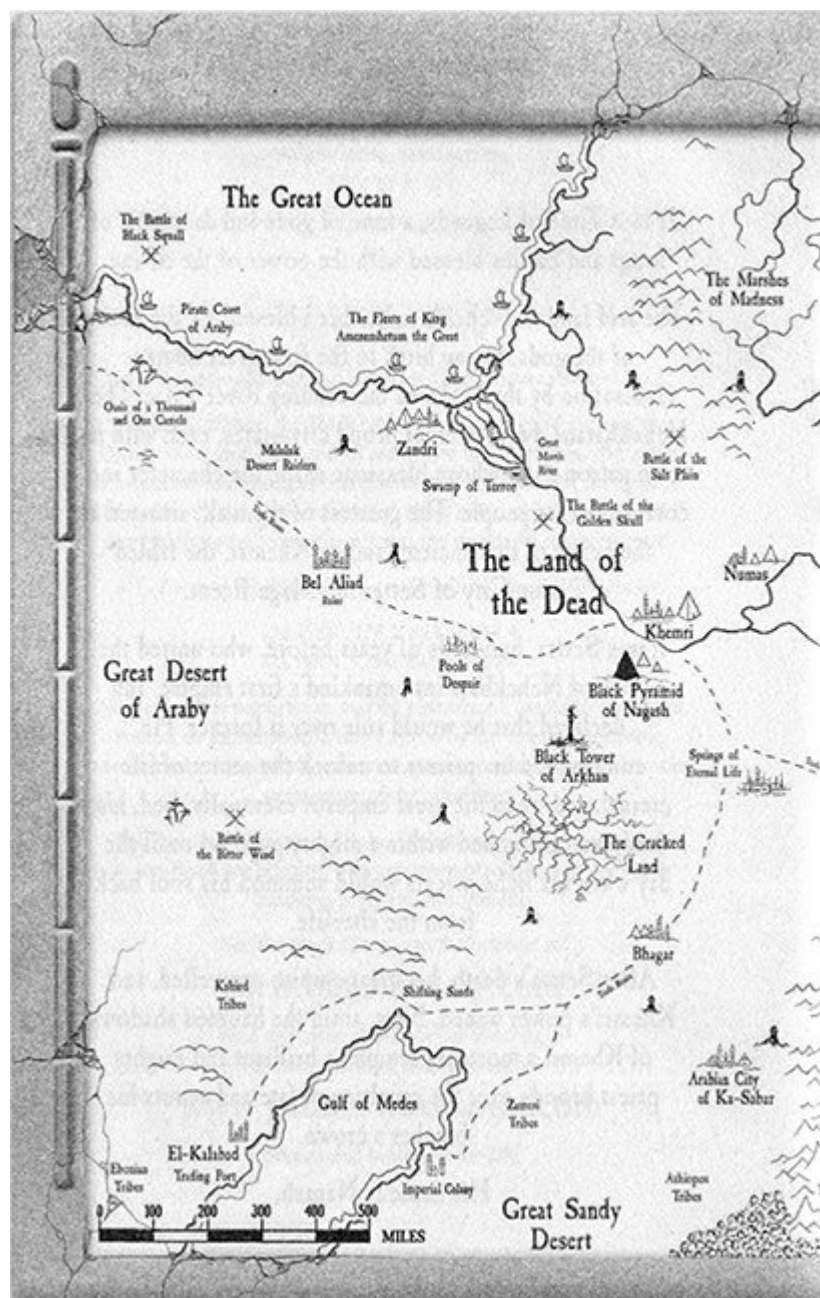


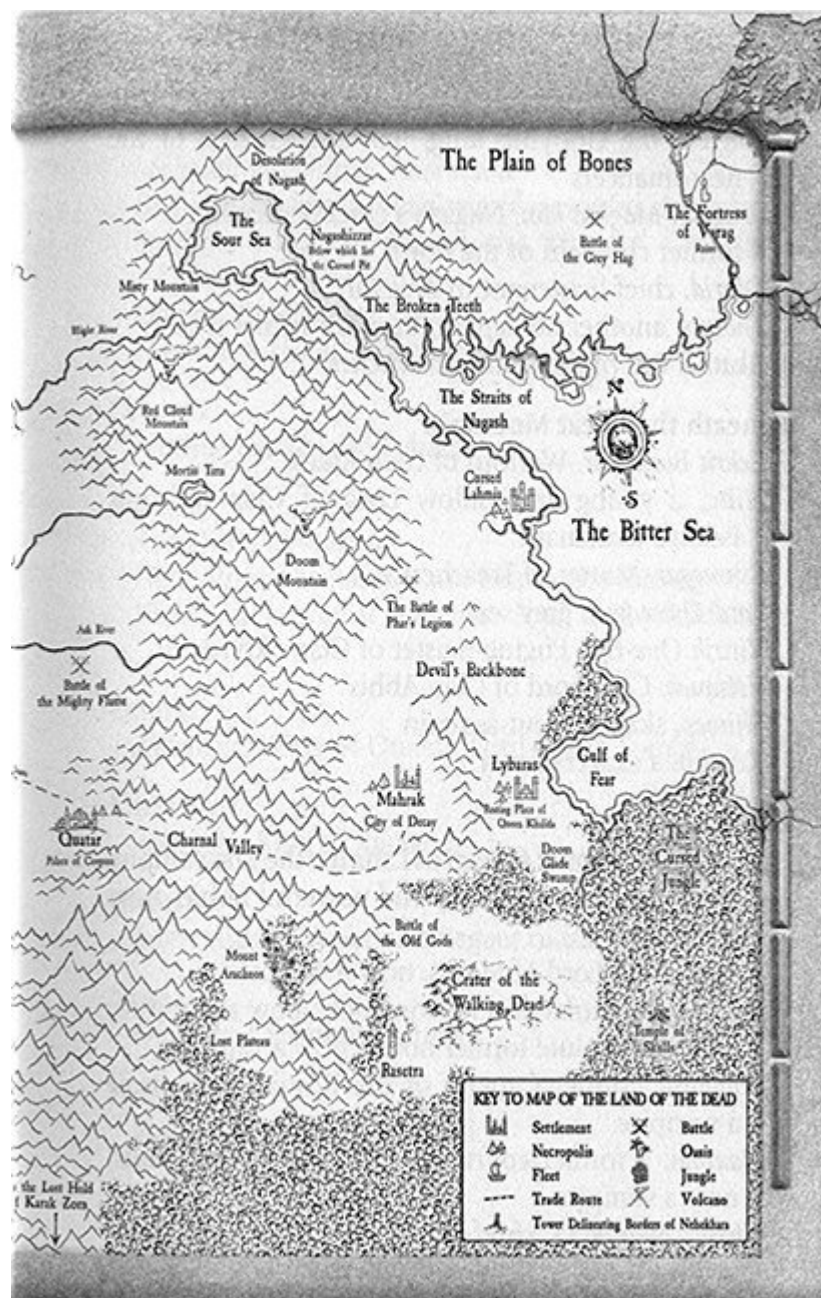
It is a Time of Legends, a time of gods and daemons, of kings and heroes blessed with the power of the divine.

The arid land of Nehekara has been blessed by the hands of the gods, giving birth to the first great human civilisation by the banks of the winding River Vitae. The Nehekharans dwell in eight proud city-states, each with its own patron deity whose blessings shape the character and fortunes of its people. The greatest of them all, situated at the nexus of this ancient land, is Khemri, the fabled Living City of Settra the Magnificent.

It was Settra, hundreds of years before, who united the cities of Nehekara into mankind's first empire, and declared that he would rule over it forever. He commanded his priests to unlock the secret of life eternal, and when the great emperor eventually died, his body was entombed within a mighty pyramid until the day when his lich priests would summon his soul back from the afterlife.

After Settra's death, his great empire unravelled, and Khemri's power waned. Now, amid the haunted shadows of Khemri's mortuary temple, a brilliant and mighty priest broods over the cruelties of fate and covets his brother's crown. His name is Nagash.





DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nagashizzar

Nagash, the Undying King, first and greatest of the necromancers

Bragadh Maghur'kan, Nagash's chief lieutenant, former chieftain of the north

Diarid, chief lieutenant to Bragadh

Thestus, another lieutenant, Bragadh's chief rival

Akatha, last of the northern witches

Beneath the Great Mountain

Eekrit Backbiter, Warlord of Clan Rikek

Hiirc, a young and callow Lord of Clan Morbus, Eekrit's lieutenant

Eshreegar, Master of Treacheries

Lord Qweeqwol, grey seer

Vittrik One-Eye, Engine-master of Clan Skryre

Velsquee, Grey Lord of Clan Abbis

Shireep, skaven scout-assassin

Kritchit, a skaven slaver

Lahmia

Neferata, immortal Queen of Lahmia, the first vampire

Ankhat, formerly a wealthy and powerful noble, now a vampire

Ushoran, the Lord of Masks, now a vampire

W'soran, a scholar and necromancer, now a vampire

Zurhas, a dissolute former noble, now a vampire

Abhorash, former Captain of the Royal Guard, now a vampire

Naaima, a former courtesan from the Silken Lands, now a vampire

Ubaid, Neferata's chief thrall, Alcadizzar's personal servant

Alcadizzar, Prince of Rasetra, hostage to the Lahmian court

Upon the Golden Plain

Faisr al-Hashim, Chieftain of the *bani-al-Hashim*

Muktadir al-Hashim, Faisr's son

Bashir al-Rukhba, a wealthy and powerful chieftain

Suleima, bride of Khsar, the Hungry God, and Daughter of the Sands

Ophiria, Suleima's successor

Nawat ben Hazar, bandit leader

Lybaras

Ahmenefret, King of Lybaras

Rasetra

Asar, King of Rasetra

Heru, Prince of Rasetra and heir to the throne

Khenti, a powerful Rasetran lord and Alcadizzar's uncle

Quatar

Nebunefre, King of Quatar, Lord of the Tombs

Ka-Sabar

Aten-sefu, King of Ka-Sabar

Khemri

Inofre, Grand Vizier and Regent of the city

Numas

Omorose, Queen of Numas

Zandri

Rakh-an-atum, King of Zandri



PROLOGUE

Mountain of Sorrows

*Nagashizzar, in the 96th year of Geheb the Mighty
(-1325 Imperial Reckoning)*

The mountain had many names, stretching back to the dawn of mankind.

The nomadic herders of the far northern steppes knew it as *Ur-Haamash*, the Hearth-stone; in the autumn they would drive their herds south and spend the winter sheltered at the foot of its broad, eastern slope. As the centuries passed and the tribes prospered, their relationship to the mountain changed; it became *Agha-Dhakum*, the Place of Justice, where grievances were settled in trials of blood. Nearly a thousand years later, after a long summer of murder, raids and betrayals, the first high chieftain was proclaimed from the mountain slope, and ever after the tribes knew it as *Agha-Rhul*, the Place of Oaths.

In time, the tribes grew tired of the constant cycle of migration from the northern steppes to the foot of the mountain and the shores of the Crystal Sea. One winter they built their camps just south-west of the *Agha-Rhul* and decided to stay. The camp grew, transforming over generations from a crude settlement into a sprawling, foetid, noisy city. The high chieftain's territory grew to encompass the entire coast of the inland sea and even reached north onto the great plateau, within sight of the bleak steppes from whence the tribes had come.

And then came the terrible night that the sky-stone fell from the heavens, and the mountain's name changed once more.

It came on a night when the awful bale-moon hung low and full in the sky; it arced earthwards on a hissing spear of greenish flame. When it struck the mountain the blow could be heard for miles; the force of the impact reverberated from its slopes and flattened villages on the far side of the Crystal Sea. The great city of the tribes was devastated. Buildings were shattered or consumed in eerie, green flames. Hundreds died, hundreds more suffered hideous diseases and malformations in the months that followed. The survivors looked northwards in terrified wonder at the glowing pillar of dust and ash that rose from the great wound carved in the mountainside.

The destruction was so sudden, so terrible, it could only be the work of a wrathful god. The following day the high chieftain and his family climbed the slope and bowed before the crater, offering up sacrifices to the sky-stone so that their people might survive. *Agha-Rhul* became *Khad-tur-Maghran*: the Throne of the Heavens.

The high chieftain and his people worshipped the sky-stone. They called themselves *Yaghur*—the Faithful—and over time their priests learned how to call upon the power of the sky-stone to perform terrible works of sorcery. The *Yaghur* became great once more and the high chieftain began to refer to himself as the chosen of the sky-god. His priests anointed him as a king and told the people that he spoke with the voice of the god itself. The priesthood of the sky-stone knew that, as the *Yaghur* kings prospered, their wealth and power would grow as well.

And so it went, for many generations, until the *Yaghur* kings grew decadent and mad, and the people suffered daily under their rule. Finally, they could take no more; they forswore their oaths in favour of a new god and cast down the king and his corrupt priesthood. The temple on the mountain was sealed up and the *Yaghur* went north once more, following the ancient pathways their ancestors had trod thousands of years before in search of a better life. When they spoke of the mountain at all in the years that followed, they called it *Agha-Nahmad*: the Place of Sorrows.

So it remained for centuries. The mountain became a desolate, haunted place, wreathed in poisonous vapours from the immense sky-stone buried within its heart. The *Yaghur* settled on a great plateau north of the mountain, devolving into a collection of tribes once more. For a time they prospered, but their new god proved to be just as hungry and cruel as the one they had left behind. The *Yaghur* were wracked by schism and civil war. In the end, those who sought to return to the old ways and worship the god of the mountain were cast out. They found their way back to the shores of the Crystal Sea and tried to eke out a living in the bleak wetlands, offering sacrifices to the mountain and burying their dead at its feet in hopes of winning back the sky-god's favour.

Their deliverance came, not from the great mountain, but out of the desolate lands to the west: a wretched, shambling corpse of a man, clad in dusty rags that had once been the raiment of a king. Feverish, tormented, he was drawn to the power of the sky-stone like a moth to the flame.

He was Nagash the Usurper, lord of the living dead. When the energies of the sky-stone were bent to his will he raised a legion of corpses from the *Yaghur* burial grounds and slew their priests in a single night of slaughter. He demanded the fealty of the coastal tribes and they bowed before him, worshipping him as the god of the mountain made flesh.

But Nagash was no god. He was something altogether more terrible.

More than two hundred years after the coming of Nagash, the great mountain had been transformed. Night and day the necromancer's minions had carved a vast network of chambers and passageways deep into the living rock, and mine shafts were sunk deeper still in search of deposits of glowing sky-stone. Seven high walls and hundreds of fearsome towers rose from the mountain slopes, enclosing foundries, storehouses, barracks and marshalling yards. Black chimneys belched columns of smoke and ash into the sky, mixing with the mountain's own vapours to spread a pall

of perpetual shadow over the mountain and the sullen waters of the Crystal Sea. Polluted run-off from the mine works and the fortress construction spread across the empty burial fields at the base of the mountain and spilled into the waters of the sea, contaminating everything it touched.

This was *Nagashizzar*. In the tongue of the great cities of distant Nehekhar, it meant “the glory of Nagash”.

The great hall of the Usurper lay deep within the fortress mountain, carved by skeletal hands from a natural cavern that had never known the light of the accursed sun. They had laboured under the mental guidance of their master, smoothing the walls, laying flagstones of black marble and carving tall, elaborate columns to support the hall’s arched ceiling. And yet, for all its artistry, the great, echoing chamber was cold and austere, devoid of statuary or braziers of fragrant incense.

Thin veins of sky-stone glowed from the chamber walls, limning the towering columns and deepening the shadows in between. The only other light came from the far end of the hall, where a rough sphere of sky-stone the size of a melon sat upon a crude bronze tripod at the foot of a shallow dais. A sickly, green glow pulsed from the stone in slow waves, bathing Nagash’s throne in shifting tides of light and shadow.

In the tenuous light the necromancer’s robed form seemed to be carved from the same dark, unyielding wood as the chair itself. He sat as still as death, his cowed head turned towards the pulsing stone as though meditating upon its glowing depths. The hem of the cowl was stitched with complex chains of arcane symbols and the thick layers of his outer robe were faced with bronze medallions that had been enchanted with potent sigils of protection. The skin of his bare hands was dark and leathery, like that of a long-buried corpse, and the flesh beneath the robes was twisted and misshapen. In place of living eyes, twin green fires flickered coldly from the depths of his cowl, hinting at the cruel, unyielding will that animated the necromancer’s grotesque frame.

Once, Nagash had been a mighty prince, scion of a great dynasty in a rich and civilised land. By tradition he had been forced to become a priest, where otherwise he might have risen to become king, and that he could not tolerate. He scorned the gods of his people, calling them parasites and worse, and sought a new path to power. And so he learned the secrets of dark magic, as practised by the cruel *druchii* of the distant north, and combined it with his knowledge of life and death to create something entirely new and terrible. The secrets of necromancy granted him the secret of eternal life, and dominion over the spirits of the dead.

In time, he seized his brother’s throne and enslaved his wife, who was nothing less than the blessings of the gods made flesh. He subjugated the entire land, forging a kingdom the likes of which had not been seen in centuries, and *still* it was not enough. He sought to become something still greater... something very like a god.

Finally, the people of Nehekhar could bear the horrors of his rule no longer, and rose up in revolt. The war was more terrible than anything they had experienced before: entire cities were devastated and uncounted thousands were slain. The greatest wonders of the age were cast down and, in the end, even the sacred covenant between the people and the gods was sundered forever, but the power of the Usurper was broken.

With the kingdom in ruins, Nagash fled into the wastelands to the north, where he wandered, wounded and raving, for a hundred years. And there he might have perished at last—bereft of power, and without the life-giving elixir to restore his vitality, the sun and the scavengers eventually would have succeeded where all the kings of Nehekharan could not—but for his encounter with a pack of twisted monstrosities that were neither man nor rat, but some horrible combination of the two. The creatures were foragers of a sort, searching the land for fragments of sky-stone that they took to be gifts from their strange, horned god. Nagash slew the creatures in a wild frenzy; he sensed the raw power of the stone fragments they possessed, and so great was his need that he *ate* them, choking them down his shrivelled throat. And in that terrible moment, the necromancer was reborn.

His search for more of the burning stone, as Nagash called it, had brought him to the shores of the Crystal Sea and the slopes of the ancient mountain. And here, his schemes of vengeance against the world of the living had taken root.

From Nagashizzar he would reach forth to choke the life from the world and rule the darkness that would follow. And the first to die would be Nehekharan, the Once-Blessed Land.

There were tens of thousands of corpses labouring in the halls of the Undying King, each one driven to some degree by a fragment of Nagash's will. The demands upon his awareness created periods of cold reverie, scattering his thoughts like sparks from a flame. Time ceased to have any real meaning; his world turned upon the progress of construction and excavation, of coal fed to the great forges and metal hammered into the shapes of axes, spears and swords. From the moment of its construction, Nagashizzar had been arming for war.

Now the creaking of braided sinew and the groan of ponderous hinges intruded upon his meditations. His attention shifted, coalescing from thousands of scattered motes to focus on the towering doors at the far end of the chamber.

The doors—twin slabs of thick, unfinished bronze more than twenty feet high—parted just wide enough to admit four silent figures. They strode swiftly into the darkness of the hall, moving with purpose and a small measure of deference. Monsters prowled and snuffled in their wake: naked, filthy things whose bodies resembled those of men, but who loped across the stone floor like apes. The creatures kept to the deeper shadows of the chamber, circling the four interlopers like a pack of hungry jackals.

The leader of the four was a tall, broad-shouldered man, clad in bronze and leather armour in the Nehekharan style whose refinements clashed with the warrior's scarred, heavy-browed face. His wild mane of red hair and long, forked beard were streaked with grey; the skin around his deep-set eyes was etched by the weight of many years, but the warrior's thick arms were still corded with muscle. Once he had been Bragadh Maghur'kan, a mighty warlord and leader of the northern tribes that in ancient times had been called the Yaghur. Nagash had conquered the tribes after two and a half centuries of bitter warfare and made them vassals of his growing empire. Now the hill forts of the northern plateau tithed two-thirds of their men to guard the walls of the great fortress until they died and their bones were put to work in the mines.

Beside the former chieftain came Diarid, his chief lieutenant, and a shaven-headed barbarian named Thestus. Unlike Bragadh and Diarid, Thestus had descended from one of the first conquered tribes and had known nothing but servitude to the Undying King, and during the war had risen to command the necromancer's living army. He had been seconded to Bragadh, his former enemy, as soon as the former warlord had bent the knee. It was clear to Nagash that the two men hated and distrusted one another, which was exactly as he wished it.

The fourth member of the group was a woman, and she walked a measured two paces left and one pace behind Bragadh. Unlike the men, she disdained civilised attire, clinging stubbornly to the wool-and-leather robes of her former station. By tradition, the leaders of the northern tribes were counselled by a trio of fierce and cunning witches, who stood at their chieftain's side in times of peace and fought beside them in times of war. Akatha's two sisters had both died in the last battle of the war, when Nagash's warriors broke through the gates of Maghur and defeated Bragadh's exhausted warband. Despite her years, she was still lean and fit. Her narrow face might have been attractive once, but the years at Nagashizzar had hardened it into something like a blade: cold and sharp and eager to harm. Ever since Bragadh had bent his knee in submission she'd worn ashes in her tightly braided hair as a sign of mourning.

Nagash tolerated her continued existence because she tempered her hatred with flinty pragmatism that served to hold the barbarians' headstrong natures in check.

The northmen approached the dais and knelt. Akatha bent her knee slowly, making it yet another gesture of defiance that the necromancer simply ignored.

Joints crackled and muscles creaked as Nagash turned his head to regard Bragadh. With a conscious effort, he willed his lungs to draw breath. It rasped down his throat like wind skirling over stone.

"What is the meaning of this?" Nagash said in a sepulchral voice.

Bragadh raised his head slowly and met his master's gaze. Whatever else the barbarian was, he was not without courage. "I come to speak of your army, great one," he replied, speaking in badly accented Nehekharan.

Nagash's irritation grew. When Bragadh spoke of the army, he meant his kinsmen. His *living* kinsmen. It galled him to think that he still needed the assistance of flesh-and-blood servants; they reminded him that, despite everything, there were still practical limits to his power.

"Is there an issue with their training?" he asked, his broken voice somehow mocking.

Bragadh visibly steeled himself. "The training *is* the issue, great one," he replied calmly. "There is no end to it. There are men within the spear companies that have known nothing else their entire lives."

The northmen were mighty warriors, but they fought like animals, hurling themselves wildly at their foes without a thought to the larger battle at hand. Nagash wanted soldiers who could fight in disciplined companies and not break the first time they faced a cavalry charge. The northmen were commanded to learn the proper arts of spear and shield, how to march as a unit and respond to trumpet calls just as Nehekharan infantry did. The forges of Nagashizzar worked day and night to arm them with the weapons that were the equal of anything that the great cities could

provide, for in time they would march in the vanguard of the vast host that would reduce his former homeland to ruins. Even now, hundreds of years after the war against the rebel kings, the taste of his defeat at Mahrak burned like a hot coal in his guts. It was not enough to defeat the Nehekharans; Nagash wished to destroy them utterly, to crush their armies and grind their cities to dust, so that no one would ever doubt that he was the greatest conqueror to walk the earth since Settra the Magnificent.

“Are they not learning as they should?” Nagash rasped. The question was as pointed and as menacing as a poisoned blade.

“They are not learning the ways of *war*, great one,” Bragadh declared. “They march to the trumpets in their sleep, but most of them have yet to spill a foeman’s blood. The purpose of an army is to *fight*.”

The necromancer’s burning eyes narrowed to pinpoints. *“The army will fight when I command it,”* he replied. He recalled the Bronze Legion of Ka-Sabar and the companies of Rasetra, his greatest adversary during the war. He had no doubt they could grind the barbarians under their heel. *“Your companies are brittle. They are not ready to stand against veteran troops.”*

“That can only come with experience,” Bragadh countered. There are tribes of *rakhads* in the mountains, north of the great plateau. They are fearsome in battle, but as wild and undisciplined as we were, years ago. We could blood the warriors against them, great one.

“A short campaign, not far from the hill forts. The army would be easy to supply, and we could reap a fine harvest of slaves into the bargain.”

Nagash stared thoughtfully at the barbarian leader. There was some merit to the idea; in his day, the great cities would often stage small-scale raids against one another to give their young nobles the chance to spill some blood and see what battle was like first-hand.

But was that the only reason for Bragadh’s request? After twenty-five years, the northmen had recovered the strength they’d lost in the long war against Nagashizzar; now they were better trained and better equipped than they had ever been before. Once they had left the shadow of the great fortress, would they not be tempted to rebel? It was possible, the necromancer thought.

His gaze shifted from Bragadh to his champion, Diarid, then to Akatha. Their faces betrayed no hint of treachery, but that meant little. The northmen were slaves, and what slave didn’t dream of taking a knife to his master’s throat?

Nagash was silent for a moment, considering. *“How large a force do you propose?”*

Bragadh’s shoulders straightened. “No more than five or six thousand,” he replied quickly, his voice growing eager. “A warband that size would be small enough to manage in the mountains, yet easily strong enough to deal with a single tribe of greenskins.”

The necromancer nodded slowly. *“Very well,”* he replied. *“How quickly can such a force be assembled?”*

Bragadh smiled wolfishly. “The warband could be on the march by the end of the day, great one.”

“Good,” Nagash replied. “*Then Thestus and the raiding force should be back at Nagashizzar by the end of the summer.*”

Nagash watched Thestus look up in surprise. The lieutenant’s gaze shifted from Nagash to Bragadh. A faint grin pulled at the corner of his mouth.

Bragadh frowned, as though uncertain of what he’d just heard. “Thestus? I don’t understand.”

“*Your place is here, training the rest of the army,*” Nagash explained. “*Surely you didn’t intend to lead the raid yourself?*”

Bragadh glanced over at his rival. When he caught the grin on Thestus’ face, he ground his jaw angrily. After a moment, he said, “Thestus is... a capable warrior. But he knows nothing of the *rakhads*. The only foes he has ever known have been his own people.”

Thestus bridled at the contempt in the warlord’s voice. Nagash chuckled, a sound like grinding stones. “*One foe is the same as another,*” he observed. “*All men die in the same way.*”

“The greenskins are more beasts than men,” Bragadh declared. “Sending Thestus against them would be a disaster!”

“*Then we will send no one,*” Nagash answered coldly. “*Your warriors will have to wait for battle until we begin the march on Nehekhar.*”

“And when will that be?” Bragadh demanded, forgetting himself.

“*Soon enough,*” Nagash replied. “*Do your work well, and you will hasten the day.*”

The tone of Nagash’s reply made it clear that there was nothing more to be said, but Bragadh was not quite done. As the barbarians rose to their feet, he folded his muscular arms across his chest and scowled up at the necromancer.

“Forget the greenskins then, we will continue to train instead,” he said, “but mark me, a knife can only be sharpened so much before it’s worn down to a splinter. Men live to spill the blood of their enemies! If they aren’t given a foe to test their strength against, they’ll make one for themselves.”

Nagash stared down at the warlord. He leaned forwards slowly, his mummified hands clenching the arms of his throne. “*If there is blood to be spilled at Nagashizzar, I will spill it!*” he hissed. “*Caution your warriors not to crave death too much, Bragadh, or I will give it to them!*”

Thestus blanched at the tone in Nagash’s ghastly voice. Figures stirred in the shadows: the misshapen forms of the necromancer’s flesh-eaters edged towards the barbarians, their talons scraping across the stone floor. Long, black tongues lolled from their fanged mouths, and their pointed, jackal-like ears were pressed flat against their bald, bulbous heads. Wet, rasping growls rose from their throats as they readied themselves to pounce upon the northmen.

The barbarians glared hatefully at the flesh-eaters. Diarid’s hand strayed to the hilt of his sword, but Bragadh forestalled him with a curt shake of his head. The warlord tore his gaze away from the monsters and looked up at Nagash.

“I hear, great one,” he said through clenched teeth. “I hear and obey.”

Satisfied, Nagash leaned back against his throne. *“Then go,”* he said, dismissing the northmen with a wave of one leathery hand. *“And remind your warriors who is master here.”*

Bragadh bowed his head slowly, then turned his back on the flesh-eaters and stomped angrily from the hall. Still growling, the creatures made to follow, but Akatha paused and fixed the pack with a cold-eyed glare that stopped them in their tracks.

Nagash’s eyes narrowed upon the witch. Akatha met his stare fearlessly, turning away only a heartbeat before the gesture could be construed as a challenge. She fell into step behind the warlord, never once looking back at the necromancer or his beasts.

The flesh-eaters watched them go, growling deep in their throats.

* * *

With miles of walls and hundreds of feet of crenellated towers, Nagashizzar was the largest and most terrible fortress ever built—but already there was an enemy gnawing at its roots.

Thousands of feet below the necromancer’s great hall, in vast, dripping caverns and half-finished galleries, a mighty host had been gathered. The army was so huge it could not be contained in one place. It spread like a sea of dark-furred bodies through the deeps, waiting only for word from its master to flood the upper levels of the fortress and claim its treasures for the glory of the Horned God.

In one such teeming cavern, the master of the army stood atop a roughly hewn dais carved from the living rock and surveyed the stinking multitudes arrayed before him. Shifting, greenish light cast by god-stone lanterns played across a sea of armoured bodies. Naked, pink tails twitched restlessly; long snouts wrinkled, tasting the foetid air. Thin lips drew back from long, chisel-shaped teeth. Hungry, chittering whispers filled the echoing space with a malevolent, surf-like roar.

Eekrit Backbiter, Lord of Clan Rikek and master of the largest army of skaven assembled in the history of the Under-Empire, rubbed his clawed paws together expectantly and thought of the wealth and power that would soon be his. There was more god-stone buried within the mountain than his people had ever seen before. Its discovery had driven the scheming Grey Lords to paroxysms of treachery and murder that had consumed the Great Clans for decades before the Seer-lord had finally intervened. The resulting alliance had led to the creation of the expeditionary force, comprised of massive contingents of warriors from each of the twelve Great Clans and their vassals. Arrayed against them—as far as the army’s black-robed scouts were aware—were but a few thousand walking corpses toiling in the mines. No one had ever explained to Eekrit’s satisfaction just where those corpses had come from, and what exactly they were doing with the god-stone they carved out of the mountain’s heart. Old Vittrik One-eye, master of the host’s war engines, once surmised that the skeletons might be the remains of slave workers from a long-dead kingdom, animated by energies from the very stones they mined and driven to toil in the mines for all eternity. Eekrit suspected the warlock was talking from the depths of

one of his many wineskins, but wasn't so foolish as to point this out to the engine-master.

Truly, Eekrit didn't care who the mountain's skeletal inhabitants were. His warriors alone outnumbered them more than ten to one. The mountain would be his within a matter of hours; *keeping* it was likely to be a far more dangerous task altogether.

The dais was crowded with those who would be all too happy to poison his wine or slip a dagger between his ribs the instant it became profitable to do so. Just to Eekrit's right was his lieutenant, Lord Hiirc, a young and callow little fool from Clan Morbus, currently the most powerful of the Great Clans. Outwardly, Hiirc didn't seem threatening in the least; he had no experience as a war leader, no especial prowess as a warrior, nor any notable murders attached to his reputation. He was sleek and well fed, his face marked with fine scar-tattoos and his chisel-teeth capped with gold, in the style of the obnoxiously rich. But Eekrit didn't mistake the veritable treasure-trove of god-stone amulets wound about Hiirc's scrawny neck; the idiot glowed from so much refined stone that he hardly needed lantern-bearers to find his way about in the darkness. Of course, Eekrit hadn't gotten a good look at the amulets themselves—that would have been considered rude—but he'd heard enough from his spies to know that the vast majority of them were wards of protection against everything from assassins' knives to ague. There were *clan lords* who weren't so thoroughly encased in protective spells, which spoke volumes to the crafty Eekrit. Clan Morbus wasn't protecting Hiirc; they were guarding his *position* within the army. Eekrit had no doubt that Hiirc's retinue was stuffed to the snout with "advisors" far more experienced and capable than the young rat lord, who would then direct the course of the campaign from the shadows in the event that Hiirc found himself in control of the army.

Then there was the army's black-robed Master of Treacheries, Lord Eshreegar, who commanded the companies of scout-assassins. The scout-assassins were the army's eyes and ears—and its left-hand dagger, when the situation demanded it. Eshreegar's rats had spent years exploring the tunnels and chambers of the great mountain, until they knew it better than their own spawning-nests; for that reason alone Eekrit had made every effort to favour, flatter and outright bribe his way into Eshreegar's good graces. Eshreegar had accepted the warlord's many gifts with great pleasure and had deigned to provide a few choice secrets about the workings of his rivals, but Eekrit couldn't be certain exactly whose side the Master of Treacheries was on. The warlord had tried to hedge his bets on the march from the Great City by attempting to suborn several of Eshreegar's lieutenants, but the three rats who'd accepted his bribes had managed to suffer gruesome and wildly implausible accidents before the army reached its destination.

Lord Eshreegar crouched to Lord Eekrit's left, in whispered consultation with several of his black-robed dagger-rats. He was tall and lean for one of the rat-people, a veritable giant among the scout-assassins, who as a rule tended to be small, swift creatures.

Though his reputation as a stalker and a slayer was legendary among the clans, the expedition to the great mountain was his first in command of a scout cadre. It

spoke highly of his connections and reputation among the secretive assassin clans, if not necessarily his ability as a scout leader.

And then there was Lord Qweeqwol, the expedition's representative from the grey seers. Ancient, addled and canker-ridden, mad old Qweeqwol was believed by many to be well past his prime; most of the rat-lords in the Great City assumed that he had been chosen to accompany the expedition as a concession to the Council of Thirteen. Since the Seerlord was the driving force behind the great alliance that had made the expedition possible, the Grey Lords would be exceptionally sensitive to the slightest hint that the grey seers were arranging things to their own personal benefit. Few skaven imagined old Qweeqwol to be much of a threat in that regard.

Eekrit was one of the paranoid few. He couldn't help but take note that Qweeqwol had not only been Seerlord himself for more than *forty* years, he had voluntarily *retired* from that position in favour of Greemon, the current Seerlord. Most skaven thought that only confirmed just how far gone Qweeqwol really was. Eekrit wasn't so certain.

The warlord cast a wary glance over his shoulder at the aged seer. Qweeqwol was at the very rear of the crude dais, his wrinkled paws clutching a thick, gnarled staff of black cypress. The entire length of the staff had been carved with arcane sigils and inlaid with crushed god-stone, so that the air around the wooden shaft shimmered with a haze of magical energy. The white-furred skaven had his back to the proceedings, his pointed snout wrinkling as he studied the striations in the back wall of the cavern. Qweeqwol was muttering to himself, the sibilant words pitched just slightly too low for Eekrit to make out. When the warlord's gaze fell upon him, the seer straightened slightly. His mangy head turned to regard Eekrit; green light played across patches of bald, greying skin grown misshapen with pulsing tumours. Qweeqwol's ears were ragged and frail, as thin and fragile as wet parchment, and where his eyes had once been there were only blasted hollows, ringed by ancient, scarred flesh. Twin orbs of pure, polished god-stone, carved in the likeness of eyes, glowed from those ruined sockets. They fixed Eekrit with an eerie, unblinking stare.

It was all the warlord could do to keep his tail from lashing with unease. A cave-in, he thought. That was what he needed. A shower of sharp rocks on the heads of those who vexed him. Sharp, *poisoned* rocks. Yes, that would do. He should speak to Vittrik. Perhaps something could be arranged.

Lord Vittrik, the engine-master, was nowhere to be seen. Typically the warlock-engineer never strayed far from the glowing, spitting contraptions he and his clan-mates had brought from the Great City. The god-stone machines of Clan Skryre were legendary among the skaven; they were also notably capricious and often as deadly to their operators as to anyone else. All too frequently, the bronze casings of their fearsome weapons simply blew apart in the heat of battle, sending jagged splinters of glowing metal tearing through friend and foe. There were many clan lords who scorned the upstart warlocks and their unstable inventions; others feared them, believing that they could one day become among the most powerful of the clans, if only they could obtain enough quantities of god-stone to produce their machines en masse. Of all the clans, they had the most to gain from the success of the expedition. Eekrit thought that made Vittrik a natural ally, but the warlock-engineer was irritatingly oblivious to his overtures. Fiery contraptions or no, if the Skryre clanrats

couldn't master the simplest intrigues they would very soon find themselves extinct, Eekrit mused.

There was a stir from the scout-assassins. Lord Eshreegar was trying to get his attention, snout raised, paws resting atop one another, tight against his narrow chest. The towering skaven had to hunch his shoulders somewhat to lower his eyes to a level just beneath the warlord's.

"All is in readiness," Eshreegar murmured. His voice was not unlike the sound of bronze being drawn across a whetstone. "The scouts await your signal." Which was a circumspect way of saying, *get on with it*.

Lord Eekrit flicked his ears in agreement, his tail lashing against his heels. He was garbed for war, cased in a heavy hauberk of bronze scales over a thick jerkin of tanned human hide. A heavy cloak, stitched with runes of protection against ambushes and betrayals, lay across his shoulders. An amulet inset with a palm-sized piece of god-stone hung from a golden chain around his neck. It was both a badge of rank and a token of the Horned God's favour. He reached up to stroke its polished surface with the tip of one claw.

Growling thoughtfully, Eekrit regarded the messengers that knelt at the foot of the dais. This would be no field battle, where he could stand atop a piece of high ground and take in the movements of his entire force. This assault would follow dozens of twisting paths through the labyrinthine fortress, directed by a steady flow of messages between Eekrit and his chieftains. He would be no closer to the battle than the dais upon which he now stood.

The warlord rested his paw upon the hilt of his sword. His ears flattened against the side of his skull. With a twitch of his tail, the air about Eekrit grew heady with musk. A stir went through the skaven assembled upon the dais; at the foot of the stone platform the messengers gripped their paws against their chests and raised their snouts. Pink noses twitched; lips quivered, revealing blunt, yellowed teeth.

Lord Eekrit stretched out his free paw. "Go!" he commanded in a shrill voice. "Carry my command to the chieftains! Swarm through the tunnels! Tear apart our foes! Seize the treasures of the Horned God! Strike-strike!"

Chittering and squealing, the messengers scattered in a blur of dark cloaks and whipping tails. They raced down narrow lanes between the great war-packs, sending a ripple of excitement through the restless horde. Within seconds, the runners were lost from sight. Then, from the far end of the cavern, came a blood-chilling chorus of bone whistles, rising and falling in an eerie cadence that never failed to set the warlord's fur on end. In response to the call, pack leaders snarled and spat at their warriors. The giant mass of furred bodies began to heave like an angry sea as the army began to move. Thousands of clawed feet scraped on stone; the air shivered with a cacophony of brass bells and clashing cymbals. Lord Eshreegar screeched a command to his scout-assassins and sent them racing after the mass of warriors, their black cloaks flapping about their flanks. The army's many scouts would be responsible for leading the scattered contingents of clanrats through the maze of tunnels towards their objectives. Lord Eekrit turned his attention to one side of the dais and beckoned for a goblet of wine.

The skaven were marching to war.

—<ONE>—

War in the Deeps

*Nagashizzar, in the 96th year of Geheb the Mighty
(-1325 Imperial Reckoning)*

The skaven horde came swarming up out of the bowels of the great mountain, pouring in a flood of snarling, snapping, sword-wielding bodies into the shadowy corridors and noisy mine works of Nagash's fortress. Guided by Lord Eshreegar's scout-assassins, they overran level after level in a headlong dash for the treasures that Nagashizzar contained.

Surprise was absolute. The lowest levels of the fortress were all but deserted, so the skaven were more than halfway to their objectives before they encountered the first of Nagashizzar's skeletal inhabitants. The handful of undead labour parties caught in the horde's path were literally crushed underfoot, trampled by the weight of thousands of charging, brown-furred warriors. The momentum of the charge was so great that the old bones were crushed to powder within moments. By the time the rear ranks passed over the same spot, naught but tendrils of dust remained.

The attackers reached the deepest of the mine shafts within minutes. The dank air trembled with the piping wails of bone whistles and the screech of skaven war cries as the clanrats erupted into the flickering light of the tunnels and fell upon the slow-moving skeletons. The disparity in numbers told against the undead labourers at once: the skaven came at their foes in packs, dismembering the skeletons with contemptuous ease. The initial encounters were over so quickly that actual skaven casualties occurred only in the aftermath, as the clanrats took to squabbling with one another over upturned carts of god-stone nuggets, or found a convenient, out-of-the-way spot to slip a knife into a troublesome rival.

As the invaders rose through the many levels of the fortress, resistance began to slowly increase. More and more, the skaven would burst into a strategic passageway and find a phalanx of skeletons waiting for them. Swords, spears, claws and teeth clashed with picks and shovels, or sometimes nothing more than bony, grasping hands. In each case, the defenders were quickly overrun, scarcely slowing the clanrats' headlong advance.

The first real fighting of the skaven assault occurred in the last, highest mine shafts. Almost two full hours had passed since the attack had begun, and the warriors of Clan Morbus, who had been given the honour of running the farthest to seize the most played-out of the mine shafts, found themselves up against packed ranks of skeletons armed with spears and wearing tattered but functional armour. Here the

onslaught faltered, as the clanrats were forced to chew their way doggedly through the press of slow-moving foes. Before long the passageways became choked with heaps of bones and bleeding bodies, but the snarls of the chieftains—and the sharp jab of their blades—kept the clanrats fighting towards their goal.

The skeletons fought to the very last, giving ground only after they had been hacked to bits. The clanrats overwhelmed the remaining defenders at the very entrances to the topmost mine shafts, only to find the sloping tunnels dark and nearly devoid of treasure. The warriors who had been fighting in the front ranks slumped wearily against the tunnel walls and commenced to lick their wounds, leaving the rest to scuttle about in search of some kind of plunder. They cursed and spat, finding only a handful of nuggets in the deepest part of the shaft—which found their way unerringly into the paws of the much larger and cleverer clan chieftains.

It wasn't long at all before small parties of enterprising skaven began exploring the branch-tunnels that led to the upper levels of the fortress. All of the god-stone carved out of the upper shafts had to have been taken *somewhere*, after all. When the first few parties didn't return immediately, the rest of the clanrats took it as a sign that there were valuables up above, and the wretches were helping themselves to as much of it as they could. More small groups skulked off and when *they* didn't return, still more and still larger parties set off after them, until finally the chieftains took notice and took out their ire on the lackwits who remained behind.

That was when they heard the first, faint, bloodcurdling howls—shrieks of madness and savagery the likes of which no skaven throat could make—echoing from the upper passageways. Moments later came a bare handful of hysterical clanrats, covered in gruesome wounds that turned foul with poison before the chieftains' very eyes.

A cold wind gusted down the branch-tunnels, filling the mine shaft with the dusty stench of old death. Over the frenzied howls of the approaching monsters came the eerie wail of horns and the *tramp tramp tramp* of thousands upon thousands of skeletal feet.

At first, the destruction of his servants in the lowest levels of the fortress escaped Nagash's attention; accidents occurred from time to time, and what was the loss of ten or twenty skeletons out of the teeming multitudes under his control?

It was only when the labour parties in the lowest and deepest mine shafts vanished that the necromancer realised something was amiss. *Treachery*, Nagash thought at once, immediately suspecting Bragadh and the northmen of some kind of coup. Furious, he drew upon the power of the burning stone, focussing his awareness on the skeletons toiling in the lower levels so he could come to grips with the scope of the attack. Even as he did so, three more of the mine shafts were overrun; dozens more skeletons were destroyed, but in the split-second before they ceased to exist, Nagash caught a glimpse of his foes. They weren't wild-eyed, bearded northmen, however; instead, he saw a seething mass of armoured, dark-furred bodies, wielding short, pointed bronze swords or cruel-looking spears. There was a flash of beady eyes, red with reflected light, and the snapping of curved, chisel-like teeth—and then darkness.

An angry hiss grated from Nagash's leathery throat. The ratmen! An army of them, loose in the deepest parts of his fortress! It had been centuries since he'd set eyes upon the filthy creatures, and then only in small, cowardly little packs. They slunk like jackals through the wastelands to the west of the great mountain, searching for pieces of burning stone. In those days he'd slain each and every one he'd found, whether they carried any stone on them or not. Their very existence offended him.

Somehow they had discovered the great lode of sky-stone buried within the mountain—his mountain—and they had come to lay their disgusting hands on it. Nagash vowed that when he'd slaughtered these interlopers, he would find the stinking holes from whence they'd come and wipe them from the face of the earth. Bragadh and his young warriors would have the blood they were thirsting for after all.

The lash of the necromancer's will resounded across the length and breadth of the fortress, and tens of thousands of skeletons swayed like wheat against its invisible weight. They answered the call to arms in silence, save for the creak of dried skin or the clatter of bone.

Not long afterwards came the ominous tolling of alarm gongs from the tallest towers of the fortress. The deep, shivering notes reverberated through the air and sent a chill down the spines of the living. Across dozens of marshalling grounds, companies of northern warriors paused in their training and looked skywards, wondering at the sound. How could there be an alarm when there was no enemy to be seen for leagues in any direction?

In the shadowy recesses of the great fortress, packs of Yaghur raised their heads and added their howls to the spine-tingling chorus. The noise rolled like an avalanche down the mountain slopes and across the grey sea, where it reached the ears of hundreds more of the flesh-eaters. Entire tribes emptied from their foetid lairs, loping like apes across the reeking, marshy ground in response to their master's call.

Within the fortress, living messengers ran back and forth from the great hall, carrying Nagash's commands to his barbarian troops. Meanwhile, the necromancer threw every available skeleton he could into the ratmen's path to slow them down while he assembled his spearmen into companies near the surface.

His rage grew as one mine shaft after another fell to the swarming creatures; their numbers were vast, easily as large as any Nehekharan army, and he had to concede that the assault was being carried out with speed and skill. Comparing the rate of their advance to the marshalling of his forces on the upper levels, Nagash could see that the ratmen would overrun all of his mine shafts and possibly even reach the upper levels themselves before his army was ready to act. Working quickly, he despatched several large companies into the upper mine shafts to slow down the enemy advance and keep the monsters bottled up below ground. Nagash meant to keep the ratmen penned up in the tunnels, where he could grind the horde to pieces under the relentless advance of his spearmen. He had no need of cunning manoeuvres or elaborate stratagems; Nagash planned to come at the trespassers head-on, crushing the ratmen under the weight of his troops.

The necromancer filled the upper tunnels with spearmen and hundreds of slaverling flesh-eaters, then despatched Bragadh and his warriors to seal off the surface exits of each of the mountain's mine shafts. Any attempt by the ratmen to

escape his advance—or outflank him along the surface—would be met with a thicket of barbarian spears. All too slowly, the units of his army moved into position, like pieces on a gaming board, while his rearguard troops in the upper mine shafts were slowly but surely cut down by the advancing ratmen. When the invaders finally broke through and swarmed into the mine shafts, Nagash turned his attention upon the Yaghur. Whispering words of power, he exerted his mastery over the foul creatures and stirred them to action.

Gripped by the necromancer's unyielding will, the flesh-eaters crept silently down the dimly lit tunnels towards the invaders. Though they could not be controlled as completely or as easily as the true undead, they were swifter, stronger and far tougher than his regular troops and their constant hunger made them keen predators. At his command, the flesh-eaters found places along the tunnels to lie in ambush for any advance parties of ratmen that ventured their way.

The Yaghur didn't have long to wait. The first, small scouting parties were swiftly overwhelmed, succumbing to the flesh-eaters' filthy talons and powerful jaws. Behind them came still more of the invaders, in ever-larger and less-cautious bands, until finally there were so many of the rat-creatures to contend with that the Yaghur couldn't possibly take them all at once. A handful of survivors managed to escape the flesh-eaters' clutches, fleeing back the way they'd come. With a mental command, Nagash ordered the first of his companies to advance, intending to strike before the clanrats could organise a proper defence.

Once again, the Yaghur struck first. The blood-spattered beasts erupted from the branch-tunnels hard on the heels of the dying ratmen, sowing terror and confusion through the enemy's ranks. The air shook with the baying of bone horns and the tread of marching feet. When the first companies of spear-wielding skeletons emerged into the upper mine shafts the stunned invaders lost their nerve and fled, trampling one another in their haste to escape. From his throne in the great hall many levels above, Nagash smiled cruelly and poured the energy of the burning stone into his lead companies, speeding their limbs and pressing hard upon the ratmen's heels.

The tide of battle, at first so overwhelmingly in favour of the ratmen, turned just as swiftly against them. The invaders fled back into the lower levels, spreading panic amongst their fellows. The necromancer's forces reclaimed one mine shaft after another; they slew so many ratmen in the process that they couldn't keep up with the survivors in the corpse-choked tunnels. The Yaghur, provided with a feast the likes of which their kind hadn't seen in centuries, required constant pressure to keep them focussed on the battle at hand, slowing the pursuit still further.

Lord Eekrit was eating fermented musk-berries and preparing a letter to inform the Grey Lords of his great victory when the first of Lord Eshreegar's scout-assassins returned to the great cavern. At first, he paid no mind to their near-frantic whispers as they reported to the Master of Treacheries. The scouts had been ordered to continue their explorations of the levels beyond the mine shafts, in hopes of finding where the skeletons were storing the god-stone. From the sound of their voices, he surmised that what they'd found was far greater than anyone had expected.

The first intimation that something was wrong came not from Eshreegar, but mad Lord Qweeqwol. The old seer limped up next to Eekrit and leaned in close. "It's begun," he hissed, his scarred nose twitching. "Time for battle. Fight-fight!"

Eekrit curled his lip in a bemused scowl. What in the Horned One's name was he babbling about? He glanced up, and caught sight of Lord Eshreegar. The Master of Treacheries looked like he'd swallowed a live spider.

The warlord glanced down at the bowl of half-eaten berries in his left paw. On impulse, he stuffed the remainder in his mouth and gulped them down. Thus fortified, he went over to the scouts. The black-robed underlings shrank back at his approach, their tails lashing apprehensively. At once, the fermented berry juice curdled in Eekrit's guts.

"What is going on?" the warlord asked, his voice deceptively mild.

The Master of Treacheries turned slowly to regard his commander. The skaven's whiskers twitched.

"There... ah," Eshreegar began. "There is a small problem."

Eekrit's tail twitched. "What kind of problem?"

"Ah..." the Master of Treacheries considered his reply carefully. "It's possible there are more skeletons here than we thought."

The warlord's beady black eyes narrowed on Eshreegar. "How many more?"

Eshreegar stole a glance at his minions. The scouts focussed their gaze on the cavern floor, as though contemplating an escape tunnel.

"Well. Perhaps... five or six," Eshreegar said weakly.

The warlord's ears flattened against his skull. "You and your rats have had years to scout this place," Eekrit hissed. "There were two thousand of the skeletons, you said. And now you tell me you missed five or six hundred more?"

Eshreegar seemed to shrink in on himself. His head drooped below the level of the warlord's snout. His whiskers twitched and he mumbled something under his breath.

"What was that?" Eekrit demanded. "Explain yourself!"

"Not five or six hundred," the Master of Treacheries said in a defeated voice. "Five or six *thousand*."

The warlord's eyes widened. "What?"

"I said—"

Eekrit cut him off with an upraised paw. "I *heard* what you said," the warlord snarled. "How... where..." He paused, breathing deeply. His paw clenched, as though ready to claw out Eshreegar's eyes. "Where are they now?"

Speaking quickly, his voice pitched barely above a squeak, Eshreegar related what he'd heard from his scouts. "Clan Morbus is in-in full retreat," he finished. "The upper shafts have been retaken."

"And what of Rikek and Halghast?" the warlord demanded. They would be the next clans in line if the skeletons continued their descent.

Eshreegar spread his paws helplessly. "There is no-no word yet."

"Find. Out." Eekrit growled.

The scouts leapt to obey without waiting for a word from their master. As soon as they were gone, the warlord stepped close to Eshreegar, until the two skaven were snout-to-snout. He sensed an opportunity here.

“The Council will want an explanation,” Eekrit hissed.

Eshreegar made a half-hearted shrug. “One skeleton looks much like another,” he said.

“It is your business to tell the difference!” the warlord snapped. “Do you imagine the Grey Lords will be sympathetic, Eshreegar?”

“No.”

Eekrit nodded. “Just so. You will need allies if you hope to keep-keep your hide.”

The Master of Treacheries nodded. “Of course,” he replied. “I understand.”

The warlord nodded. “Good. Then fetch a map. *Now.*”

Eshreegar gave a quick nod of obeisance and turned to bark orders at a nearby underling. The warlord folded his paws against his chest and began to pace, his mind working quickly.

The situation could still be salvaged, Eekrit thought. Five or six thousand more skeletons were an unwelcome surprise, but his force still outnumbered the enemy more than ten to one. That didn’t even count the thousands of slaves attached to the army—fodder that he could use to bury the attackers by sheer weight of numbers if he wished.

So far, the enemy had provided him with a solid alliance with Eshreegar, and bloody humiliation for Clan Morbus. That would keep Hiirc and his minders in check for the foreseeable future.

A pair of slaves scuttled up onto the dais, carrying a large, rolled parchment between them. Eekrit smiled to himself as they unrolled the map at his feet.

Yes, the warlord thought. This might actually turn out better than he’d hoped.

Resistance increased steadily the deeper Nagash’s forces went. The ratmen holding the lower mine shafts were fresher and forewarned of the counter-attack by streams of fleeing survivors from the upper levels. Nagash’s warriors began to encounter more prepared defences and formed companies of warriors holding key tunnel junctions leading to the lower shafts.

Nagash drove his troops remorselessly forwards, determined to cleanse Nagashizzar of the invaders. When his companies encountered heavy resistance, he simply ground the ratmen down; gladly trading one of his warriors for one of theirs, until finally the creatures broke and ran. He had fewer of the Yaghur to call upon now; most of the surviving flesh-eaters were either too gorged or too exhausted to be much use. So far, the northmen had successfully held the ends of the mine shafts so that the retreating ratmen couldn’t escape the necromancer’s trap. With almost half of the mountain’s mine shafts back in his hands, he had a sizeable reserve force of living infantry to call upon, but he was loath to trust them unless he absolutely had to.

What troubled Nagash was that he hadn’t yet plumbed the depths of the enemy force. Every army had its breaking point, he knew; an invisible line where its leaders knew that they’d given all they had and it was time to pull back or risk destruction. Gauging an enemy’s breaking point was a fine art, one that separated competent

generals from great ones. Nagash knew without doubt that he was a great leader, but this subterranean battlefield offered him no clues as to the dispositions of his foe.

Though he had a god's-eye view of the battlefield from his own troops' perspective, he had no idea what the ratmen had waiting for him around the next bend in the tunnel. He'd expected fierce resistance in the upper levels of the mountain, then less organised resistance as he broke through the enemy's front line and encountered his reserves. But there didn't seem to be a front line that he could discern, not in the manner of a traditional field battle. This was an entirely different style of warfare—one that he began to suspect the ratmen were better capable of fighting than he was. They certainly seemed to know the layout of the lower tunnels as well as he did, which led him to wonder just how long they'd been hiding down there, biding their time until they chose to strike.

Hours passed and the fighting wore on. Nagash breached one defensive line after another. Now more than three-quarters of the way through the lower levels of the fortress, his troops had reclaimed all but a handful of the newest, deepest—and therefore richest—mine shafts. The enemy resistance grew clever and more determined. His lead packs of flesh-eaters were lured into five separate ambushes and badly mauled by dark-robed rat-creatures wielding knives and razor-edged obsidian darts, then a company of ratmen attempted to launch an attack at his flank through a network of half-finished tunnels. Or they *had* been half-finished, the last time he'd turned his attention to that part of the under-mountain. It appeared that the invaders had actually spent some time and effort in expanding the tunnels, displaying a kind of instinctive engineering skill that such monsters had no right to possess.

The advance began to lose momentum against a seemingly endless tide of screeching, furry bodies. His skeletons were within a few hundred yards of the next mine shaft, but no matter how many of the creatures his warriors killed, it seemed like three more sprang up to take their places. The necromancer's anger grew. For the first time, he regretted not entering the battle himself—but in the close confines of the tunnels, his sorcery would only be effective on localised portions of the battle. And as it stood now, he was literally miles from the front lines, with no swift way to reach the centre of the action.

Nagash leaned back against his throne and once again considered summoning the northmen. A flanking attack down the mouth of the lower mine shafts could well tip the balance... but then he remembered the steady look of defiance on Akatha's face, and his paranoia asserted itself once more.

He redoubled his attack on the rat-creatures, fuelling the lead companies with still more sorcerous power. The invaders had to be near the limits of their strength, he told himself. They *had* to be.

The counter-attack couldn't keep going much longer, Eekrit told himself. There *had* to be an end to the damned skeletons, sooner or later.

Hopefully sooner, the warlord thought nervously as he studied Eshreegar's map. The fighting was now less than five levels away. He fancied that if he opened his ears fully he could hear the faint sounds of battle, though he knew that it was just his imagination.

At least with the battle close at hand he had a better idea of how things were progressing. A steady stream of messengers were running to the front lines and making it back to report within minutes. He doubted the master of the damned skeletons had half so good a picture of the battlefield as he did.

The enemy had pushed his clanrats nearly all the way back to the caverns where they'd started from. At last count, he had only five mine shafts still in his possession, and one of those was about to fall. If he didn't manage to turn things around very quickly, he might as well ask Eshreegar to put a poisoned knife between his eyes. Better that than report his defeat to the Council.

The warlord turned to the Master of Treacheries. The counter-move had been Eshreegar's idea; no doubt if it succeeded, he would try to use it to balance his utter failure to determine the actual size of the enemy force. Unfortunately for him, Eekrit was increasingly certain that the revised estimate of five or six thousand skeletons was still woefully inadequate—not to mention the reports of howling, ogre-like creatures that seemed to accompany the skeletal spear companies like packs of jackals. When all this was over, Eshreegar would have a great deal of explaining to do, Eekrit thought.

"What are the reports from the slaves?" he asked.

Eshreegar paused for a whispered query to one of his scouts. With a curt nod, he turned back to Eekrit. "All is in readiness," he replied.

Eekrit gave the map one last look and then reached his decision. It was now or never.

"Send word to Clan Snagrit," he ordered. "Begin the retreat."

The change in the tempo of the fighting was palpable. For more than an hour, the ratmen had been fighting tooth and nail—sometimes literally—to keep the skeletons from forcing their way into the next mine shaft. The branch-tunnels were choked with pieces of bone and heaps of furry bodies, and no matter how hard Nagash pushed his troops, the advance ground inexorably to a halt.

Both sides hammered at one another without pause, until the course of the battle was measured in mere feet gained or lost. And then, slowly but surely, the pressure against the skeletons began to ebb. First the ratmen were pushing hard against the skeletons, trying to drive them back; then their momentum dwindled until they were at a virtual standstill. It was only minutes later, when the invaders actually began to retreat back the way they'd come, that Nagash began to suspect that the ratmen had finally reached their breaking point.

The invaders withdrew quickly, but in fairly good order, careful not to create any gaps that Nagash could turn to his advantage. That convinced him the retreat wasn't a feint; had they been trying to lure him into an ambush, he would have expected to see a tantalising gap open in their lines to lure him into a killing zone. Sensing that the endgame was near, Nagash drove his companies forwards all the harder, pressing the enemy across the entire front in hopes of creating so much strain that it finally shattered. Then the slaughter would well and truly begin.

Nagash's companies reclaimed yet another mine shaft. There were only four left in enemy hands, the excavations begun so recently that they had yet to commence full operation—in fact, the mine shafts themselves had yet to be extended all the way

to the surface of the mountainside. This served to limit the avenues of approach and channel the retreating invaders into fewer and fewer tunnels, which in turn permitted Nagash to focus his battered forces into larger, more powerful columns. The exhausted ratmen would have no reprieve as the undead warriors chased them inexorably into the deeps.

Level by level, the skeletal companies drove the ratmen back. From time to time, the enemy lines would halt and resistance would stiffen, but never for more than a few minutes at a time. Nagash's certainty grew: clearly the enemy's troops were exhausted and they had no reserves to call upon. Sooner or later, the leader of the ratmen would be forced to either sacrifice a rearguard so the rest of his army could escape, or else find a place to make a doomed, final stand.

Within an hour, Nagash's troops were closing in on the next mine shaft. Here the chambers and passageways were rudimentary in the extreme. Nagash's past philosophy of expansion was predicated on one thing only; access to the mountain's deposits of burning stone. His labourers first created exploratory tunnels to locate sources of *abn-i-khat*, then created galleries and chambers around the tunnels in anticipation of mine work to come. The necromancer knew that there were numerous natural tunnels and caverns throughout the lowest levels, as well as half-finished spaces that the enemy had been using for some time. If the ratmen hoped to outflank him through one of these natural approaches, he would be ready for them.

The spear companies reached the branch-tunnels leading into the fourth mine shaft and pressed onwards, forcing the ratmen back into the wide, echoing tunnel. The invaders continued to fall back across the dimly lit mine shaft—and then halted with their backs to the branch-tunnels at the far side. The loathsome creatures stood shoulder to shoulder, brandishing their weapons and snarling defiantly at the advancing skeletons.

Nagash smiled, already anticipating the final battle. He poured troops into the mine shaft, taking full advantage of the space to bring his greater numbers to bear against the enemy. No matter how fierce the ratmen thought they were, the fight would be a short one.

The two sides came together, not with a flurry of war-horns and the thunder of charging feet, but with a dreadful, appalling slowness. The ratmen watched the thicket of spears press in about them, one slow, implacable step at a time. Many became unnerved by the warriors' soulless advance, but there was nowhere left to run. Their angry snarls turned to panicked whimpers, then to shouts and screeches of terror as the bronze spear-points closed in.

In seconds, the screams and shouts of the living were drowned by the rising clatter of metal and wood, as swords and axes beat against spear-shafts and the rims of bronze-edged shields. Ratmen fell, pierced through the neck and chest, their blood slicking the stones. Bones cracked like brittle branches. The invaders had already learned to focus their attacks against the legs of the undead warriors; they toppled to the tunnel floor, rendering their spears all but useless and hindering the advance of the troops behind them.

More of the ratmen threw themselves desperately at Nagash's host. They came rushing through narrow passageways and rough-hewn tunnels, probing for a way to reach the army's flanks, but in each case their path was blocked by a phalanx of

skeletal troops. Soon, Nagash knew, the ratmen would realise that there was nowhere left to turn and that defeat was imminent.

The enemy fought hard, matching Nagash's troops blow for blow. The battle raged across a two-hundred-yard length of mine shaft and at a score of smaller side-tunnels to either flank. The ebb and flow of the fighting absorbed the necromancer's full attention—so much so that by the time he saw the ratmen's trap, it was already too late.

To either flank of the undead advance, and a full two levels *behind* the front rank of the army, rough stone walls burst apart under the frantic claws of digging ratmen. Years before, the invaders had begun expanding side-tunnels in anticipation of their own mining operations in the depths of the mountain. Now their tunnelling masters skilfully turned those unfinished passageways to deadly knives aimed at the centre of the skeletal horde.

The ratmen broke through into the flanks of Nagash's forces at almost a dozen points. Whips cracked and a storm of snarling, snapping rat slaves tore into the packed ranks of skeletal warriors. Armed with picks, shovels, heavy rocks and bare paws, the slaves rushed in low, tearing at the skeletons' legs and lower spines. The skeletons, packed tightly into the narrow tunnels, couldn't bring their weapons to bear against the sudden onslaught and losses began to mount.

The first indication Nagash had of trouble was a sudden surge in ferocity from the ratmen inside the mine shaft. Where moments before the invaders seemed to be locked in a last, desperate stand, now they pushed forwards against the undead ranks with steadily mounting fervour. With sheer, bloody-minded ferocity the ratmen began to drive wedges into the skeletal companies. They scrambled over heaps of their fallen kin, their feet and legs coated in crushed bone and gore, and began hacking at every bony limb they could reach. Skeletons collapsed by the score and were crushed underfoot as the ratmen carved deeper and deeper into the enemy ranks.

What shocked Nagash more than the wild counter-assault wasn't the attack itself, as much as the waves of attackers that came pouring out of the tunnels and into the mine shaft. These warriors weren't the exhausted, desperate creatures he'd expected; they were fresh troops, well armed and eager for a fight.

For just a moment, the necromancer was incredulous. Somehow, somewhere, he had made a miscalculation.

Thinking swiftly, he ordered his troops to redouble their efforts, determined to swallow up the enemy's counter-attack and smother it by sheer weight of numbers.

Nagash's awareness swept backwards, along the arteries that supplied his advance. It was then he saw the enemy's flanking attack and realised how he had been duped. The sheer scale and complexity of the ambush had been greater than anything he'd imagined his foes to be capable of. Worse, their numbers seemed endless.

The enemy had chosen to face his troops inside the mine shaft for the very reason that it would draw in as many of Nagash's warriors as possible. The branch-tunnels created choke points both into *and* out of the long tunnel, and now the pincers of the enemy's flanking movement had effectively cut them off from reinforcement. That left fully a third of his army isolated, and the rest strung out along miles of connecting tunnels where they couldn't bring their full strength to bear.

As Nagash watched, the enemy's flank attacks poured warriors into the tunnels in staggering numbers. They fought down the connecting tunnels in both directions, tightening the noose around the skeletons trapped inside the mine shaft. Immediately, Nagash ordered skeletons from the upper levels to push forwards, trying to batter their way through the enemy positions and link back up with the front lines, but he could already sense the tide of battle starting to flow away from him once more. After another moment's hesitation, he came to a galling decision.

The necromancer broadcast his orders to the horde. Within the mine shaft, half of the warriors formed a rearguard to hold the attacking ratmen at bay, while the rest began to withdraw back down the branch-tunnels towards the enemy's flanking units. He had to salvage what forces he could and form a defensive line until he knew the full extent of his enemy's dispositions.

It took almost three hours for his warriors to fight their way out of the trap. The enemy's flanking attacks were finally driven back, but not before the skeletal rearguard had been overwhelmed. The ratmen surged forwards, scrambling over heaps of shattered bones, and harried the withdrawing skeletons until they fetched up against fortified defensive positions three levels above. The invaders hurled themselves at the fortifications three times, only to be repulsed with heavy losses. After the third attack, the survivors paused, muttering and snarling to one another as they considered their next move. Nagash used the time to further reinforce his lines and prepare for more flanking attacks, but after half an hour the invaders slowly withdrew to their own hastily-formed lines.

The first battle of Nagashizzar had reached its bloody, inconclusive end.

—<TWO>—

Manifest Destinies

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 97th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1320 Imperial Reckoning)*

Old Jabari grinned and picked up the wooden cup with one gnarled hand. He gave it a good shake, rattling the ivory dice inside. Alcadizzar had learned to hate that sound.

The scarred Rasetran bent forwards and squinted into the depths of the cup. “Hmm,” he said cheerfully. “Interesting.”

Alcadizzar folded his arms, glaring at the dispositions of his army. Four spear companies were arrayed in a slightly curving line before the oasis, their left flank anchored by the ruins of the old caravan post, their right covered by his chariots, situated on a low dune to the south-east. His archers still held the caravan post, despite repeated attacks by enemy skirmishers. The survivors of the last attack had retreated to the edge of a dune to the north-west, where it looked like they might be re-forming for another attack. In the centre, his companies were hard-pressed by enemy infantry, and his fourth company was on the verge of breaking. His reserves—a single company of spearmen—waited in the shade of the palm trees surrounding the oasis. He hesitated on committing them just yet, for the enemy cavalry had yet to make an appearance.

Jabari set the cup aside and plucked a wooden figure from the tray at his side. “There’s a thundering of hooves off to your left!” the tutor declared. “Bronze glints in the noonday sun! There are shouts and confused cries from the ruins!” The Rasetran leaned across the wide sand table and placed the elegantly carved figure of a mounted horseman on Alcadizzar’s flank—*behind* the ruins of the caravan post.

The prince’s eyes widened. “Where in the name of all the gods did *they* come from?”

Jabari shrugged his wide shoulders in feigned bewilderment, but his deep-set eyes glinted with mischief. In his prime, he had been Rasetra’s Master of Horse, and had ridden in more than a dozen campaigns against the city’s foes. He pointed a scarred finger at the ragged, knife-like cleft carved through the sand off to the left of the ruins. “Given the shouts of surprise coming from the ruins, I’d hazard a guess that they came galloping out of that wadi.”

“What? No, that’s not possible!” Alcadizzar sputtered. “Look—the far end of the wadi’s in full view of my archers! We’d have seen them coming!”

Jabari nodded sagely. “So it would seem, so it would seem,” he replied agreeably. “Of course, there could also be a narrow branch connecting it to that larger wadi

further north,” he pointed out, indicating a much wider cleft that curved behind the dunes further north. “No way to tell from here, of course. Perhaps if your scouts had explored the area more thoroughly the day before you might have learned for certain.”

Alcadizzar sighed. “Very well,” he grumbled. “How many?”

Jabari smiled and picked up the cup again. The dice rattled. “Thousands, your aides say. Many thousands!”

The prince’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Jabari always portrayed his aides as credulous nitwits. It hardly seemed realistic. He studied the sand table for a moment. The carved mahogany figure representing him and his retinue was positioned on a low dune just behind the oasis, dangerously close to the swift-moving enemy horsemen. “All right. How many can *I* see?”

Jabari shook the dice cup. “You can’t tell. Too much dust.”

Of course, Alcadizzar thought sourly. He studied the battlefield a moment longer, then nodded. “Shift the reserve company to the left, double-quick, and order them to attack the enemy horsemen.”

“Very well—”

“And I send *two* runners instead of one, to make certain that the order gets through,” Alcadizzar interjected. He wasn’t going to make *that* mistake again.

Jabari’s smile widened. “I hear and obey, great one,” he replied. The tutor rattled the dice in the cup a few more times, considered the results, and then began shifting the positions of the troops on the table.

The prince reached for the goblet of watered wine resting on the edge of the table and sipped thoughtfully, his gaze wandering to the tall windows that lined the western wall of the chamber. There were few clouds in the sky, despite the summer season; the late afternoon sun outlined the dark hills beyond Lahmia’s walls and sent shafts of mellow, golden light through the tall windowpanes. A good day to be riding, he thought wistfully, watching a caravan heading out through the city’s western gate. The traders were leaving very late in the day; possibly there had been delays loading their goods, or perhaps they’d encountered difficulties obtaining the proper permits from the city magistrates. As it was, they would be lucky to make it up the winding hill roads and onto the edge of the Golden Plain by nightfall. From there, it would be a week to cross the plain—providing they had no trouble from the bandit gangs that roamed the area—and then on to Lybaras, or Rasetra, or even farther west, past forlorn Mahrak and through the Valley of Kings to the great cities of the west. They could even be heading for Khemri, he realised, and felt a sharp pang of envy.

Some day, Alcadizzar told himself. Some day he would be ready. But *when*?

All roads in Nehekhara led to Lahmia, the opulent City of the Dawn. The wealth of the great city and the wise leadership of its rulers had led the Nehekharans out of the dark age wrought by Nagash the Usurper; indeed, the bloodline of its ruling dynasty was worshipped as the last vestige of divinity in a land that had been rendered bereft of its gods.

Lahmia’s power and influence was so preeminent that it had become custom for the ruling families of the other great cities to send their young heirs to be educated at the City of the Dawn. They were borne to the great city, amid much pomp and

ceremony, as soon as they were old enough to travel—all except for Alcadizzar, that was. His mother Hathor, Queen of Rasetra, had journeyed to Lahmia while he was still in the womb; her pregnancy had been fraught with trouble and the royal midwives were doubtful that she would deliver her child. Desperate, the queen turned to the only source of aid left to her, the Temple of Blood. There, she held a vigil in the presence of the goddess, praying for the prince's life.

Before the dawn—or so the story went—the high priestess of the temple came to Hathor, saying that her pleas had been answered. The goddess had spoken, and her child would survive. Every week afterwards, she was brought to the temple, where she was given an elixir to drink that had been blessed by the goddess herself. Two months later, almost to the very hour that the high priestess first spoke to her, Hathor gave birth to Alcadizzar. The queen had remained with him at the temple for a full year afterwards; then she placed him in the care of the Lahmian royal household and returned to Rasetra. Alcadizzar had never met his father, King Aten-heru, nor did he have any memories of his mother, who died in childbirth two years after returning home.

The insistent rattling of dice disturbed the prince's reverie. Alcadizzar turned back to the table and frowned. Jabari smiled, shaking the cup. "What are your orders, great one?" he asked.

On the battlefield, Alcadizzar's reserve company had obeyed its orders with surprising speed, altering their formation to the left and charging over the open space behind the oasis to make contact with the oncoming enemy horsemen. Now both units were locked in melee. The spearmen had suffered the worst of it so far, having borne the brunt of the cavalry's charge, but now the horsemen's momentum was exhausted. Given time, the infantry would gain the upper hand.

Unfortunately, time was not a luxury that Alcadizzar's fictional army possessed. As the cavalry attack began, the rest of the enemy force renewed its attacks all along the length of the battle-line. The skirmishers had rallied and once more charged the caravan post, locking his archers in brutal hand-to-hand combat. In the centre, the enemy spear companies were driving forwards, despite terrible casualties, and his fourth company had broken at last. The survivors were retreating into the oasis and the triumphant enemy company was swinging to the right, preparing to attack his third company in the flank.

The prince took in the situation at a glance. His army was balanced on a knife edge. If he didn't shore up the centre, he was finished. "Order the chariots off the hill," he said to Jabari. "Have them screen their movements behind the oasis, then swing around and charge the enemy spear company on our flank. I also send one of my senior nobles to rally the broken spear company and hold them in reserve inside the oasis."

Jabari nodded sagely and rattled his dice. He peered into the cup. "There is a problem," he replied.

Alcadizzar gritted his teeth. There were *always* problems. "What now?"

Jabari pointed to his reserve company. "The commander of the unit has been killed, as well as his champion. The company is wavering."

The prince leaned against the edge of the table, looming over the two innocuous-looking wooden figures. If the reserve company broke, the cavalry would be free to

charge his chariots, preventing them from saving his centre. He had to either rally the reserve company somehow, or stop the horsemen. Preferably both. Unfortunately, he didn't have anyone left to commit to the fight.

Alcadizzar paused. That wasn't entirely true. He reached over the map and picked up a small, unassuming piece of wood carved in the shape of a sphinx, its fearsome head crowned with a king's headdress.

"I and my retinue will attack the enemy horsemen in the flank," the prince said. He repositioned the sphinx next to his embattled reserve unit.

Jabari rubbed his weathered chin. "Risky," he said. "Very risky. You could get a sword in your guts. And there's no one giving orders to the rest of the army while you're off playing soldier."

"The rest of the army's committed." He shrugged. "Time for me to do my part."

The old Master of Horse shook his head. "A fine thing to say when you're talking about pieces of wood," he grumbled, but for a moment there was a glint of admiration in Jabari's eye. "Very well, great one. On your head be it."

The dice rattled. Alcadizzar's tutor contemplated the results, like a long-lost oracle. First he moved the prince's chariots off the hill and placed them against the rear ranks of the flanking enemy spear company. Then he bent over the map and plucked Alcadizzar's archers from the caravan post.

"The enemy's skirmishers have taken the caravan post," he told the prince. "There's no way to tell how many of them are left, because none of yours lived to tell the tale." Before Alcadizzar could protest, Jabari turned his attention to the chariots. "Your charioteers have taken the enemy spear company by surprise; their initial charge has wrought terrible carnage on their rear ranks. So far, however, the enemy continues to hold their ground."

Then the old tutor turned to the battle against the enemy horsemen. "Your charge here likewise surprised the enemy," he said. "You and your bodyguard have penetrated the formation, but your foes are putting up a stiff fight. You are swiftly surrounded."

Alcadizzar's eyes narrowed on Jabari. "What about the spearmen?"

Jabari nodded. "Your appearance has rallied them. They are pushing back hard against the enemy horsemen. Will you withdraw at this point?"

The prince frowned. "Of course not!"

Jabari shrugged. He raised the cup. Dice rattled. He thought for a moment, then sighed.

"Most of your bodyguards have fallen, struck down by enemy swords and axes," he said. "You've been wounded, but remain in the saddle. Your spearmen are fighting to reach you, but they seem a long way off."

"What about the chariots?"

"You have no idea," the instructor said. "They're the least of your worries right now."

"But—surely I can see them?" Alcadizzar stammered.

"All you can see right now is dust and rearing horses," Jabari said. "Men are screaming. Blows are hammering at your shield and sword. It's all you can do to stay in the saddle."

“My bodyguards—”

“They’re gone,” Jabari said. “All of them.”

Before Alcadizzar could reply, Jabari rattled the dice again. “There is a terrible blow to your side. You tumble from the saddle. Hooves churn the ground all around you, missing you by inches.”

Alcadizzar’s eyes went wide. “Wait. That’s not what I—”

“Men loom over you, shouting and swearing from their saddles. One of them raises his sword. And then...”

The prince’s heart sank.

“There is a mighty shout from your right. Your spearmen hurl themselves at the enemy, frantic to save you from their clutches. The enemy horsemen are stunned by the ferocity of the attack and as dozens are killed, their courage breaks. They break off, fleeing back in the direction of the wadi.”

Jabari bent over the map, shifting the figure of the enemy cavalry back towards the winding gully. Alcadizzar’s mouth was dry. Belatedly, he remembered the goblet of wine in his hand and took a quick drink.

The old cavalryman continued to work. “Your men find you a horse that belonged to one of your bodyguards and put you on it.” Jabari turned his attention to the centre. “When your messengers are able to reach you again, you learn that your chariots have broken the enemy spear company.” He picked up the unit’s wooden figure and placed it at the foot of a dune well behind the rest of the enemy army. “Your chariots are now poised to strike the next enemy company in the flank.”

The prince felt a flush of triumph. “Give the order to charge!” he said. “Meanwhile, I will lead the reserve company back to the oasis and attempt to rally the broken spear company there as well.”

At that point, the battle had turned. Alcadizzar could see that his troops were stronger and had momentum on their side. The chariots drove off a second enemy company before having to withdraw themselves, but by that point he had rallied the survivors of the fourth spear company and sent both them and the reserve spear company back into the fray. Their arrival tipped the balance, forcing the rest of the enemy army to withdraw. Jabari, ever stubborn, fought a bitter rearguard action against Alcadizzar’s warriors. The sun had nearly set by the time the old tutor declared that the battle was finally over.

“A narrow victory,” Jabari declared, surveying the battlefield afterwards. “You were very lucky. Do you know what you did wrong?”

“I didn’t scout that damned wadi before the battle,” the prince said ruefully.

Jabari nodded. “That’s right. You should have never left those horsemen to get behind you like that. Always know the site of battle better than your enemy.”

Alcadizzar watched Jabari gather up the wooden figures from the table and set them on a shelf along the wall at the far side of the room. “Was it a mistake to charge the enemy horsemen?” he asked.

The old tutor paused. “What do you think?”

“It seemed like the best chance of winning the battle.”

“You could have been killed.”

The young prince shrugged. “Isn’t it a king’s duty to protect his people to the death?”

To Alcadizzar’s surprise, Jabari threw back his head and laughed. “Most kings prefer it the other way round.”

“Well, *I’m* not afraid to die,” Alcadizzar said haughtily.

“That’s because right now you’ve got nothing to lose,” Jabari said. “Wait until you have a wife and a family. Wait until you have real people depending on you, not blocks of wood.”

Alcadizzar folded his arms stubbornly, stung by the dismissive tone in Jabari’s voice. “It wouldn’t make a difference. When I rule Khemri, I’ll defend the city with my life.”

“Then no doubt history will remember you as a great king,” Jabari replied. “But your reign will be a short one, I fear.” He bowed to the prince. “Congratulations on another victory, Alcadizzar. By tomorrow, I expect you to be ready to continue your pursuit of the retreating army... and take steps to deal with the peasant revolt that has broken out in your capital.”

Alcadizzar returned the bow, permitting himself a fleeting smile at Jabari’s rare praise. “Thank you, Jabari. I—” Suddenly the prince stood bolt upright, his brows knitting together in a frown. “Peasant revolt? *What* peasant revolt?” He glanced about, searching for Jabari, but the old cavalry master had already slipped silently from the room.

With a sigh, Alcadizzar set his empty wine cup on the edge of the table. “It never ends,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Never.”

“All things end, master,” said a quiet voice from behind Alcadizzar. “Or so the priests say.”

The prince turned at the sound of the voice. A gaunt, shaven-headed man stood just to the right of the doorway at the eastern end of the room, head bowed and hands clasped at his waist. His skin was a peculiar shade of pale mahogany, with the shadowy lines of old tattoos twining sinuously along his throat and the sides of his skull.

“Ubaid,” Alcadizzar said, addressing the man. “Forgive me. I didn’t realise you were there.”

“I didn’t wish to disturb your study,” Ubaid answered. He was a man of subdued manner and indeterminate age, who had been the prince’s personal servant since he was a babe. In all that time, Alcadizzar had never known him to smile, or frown, or sneer; his expression was leaden, his movements slow and hesitant. Ubaid had the aura of a man burdened by the weight of the world. If the man had a family—or a life at all beyond the palace walls—he had never spoken of it to Alcadizzar.

“You fought well,” the servant observed. “Are you not pleased with your victory?”

Alcadizzar ran a fingertip along the metal rim of the cup, his handsome face pensive. “Every victory just leads to another set of problems,” he grumbled. “I fail to see the point anymore.”

“The point is to learn,” Ubaid answered patiently. “You are privileged to have the very best tutors in the land, master. Their wisdom is worth its weight in gold.”

“Really? It doesn’t feel like wisdom anymore, Ubaid. More like mockery.” Alcadizzar glowered at the miniature battlefield. “Jabari never lets up. *None* of them do. What am I doing wrong?”

“Wrong?” For the first time in Alcadizzar’s memory, Ubaid sounded faintly shocked. “How can you say such a thing, master? The blood of the divine runs through your veins. You are stronger, swifter and sharper of mind than any of your peers, and you well know it.”

“Then why am I still here?” Alcadizzar rounded on Ubaid, his dark eyes flashing. “I’m thirty years old! None of the other heirs remained past their eighteenth birthday. If I’m so much better than everyone else, why do I remain behind?”

Ubaid sighed. “Is it not obvious? Because you are meant for greater things, Alcadizzar. You alone will one day rise to the throne of Khemri, greatest of the cities of the west. For all the work your father has done to resettle and rebuild Khemri, it will fall to *you* to restore it to its former glory.” The servant slowly straightened, folding his thin arms across his chest. “The great queen has her eye upon you, master. She... expects great things of you.”

Alcadizzar had a hard time believing that the stiff, somnolent Queen of Lahmia paid him any mind at all. For the most part, the royal heirs lived in their own world, separate from the affairs of the court, attended by a select cadre of servants and tutors. In all his years at the palace, he’d been in her presence only a handful of times and she had scarcely spoken to him at all.

“I know very well what’s expected of me,” the prince answered. “Believe me, I do. It’s all I’ve ever known.” He swept his hand over the mock battlefield. “Tactics. Strategy. Statesmanship. History, law and commerce. Philosophy, theology and alchemy. Within these walls I’ve fought campaigns, forged alliances, crafted trade agreements and designed great buildings. I’ve learned to fight with sword and spear, learned how to ride, how to speak and sing and a hundred other things I can’t ever imagine having a use for.” He leaned against the table and sighed. “I’m ready, Ubaid. *I know* I am. Khemri is waiting for me. When will the queen let me go?”

The servant joined Alcadizzar at the table. He leaned forwards slightly, studying the prince’s troubled face. “A delegation from Rasetra arrived today, led by your uncle Khenti. He was in audience with the queen all afternoon.”

Alcadizzar scowled. He’d never met Khenti, but he knew from Jabari that his uncle was one of Rasetra’s most powerful nobles, and a force to be reckoned with. “What does he want?”

“Why, you, of course,” Ubaid replied. A strange expression passed like a shadow across the servant’s face. “He must be a very persuasive man. I’ve been told to prepare you for a second audience later tonight.”

Alcadizzar straightened, pulse quickening. “An audience? In the royal court?” Such a thing was rare and portentous indeed.

Ubaid shook his head. “No, master. At the Temple of Blood.” The ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You and your uncle have been summoned by the high priestess herself.”

“For you, holy one,” the priestess said, her voice muffled by the exquisite golden mask she wore. She bowed her head, lifting the golden goblet to Neferata with both hands. “An offer of love and life eternal.”

Neferata favoured the priestess with a faint smile. She reached out with long, cold fingers and plucked the goblet from the supplicant’s hands. The thin metal was deliciously warm to the touch. As always, the thirst cut through her like a knife. No matter how many nights went by, it never lost its razor edge.

Carefully, with perfect, unnatural grace, she raised the cup to her lips. Hot and coppery, yet ineffably sweet, it suffused her entire body in moments, filling it with heat and strength. She drank slowly but steadily, savouring the sensations of mortal life. When she was done, she licked a stray speck of red from the goblet’s rim with the tip of her tongue, then handed back the empty vessel. She could already feel the blush of vigour fading like heat seeping from the sides of a cooling kettle. In just a few hours the thirst would return, as sharp and cruel as ever.

“This isn’t wise,” said Lord Ankhat, scowling into the depths of his own cup. In life, he had been a handsome, charismatic nobleman, with a charming smile and dark, piercing eyes. Slightly shorter than most Nehekharans, but trim and physically fit even into middle age, he acted with the casual authority of a man born to wealth and power. “The Rasetrans are out of patience. Just give them the damned boy and be done with it.”

The nobleman’s rich, commanding voice echoed in the dimly lit vault of the temple’s inner sanctum. Above them, lit by shafts of moonlight that filtered through narrow gaps in the chamber’s ceiling, rose the alabaster statue of Asaph, goddess of love and magic and ancient patron of the city itself. The blessings of the gods had allowed the Nehekharans to prosper amongst the desert sands for thousands of years, and in all that time, the sacred covenant between man and the divine had been made flesh in the eldest daughters of the Lahmian royal bloodline. Though the covenant had been broken centuries ago during the war against the Usurper, the power of the blood remained, and it was this that the temple purported to venerate.

In truth, the temple served as the secret heart of Lahmia’s de facto empire, and provided both fortress and refuge for its immortal masters. When Nagash was defeated at the fall of Mahrak, more than four hundred years ago, the rebel kings of the east had pursued the Usurper’s defeated army back to Khemri. The rulers of Rasetra and Lybaras meant to end Nagash’s reign of terror for all time, but their erstwhile ally, young King Lamashizzar of Lahmia, had different plans. With the aid of the traitor Arkhan the Black, Lamashizzar found the blasphemous Tomes of Nagash and smuggled them out of the ruined city. The King of Lahmia sought the secrets of eternal life, but in the end his schemes were undone by his young queen, who had mastered Nagash’s arts more swiftly than he. Though Lamashizzar had struck first, poisoning Neferata with the venom of the long-lost sphinx, she had been reborn through a combination of dark sorcery and blood.

With a gesture from Neferata, the priestess bearing the cup withdrew. She turned to a second priestess, who waited with downcast eyes and held a curved mask of beaten gold in her hands. The features of the mask were a cold reflection of Neferata’s own, crafted by master artisans in her youth to conceal her divine beauty from unworthy eyes. She had been forced to wear it every day of her life when in

public and, like her forebears, she was meant to wear it to her tomb. Neferata closed her eyes as the cool metal was pressed to her face, reminded, as she always was, of her own death, centuries before.

“Alcadizzar is not ready. Not yet,” she replied. Her tone was smooth and melodic, as soothing as cool water in the desert. It was not the sort of tone a sane man could resist, no matter what he felt in his heart, but Ankhat was unmoved.

“Then you’re flirting with war,” the nobleman said darkly. “Khenti all but spat at the queen’s feet. He *demand*ed we hand over Alcadizzar immediately. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Neferata straightened swiftly and glared at Ankhat. Her full lips parted behind the concealing mask, revealing a pair of curved, leonine fangs. Though he couldn’t see her expression, the force of her stare caused the immortal to stiffen.

“You forget who rules here, Ankhat.” Her voice lowered to a soft growl. “Khenti can say all he likes to the queen. If he wants Alcadizzar, he will have to deal with *me*.”

A figure stirred from the shadows near the entrance to the sanctum. Lord Ushoran came forwards, holding his own empty cup loosely in his hand. Though distantly related to the royal family and in life a powerful nobleman himself, Ushoran was nothing like the dynamic, charming Ankhat. He was of average height, with bland, average features that failed to leave a lasting impression in the mind. The Lord of Masks was a man who loved his intrigues, and over the centuries his network of spies had spread all over Nehekhara.

“It is not merely Khenti that you contend with,” Ushoran said. “My agents in Rasetra tell me that Aten-heru has warned his nobles that they could be called to arms at any moment. What is more, the king has sent a number of letters to the rulers of Lybaras, Ka-Sabar—even far-off Zandri.” He shrugged. “It’s possible that Aten-heru *expects* you to refuse him once again. It would give him something to rally the other cities around and force a confrontation between us and a coalition of most of the other great cities.”

“If that happens, we would be undone,” Ankhat declared. “We have no means of enforcing our trade agreements and loan obligations at this point, also the other cities have grown increasingly resentful of the gold they pay us every year. Zandri has been testing our resolve for years now; if Aten-heru declares he’ll no longer honour his obligations to us, the other cities will surely follow.”

“And what of the army?” Neferata demanded. “It’s been five years. Are they ready to fight, or not?”

Ankhat sighed. “The process of rebuilding is a slow one. We’ve restored the army to its former size, but the troops are inexperienced. They’re a credible threat to a weak city like Lybaras or Mahrak, but the Rasetrans are another matter entirely.”

Neferata beckoned, and another group of priestesses hurried from the shadows to set a carved mahogany chair at the feet of the great statue. There were never more than three hundred priestesses and acolytes in the temple at any time, and the highest of the orders served as her personal handmaidens. They were entirely her creatures, bound by Neferata’s seductive allure and her implacable will. She settled lightly into the chair and allowed the priestesses to hover about her, arranging her golden vestments and tugging at the sleeves of her white silk robe.

“Alcadizzar must remain, whether Khenti wishes it or not,” she told the two lords. “And the Rasetrans will have no choice but to accept it. You will see.” She waved the priestesses away. “Now go. Khenti and his retainers are drawing near.”

Ushoran withdrew into the shadows without a word. Ankhat remained a moment longer, his eyes glinting angrily.

“Your obsession with this man is going to destroy us all,” he said to her. “You mark my words, Neferata. One day, Lahmia will burn, and Alcadizzar will be the cause.”

Neferata straightened, swift as an adder, but before she could snarl a reply Ankhat was gone. Moments later, the great doors of the outer sanctum swung silently open to admit Lord Khenti and his retinue.

Khenti was a man of middle years, but like nearly all of Rasetra’s noblemen, he was still in fighting trim. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a swordsman’s thick wrists and sinewy forearms, and a blunt, pugnacious face that harked back to Rakh-amn-hotep, the city’s legendary warrior-king.

Neferata noted with some amusement that Khenti had chosen to attend the audience in full battledress; a heavy iron scale vest, no doubt obtained at great expense from the new foundries at Ka-Sabar, worn over a thick vest and calf-length kilt of thunder-lizard hide. His left hand rested on the worn hilt of a heavy khopesh sheathed at his hip and his dark eyes swept the shadows of the sanctum, as though expecting some kind of ambush. She studied the nobleman’s belligerent expression and smiled mirthlessly, running her tongue along the needle-like tips of her fangs.

“Enter and be welcome,” she said to the Rasetrans. Her rich voice resonated through the sanctum, augmented only slightly by the power in her veins. Khenti’s bodyguards slowed their swift pace almost at once, their shoulders relaxing and their hands sliding from the hilts of their weapons. Their master, however, was apparently made of sterner stuff; if anything, Khenti’s suspicious scowl only deepened, though he no longer had eyes for anything but Neferata.

“Be at peace, and know that the power of the divine abides in the blood of the chosen,” she continued, focussing a bit more of her attention on Khenti. This close, she could hear the whisper of blood in his veins and measure the drumbeat of his heart. “You honour us with your presence, Lord Khenti. Have you an offering to propitiate the memory of the gods?”

The nobleman grunted. “I made my offerings to Ptra at noontime,” he said disdainfully, “and at a proper temple, down in the city.”

Neferata gave a faint nod. Though the sacred covenant had been broken and the holy city of Mahrak ravaged during the war with the Usurper, the temples to the gods still lingered in most of the great cities. Attempts to spread Lahmia’s cult across Nehekhara had so far met with little success. “It is virtuous to respect the old ways,” she replied neutrally.

Khenti drew himself straighter, chin raised defiantly. “Would that your queen did as well!” he declared. “Bad enough that Lahmia holds the royal heirs of the other cities as hostage to its greed; now it denies Khemri its rightful king!”

Neferata folded her hands in her lap. “Greed, my lord?” she said. Her smile widened. “Am I mistaken, or was Khemri not rebuilt with Lahmian gold?”

Khenti folded his muscular arms. “Don’t play games of rhetoric with me, priestess,” he growled. “Either the Queen of Lahmia gives up Alcadizzar, or else she admits that she’s holding him as a prisoner and accepts the consequences of her mistake.”

Neferata chuckled. Aten-heru had been a fool to send Khenti, she thought. This was going to be simpler than she’d imagined. “Blunt, but well said,” she told the Rasetran. “I would expect no less from a man such as yourself.” She laced the words with another slight caress of power and watched Khenti relax slightly. He believed that he had the upper hand now. With the right words, she could make him believe anything she wished.

“The hour grows late, priestess,” Khenti said. “Why is it you wished to see me?”

Neferata studied the Rasetran thoughtfully. “You came here seeking the release of Prince Alcadizzar,” she said carefully. “But there has been a misunderstanding, my lord. The queen did not speak of it, because it was not her place to do so.”

Khenti frowned. “Not her *place*?”

She met his scowl coolly. “Prince Alcadizzar is not a guest of the royal house. For the last twelve years, he has remained in Lahmia at the behest of the temple.”

For a moment, the Rasetran was too stunned to speak. “The temple? How in the name of all the gods—”

“All will be explained in due course,” Neferata said, forestalling Khenti’s outrage with an upraised hand. “We await only the arrival of the prince. And see—he comes, even now.”

She could hear Alcadizzar’s approach through the temple’s antechamber; swift, sure steps, light and precise as a dancer’s. Neferata could read much into those movements; after thirty years, she knew the prince more intimately than any lover. The prince was in high spirits, hastening to the audience with eagerness and keen interest. She straightened slightly, listening to the long, powerful drumbeats of Alcadizzar’s heart, and felt her own pulse quicken in response.

He swept into the outer sanctum like a summer storm. The still air was suddenly tense with pent-up energy; heads turned at once, seeking the source. A stir went through the Rasetrans. Khenti’s bodyguards sank to their knees at once, several of the warriors crying out in wonder at the sight of the prince. Khenti gaped at Alcadizzar for a moment, his eyes widening in disbelief. Then, with a shout of joy he strode forwards and gripped the prince’s forearms in greeting.

Alcadizzar favoured Khenti and the bodyguards with one of his dazzling smiles. Taller even than Khenti and powerfully built, his presence filled the shadowy chamber with warmth, vitality and strength. Such was his charm that within moments the Rasetrans were smiling and laughing as though in the presence of a long-lost friend.

“Look at you!” Khenti marvelled, staring up at his nephew’s face. He gripped Alcadizzar’s muscular forearms tighter, as though fearful that the prince might be a mirage. “Big as a damned thunder-lizard!” He rotated the prince’s arms and studied his hands. “You’ve been training hard, I see. Good.” The nobleman frowned questioningly. “What about your studies? Has that old horse Jabari been keeping you busy?”

Alcadizzar chuckled. “He vexes me every single day, uncle.”

“Good, good!” Khenti said with a laugh. “There’s no better campaigner in all of Nehekhara. If you can hold your own against the likes of him, there’s no army in the land you can’t defeat.”

“I can well believe it,” the prince replied. Absently, he waved for the bodyguards to rise from the floor. The warriors responded at once, admiration evident in their eyes. Neferata watched the exchange with bemusement, as she always did when Alcadizzar was in the company of lesser mortals. Though he’d been exhaustively educated in the social arts, the prince still had a disturbing tendency to ignore propriety and treat everyone, even *servants*, as his equals. It was degrading to watch, but Alcadizzar didn’t care in the least, and the common folk worshipped him for it. Neferata couldn’t fathom it; it was the one aspect of his personality that remained a complete mystery to her.

“How is my father?” the prince asked. Alcadizzar gave Khenti a wink. “He hasn’t forgotten about me, has he?”

“Certainly not!” Khenti said. “He thinks of you always and awaits the day of your homecoming.” The nobleman seemed to remember Neferata, and turned back to the dais. His good humour evaporated like rain on the desert sands. “A homecoming that’s twelve years overdue.”

“Indeed,” Neferata said. She laced the word with power and savoured its effect on the assembled men. They responded to her at once, forgetting their high spirits and focussing on her once more. All except Alcadizzar. The prince favoured her with a bemused expression and one of his intense, curious stares, as though she were a puzzle that demanded a solution.

The intensity of his stare transfixed her. The power of his intellect was almost tangible, gripping her like a pair of invisible hands. Her dead heart raced. Was this how mortals felt when she addressed them? Did they feel this mixture of anxiety and exaltation?

Here was a man to give even the immortals pause, like one of the great heroes from Nehekhara legend. But it wasn’t the power of the gods that coursed like lightning through Alcadizzar’s veins, but Neferata’s own dark magic. While he was still in the womb, his mother had been persuaded to drink an elixir of youth and vigour formulated by Neferata herself. It had made Alcadizzar a virtual god among men, like the mythical Ushabti of ancient times. Now, at last, his abilities were nearly at their peak. The time had come to reveal the destiny that awaited him—one she had built painstakingly for the last thirty years.

“Welcome to the Temple of Blood, great prince,” she said, nodding her head in greeting. “It gives me great joy to see you here.” She extended her hand and pointed to a spot on the stone floor, not far from where Alcadizzar stood. “It was not so long ago that your blessed mother knelt here and prayed to the goddess to bless you with health and good fortune.”

Alcadizzar nodded sombrely. “Yes. I’ve heard the tale.”

“She was very brave,” Neferata said, affecting as much warmth in her voice as she could. She had to be careful with the prince; she knew from experience that his perceptions were much keener than normal men. “Your mother was in ill health, but she braved the long journey from Rasetra to pray here, at the temple, in hopes of

saving your life.” Neferata inclined her head to Khenti. “You remember, don’t you, my lord?”

Khenti’s pugnacious face turned pinched, as though he’d bit into a lemon. “Aye, I recall,” he said, disapproving of the deed but unwilling to speak ill of the dead.

Neferata smiled behind her mask. “The goddess heard your mother’s plea and was moved.” She gestured towards Alcadizzar with a sweep of her hand. “And look at the man you have become! There is not another like you in all of Nehekhara, Prince Alcadizzar. *She* has seen to that. Now it is incumbent upon you to honour the great gifts that you have been given.”

Khenti frowned. He opened his mouth to protest, but Alcadizzar unintentionally cut him off.

“I’m deeply aware of my obligations to the people of Khemri,” the prince said, in that same, sombre tone. “I’ve spent my entire life preparing for the day I become king.”

“So you have,” Neferata said, and there was no need to manufacture the pride in her voice. “You will be a great king, Alcadizzar. But we at the temple believe that you are destined for much more.”

“Destined for what?” Khenti asked, having recovered his composure.

Neferata leaned back in her chair and fixed Alcadizzar with a steady gaze. “What do you know of the Temple of Blood, my prince?”

Alcadizzar answered at once. “The temple is based on the premise that the gods and their gifts have been taken from us, but the bloodlines they have blessed throughout Nehekhara’s history remain. They are our sole remaining connection to the divine.”

“Preposterous,” Khenti sneered.

“And yet the proof stands before you,” Neferata said. “Alcadizzar’s mother came here after she’d spent months praying in vain at the old temples of Rasetra. It was here that her prayers were answered, were they not?”

Khenti’s eyes narrowed, but he made no attempt to gainsay her. Alcadizzar, on the other hand, rubbed his chin thoughtfully and said, “If the gods no longer take an active hand in our affairs, how is it that the goddess answered my mother’s prayers?”

Neferata nodded approvingly. “Remember, oh prince, the gods are gone, but the sacred bloodlines remain. Earlier, I spoke in figurative terms. The truth is that your mother spoke not to the goddess, but to the nascent power of the blood running through your veins.”

“I’m descended from a sacred bloodline?” Alcadizzar replied, both intrigued and dubious at the same time.

“One of the greatest and most venerated of all,” Neferata replied. “We suspected as much when you were born, but it has taken many years to produce the evidence.”

She clapped her hands gently and a priestess appeared from the shadows, bearing a newly bound book in her hands. The priestess set the expensive tome in the prince’s hands, bowed deeply, and then withdrew.

“Naturally, both of you are well familiar with the sacred ties between Lahmia and Khemri,” Neferata began. “Since the time of Settra the Magnificent, the kings of the

Living City have wed the eldest daughters of the Lahmian royal house, who were the living embodiment of the covenant with the gods.”

Alcadizzar opened the tome reverently and began to peruse its pages. “So the blood of the royal heirs of Khemri was made sacred as well.”

“Just so,” Neferata replied. “And the Lahmian royal house has gone to great pains to record each and every family line that has been produced as a result. The documents have been maintained here at the palace for many hundreds of years.”

Neferata considered the book in Alcadizzar’s hands. The information within couldn’t be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, but Lord Ushoran was certain that it would survive all but the most learned scrutiny. All that mattered to her was that Alcadizzar himself believed it.

“Now, Rasetra’s origins are well known; the city was originally a colony of distant Khemri, founded during the reign of King Khetep, some four-and-a-half centuries ago.” During the time of my father, she thought. Neferata still remembered how King Lamasheptra had scoffed at the thought of the small settlement at the edge of the deadly southern jungle. It was their constant, ruthless struggle for survival that had transformed them into a warrior culture both respected and feared throughout Nehekhara.

“When King Khetep made ready to return home, he chose one of his ablest lieutenants, a nobleman named Ur-Amnet, to govern the new settlement. His son, Mukhtail, became the first king of Rasetra, and every king that followed is descended from his line.”

Now Khenti’s interest was piqued as well. “But Ur-Amnet was not part of Khemri’s royal house,” he said. “His family was a noble one, but its lineage uncertain.”

“Until now,” Neferata replied. “We searched the records here at Lahmia and despatched agents to search for confirmation among the old temples at Khemri. Ur-Amnet is descended from Hapt-amn-koreb, who was a great warrior and Master of Horse to the mighty King Nemuret. Hapt-amn-koreb’s lineage is murkier still, but after many years of searching it was determined why—he was descended from Amenophis, fifth son of Settra the Magnificent.”

Alcadizzar closed his eyes for a moment. “Amenophis was disowned by Settra during the tenth year of his reign,” he said, calling upon his years of study.

“Correct. He was suspected of assassinating his older brother Djoser. Though it was never proved, Settra cast him out nonetheless. But that is irrelevant. The bloodline remains true. You, Alcadizzar, bear the ancient birthright of the gods.”

“What does this mean?” Khenti asked, taking the bait.

“That depends on Prince Alcadizzar,” Neferata replied. “There is a unique opportunity here to restore Khemri—and by extension, all of Nehekhara—to a measure of the glory it once possessed. If the prince proved himself worthy, we could witness the dawn of a new golden age of peace and prosperity, and put the dark memory of Nagash behind us forever.”

Alcadizzar raised his head from the book. “What do you propose?”

Neferata leaned forwards. “A new union,” she said. “One not of flesh, but of spirit. Lahmia and Khemri can be united once more by the veneration of our shared bloodline.”

Khenti's frown deepened. "No, I don't think—" but Alcadizzar placed a hand on his shoulder and the older Rasetran fell silent.

"What would Khemri stand to gain from such a union?"

"Why, all of the west," Neferata said. "Right now, Lahmia rules Nehekhara in all but name. What I propose is to divide the land between us. The trade and loan obligations of Zandri, Numas and Ka-Sabar would be placed in your hands. It would ensure Khemri's growth and prosperity for centuries, and restore a substantial measure of its political power in a single stroke."

That got even Khenti's attention. He looked to Alcadizzar, who'd turned pensive once more.

"What would you require of me in return?"

"For the union to be consummated, you must pledge yourself to the temple," Neferata said. "Lahmia will have its high priestess, and Khemri its priest king."

The prince sighed inwardly. "How long would such an initiation take?"

Neferata felt a rush of triumph. She knew him better than he knew himself. "That is up to you, of course," she said. "For most initiates, the path to the temple's highest rank is a long and difficult one. What might take them a lifetime, you could accomplish in a decade or less."

"A *decade*!" Khenti turned to the prince. "Khemri needs you *now*, great one. This... this is too much!"

"Khenti is perhaps right," Neferata said slowly. Her eyes never left Alcadizzar's. "It is a great deal to ask of any man. But the potential is equally great, is it not?"

The prince glanced at Khenti's worried face. "What if I refuse?"

"Then your time here in Lahmia will be at an end," she replied.

"I'm... free to go?"

"Of course," Neferata said. "The choice is yours, oh prince. Do as you think best for your city and your people."

Khenti gripped Alcadizzar's shoulders and turned the younger man to face him. "You can't seriously be considering this," he said. "It's over! You're free! Come with me now, and we can be on the road to Rasetra by dawn!"

Alcadizzar stared down at his uncle, and Neferata could see the longing in his eyes. For a moment, her heart went out to him; she knew all too well what it was like to live as a prisoner, trapped in a gilded cage. One day he will thank me, though, she told herself. This is not just for me, or even for him, but for all of Nehekhara.

"What sort of king would I be if I put my own selfishness ahead of my city's future?" Alcadizzar said. His voice was heavy with regret, but he gripped his uncle's arms tightly. "Khemri has survived for decades without me. It will last for a few years more."

The prince turned to Neferata and bowed his head. "I accept your offer," he told her. "Let Khemri and Lahmia be united once more."

Neferata rose from her chair and joined Alcadizzar. Beneath the mask, her cheeks were wet with crimson tears as she placed a hand on his cheek. His skin felt hot beneath her fingers. She could feel the blood coursing through the flesh beneath. The thirst cut through her, slicing deep into her heart.

"As you wish, oh prince," she said softly.

—<THREE>—

Deadlock

*Nagashizzar, in the 98th year of Tahoth the Wise
(-1300 Imperial Reckoning)*

Moving as though in a dream, the barbarian witch crept towards the cavern wall. The rough stone had been scribed with angular northern runes in complex spiral patterns that radiated from the centre of the wall and covered an area broad enough for two men to stand abreast. Akatha paused before the strange sigil, her grey-tinged lips working as she murmured sibilant words of power. Arcane symbols had been painted on her cheeks and down the length of her arms in sinuous patterns; they shone a pale and ghostly blue through the fine layer of ash that had been smeared over her skin. Tiny charms of yellowed bone had been woven into her tangled, soot-stained braids, clattering softly with each measured tread. A faint, greenish glow emanated from the whites of her eyes.

Akatha raised her right hand and reached out palm-first towards the wall. Slowly, warily, as though testing the heat of a roaring furnace, she brought her hand close to the stone. Her eyes flickered shut.

She stood that way for several long moments, muttering the words of power. Suddenly, her body stiffened. Her eyes flew open, and she retreated swiftly and silently from the wall, back to where Nagash and her kinsmen waited.

The cavern was small and low-ceilinged, its floor sloping slightly downwards towards the rune-marked wall and the mountain's distant core. Nagash hadn't known it existed until just the week before; it had been separated from the fortress' passageways by little more than a few feet of solid rock at one part of the chamber's western wall. Akatha had discovered it during a casting of runes, as she'd sought to divine the invaders' next move.

Nagash stood just inside the narrow opening his labourers had dug into the chamber. At his back stood Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus, as well as a score of Bragadh's chosen warriors. Like Akatha, the warlord and his men were pallid and moved with an eerie, almost dreamlike grace. Their eyes shone faintly in the dimness, just as hers did, evidence of the potent elixir that Nagash had created to extend their life spans. Based on the same formula he'd used to create his immortals centuries ago, this elixir drew its power from a combination of stolen life force and the dust of the burning stone. It lent the northmen fearsome strength and vitality, though Nagash suspected that, once enough of the dust had collected in their bones, it

would begin to change them in unpredictable ways. So long as they could take orders and lead their men in battle, he would continue to make use of them.

Hundreds of Bragadh's best fighting men waited along the passageways just outside the cavern, listening intently for the call to action. They all knew that, three levels below, the ratmen were launching yet another howling assault on the bastions protecting mine shaft number six.

Akatha approached the necromancer. Daring greatly, the witch met Nagash's coldly glowing eyes. "They are nearly through," she whispered, her voice flat and cold. "A few minutes, perhaps. No more."

Nagash raised a leathery hand and waved her aside. As much as her insolence irritated him, her sorcerous abilities had proven unexpectedly useful in the war against the ratmen. The barbarians, he'd discovered, had a long history of dealing with the creatures, and the arcane traditions of Akatha's extinct sisterhood contained several rituals that were designed to combat them. The necromancer's pride prevented him from stooping so low as to learn the barbarian rites for himself, and so the damned witch continued to survive.

The war beneath the mountain had raged for twenty-five galling years and showed no signs of ending. The ratmen were drawn like moths to the burning stone, and no matter how many thousands of the creatures he slew, there were always more to take their place. Losses on both sides had been staggering. The sheer amount of resources Nagash had expended thus far filled him with cold rage. The massive invasion force he'd carefully built for centuries was being squandered against a never-ending tide of vermin. When the war finally ended, it would take years, perhaps decades, to marshal another force capable of destroying Nehekara. If he did not know for a fact that he'd broken the gods of his old homeland, he might have suspected some divine power bent on thwarting his dreams of revenge.

A faint sound echoed across the cavern—a scratching scrabbling sound that Nagash and the barbarians had come to know all too well. With neither side willing to concede defeat, the course of the war had been measured in tunnels seized and levels taken. Passageways and branch-tunnels leading to the all-important mine shafts had been fortified by both sides, with cunning barricades and redoubts designed to hinder an enemy advance. Smaller tunnels were filled with rubble or sown with vicious traps to slaughter the unwary, forcing teams of sappers to reopen them in preparation for a major attack. Control of the deeps ebbed and flowed from one week to the next. Conquests were made and then lost again, as one side or the other exhausted itself in a punishing attack and then lacked the strength to hold on to what it had taken. In-between major assaults the two armies would pause for weeks or even months at a time, staging punishing raids against their enemy's forwards positions while they rebuilt their shattered forces.

From time to time, the two armies would try to break the deadlock with cunning stratagems. Most often they involved the digging of new tunnels to strike at the enemy from an unexpected direction—just as the ratmen were attempting now. The assault on mine shaft six was a diversion, meant to pin down the necromancer's troops so that another contingent of warriors could emerge behind them and cut them off.

It was a strategy that had served the ratmen well since the first day of the war, and one they returned to time and again when their frontal assaults had been stymied for more than a few months at a time. The tactic was effective because the creatures could dig tunnels with a speed and skill that beggared the imagination; by the same token, it was also largely predictable.

Nagash had known this was coming for several months now; he'd planned for it, in fact, reinforcing the defences around mine shaft six with every warrior he could spare and grinding down one frenzied assault after another. When the tempo of the attacks tapered off, he set Akatha to watching for the signs that the enemy was attempting another tunnel. This time he meant to turn their favourite tactic against them.

A part of the cavern wall across the chamber seemed to shimmer in the torchlight as the furious tunnelling stirred up a fine haze of rock dust. There was a faint crackling sound. Tiny fragments of stone began to cascade from the wall. Nagash smiled mirthlessly and clenched his fists. Power coursed through his limbs as he began a soundless chant, summoning up the energies of the burning stone.

The breach opened in a single instant, with a crash and a rumble of broken rock. A cloud of pale dust billowed out into the cavern, followed by the swift-moving silhouettes of ratmen. Hissing and chittering turned to squeaks of surprise as the attackers realised that they were not alone.

Words of power boiled up from Nagash's throat, reverberating painfully in the dank air. A surge of savage anticipation gripped him; since the war began, he had remained far from the front lines, directing the movements of his forces from on high rather than embroiling himself personally in one small part of the conflict. As a result, the ratmen had yet to suffer the full might of his power.

With a furious cry of exultation, the Undying King flung out his hands and unleashed a storm of death upon his foes.

Streams of hissing green darts leapt from the necromancer's fingertips, scything through the ranks of the stunned ratmen. The filthy creatures screamed as they were struck; their blood boiled, erupting from their bodies in glowing, greenish-black mist. Scores fell in the first moments, slain before their bodies hit the cavern floor.

Shrieks of terror rebounded across the chamber as the ratmen who escaped the first onslaught fled in panic back through the tunnel and fetched up against their comrades advancing in the other direction. Nagash followed after them, hurling another volley of magical bolts into the press. In the packed confines of the tunnel, the darts savaged the ranks of the ratmen. They collapsed where they stood like reaped grain, their corpses blackened by heat and hissing with escaping fluids.

The sight of so much terror and death filled Nagash with ferocious joy. The necromancer waded into the windrows of heaped bodies like a starving man welcomed to a feast. He seized corpses and flung them out of his way like straw dolls, his desiccated flesh buzzing with the unleashed energies of the *abn-i-khat*. Screams of pure, animal terror echoed from the roughly hewn walls. Nagash threw back his misshapen skull and howled with dreadful laughter as he hounded the ratmen into the depths.

Roaring wild oaths and battle cries, the northmen followed after their master. There was no way to know how far the tunnel went, but it was certain that it led back

behind the invaders' front lines. The avenue of attack ran both ways, as the ratmen were about to learn.

Thoughts of strategy were lost on Nagash at the moment; he was caught up completely in the slaughter, hurling one burning volley after another at the retreating ratmen. His body was wreathed in a fierce nimbus of crackling green fire that grew fiercer with every spell he cast, until the corpses of the ratmen smouldered beneath his touch.

The pursuit stretched into an eternity of thunder, screams and bloodshed. Nagash waded through a sea of corpses, his body burning with unleashed power. The number of ratmen he slew passed all reckoning. He had grown so lost in the grim rhythms of the slaughter that when he finally emerged from the far end of the tunnel the transition took him momentarily aback.

Nagash found himself in a broad, low-ceilinged cavern packed with squalling, screeching ratmen. The terrified survivors had fled into the mass of warriors waiting their turn to advance up the tunnel, and their panic had spread like wildfire through the ranks. Pandemonium reigned as pack leaders fought to rally their warriors with snarled threats and the flats of their blades. Bone whistles shrieked and the urgent clash of brass gongs added to the cacophony.

The necromancer paused, taking his bearings. The closest of his undead warriors was *six* levels above him, below even mine shaft number seven. He was deep in enemy territory—possibly even behind the bulk of the ratmen army. In one swift move he'd turned his enemy's knife back upon their own throat. For the first time in decades, he dared to think that perhaps victory finally lay within his grasp.

With a triumphant shout, Nagash drew upon the burning stone and brought down a rain of fire on the milling ratmen. Burning bodies collapsed in heaps, adding fuel to the howling panic. He advanced on the stricken horde, his warriors filling the space behind him and forming up into companies of sword and axemen. Dimly, Nagash could hear Bragadh and Thestus shouting orders over the din; their people's hatred of the ratmen ran so deep that their rivalry had all but disappeared in the face of the invasion.

A dull clatter arose at Nagash's back—the flat bark of sword and axe against the surface of bronze-edged wooden shields, rising in volume and intensity as one northman after another added their weapon to the din. Blue-tattooed barbarians threw back their heads and bellowed their bloodlust in a swelling roar that could be felt in the bones of man and rat-creature alike. In the confines of the cavern it was an awesome, world-shaking sound.

The noise rose to a fever pitch—and then, cutting through the tumult like a knife, came an unearthly, piping wail. Akatha's voice, charged with primitive magics and shaped by the ancient secrets of her sisterhood, calling for the spilling of blood and the harvesting of souls. As they had for thousands of years, the northmen charged at their foes not to the baying of horns, but to the cry of the witch's war-song.

A wave of shouting barbarians swept past Nagash in a thundering wave and smashed into the corpse-strewn ranks of the ratmen. The broad-shouldered warriors towered over their foes; their blows splintered shields and shattered swords. They carved their way through the enemy with as much joyous savagery as Nagash himself. Bragadh and his chosen warriors were in the thick of the fighting, spilling

the blood of their foes with every stroke of their blades. The necromancer followed close behind them, hurling bolts of fire over their heads to fall upon the densely packed mob.

The ratmen, already well past the limits of their resolve, collapsed completely under the weight of the barbarian onslaught. A rout began: terrified warriors threw down their weapons and climbed over their fellows in an attempt to escape the oncoming northmen. The horde began to dissolve before Nagash's eyes as the ratmen died or fled into the dubious safety of the passageways on the far end of the cavern. The murderous northmen hounded them mercilessly and the melee seemed to swiftly recede away from the necromancer. Behind him, still more of the barbarians were charging into the cavern; Nagash paused, his own thirst for slaughter ebbing away as he tried to focus on the unfolding battle. From where he stood, he had two options: order his warriors to turn aside and cut off the ratmen on the levels above, or to press still deeper into the mountain in hopes of sowing further chaos and perhaps coming to grips with the leader of the enemy army.

He hesitated for scarcely a moment before reaching a decision, but the pause was enough to save him.

Across the cavern came a chorus of metallic-sounding shrieks, like steam bursting from a dozen copper pots. A furious, greenish glow filled the air at the far end of the chamber, and the battle cries of the northmen were transformed into screams of horror and pain.

In an instant, the barbarian charge came to a crashing halt. Warriors piled into one another around Nagash, shouting and cursing. The strange, hissing shrieks sounded again, followed by more screams and a gust of hot wind that carried the sickly-sweet reek of charred flesh. The flickering glow was getting closer, spreading over and through the ranks of Nagash's men.

The crowd of northmen surrounding Nagash began to surge backwards, towards the captured tunnel. Men were shouting in terror up ahead, exhorting their fellows in their own crude northern tongue. Furious, the necromancer forced himself through the press, searching for the source of the panic.

A figure loomed ahead of him. It was Bragadh, his face streaked with gore. The warlord's eyes were wide with shock. He shouted something in his native tongue, then remembered himself and switched to Nehekharan. "Back, master!" he cried. "You must go back—"

Before Nagash could snarl a reply, the shrieks rose again, louder and closer than before, and the necromancer saw a dozen northmen in front of Bragadh disappear in a roaring blast of green flame. The sorcerous power in the fire was as palpable as the heat he felt against his leathery skin. It ate through armour, clothing and flesh with appalling swiftness, gnawing the warriors down to blackened bones right before his eyes.

Like the lash of a whip or the flickering tongue of a dragon the flame receded with a thin hiss, vanishing even as the charred corpses of the northmen collapsed to the ground. With a shock, the necromancer realised that the hungry flames had carved a broad swathe through his troops, who were now in full retreat from the four contraptions of wood and bronze that squatted at the far side of the cavern.

The devices were each the size of a large war-chariot, and mounted on a wooden bed supported by a pair of bronze-rimmed wheels. A sturdy wooden yoke extended from the front of the bed, but where a set of horses would have been lashed to the post, there were four broad-shouldered ratmen with push-handles gripped in their clawed paws. Upon the wooden bed sat a sealed cauldron of cast bronze, whose curved sides shimmered with radiant heat.

Situated on the rear of the wooden bed, just behind the cauldron, was a large box of bronze and wood. Four long, almost oar-like levers extended from the box, alternating to the left and right. Two ratmen gripped each lever. In that strange, slow-motion clarity brought on by combat, Nagash saw the rats lift the great levers so high that they rose onto the tips of their toe-claws. There was a muffled *whoooosh* of indrawn air, like the sound of a great furnace bellows.

Four thick, bronze pipes ran from the box into the sides of the great cauldron and a long, oddly flexible pipe of some kind ran from the front of the cauldron and was threaded through arched bronze staples hammered into the wood. It extended for another six feet from the end of the yoke, terminating in a heavy-looking bronze nozzle held by a pair of curiously garbed ratmen. The creatures were swathed in heavy robes of leather and sturdy cloth, and wore leather gauntlets that reached all the way back to their knobby elbows. The skin of their snouts was bald and blistered from heat. Strange discs of some dark, glossy material were held over their beady eyes by a dark leather band, lending them an unblinking, soulless stare.

Nagash watched the mouth of one nozzle turn his way. Green fire flickered hungrily in its depths, mirroring the hungry leer of the ratmen who wielded it.

There was nowhere to run. Instinctively, Nagash shoved Diarid aside and called upon the power of the *abn-i-khat*. The wild energies burned at his fingertips, but at the last moment he hesitated to unleash his sorceries on the fire-throwers. If the cauldrons burst, even in such a relatively large space as the cavern, the escaping heat might consume everything in the chamber. Instead, he turned his attentions on the carpet of mangled bodies that lay between him and the ratmen.

The necromancer clenched one fist. “*Rise,*” he commanded, just as the bellows-rats hauled down their levers and another chorus of draconic shrieks filled the cavern.

Necromantic energies flowed from Nagash in a torrent, enveloping the corpses in an instant. The bodies of human and ratman alike reared up from the cavern floor, like mummer’s dolls pulled by invisible strings. They caught the blast of sorcerous flames full-on; Nagash heard the buzzing sizzle of flesh and the sharp crackle of splintering bone as the heat consumed them. The ranks of the undead were cut down by the flames, but in so doing they absorbed or deflected enough of the blast to spare their master.

Once more the flames receded with a menacing hiss. Barely a handful of Nagash’s newly-animated corpses remained.

Diarid clambered to his feet and stared at the enemy war engines in evident horror. “We must retreat,” he said to Nagash. “Quickly, before those things can draw another breath.”

Nagash clenched his corroded teeth. The barbarian was right. He hadn’t imagined the damned ratmen could be so clever. Wordlessly, he ordered the remaining corpses

forwards in a token charge against the war engines, then hastened swiftly back to the far tunnels.

His token force managed scarcely a dozen steps before they were incinerated. Nagash felt the heat of the flames wash over his shoulders, then abruptly recede. He glanced over his shoulder to see a semicircle of green flame playing across ruined corpses three-quarters of the way across the cavern. Realising that their quarry had retreated beyond their reach, the nozzle-rats were screeching at the wretches manning the yokes of their war engines, urging them forwards.

Diarid vanished into the tunnel. Moments later, Nagash reached the mouth of the sloping passage. Behind him, axles groaned as the war engines began to move.

The necromancer turned back to the ratmen, his rage building. Would the damned stalemate never end?

Nagash raised his arm and pointed at the oncoming ratmen. The fires of the burning stone had ebbed to little more than sullen embers. He'd expended too much, too quickly. Next time, he would be certain to have greater reserves to call upon.

His ragged lips curling with contempt, he spat a stream of arcane syllables. A handful of darts, larger and brighter than those he'd cast before, streaked across the cavern. They flashed past the nozzle-rats of one of the middle fire-throwers, missing them by a hair's breadth—and struck the bronze cauldron in a shower of hot green sparks. The cauldron resounded like a struck bell and then blew apart in a thunderous detonation. The crew of the war engine vanished in a ball of sorcerous fire. Jagged metal fragments slashed through the air, striking the engines to either side; less than a second later, they detonated too, showering the cavern with curtains of sizzling flame.

Hot air buffeted Nagash, tugging at his hood and the sleeves of his robe. For a long moment he stared into the depths of the holocaust he'd unleashed, then, muttering venomous curses, he withdrew into the darkness of the tunnel.

The long knife flashed in the firelight, silencing the pack leader's protestations. The warrior stiffened, beady eyes widening as he clawed at the gaping wound that stretched across his throat. He collapsed in a welter of bitter blood, legs and tail twitching horribly.

Lord Eekrit stood over the dying clanrat, his tail lashing in fury. The hem of his rich robe was soaked in gore.

"Anyone else?" he hissed, turning to glare at the trio of quivering pack leaders left on the dais. Four of their number already sprawled lifelessly on the steps behind them. The warlord gave the fifth pack leader a savage kick, rolling him off the dais to join the rest. "Does *anyone else* expect me to believe that a *burning man* with eyes of *god-stone* killed four hundred of our best warriors *by himself*?"

The surviving pack leaders—all that remained of those who'd presided over the debacle earlier that night—stretched their rangy bodies across the stones and bared their necks to Eekrit. Ears flat, tails twitching feverishly, they filled the air with fear-musk and made no reply.

Eekrit had enough. No one was telling him anything useful, and his shoulder was getting sore from all the throat-cutting. "Out of my sight!" he shrieked. "Out-out!

"Tomorrow you fight in the front ranks, with the rest of the slaves!"

The three pack leaders scrambled off the dais, all but tripping over themselves in their haste to escape their master's rage. Once they were gone, packs of slaves hastened from the shadows to drag away the objects of Lord Eekrit's ire. The warlord watched them for a moment then turned away in disgust, flinging the bloodstained knife across the dais. It skittered over the stones, missing Lord Eshreegar's foot by a hair's-breadth. The Master of Treacheries never so much as twitched.

Like everything else in the great cavern, the dais had changed greatly in the past quarter-century. Slaves had built three-quarter-height walls from rubble and mortar, creating a proper audience chamber without completely isolating it from the cacophonous noise of the rest of the space. Rich rugs had been laid across the top, flanked by two gilded braziers that filled the partially enclosed space with a pleasing mosaic of light and shadow. Heavy tapestries hung from the walls, each one commissioned at great expense by artisans in the Great City. Tall, broad-shouldered warriors from Eekrit's own clan stood guard at every corner and to either side of the chamber's door, clad in armour of thick leather faced with bronze discs and clutching fearsome-looking polearms.

At the rear of the dais another, smaller platform had been built, upon which sat a fine and imposing throne made of teak and inlaid with trceries of gold. Growling under his breath, Eekrit stalked back to the throne and collapsed angrily onto its cushioned seat. "Idiots," he muttered darkly. "I'm-I'm surrounded by *idiots*."

The tunnel had been a masterstroke. It had taken weeks to gnaw through the hard granite closer to the mountain's heart, but it had positioned his army for a devastating thrust into the enemy's side. While a massive frontal assault pinned down the bulk of the mountain's defenders around mine shaft six, Vittrik's precious war engines would have been positioned to pour fire into the rear ranks of the enemy. Meanwhile, the rest of Eekrit's troops would have raced into the upper levels of the fortress, seizing key tunnel junctions and disrupting the flow of reinforcements from the surface. He'd fully expected to seize at least three of the enemy's upper shafts by the end of the day, possibly even more. With a little luck and the Horned God's favour, it could even have been the death-stroke that put an end to the whole war.

But of course it hadn't worked out that way. All he had to show for his efforts were another three thousand dead skaven and a raging fire in his painstakingly crafted tunnel that was *still* burning, hours after Vittrik's engines had been blown to scrap. If he cocked his ears just right, Eekrit could hear the sounds of crashing metal and panicked squeals in the distance as the drunken warlock-engineer took out his rage on his hapless slaves.

Lord Eekrit drummed his claws on the hard wood of the throne's armrest. What could he have possibly done to earn the Horned God's ire? Had he not made all the proper obeisances, given all the proper bribes? What had he done to deserve such a perplexing, miserable, *expensive* war?

True, he had personally profited greatly from the War beneath the Mountain, as it was being called back at the Great City. God-stone was being carved from the mine shafts under his control and shipped home in staggering amounts. His personal fortunes and those of his clan swelled with each passing season; they had grown so great that Rikek was now considered among the most powerful of the warlord clans. He could afford the best of everything, even sorcerous potions and charms of god-

stone to preserve his handsome looks and youthful vigour. Eekrit had even begun to seriously consider buying his way onto the Great Council once the war ended, *if* it ever ended.

There was just no end to the damned skeletons. For every one his warriors killed, there seemed to be a dozen more ready to take its place. The northmen who'd apparently allied themselves with the walking corpses were at least something his people knew how to deal with. Long ago they'd had a running war with the humans over their meagre store of god-stone, and while the barbarians were fearsome warriors in their own right, the fact was that they had lost their war with the skaven all those centuries ago. They could be beaten. The corpse army, though, that was something else again.

The long war of attrition was consuming skaven lives at a horrifying rate. New companies of reinforcements were arriving from the Great City every month. When the first loads of god-stone had begun to arrive at home, there had been a massive swell of volunteers from the clans, each seeking to make their own fortunes in the war. Now most of those treasure-seekers were dead, spitted on enemy spears or eaten by the enemy's pallid corpse-takers, and their gnawed skeletons stood in ranks behind their foe's tunnel redoubts. All that Eekrit got from the clans now were mobs of terrified slaves and sullen criminals; he suspected that the Great City hadn't been so free of bandits in centuries.

So far, the Council of Thirteen had tolerated the bloody stalemate thanks to the wealth of god-stone Eekrit provided, but he knew that such tolerance had its limits. The Children of the Horned God had never fought so long and so bitter a war in the entire history of their people and their resources, however vast, were not without their limits. He had to find a way to break the deadlock, and soon, before the Grey Lords decided to take matters into their own paws.

Eekrit glanced sullenly at Eshreegar. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

The Master of Treacheries shrugged. For once, Eshreegar couldn't be blamed for having no news to give the warlord; his scout-assassins had been covering the diversionary assault, many levels away from the disaster. "We know that the northmen are accompanied by a witch," he observed. "It's said they have powers of divination. She might have predicted the attack."

"Not that," Eekrit growled. "The burning man."

Eshreegar's ears rose in surprise. "You believe the pack leaders' tales?"

"The fools didn't have the wit to change their story, no matter how many throats I-I cut," Eekrit grumbled. "So I must assume they were telling the truth, strange as-as it seems."

The black-robed skaven considered the warlord's question. "A sorcerer-corpse, perhaps?"

Eekrit's whiskers twitched. "Is such a thing possible?"

The Master of Treacheries shrugged again. "Perhaps Qweeqwol knows."

The warlord bared his teeth in disgust. "Most days I'm not certain which side that-that lunatic is on."

When the war had first begun, Eekrit had made a point of soliciting the old seer's advice, showing him the respect that Qweeqwol's station deserved; to do any less would have tempted the wrath of the Seer Council. All he'd gotten for his trouble

were riddles, or rambling discourses on treachery and death—as though he needed an education on *those* subjects. Qweeqwol came and went as he pleased, roaming the caverns and the lower tunnels at will, even occasionally making token appearances along the battle-lines. It was as though the seer was searching for something, though what was anyone’s guess. And yet, he wasn’t *entirely* useless. Eekrit could think of at least three separate occasions over the years where Qweeqwol had taken an interest in the course of the campaign and supported Eekrit’s strategies in the army’s war councils. On two of those occasions, Lord Hiirc had very nearly turned the army’s chieftains against him, but the seer had stomped into the middle of the proceedings and had the would-be rebels baring their throats with little more than a hard stare and a few well-chosen words. Come to that, Qweeqwol had also been instrumental in persuading Lord Vittrik to part with those precious war engines of his. It was as though the seer was pursuing an agenda all his own, but Eekrit hadn’t the first clue what it might be.

A thought occurred to the warlord. He tapped a claw meditatively against the armrest. “If this magical terror is half as deadly as those fools claimed it to be, perhaps I could appeal to the Seer Council for someone...”

“Younger?”

“Less insane.”

Eshreegar let out a high-pitched snort. “Best of luck with that,” the Master of Treacheries said, his pink tail twitching.

The warlord’s ears flattened in irritation. He raised a paw to summon a scribe, and was surprised to see one of his slaves already racing to the foot of the dais. Eekrit straightened.

“What is it?” he demanded.

The slave stretched himself out at the base of the steps—no mean feat, with the puddles of cooling blood scattered across the stones. “New-new arrivals, master,” the slave gasped. “From the Great City.”

Eekrit’s whiskers twitched. Travellers to the mountain were rare, especially these days, and the next contingent of reinforcements weren’t due for another few weeks.

“What manner of arrivals?” he asked.

“Warriors,” the slave squeaked. “Many-many of them.”

Eekrit gave the Master of Treacheries a penetrating stare. Eshreegar tucked tail and head both.

“I-I don’t know,” he said weakly. “I’ve heard nothing.”

Eekrit growled deep in his throat. “One day you’ll have to tell me the story of how you came to be a master of scouts,” he said darkly. “I imagine it’s a *very* amusing tale.”

Without waiting for a reply, the warlord stalked down off the dais and across the audience chamber. His bodyguards fell into step behind him in ordered ranks, polearms held across their chests and tails lashing aggressively. The slave let out a startled squeak and dashed ahead of Eekrit to pull open the chamber’s double doors.

Beyond lay a complex of walled spaces and narrow passageways, framed by three-quarter-height walls of mortar and stone, which included lavish living quarters for Eekrit and loyal members of his clan who served in his retinue. More bodyguards

stood watch at strategic locations throughout the complex, ever vigilant for signs of treachery. They pounded the ends of their polearms on the stone floor as Eekrit approached, sending passing slaves scrambling out of the warlord's way.

The warlord's mind raced as he hurried through the maze of dimly lit corridors. He wasn't fool enough to assume that the sudden arrival of troops was a good sign, nor was he going to sit idle and wait for their leader to come and pay his respects. It was entirely possible that one clan or another—possibly Morbus, or even Skryre—had decided to alter the balance of power in their favour and claim the mountain's riches entirely for their own. The longer he waited to assert himself, the more time the new arrivals had to begin pursuing their own agendas.

The clangour and stench of the cavern steadily grew as the warlord left his clan's lair behind. The great space, once so vast it easily held as much as a quarter of the entire skaven expeditionary force, was now sub-divided into dense warrens of living quarters, foundries, storage sites and slave pens. The labyrinth of chambers and passageways spread outwards from the cavern for as much as a mile in every direction—an under-fortress to match the sprawl of towers and structures crowding the mountain slopes high above. There were even marketplaces stretching back along the wide tunnels that led to the Great City, where traders from the lesser clans gathered to provide goods and luxuries for the wealthier members of the expeditionary force. Eekrit couldn't even guess how large the population under the mountain had grown over the last two decades; in another ten years the under-fortress might become a subterranean city every bit as tangled, scheming and treacherous as anywhere else in the growing skaven empire.

Hot, dank air swirled around the warlord, reeking of scorched metal, offal and old, pungent musk. Skaven screeched imprecations at their slaves; somewhere a whip cracked and a young voice cried out in pain. Copper furnaces huffed and roared, sending up thin ribbons of acrid smoke and casting waves of pulsing green light across the soot-stained roof of the cavern. It was the sound and smell of civilisation, Eekrit mused. Whether the skeletons wanted it or not, the skaven were here to stay.

The warlord and his bodyguards cut like a knife through the crowds of labourers, slaves and clan warriors milling along the main arteries that led across the floor of the cavern. He headed for the broad square that lay just inside the cavern opposite the Skaven Gate, which opened onto the wide tunnel that led from the mountain back to the Great City. As they approached the square he could hear the deep buzz of voices up ahead.

Eekrit emerged at the side of the square opposite the Skaven Gate and, even knowing what to expect, the sight of the warriors assembled there stunned him. The entire assembly area was packed from one end to the other, and judging by the commotion over by the gate, there were still more arriving. Facing him were packs of towering, broad-shouldered skaven warriors, armoured in layered plates of bronze and wielding polearms with broad, curved blades. They were the *heechigar*, the elite storm-walkers of the warlord clans, rarely seen in the field unless—

The warlord felt his hackles rise at the sight of the two skaven standing in the shadow of the storm-walkers. One was mad old Qweeqwol. The aged seer was standing with his back to Eekrit, his knobby paws gripping the ancient wood of his glowing staff as he spoke in low tones to a tall, lean skaven lord.

Eekrit's tail twitched. The warlord clamped down hard on his musk glands. The skaven lord was older than he, and wore a fine harness of bronze plates chased with gold. Glowing tokens of god-stone hung about his neck, and another god-stone the size of a swamp-lizard egg shone balefully from the pommel of a curved sword resting at his hip. His lean, dark-furred head bore the marks of the battlefield: a triangular notch had been neatly sliced from the skaven's right ear, and a fearsome old scar spread down his cheek and across his throat like a jagged fork of pale lightning. But it wasn't the terrible scars, or the vicious sword and armour that struck terror into Eekrit's ruthless heart, it was the unassuming grey wool robe that hung about the lord's broad shoulders.

Eekrit's bodyguards snapped to attention at once, the butts of their polearms striking the stone in a single, well-practised motion. The sound caught the attention of the skaven lord, whose dark eyes narrowed coldly as they regarded the warlord. Noticing the sudden change, Qweeqwol turned about slowly and focussed on Eekrit as well, his glowing green eyes unblinking and inscrutable.

Lord Eekrit clasped his paws over his stomach and approached the newcomer. Despite his best efforts, his whiskers gave a single, nervous twitch.

"An honour," Eekrit managed to say. The back of his neck itched as he sank to his knees before the Grey Lord. His eyes were on a level with the baleful light at the pommel of the skaven's sword. "A great-great honour, yes." The warlord's fawning expression faltered. "Ah, my lord—"

"Velsquee," Lord Qweeqwol announced. "Grey Lord Velsquee, of Clan Abbis."

Eekrit stole a glance at the seer. Was the old fool smirking at him?

"My lord Velsquee," he continued, pronouncing the name with care. "Welcome you to the under-fortress." The warlord bowed his head. "How may I serve the Council?"

The Grey Lord stared coldly down at Eekrit. "Under-fortress, eh?" he said. "I suppose you've scratched out a lair for yourself somewhere in this nest."

Eekrit gritted his teeth. The stonecutters had only just finished the last touches on his chambers. "I would be pleased to make them available to you, my lord," he managed to say. "Will you be visiting for long?"

Velsquee rested a clawed paw on the hilt of his sword. "As long as it takes to win this war," he said with a wicked smile. "This stalemate's gone on long enough. It's time for a change of strategy."

—<FOUR>—

Necessary Evils

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 98th year of Tahoth the Wise
(-1300 Imperial Reckoning)*

The night air was sultry in the Travellers' Quarter, redolent with sweat, cooking spices and sour wine. Crowds of immigrants—mostly from the struggling cities of Mahrak or Lybaras, but also a few from as far away as drought-stricken Numas—mingled with dusty caravan drivers and scowling sell-swords as they plied the tightly-packed merchant stalls in search of everything from fine saddles to silver jewellery. The singsong chants of the merchants seemed to drift like smoke through the humid air, rising and falling over the muted buzz of the crowd.

The night bazaar stretched for six winding blocks through the quarter, and was anchored at the eastern end by a wide, paved square lined with ale-houses, wine-sellers and incense shops. Lord Ushoran sat at a table beneath a faded linen awning of a wine-seller's shop, idly fingering the cracked rim of a clay cup filled with date wine as he studied the faces of the passers-by.

Tonight he chose to wear the face of a well-to-do scholar: a dispossessed Lybaran noble, perhaps, driven from his home by the steady decline of the collegia there and forced to continue his studies in self-imposed exile. The serving girls and the other patrons of the wine shop saw a man of middle years, stooped with age, his pate gone bald save for a thin fringe of white. His nose was crooked, his eyes watery and deeply set. His cheeks were pocked from a bout of river fever, and starting to show the rude blush of a man who indulged in too much wine. A dark brown robe hung from his hunched shoulders, the fabric rich but faded from years of hard use. Around his thick neck hung a chain made of elongated links of gold, decorated with more than a dozen brass-rimmed lenses of glass and faceted crystal—one of the many tools of the scholar-engineer's trade.

In the past, he'd had to be far less ostentatious with his disguises, for there was only so much one could do with a change of clothing and a bit of face paint. He'd tried to blend with the teeming crowds, quickly dismissed and easily forgotten. Now, he was limited only by his imagination and he could switch guises with but a moment's concentration. Ushoran could cloud a mortal's mind simply by willing it, placing any image in his or her mind that suited him. It was a gift that none of his fellow immortals possessed and, more importantly, one that not even their supernatural senses could penetrate. Which was for the best, as far as he was

concerned. He doubted that Neferata or Ankhat would approve of what he had become.

Ushoran was nothing like the acerbic, cerebral W'soran, but he still considered himself a scholar of sorts. Mysteries and secrets intrigued him, and the process of death and rebirth was one of the greatest mysteries of all. Though Neferata had forbidden the cabal to create immortal progeny of their own, he had made a few discreet experiments over the centuries and suspected that the others—especially W'soran—had as well. He'd made good use of the dozen or so safe houses he'd established throughout the city, with their deep cellars and sets of stout chains fixed to the walls.

Along the way, he'd learned a great deal. Their kind could only draw sustenance from living blood; animals could serve, but the vigour they possessed was far less potent than a human's. Starvation steadily weakened them, but did not bring extinction—merely a kind of nightmarish torpor, which could only be broken by the taste of blood. The vigour gleaned from living blood gave them strength and speed far surpassing any mortal, and allowed them to swiftly heal any wound save outright decapitation. If their heart was pierced, or rendered unable to beat, they became torpid until the offending object was removed. As a result, they were nearly impossible to kill. Fire inflicted lasting injury; direct sunlight sapped their vigour with terrible speed, and especially intense sunlight burned like a brand. Ushoran suspected that sorcery could harm them as well, but had to wait to test the theory himself.

Such qualities were common to all immortals. In addition were the unique gifts that manifested in Neferata and the rest of the cabal—those who were transfigured by the complex and gruelling mixture of poison and magical ritual that Arkhan the Black had used to resurrect the queen herself. Neferata's goddess-given beauty and allure had increased tenfold, lending her powers of seduction and mental domination far beyond mortal ken. Arkhan, the aristocrat and political creature that he was, demonstrated his own sense of eerie charisma and razor-keen perception. In life, Arkhan had been a well-known hunter and breeder of horse and hound, and Ushoran wondered if perhaps his gifts had developed along those lines as well. W'soran, the secretive former priest, was entirely the opposite. He had been transformed into a repellent, skeletal creature, more corpse than man, but his grasp of the arcane—and necromancy in particular—possibly rivalled that of the infamous Nagash himself. That left Abhorash, the former king's champion, and Zurhas, the feckless cousin to the late Lamashizzar. Abhorash had fled the city almost immediately after his transformation and Ushoran could only speculate on the particulars of his transformation, but given his dedication to the arts of warfare, Ushoran suspected that Abhorash had gained a degree of physical prowess equal to—or possibly greater than—the fabled Ushabti themselves. If true, there was no deadlier warrior anywhere in the world.

As for Zurhas, Ushoran hadn't a clue. The former nobleman seemed more furtive and rodent-like with every passing year. Perhaps his gifts extended to gambling and whoring, two of his favourite pastimes. It stood to reason. Every one of them had changed in ways that reflected their true natures, for good or ill.

Lost in thought, Ushoran didn't notice the lean, travel-stained man at first. He'd slipped from the crowd milling in the square with the practiced ease of a cutpurse and unobtrusively ducked beneath the wine shop's low awning. The man's flinty, appraising stare swept over Ushoran, stirring him from his reverie.

This was the one he'd been waiting for, Ushoran realised at once. The man had the look of a desert bandit, clad in dusty, tattered robes and ragged leather sandals held together with cheap twine. A battered khopesh and a pair of curved daggers hung from a wide leather belt about his waist, partly concealed by a thin, sand-coloured cloak that hung nearly to the man's feet. His face was narrow and gaunt, the leathery skin tanned a deep brown by years of exposure to the harsh desert sun. With his narrow chin, hooded eyes and brooding brow, he reminded Ushoran somewhat of a jackal—which, considering his profession, wasn't all that much of a surprise. The Lord of Masks met the tomb robber's gaze and placed a bulging leather bag on the table next to the wine. The coins inside clinked softly as he set the bag down.

Even then, with his reward in sight, the thief didn't immediately react. His gaze swept past Ushoran and studied the rest of the shop for a full minute, searching for signs of a trap. When he found none, the man wove among the tables and took the chair opposite Ushoran. He studied the Lord of Masks silently for a moment. Ushoran returned the stare with a placid smile.

The thief grunted to himself. "You're not what I expected," he said.

Ushoran chuckled. The thief and his companions had been hired through a sprawling network of intermediaries stretching all the way to Khemri, one entirely separated from his conventional network of informants and spies. He'd been careful and patient, building the links over a period of decades, until he was certain that their actions could not be traced back to him. The consequences of discovery—for Ushoran, and for Lahmia in general—would have been too terrible to contemplate.

"I hear that quite a lot," the Lord of Masks said with a smile. "Wine?"

The thief shrugged. Ushoran beckoned, and a girl quickly appeared at his shoulder with another cup of wine. About fourteen, the nobleman reckoned, admiring the girl as she bent over the table. Fine skin, firm of flesh and lean of limb. A bit old for his tastes; in the old days he might not have cared—the older ones lasted longer, after all—but now he could afford to be choosy. The girl met his gaze, smiled innocently, and hastily withdrew.

"To your health," Ushoran said, raising his cup in a toast. He feigned taking a sip. The thief raised his cup and likely did the same. "It's been months. I was beginning to grow concerned."

The thief's upper lip curled in a sneer. "There's a damned good reason why nearly all of the great pyramids are still intact, and Khemri's are the worst of the lot. Go barging inside and you'll be dead before you're ten steps past the door." He shook his head. "None of the other fools you hired made it past the first antechamber."

Ushoran nodded. There had been four other gangs who'd accepted the job over the years. Khete's pyramid had simply swallowed them up, one after the next. "Truth be told, you were my first choice all along, but since you proved extraordinarily difficult to contact, I had to make do with lesser talents."

The thief grunted noncommittally, but Ushoran caught a glint of pride in the tomb robber's eye.

The Lord of Masks spread his hands. "So. What do you have for me?"

Once again, the thief glanced warily at the other tables. When he was satisfied that no one was watching them, he reached within his cloak and produced an old, wooden box the size of a small wine jar, which he set on the table between them.

Ushoran glanced sceptically at the box. "That's all?"

The thief barked a laugh. "If you'd wanted the whole thing, you should have said so," he snarled. "You're lucky we managed that much."

The Lord of Masks sighed. "I suppose it will do," he said, though in truth W'soran would have to be the judge of that. "You're certain it's him?"

The tomb robber shrugged. "As certain as I can be," he replied. "It was the right tomb, sure enough, but... well, let's just say it wasn't your typical internment."

Ushoran cocked his head quizzically. "He wasn't interred with the typical grave goods?"

"Hardly." To his surprise, the thief shifted uncomfortably. "He wasn't even dead when they sealed him up."

"Ah. I see." Ushoran had heard tales of Nagash's brutal usurpation, but there had been no way to tell fact from rumour at the time. He picked up the heavy bag of coin and set it down beside the thief's cup. "I'd say you and your people earned every bit of this."

The man picked up the bag and hefted it. "Only four of us made it out of that damned place," he said grimly. "There were traps everywhere. Poor Jebil died on the way out, just three steps from the entrance. Toppled over dead with a dart in his neck. Never did find out where it came from."

Ushoran nodded sagely. "Sad, indeed," he agreed. "And your three companions?"

A slow, wolfish smile spread across the thief's face. "Well. The Golden Plain's a dangerous place," he said slowly. "Bandits everywhere, you know."

"How tragic," the Lord of Masks replied. "I suppose you'll just have to keep their shares as well."

"I suppose so," the thief said, slipping the bag beneath his cloak. He rose quickly from the table.

Ushoran laid a hand on the wooden box. "You aren't the least bit curious about this?" he asked.

"I couldn't care less," the thief said, his attention already focussed on the square.

"Well, I suppose that's it, then." Ushoran leaned forwards, extending his hand. "Safe travels, my friend. You have my thanks."

The thief turned back to Ushoran, looking down at the immortal's outstretched hand as though it were an especially venomous snake. He started to sneer—but something in the immortal's eye gave him pause. After a moment's hesitation he reached out and gripped Ushoran's hand.

"I have your gold, and that's enough," the thief growled. "Goodbye, scholar. I don't expect we'll see each other again."

With that he turned and slipped into the square without a single backwards glance. The thief blended into the milling crowd and within moments was lost to sight.

Ushoran watched him go with a smile. His hand was still faintly damp from the thief's sweaty grip. He raised it, palm inwards, to his face and breathed deeply, drinking in the man's scent.

"I hear that quite a lot, too," the immortal said. He chuckled softly to himself and licked his palm lightly with the tip of his long, grey tongue.

The Temple of Blood was a fortress within a fortress. Situated within the walls of the Lahmian royal palace, the huge, roughly pyramidal structure fully enclosed what had once been the Women's Palace, where the daughters of the royal line were kept in virtual seclusion from the rest of the mortal world. The stepped sides of the temple were comprised of solid blocks of sandstone, each one twelve feet high and weighing many tons. The only entrance was sealed by a pair of immense bronze doors and was guarded day and night by a company of dour-looking warriors from the queen's lifeguard. To all outside appearances, the monumental structure seemed more impregnable than the royal palace itself, but, like much else about the temple, such impressions were deceiving.

The hour of the dead was fast approaching as Ushoran stole across the silent palace grounds towards the temple. There were few mortals about at such a late hour, allowing him to pass unobserved along the north wall of the mammoth structure until he reached the hidden entrance set cunningly into the stone. The door was very heavy, and set so snugly into its frame that its seams were nearly invisible to the naked eye. Pressing with both hands and exerting his unnatural strength, he swung the portal silently inwards, revealing a dark, narrow passage carved into the foundation stone.

There were at least a half-dozen secret ways into and out of the temple that Ushoran knew of; only Neferata herself could say if there were more. He followed the passageway through the temple's foundation, emerging a short while later into the ground level passageways that wound secretly among the storerooms, dormitories and halls of meditation used by the initiates of the cult. The immortal moved down the dark corridors swiftly and surely, aided by supernatural senses and more than two centuries of practice. Finally, many minutes later, he passed through another hidden door and into the temple's vast inner sanctum.

In truth, the inner sanctum was actually a sprawling complex of chambers that had once comprised the most opulent rooms of the old Women's Palace. It was here that Neferata ruled, issuing edicts from the Deathless Court through successive generations of Lahmian queens who were enslaved to her from birth. But that wasn't the only secret concealed within the inner sanctum's walls—and, in Ushoran's opinion, far from the worst.

There were many libraries in the former palace: small, quiet rooms piled with sumptuous rugs and surrounded by shelves atop shelves of histories, fables, romances and more. They were nothing like the one Ushoran now sought. It was located in a largely isolated part of the old palace, far from the corridors frequented by the temple priestesses and initiates. Its walls had been reinforced with slabs of dark, heavy

granite, which in turn had been engraved with layer upon layer of arcane wards designed to keep out even the most determined intruder. The door, likewise, was stone, and far too heavy for mortal hands to open. It was also covered with potent runes of binding, strong enough to seal the library shut for all time, but for the last fifty years the sigils had been cold and inert. The Lord of Masks took a moment to compose himself, putting on the bland, neutral face that his fellow cabal members were accustomed to, then laid a hand upon the door and pushed it silently open.

As always, the chamber was dimly lit and wreathed with acrid incense smoke, shrouding the walls and ceiling in darkness and rendering the dimensions of the room uncertain. A dense arrangement of worktables and reading stands filled the chamber, piled with precise stacks of parchment and priceless, leather-bound tomes of varying size. Some of the books were fairly new, having been written within the past half-century, while others were larger and far, far older.

Ushoran eyed a stack of such volumes on a nearby table as he slipped inside the room. They had been bound in pale leather once, but the centuries had caused the covers to wrinkle and darken to a deep reddish-black. Their edges were ragged from age and rough treatment; in their time they had travelled with armies, and been fought over like ghastly treasures. Their thick pages were likewise roughened and rendered grey with age, but Ushoran had no doubt that if he were bold enough to turn back one of the covers, he would find the notes and diagrams within still perfectly legible, despite the passage of years. These tomes had once belonged to Nagash himself, plundered from his Black Pyramid outside the ruins of Khemri after the war. Some of the volumes were at least five hundred years old, Ushoran reckoned, and yet they lingered when other books would have long since turned to dust.

W'soran stood at the far side of the chamber, his macabre form lit by wan candlelight as he paced about the perimeter of a complicated magical circle that had been laid down with silver dust on the bare stone floor. He was a hideous figure, bearing more resemblance to a poorly mummified corpse than a living, breathing man. What little flesh he'd possessed had melted away, leaving his grey, parchment-like skin stretched tight against ropy sinew and sharp-edged bone. The immortal moved with a strange, angular gait, almost like a spider, and his bald head swung from side to side in furtive arcs as he surveyed the handiwork of his thralls. The circle was, in truth, more like a nested set of complex bands of magical runes, each one laid down with exacting precision and carefully arranged in relation to one another. It was the culmination of a half-century of effort, shaped by the most astute arcane mind in Nehekhara. Ushoran hoped that it would be enough.

W'soran's head rose as the Lord of Masks stole into the chamber. His fleshless lips were plastered against his teeth, exaggerating his needle-like fangs and lending the immortal a permanent snarl. He drew a rasping breath. "Will you never learn to knock, my lord?"

Ushoran smiled coldly. "I don't see why I should," he replied. "Neferata certainly won't."

"Neferata," W'soran sneered. "She thinks of nothing but her young prince these days. I doubt she even recalls opening the library at this point."

"Let us hope so. Because we both know what she would do if she realised what you've been up to these last fifty years."

W'soran hissed derisively, but Ushoran caught a flash of unease in the immortal's deep-set eyes. Necromancy had been forbidden even when Lamashizzar was master of the cabal, but Neferata had even gone so far as to take the worst of Nagash's tomes and lock them away in a separate vault elsewhere in the inner sanctum. W'soran had been trying to circumvent her restrictions ever since. He had persuaded her to open the library solely to learn the rituals of summoning and communicating with spirits, and so far as it went, he had spoken the truth. If she knew precisely *who* W'soran intended to call up from the lands of the restless dead, her wrath would be terrible to behold.

Ushoran had known what he was up to from the beginning. W'soran had never been secretive about his ambitions. But instead of betraying the would-be necromancer, Ushoran had become an uneasy ally. As terrible as the risks were, he was certain that Neferata's obsession with Alcadizzar would ultimately lead to disaster. They needed leverage to persuade her to abandon her ridiculous scheme—or, failing that, the power to supplant her and seize control of Lahmia themselves.

W'soran's gaze fell to the wooden box tucked under Ushoran's arm. His pale eyes narrowed. "Is that it?"

The Lord of Masks stepped forwards, setting the box on one of the tables. "You tell me."

W'soran made his way across the cluttered chamber, weaving among the tables and reading stands with his strange, spider-like gait. His ghastly face was lit with a dreadful sense of anticipation as he unfastened the catch and opened the lid of the box.

Ushoran folded his arms. "I'd thought he would have brought more," the Lord of Masks said with a scowl. "Will it be enough?"

A faint, hitching rattle rose from W'soran's throat. It took a moment before Ushoran realised the immortal was chuckling to himself.

"Oh, yes," W'soran hissed, reaching into the box with knobby, clawed hands. "Yes. This will do."

He lifted from the box a human skull, still covered in scraps of yellow flesh and matted black hair. The eyes were empty sockets, the nose, lips and ears gnawed down to little more than tattered nubs by the work of hungry tomb beetles. The jaw hung open, as though frozen in the midst of an agonised scream; the taut, leathery tendons of the jaw muscles stood out in sharp relief beneath the papery skin.

Buried alive, Ushoran thought, recalling what the thief had told him. The thought sent a chill down his spine.

"Is it him?" he asked.

W'soran nodded. "Thutep, last true king of Khemri," he said with certainty. "And brother to Nagash the Usurper."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because his death is etched here." W'soran traced a clawed fingertip along Thutep's skull, from forehead to chin. "The agonies he suffered in the tomb left their mark in flesh and bone before Thutep's spirit passed into the dead lands." He turned away from the table, still holding the king's skull, and beckoned with his free hand. At once a gaunt, robed figure shuffled out of the shadows near the circle, bearing a short stand made of bronze. As Ushoran watched, W'soran plucked the stand out of

the thrall's hand and stepped carefully into the summoning circle. The would-be necromancer set the stand at its centre and placed the skull atop it.

Ushoran's eyes widened. "You're going to attempt the summoning *now*?"

"Why not?" W'soran beckoned again, and another pair of thralls placed a heavy wooden lectern a few feet from the edge of the summoning circle. "The hour is right, and the position of the moons propitious."

"Well." The Lord of Masks eyed the ritual symbols dubiously. "Are you certain the wards will hold?"

"As certain as I can be," W'soran replied. He opened the heavy tome resting upon the stand and began searching through its pages.

Ushoran fought the urge to start edging towards the door. This was what they'd been working towards for decades, after all. If the summoning worked, they would finally be in a position to challenge Neferata. "But, what if... I mean, suppose there is an accident—"

The would-be necromancer glanced back at Ushoran. "You wish to leave?"

Ushoran paused. The smug note in W'soran's voice was enough to steel his resolve. "Certainly not," he answered coldly. He folded his arms and drew a deep breath. "Go on. Call to him. Let's see what he's got to say."

W'soran's leathery cheeks wrinkled, creaking like old saddle leather as he attempted a smile. "As you wish," he said. Chuckling to himself, he turned back to the open tome and spread his skeletal hands wide. He drew a long, whistling breath and then began the invocation.

The arcane words rolled easily from W'soran's withered tongue and his voice grew stronger as he spoke, until the invocation rang from the chamber walls. Ushoran tried to follow the awful litany at first, but the words scarcely left an impression upon his mind. The passage of time seemed to slow, then failed to register altogether.

The temperature began to fall within the room. The chill came on quickly, like the cold of a desert night. Sheets of parchment fluttered atop the table next to Ushoran, stirred by a sudden breeze, and suddenly he realised that W'soran's voice no longer echoed through the shadow-haunted room.

At some point, the candles had gone out. What little illumination there was came from a pillar of pale, shifting blue light that hung in the air above Thutep's screaming skull. As Ushoran focussed on the light, he became aware of a faint sibilance emanating from the circle, like the stirring of a nest of snakes. The more he listened, however, he realised that it wasn't hissing, but *whispering*. A multitude of voices, young and old; some of them were insistent, others fearful. Some were angry. *Very* angry.

W'soran's shout rode above the sea of voices. "Come forth!" he cried. "Nagash, son of Khete, I call you! Nagash, priest of Settra's cult, I call you! Nagash, usurper of Khemri, I call you! Heed my voice and *come forth!*"

The chorus of spirits broke into wails at the sound of Nagash's name. Sheets of parchment flew into the air; a cold wind rose up, buffeting Ushoran's face. A heavy stack of books tottered, and then fell to the floor with a crash.

"Heed me!" W'soran shouted into the building gale. "By the blood of your brother Thutep, I command it! Come forth!"

The pillar of light began to waver. Thin screams issued from it. Voices howled in despair, or spat curses, or begged for release. One of W'soran's thralls was hurled away from the circle like a straw doll; he flew more than ten feet through the air and hit one of the wooden tables with a bone-jarring thud.

W'soran flung a hand out towards the shifting column of light, as though he could steady it in his grip. "You must obey!" he shouted. "Show yourself!"

The wind continued to rise, until it roared in Ushoran's ears like a hungry lion. The voices of the dead swelled in volume as well, until he could make out individual voices, each one clamouring to be heard above the din.

Within the circle, Ushoran could see tendrils of smoke curling around Thutep's skull. The hair and skin were blackening, as though from the heat of a fire, even though the room was as cold as the abyss itself. The pillar of light was growing brighter, even as its outlines grew less stable. Ushoran felt a pressure against his chest—light at first, but growing stronger and more tangible with every second, until it felt as though dozens of hands were clutching at him. The more distinct they became, the more frantically they reached for him, as though he were becoming more substantial—more *solid*—to the ghosts themselves.

There was an anguished cry—for a moment, Ushoran thought he'd uttered it himself, but then realised the sound had come from W'soran instead. The would-be necromancer clenched his fists and spat a string of angry words and the pillar of light grew tall and thin, as though squeezed in a giant's fist. Ushoran felt the unseen hands clench desperately at his robes, and then they were torn away as the pillar vanished in a brittle crack of thunder.

Darkness fell. Ushoran heard W'soran mutter a sulphurous curse, and then the sharp sound of splintering wood.

By the time the thralls were able to relight the candles, W'soran was bending down and picking up Nagash's tome from the floor. The heavy reading stand had been smashed to splinters; jagged bits of wood jutted from W'soran's palm, but the immortal didn't seem to notice.

Ushoran smoothed his rumpled robes. Belatedly, he saw that they were torn in places. A chill went down his spine.

"What happened?" he asked.

W'soran inspected the ancient book carefully for signs of damage and then set it aside. The immortal stepped carefully into the circle and picked up Thutep's skull. "I held open the doorway as long as I could," he said absently, studying the grisly artefact. "Much longer, and we might have lost the skull. The amount of energy focussed on it was... considerable."

"That's not what I mean," Ushoran said. "What went wrong? Why couldn't you summon him?"

The immortal did not reply at first. His shoulders tensed. "I don't know," he said at last.

"I thought you said—"

"I know what I said!" W'soran snapped. He turned to Ushoran, his withered face a mask of rage. "The skull was the perfect link to Nagash. It should have worked! The rite has never failed me before. *Never!*"

Silent, shuffling thralls emerged from the shadows and went to work restoring some order to the wind-wracked library. Ushoran absently watched them as they worked, trying to force his stunned mind to function. "If not the rite, then what else could it have been?"

W'soran shook his head slowly. "An unforeseen complication. A... temporary setback. Nothing more," he said. He stared at the skull for a moment more, then turned and placed it carefully into the hands of a waiting thrall.

"I must think on this," he said at last. "Perhaps it has to do with the vibrations of the third enumeration..."

The immortal's voice drifted away as he turned back to the summoning circle. He stroked his pointed chin with a clawed hand as he studied the dense bands of ritual symbols. It was not a dismissal as such, but Ushoran could see that he had been clearly forgotten.

That suited the Lord of Masks. He slipped silently from the library and swung the heavy stone door shut behind him. It was nearing dawn, and he had one last bit of business to attend to.

The tomb thief was clever and cautious, but nevertheless predictable. His scent led from the Travellers' Quarter to the Red Silk Quarter, down by the city docks. With little more than an hour to go until dawn, many of the district's dice houses and brothels had shut their doors. Dozens of revellers lay in the filthy streets, overcome by too much wine, or lotus root, or both. Bored-looking men from the City Guard checked each insensate form in turn; those who were clearly members of Lahmia's noble class were lifted from the gutter and urged on their way, while the others were efficiently searched for valuables and left where they lay. A few small knots of leathery-skinned sailors followed along behind the guardsmen, looking for stout bodies to fill the rowing benches of their merchant ships.

Ushoran took two long steps and leapt from the edge of the dice house's roof, clearing the narrow alley with ease and landing in a crouch on the pleasure house next door. He paused there for a moment, his hulking form hidden in deep shadow, nostrils flaring as he tasted the hot night air.

He followed the thief's scent to the far side of the roof, keeping low and creeping along on hands and feet like a jungle ape. It felt good to hunt again, he thought, feeling the salt breeze against his bare skin. He found it ironic that, despite what he had become, he had less opportunity to indulge his appetites now than he'd had as a mortal.

Ushoran intended to savour the next few minutes as much as possible. The failed attempt to summon the Usurper's spirit had left him deeply unsettled. He and W'soran were playing a dangerous game, one that could threaten Lahmia just as much as Neferata's obsession with Alcadizzar, but what other choice did they have?

Swift and silent, he paused at the low parapet and peered over the edge. The rooms on this side of the building looked out over the wide harbour and the slate-grey sea. Ushoran paused, his large, lantern-jawed head swinging from left to right until he caught the scent of his prey. In one fluid motion, he planted a wide, clawed hand on the parapet and swung out over the edge. For a delicious instant he hung in

empty space, thirty feet above the ground, then he dropped like a cat onto the wide ledge of a window directly below.

The window to the bedchamber had been left open to let in the cool sea breeze. Ushoran's gaze swept across the dimly lit room. The air was still tinged with blue streamers of incense and lotus smoke. A trio of figures lay tangled in the silk sheets upon the low, wide bed.

Ushoran ran his tongue along jagged teeth as he climbed silently into the chamber. It was the work of a few moments to find the bag of coins he'd given the thief just a few hours before. He hefted the bag in his hand and smiled, then set it carefully beside the bedchamber door.

There was more than enough coin left to pay for the mess he was about to make.

Reversal of Fortunes

*Nagashizzar, in the 99th year of Asaph the Beautiful
(-1295 Imperial Reckoning)*

The fires could be seen from the tallest tower of the fortress, glittering like a necklace of rubies across the hilltops along the northern shore of the Crystal Sea. From the dark lanes that ran along the terraced mountain slope, hundreds of the Yaghur filled the night air with eerie, ululating howls as they caught wind of the devastation that had been wrought on their squalid homes.

Thestus folded his arms and studied the distant lights. “I count six fires,” he said grimly. His skin was pale as chalk beneath the moonlight and his once-dark eyes were now the colour of eastern jade. But for a few tendrils of black hair that fluttered in the breeze rolling in from the sea, the barbarian stood with the statue-like stillness common to the undead. “Judging by their positions, I would say that the largest of the Yaghur nests have been put to the flame.”

Nagash stood beside Thestus atop the narrow tower, his body shielded from the sea breeze by a heavy, hooded cloak. Ancient flesh crackled as he clenched his fists in rage. Dimly, the necromancer felt the leathery tendons of his right hand start to give way under the pressure; with an act of will he exerted his power and re-knit the corded flesh back together. The practice had grown so common over the last few years that he performed it almost without conscious thought. There was a sound like the tightening of dry leather cord, and his fingers curled inwards like a grasping claw. Too much of the ancient tissue had disintegrated, leaving the remaining tendons foreshortened. The realisation further deepened Nagash’s fury.

“Despatch ten companies of infantry,” he snarled. “Run the damned ratmen to earth and destroy them!”

Behind Nagash, in the shadow of the tower’s arched doorway, Bragadh answered coldly. “Send the Yaghur if you want to chase the ratmen,” he said. “It’s their filthy holes that are burning, after all.”

Nagash rounded on the warlord, his eyes blazing angrily. Words of power rose to his fleshless lips, ready to form an incantation that would shrivel the barbarian like a moth in a candle flame. The necromancer’s anger was palpable, radiating from his body in icy waves, but the warlord was unmoved. He stood with his fists clenched at his side, his expression icy and resentful. Diarid stood close by, his expression neutral but his body tense, as though ready to throw himself between Bragadh and the necromancer’s wrath.

“*You forget yourself, Bragadh,*” Nagash hissed. “*More important, you forget your oaths to me.*” The menace in his voice was like a knife, poised and ready to strike.

Yet the warlord seemed heedless of the danger. His voice took on a hard edge all of its own. “Not so,” he replied. “Be assured, master, I have forgotten nothing. I remember all too well how I swore to obey you—while you, in turn, swore to protect the hill forts of our people. And look what came of *that*.”

Doom had befallen the hill forts of the northmen five years ago, not long after Nagash’s failed counter-stroke against the ratmen. In one night, four of the largest of the barbarian settlements had been set upon by the enemy, who burrowed up into their midst and slaughtered every man, woman and child they could find. The hill forts’ small garrisons were totally unprepared to deal with the savage raids, and without any sorcery of their own there was no way to predict when or where the next attack would occur. More settlements were attacked on the following night, and on the night after that. By the time that a messenger reached Nagashizzar with the news, nearly a dozen of the hill forts had been destroyed. Bragadh and his kinsmen had been beside themselves with rage. They begged Nagash for permission to march north and protect the hill forts; even though many of the barbarians hadn’t seen their homes in decades, their rough sense of honour demanded that they take action. Nagash had refused outright. The barbarian companies were needed in Nagashizzar, helping to secure the mine shafts still under his control.

Instead, the necromancer had withdrawn to his throne chamber and begun working on a great and terrible ritual. The drafting of the sigil alone had taken days, marking out a great circle and hundreds of complex runes with *abn-i-khat* dust. Nagash had ingested still more of the dust, until his withered flesh was saturated with it. Then, upon the hour of the dead, he entered the great circle and began a fearsome incantation.

Once, long ago, he’d kept Bragadh and his barbarians in line with the subtle threat that their homeland was rich with the bones of their ancestors. Any rebellion by the hill forts could be crushed by the simple expedient of raising a punitive army drawn from the barrows of their own ancestors. Nagash now called forth the bones of the ancients not to punish the hill forts, but to protect them from further harm. Across the length and breadth of the barbarian lands, hundreds upon hundreds of skeletal warriors rose at Nagash’s command and returned to the hills that had once been their homes.

When next the enemy raiders came pouring up from their tunnels, they ran headlong onto the swords and axes of the ancient dead. The few survivors were sent screeching back the way they’d come—only to return in greater numbers on the following night. Defeat followed defeat, but the enemy was undeterred. The raids grew more sporadic and more widely scattered; sometimes they inflicted more damage, sometimes less. Always they were chased off with substantial loss of life, but the tempo of the attacks never abated. They continued for months, then years, and slowly Nagash grasped the purpose of the enemy’s strategy. Though they lost nearly every battle against his forces, they were succeeding in forcing him to maintain scores of large garrisons across the northlands. Relatively small raiding forces were requiring him to maintain thousands of undead troops, draining his energies at a

constant and prodigious rate. Meanwhile, the incessant tunnel warfare beneath Nagashizzar ground on and on, further taxing his strength and dividing his attentions.

After five years, the strain had become severe. Worse, it had sowed seeds of discord among his barbarian troops. Nagash had watched Bragadh grow more sullen with each passing year; the damage inflicted on the hill forts had reduced the stream of new recruits to a mere trickle. Now the ratmen felt bold enough to strike at the heart of the Yaghur as well. The enemy was drawing a noose around the mighty fortress, one agonising inch at a time.

Before Nagash realised it, his deformed right hand was raised to strike at Bragadh. Lambent bale-fire crackled hungrily along the curved fingers, increasing in power with each passing moment. Bragadh never flinched; his resentful glare practically invited the necromancer's wrath.

Perhaps Bragadh wanted to be struck down, Nagash thought. Certainly, the enemy would wish it. There was no telling what repercussions such a blow would have on the rest of the barbarian army. The northmen worshipped Bragadh almost like a god at this point; to destroy him might incite the barbarians to open revolt. Though Nagash was certain that he could ultimately crush such an uprising, doing so would require troops that were desperately needed in the tunnels, and he had no doubt that the ratmen would take advantage of the crisis.

The noose around Nagashizzar drew inexorably tighter.

For a long moment, Nagash struggled to choke back his rage. Slowly, he closed his fist and willed the pent-up energies to dissipate.

"The day will come," the necromancer grated, *"when you will regret having spoken thus. For now, you will simply obey."*

Nagash reached out with his will and seized both of the barbarian warriors. Bragadh and Diarid went rigid, their eyes widening in horror as the necromancer used the power of his life-giving elixir to reach into their very souls.

"You are mine to command," Nagash hissed. *"Now and forever more. And I say take your warriors and go forth."*

Bragadh's body trembled as the warlord struggled against Nagash's grip. A low, agonised groan seeped past his tightly clenched lips. But no matter how hard he fought, the effort was futile. The warlord's trembling increased and his body began to bend, like a river palm in the face of a howling desert storm.

Just before Bragadh could succumb, a slender figure emerged from the shadows beyond the tower doorway. Bone charms clinked softly as Akatha interposed herself between the warlord and Nagash.

"This accomplishes nothing," she said to the necromancer. Her voice was hollow and cold, but her steady gaze and straight-backed pose still held some of the witch's old defiance. "Unless it is your intention to play into the enemy's hands."

Fresh rage boiled up from Nagash's withered heart. His left hand shot out, seizing the witch by the throat. Visions of hurling the barbarian woman over the tower battlements danced before his mind's eye.

"You dare to speak thus to me?" he hissed. Ancient flesh along the back of the necromancer's hand crackled and flaked away as his bony fingers tightened around Akatha's neck. He felt her body stiffen, but her cool, penetrating stare never faltered.

“I do what I must,” the witch replied, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “Despatching the great *kan*’s warriors is pointless. If the raiders still remain, it is only because they have set an ambush for you.”

Akatha paused, drawing a tortured breath. “The rat-things... have grown clever,” she managed to say. “They are... forcing you... to waste your power on... futile gestures. You... cannot... *react*. You... lack... the strength.”

Her words only inflamed Nagash further. With an angry snarl he summoned still more power, dragging Akatha to the edge of the battlements as though she weighed nothing at all. Behind the necromancer, Bragadh let out a startled shout of protest.

More blackened pieces of skin crumbled away from Nagash’s wrist in puffs of faintly glowing dust. The muscles and tendons lying along his arm looked like fraying cords of cured leather. All at once, he felt the bones of his wrist and hand shift ominously, as though threatening to burst apart beneath the strain. Without thinking, he summoned yet more power to force the bones into their proper place—and in that fleeting moment of concentration he understood that the witch spoke true. Whether the ratmen understood it or not, they were pushing him to the point of dissolution.

Nagash released Akatha. The witch half collapsed, slumping against the battlements. She looked up at the necromancer through a fall of tangled hair.

“The ratmen hope you will send warriors out into the hills,” she told him. “Is it not obvious?”

Nagash had no answer. With an effort, the witch forced herself onto her feet. “If you would strike at them, do so at a time and place of your own choosing and marshal your strength where it will do the most harm.”

The necromancer glared hatefully at the witch. The fact that Akatha was right only made him want to destroy her all the more. He relished the thought of forcing his will upon her and commanding the witch to cast herself from the top of the tower. She would struggle, no doubt, but that would make it all the sweeter. Yet was her destruction worth the power it would cost?

Nagash whirled on Bragadh and his champion. “*Send word to your companies,*” he told the warlord. “*Any warriors within the tunnels are to head for the surface and await my command.*”

Bragadh eyed the necromancer warily. “What are you planning to do, master?” he asked.

“*Something the damned ratmen will not expect,*” Nagash replied.

* * *

The pale, crescent moon hung low in the sky to the west, casting its glow slantwise across the killing ground. Eekrit could hear the snarling howls and guttural barks of the flesh-eaters coming from a long way away, the maddened sounds carrying easily across the rolling, marshy ground. Like all skaven, the warlord could see perfectly in the darkness, and he searched the line of sickly yellow trees across from his hiding place for the first signs of the monsters’ approach.

The raid on the flesh-eaters' foetid nests had unfolded with the mechanical precision of one of Lord Vittrik's tooth-and-gear contraptions. Unlike the campaign against the barbarian forts further north, Eekrit had no intention of digging his way directly into the monsters' foul burrows. Instead, his force, composed of the entirety of the army's scout-assassins and half a dozen chosen packs of clanrats, had emerged from tunnels at the base of each of their hilltop objectives and quickly surrounded them.

Once upon a time the hilltops had been ringed with protective wooden palisades, but centuries of neglect had reduced them to barely-recognisable ruins. At the appointed time, bone whistles had skirled faintly along the night air and the scattered companies had swept up and over the broad, flat-topped hills. The handful of flesh-eaters caught on the surface were swiftly and silently despatched, then the skaven spread out and located the many entrances to the monsters' reeking burrows. Heavy bladders of oil were brought up and emptied into all but a few of the tunnel mouths. By the time the first howls of alarm began to echo up from the darkness, the skaven had torches ready to toss in as well.

After decades of bitter fighting, the skaven had learned how much the flesh-eaters hated and feared the touch of fire. The oil went up with a hollow, hungry roar; from there it was merely a matter of lurking outside the unlit tunnel mouths and slaying the survivors as they emerged.

The fighting was as savage as it was merciless. No quarter was expected or given; the flesh-eaters were maddened by bloodlust and pain, and the skaven had come to fear and hate the unnatural creatures as they did little else. The monsters burst from the tunnels singly or in shrieking packs, many of them burning with sickly yellow flames, and Eekrit's warriors rushed in and cut them down with spear and blade. After five years of brutal raids against the barbarian tribes, the warlord's troops had become fearless, hard-bitten fighters—and Eekrit along with them, much to his surprise. Thanks to the thrice-damned Lord Velsquee, there had been little alternative.

Officially, Velsquee had no direct authority over the expeditionary force—or so he insisted to Lord Hiirc and the army's many clan chiefs. Eekrit retained his rank and title; Velsquee and his huge contingent of elite troops were merely there to observe the course of the campaign and to provide advice and assistance where needed. Of course, no one believed a word of it, but no one was willing to gainsay the Grey Lord, either. Meanwhile, Eekrit had been *advised* to go and harass the barbarians and the flesh-eaters, while Velsquee and that lunatic Qweeqwol discussed strategy and issued *recommendations* to the army from the comfort of Eekrit's own audience chamber.

Even now, five years on, there was much about Velsquee's arrival that Eekrit didn't understand. Clearly he and Lord Qweeqwol had been working together all along, at least insofar as the grey seers worked with anyone outside their own, secretive fraternity. But to what end? The warlord had no idea. At least, not *yet*.

Marsh grasses thrashed along the far end of the killing ground. Eekrit tensed, his paw drifting to the hilt of the sword resting on the damp ground at his side. The flesh-eaters burst from cover at a loping, four-limbed run, their eyes alight and their

hideous faces contorted with bloodlust. Eight of the monsters emerged from the tree line and down into the marshy hollow where the raiders waited.

The skaven waited until their prey reached the very centre of the hollow. Black-robed shapes rose from cover, swinging braided leather cords above their heads. The slings made a thin, deadly whirring in the night air; the flesh-eaters halted at the sound, their gruesome heads swinging about in search of the sound, and that sealed their fates. Polished sling stones the size of snake eggs hissed through the air and found their mark; bones crunched wetly and the monsters collapsed, their limbs twitching.

More black-robed figures appeared from cover and raced silently across the marshy ground. They converged on the flesh-eaters; daggers flashed briefly beneath the moonlight as the scout-assassins finished off their victims, then the bodies were dragged swiftly out of sight. Whatever their shortcomings as scouts and spies, Eshreegar's rats were nonetheless *very* enthusiastic and capable killers.

Silence descended again. The ambushers resumed their murderous vigil, ears open wide as they strained to hear the faintest sounds of approaching troops. After several minutes, Eekrit let go his sword and relaxed once more.

"Another pack of stragglers," Eshreegar whispered, close to the warlord's left side. "Probably out prowling the wasteland at the foot of the mountain when we began the attack."

Eekrit's tail gave a startled twitch. The Master of Treacheries had appeared at his side like a ghost.

Calming his suddenly racing heart, the warlord gave Eshreegar a sidelong glance. The black-robed assassin was using a handful of marsh-grass to wipe the dark ichor of a flesh-eater from the edge of one of his knives.

"There's no sign of a response from the fortress?" Eekrit asked.

Eshreegar shook his head. "Not since the alarm horns sounded, more than two hours ago. The main gate's still shut."

The warlord raised his snout and gauged the height of the moon. "If they don't march soon, it will be dawn before they arrive," he reckoned.

"If they come at all," the Master of Treacheries agreed.

Eekrit muttered irritably and considered his options. After destroying the flesh-eater nests, he'd brought together his forces and arranged them in an arc along the most likely avenues of approach from the distant fortress. Velsquee and Qweeqwol had been certain that the enemy would respond, probably with companies of swift-moving barbarian troops. In the dark and upon the unsteady, marshy terrain, Eekrit had expected to give the enemy a good mauling, then retreat to the safety of his tunnels, but that was growing less likely with each passing hour. To make matters worse, hungry packs of flesh-eaters were being drawn to the fires from lesser nests throughout the area; the longer his raiders remained in place, the greater the odds that they would be hit by the creatures from an unexpected direction, or find their escape routes cut off.

Beside him, Eshreegar raised his head, his ears unfolding completely as he listened to the seemingly random animal sounds echoing across the marshland. "We've a runner from inside the mountain," he said after a moment, then put a clawed paw to his mouth and made a sound very like the hiss of a large swamp

lizard. The Master of Treacheries listened to the plaintive cry of a marsh owl and nodded to himself. "He's heading this way."

"Damn it all, what now?" Eekrit muttered. As hard as the campaign against the barbarians had been, at least he and his warriors had been far enough from the mountain that Velsquee couldn't stick his snout into things whenever he pleased.

Within moments came the sounds of loud rustling through the marshy growth behind the raiders. Gritting his teeth, Eekrit rose carefully to his feet and sheathed his blade as a breathless skaven came dashing through a stand of dead cypress trees. The messenger came up short as he recognised Eekrit and crouched in a posture of subservience, his head cocked to the side and his throat bared to the warlord.

Eekrit scowled at the hapless rat. "Eshreegar, hand this idiot a brass gong," he growled. "Perhaps he could bang it for a while and sing us some songs. I think there might still be a few half-deaf flesh-eaters who don't yet know where we're at."

The messenger glanced nervously from Eekrit to the Master of Treacheries. "I... I don't know any songs," the clanrat protested weakly.

"I suppose we should thank the Horned One for small mercies," Eekrit snapped. "Did Velsquee send you here for a reason other than to vex me?"

The messenger wrung his paws. "Oh, yes-yes, great lord," he replied. "I-I bear a message from him."

"Well?" the warlord demanded. "Must we torture it out of you?"

"No!" the clanrat squeaked. "No-no, great lord! Grey Lord Velsquee, ah, *suggests* that you and your warriors return to the mountain at once! The enemy is about to attack!"

Eekrit frowned. "*About* to attack? And how does he know this?"

The clanrat's whiskers twitched. "That-that he did not say."

Eekrit cursed under his breath. "No. Of course not," he muttered. He waved a clawed paw at the messenger. "Tell the great Velsquee that we appreciate his *advice* and we'll come straight away. Go."

The messenger bowed his head and departed in a cloud of terrified musk. The noise he made thrashing through the undergrowth made Eekrit wince.

Eshreegar rose to his feet. "Shall I tell the rest of the warband?"

"We certainly can't stay here anymore," Eekrit snarled. "They probably heard that fool all the way back at the fortress."

The Master of Treacheries produced a bone whistle and blew three eerie, piercing notes—the signal for the raiders to abandon their positions and return to the tunnels. As the skaven made ready to depart, Eekrit glanced towards the dark bulk of the mountain and wondered what else Velsquee knew but wasn't saying.

All labour in mine shaft six had come to an abrupt end. The labourers had set aside their dusty picks and shovels and taken their place in the ranks of the spear companies massing along the length of the cavernous tunnel. A handful of barbarian warriors, hastily returning from a long patrol through the treacherous passages of the lower levels, eyed the silent assembly with a veteran's sense of foreboding as they picked their way through the tightly packed columns and continued their long journey to the surface.

Moments later, a stir went through the spear companies at the centre of the mine shaft, and with a clatter of bone they shifted left and right as Nagash and the glowing figures of his wight bodyguard emerged from a nearby branch-tunnel. Behind the necromancer shuffled a score of broad-shouldered ratmen, their muscular bodies stained with gore and their filmy eyes glowing faintly green. They laboured under the weight of a massive bronze cauldron, appropriated from one of the necromancer's fearful laboratories. The cauldron's curved flanks were freshly incised with hundreds of angular runes and it was sealed with a heavy, ornate lid crowned with a cunning representation of four gaping human skulls. Faint wisps of vapour curled from the skulls' open mouths and deep eye sockets.

At Nagash's unspoken command, the rat-corpses bore the cauldron into the cleared space between the companies and set it upon the stone with a dolorous clang, then withdrew to the mouth of the branch-tunnel. As they did, the necromancer produced a bag of crushed *abn-i-khat* from his belt and began to pour out a glowing circle of power around the great vessel. The sigil was a simple but potent one, designed to shape the workings of a spell and increase its potency a hundredfold.

When all was in readiness, the necromancer stepped up to the great cauldron and pressed his ravaged palms against its surface. Then, in a low, hateful voice, he began his spell. For many long minutes, arcane words spilled from Nagash's fraying lips, filling the mine shaft with ominous power. A deep, low hissing rose from the depths of the great cauldron and its sides began to shimmer with steadily mounting heat. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the necromancer's desiccated hands, but Nagash did not relent. His chanting grew in speed and intensity, his glowing eyes focused intently on the boiling cauldron and its invisible contents.

Slowly but steadily, the vapours emanating from the leering bronze skulls began to take on a luminous, sickly, greenish-yellow hue. The tendrils of mist thickened swiftly, flowing heavily across the cauldron's lid and writhing like serpents across the tunnel floor.

With eerie swiftness, the flow of vapour swelled to a torrent, pouring from the skulls in a rushing flood and boiling about the ankles of the waiting skeletons. Its touch pitted bone, tarnished bronze and bleached wooden spear-hafts and shields, but the undead took no notice.

Nagash's incantation swelled in volume, and the mist seemed to react to the vehemence in his sepulchral voice. Within moments the mists stretched the entire length of the mine shaft, rising as high as the knees of the skeletons and roiling against the tunnel walls.

All at once, Nagash threw back his head and roared a stream of arcane syllables, and a charnel gust of wind swept down the branch-tunnels from the surface. It howled like a tormented spirit in the confines of the mine shaft and drove the heavy vapours ahead of it, down the branch-tunnels and into the lower levels, where the masses of the ratmen waited.

By the time Eekrit and his small force had collapsed the raiding tunnels behind them and reached the under-fortress, the entire camp was in a state of pandemonium. Alarm gongs clashed and bone whistles screeched, calling the army's reserves into action. Slave masters and their gangs were driving masses of panicked slaves into the

upper access tunnels, lashing the backs of their wretched charges with whips or prodding them with wickedly pointed spears. The warlord even heard a cacophony of hisses and howling shrieks from Clan Skryre's quarter, hinting that their infernal machines were being hastily readied for action. Knowing how jealous Vittrik was of his unpredictable creations, the sound raised the hackles on the back of the warlord's neck.

Eshreegar paused beside the warlord, his ears open and his nose twitching. "What's this?" he mused aloud.

"Nothing good," Eekrit answered darkly. He considered the sounds of movement on the far side of the cavern; the main tunnels were likely crammed with skaven warriors rushing to battle. He had no intention of getting caught up in that chaos—especially with Vittrik's war machines coming up behind him. "Get the warriors over to the eastern murder holes and wait for me there."

"What about you?" Eshreegar said.

"I'm going to find out what in the Horned God's name is going on."

The warlord broke away from the raiding party and dashed down the maze-like tunnels that subdivided the cavern. Minutes later he was standing outside his clan's former quarters. He'd expected to find Velsquee's personal guard standing watch outside the entrance, but the fearsome-looking storm-walkers were nowhere to be seen.

Tail lashing apprehensively, Eekrit pressed on, heading for the audience chamber. The cramped passageways were deserted, as was the hall itself. Eekrit stood at the threshold to the chamber and stared possessively at the throne at the far end for a moment.

Eekrit caught a hint of movement at the corner of his eye. He turned swiftly, reaching for his sword out of reflex, and saw one of Velsquee's slaves scuttling from a side-passage. The slave caught the sudden motion and let out a terrified squeak. Pungent musk filled the air.

"I'm-I'm on an errand for Lord Velsquee!" the slave bleated, his beady eyes wide. "An important errand, yes-yes! Certainly not hiding. No, I'd never—"

"I don't care," Eekrit snarled. He took a step towards the terrified slave. "Where is Velsquee now?"

"Up-up, in the tunnels, with Lord Qweeqwol," the wretch stammered. "The seer said that the skeletons were going to attack, and Velsquee went with the *heechigar* to catch the *kreekar-gan*." The fiery-eyed *burning man* had become a baleful legend among the ranks of the army's veterans.

Eekrit lips drew back from his chisel-like teeth. Qweeqwol had never been half so useful before Velsquee arrived. "Go on," he growled.

The slave shuddered and his ears folded back against his head. "Velsquee laid-laid a trap for the *kreekar-gan*, but this time the skeletons have filled the tunnels with a killing smoke that slays-slays everyone it touches! Many-many are dead, and the rest are in flight! Already, the skeletons have taken mine shaft seven, and are drawing close to number eight!"

The news stunned Eekrit. If Velsquee had laid a trap for the *kreekar-gan*, he would have had his best troops gathered for the ambush. In those tunnels, there would have been no escape from any kind of killing gas. The *heechigar* and the clan

warriors of Velsquee's supporters—including the insufferable Lord Hiirc—had likely been decimated.

Like any sensible skaven, Eekrit's first instinct was to grab everything valuable he could find and not stop running until he reached the Great City. Yet the warlord also sensed a tantalising opportunity to regain some of his lost stature, if he could but find a way to check the enemy's advance. Eekrit's mind raced. He could use the murder holes to get in behind the skeletons, but what then? A few hundred warriors with hand weapons and a few torches wouldn't do more than slow them down. He would have to do something drastic.

An idea occurred to the warlord. His tail lashed as he formulated the outlines of a plan. It could work, he thought, his confidence growing. Of course, it could also get him killed. Even if he succeeded, Velsquee might have him poisoned just out of spite, but he would worry about that later.

Eekrit shook himself from his scheming reverie. "You said the skeletons were moving on mine shaft eight," he said, turning his attention back to the slave. "Is there any chance of holding the enemy there?"

The warlord blinked in surprise. He was alone in the antechamber. The slave had fled while he had been lost in his own thoughts. Under the circumstances, that seemed to be answer enough for Eekrit's purposes.

Eshreegar gripped the sputtering torch uneasily. "Are you certain this is wise?"

"Wise? No," Eekrit muttered. "But necessary. Of that, I'm certain."

The warlord and his raiders were packed into a steep, roughly circular passage that had been gnawed through the hard rock that lay deep within the great mountain. The tunnel was one of several that had been dug over the last decade and set aside in case an enemy attack succeeded in overrunning the defensive positions around the lower mine shafts. The passages were small enough to avoid detection by the enemy, or so Eekrit devoutly hoped, but were positioned to allow for lightning raids behind the enemy's line of advance. The small skaven force had reached the uppermost limit of the tunnel they were in, right at the level of mine shaft seven. Only a foot of relatively soft rock separated them from the shaft itself. A small knot of skaven warriors stood ready, awaiting the order to create the breach.

Orange light flickered hungrily in the cramped confines of the tunnel. One skaven in twenty carried a lit torch—not nearly enough to suit Eekrit, but all that they had left after the raid against the flesh-eaters. The rest of the raiders were charged with ensuring that the torchbearers reached their targets. The rest was up to luck and the Horned God's favour.

From the look on Eshreegar's face, the Master of Treacheries was far from convinced. "What about this killing smoke that the slave mentioned?"

Eekrit tried to give Eshreegar a nonchalant flick of his whiskers. "If the skeletons have such a weapon, it would be down in the lower tunnels by now," he said. "The enemy will be pressing its advantage to gain as much ground as it can."

The assassin shifted uncomfortably. "But smoke gets *everywhere*—" he protested.

"Then hold your breath if you like," Eekrit growled. With a curt nod, he ordered the digging party to go to work.

Eekrit focussed on readying his weapon and clamping down hard on his own musk glands. The more he thought about the ways his plan could go awry, the more nervous he became. He was gambling heavily that the majority of the skeletons would have passed through mine shaft seven by now. If he was wrong, there would be no way for the small force to extricate itself—and he would have opened up a direct route for the enemy all the way to the under-fortress, many levels below. Not that he would live long enough to witness such a disaster.

Within minutes, the sound of splintering stone rose above the scrabbling claws of the warriors. Eekrit tried to forget about everything that could go wrong and just focus on living through the next few minutes.

The breach opened with a crash of falling rubble. Eekrit raised his sword. *“Forwards!”* he cried.

The skaven warriors who made the breach grabbed up their weapons and charged forwards, into the mine shaft. Eekrit and Eshreegar were hard upon their heels—and then, without warning, the three skaven at the front of the raiding party collapsed to the floor of the mine shaft.

Eekrit’s blood turned to ice. He caught sight of a very faint, yellow-green tinge to the air. The killing smoke!

The three skaven writhed on the stone floor, clawing at their throats. Hideous choking sounds rattled from their gaping mouths for a few heartbeats and then their eyes rolled back and they went still. The skaven directly behind them turned and tried to flee back the way they’d come, crashing into Eekrit and Eshreegar. The scent of fear-musk was thick in the dank air—along with a very faint metallic tang, like burnt copper.

Eekrit snarled at the warriors, giving the skaven in front of him a rough shove that sent him sprawling onto his backside. *“Keep going!”* he snapped. *“If the smoke is going to kill us, it’s already too late! Go!”*

Without waiting for the warriors to respond, Eekrit rushed past them, charging up the gentle slope of the mine shaft. The faint taste of burnt metal seared his throat and made his eyes sting, but no more. What little smoke remained in the mine shaft was too dispersed to be much threat—although he reckoned the dead warriors behind him would disagree.

After the glare of the torchlight, it took the warlord’s eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom. He heard the skeletons long before he could see them—a rolling, clattering tide of wood and bone filling the mine shaft before him. It sounded like thousands of the damned things and they were all coming his way.

The warlord shook his head savagely, trying to blink away the last vestiges of the torch glare. The first thing he could make out were green pinpoints of light—a veritable sea of them—floating through the air in the tunnel ahead. As his eyes adjusted he made out the rounded tops of human skulls and the hard outlines of wooden shields. The undead warriors were bearing down on the skaven raiders in a relentless tide, but without any sense of formation. Their response was daunting in size, but largely uncoordinated. It wasn’t much, he reckoned, but it just might be enough.

“Eshreegar!” the warlord cried. *“The supports! Fire the supports!”*

“Now?” The Master of Treacheries gave Eekrit a wide-eyed look. *“But—”*

“Do it!” Eekrit ordered.

Eshreegar looked as though he might argue further, but one look at the oncoming horde seemed to persuade him. Barking orders at the raiders, he dashed over to the thick wooden support closest to him and placed his torch against it. The heavy column, soaked in pitch to prevent rot, erupted in hungry blue flames within seconds.

Other skaven torchbearers dashed across the mine shaft, lighting every support within reach. Eekrit felt waves of heat play across his shoulderblades. It was a start, but they had to reach a great many more of the wooden beams if they hoped to succeed. He raised his sword. “Fire as many supports as you can!” he called out. “Don’t waste time on the skeletons! Go!”

With that, the warlord beckoned to Eshreegar and dashed forwards, hugging the right-hand wall of the shaft. Skeletons moved to intercept him; he screeched a fierce battle cry and lashed out at their legs with vicious sweeps of his sword. Bronze smashed against bone, and undead warriors toppled, their spears still jabbing for his chest and throat. Corroded bronze points stabbed into his armour, or were turned aside; he stumbled as another point gouged a furrow across his left thigh. Snarling, he threw his shoulder against the shield of the skeleton in front of him and knocked the undead warrior backwards against its companions. With a sweep of his sword he hacked off the warrior’s lower legs, then ducked his head and plunged still deeper into the shifting mass.

More screeches and savage cries echoed across the mine shaft as the rest of the skaven raiders charged into the press of skeletons. They bent low and raced through the crowd at little better than knee-height, breaking leg bones and shattering joints with claw and blade. Others plied their torches as weapons, setting rotting cloth and shrivelled flesh alight. The skeletons hefted their spears and stabbed at the racing skaven, but the press of bodies left them with little room to bring their weapons to bear. Still, as swift as they were, the thicket of bronze points still drew blood among the raiders. Eekrit heard cries of agony as warriors were stabbed again and again by the enemy, yet still they pressed on.

The warlord forced his way further up the mine shaft, past one wooden support after another. There wasn’t time to glance back and see if Eshreegar was still behind him; it was all he could do to keep pushing forwards, staying literally one step ahead of the skeletons and their spears. He tore wildly at the undead warriors, savouring the brittle crunch of bone. A spear dug into his hip, biting deep into the armour and driving him against the wall; he snarled at the sudden bloom of pain, seizing the spear haft with his free paw and smashing the skull of the skeleton that wielded it. Eekrit pulled the weapon loose and drove himself forwards with another angry shout.

More skeletons pressed against Eekrit; time blurred, the seconds stretching with the dreadful elasticity of combat. He blocked and parried, cut and thrust. He lost count of the number of skeletons that fell beneath his blade. All that mattered was staying alive from one moment to the next and putting one foot resolutely in front of the other.

Dimly, Eekrit became aware of a constant, breathy roar that rose above the clatter and crash of battle. Fierce heat prickled at the back of his neck and head, but he paid it little heed. Then, suddenly, a hand tightened on the back of his cloak and tried to pull him backwards. With a snarl, the warlord spun, brandishing his sword, and saw

that it was Eshreegar. The Master of Treacheries was bloody and soot-stained and his head was silhouetted by a halo of raging flames.

“Enough!” Eshreegar shouted. “It’s enough! We’ve got to get out of here!”

For a moment, Eekrit didn’t understand—then he saw the inferno stretching behind them. The pitch-soaked columns were fully ablaze and the fire had spread to the overhead beams as well. Sheets of hungry flame were shooting along the ceiling of the mine shaft, drawn towards the surface by thin draughts of air; as Eekrit watched, the fire raced overhead, reaching for the next set of supports in line. The intensity of the heat swelled in an instant, bearing down on him like a red-hot brand.

The skeletons were withdrawing as well, retreating farther up the mine shaft away from the skaven. From where he stood, Eekrit could see a few score of his raiders staggering like drunkards among the heaped bodies. Many of them had drawn their cloaks over their snouts to protect them from the heat. The warlord nodded, gasping for breath, and fished out a bone whistle. He blew three shrill notes and his warriors raced boldly back into the flames.

As he watched, several of the warriors’ cloaks left trails of smoke and flame in their wake.

“It’s possible that I didn’t think this through very well,” the warlord said, shouting over the roar of the flames.

Eshreegar gave the warlord a look of pure irritation—and then his eyes widened in terror. “Down-down!” he cried, jerking hard on Eekrit’s cloak. Eekrit was pulled completely off his feet, just as the world exploded in a sizzling crack of thunder and a flash of blinding, green light.

When his vision returned, Eekrit was on his back, staring up at the inferno roaring overhead. Spots of awful heat burned across his chest, like hot coals laid atop the surface of his armour. His nerves jangled painfully, like glass shattered under a hammer blow. With a groan, Eekrit levered himself onto his elbows, and saw that a half-dozen of his god-stone charms had been melted into smoking, black lumps. They had saved him—just barely—from the blast of sorcery that had struck him from farther up the mine shaft.

Perhaps twenty yards up the smoke-filled tunnel, surrounded by skeletal spearmen and fearsome-looking wights, stood the infamous *kreekar-gan*. The figure was swathed in tattered grey robes and his face concealed within the depths of a voluminous hood. Twin points of green flame burned hatefully from its depths, their baleful glow fixed on Eekrit’s stunned form. The burning man’s mummified hands were stretched towards him, wreathed in a terrible aura of sorcerous power.

Beside Eekrit, Eshreegar moaned, and tried to push himself upright. The warlord had caught the brunt of the blast, but the Master of Treacheries had suffered a glancing blow that had battered him senseless. Eekrit scrambled to his feet, his body given new life by the terrifying figure of the burning man.

“The fire!” Eekrit yelled. “Back into the fire!” He grabbed hold of Eshreegar’s smouldering robes and began to drag him bodily down the mine shaft.

A howl of pure rage chased after Eekrit as he fled into the dubious safety of the inferno. The heat was nigh unbearable; after only a few seconds it felt as though his limbs were aflame. Every breath was an agony of heat and choking smoke. All around him, wood burst with loud, blistering cracks, showering the tunnel with

burning splinters. Fragments of dirt and broken stone were falling from the ceiling in a growing tide as the overhead supports began to give way.

Eekrit's head began to swim. Where was the breach? He couldn't be certain how far he'd gone. Everywhere he turned, there was only fire. A curse came to the warlord's lips, but he hadn't the breath to voice it. There was a groan above him, a sound so deep he felt it in his bones, and it grew with every passing second. The sound was important, the warlord thought dimly, but he couldn't quite understand why.

It was impossible to breathe. Eekrit heard a pounding in his ears, growing louder by the moment. Who in the Horned God's name would be pounding drums in the middle of a roaring fire?

Eekrit turned about, trying to focus on the sound. Invisible hands plucked at him, pulling him this way and that. And then came a thunderous, splintering *craaaaack* overhead and the warlord felt himself falling backwards into roaring darkness.

Initiation Rites

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 99th year of Asaph the
Beautiful
(-1295 Imperial Reckoning)*

A dozen pale, blood-streaked hands held the golden goblet aloft. The high priestesses lay in a tight circle at the foot of the alabaster goddess, their golden faces upturned. Drops of red speckled their smooth cheeks and dappled the corners of their eyes like tears. Their chanting swelled, stoked to a near-ecstatic pitch by the curling clouds of lotus smoke that permeated the inner sanctum. As the rite neared its climax, Neferata, standing upon the dais, spread her arms wide and added her voice to the chorus. But it wasn't the goddess she sang to; the sole object of her attention was the handsome young man who stood before the offered cup, head bowed and hands clasped across his chest.

Her pulse raced as she watched Alcadizzar gather his focus and begin to chant. His rich, deep voice blended harmoniously with the rising and falling notes of the priestesses' chorus, increasing its power and urgency. At the proper moment, the prince raised his head and spread his arms in a pose identical to Neferata's. Alcadizzar's dark eyes met hers, and the intensity of his stare sent a frisson of desire through her.

The wide sleeves of the prince's white robe had slid back to his elbows, revealing tanned, muscular forearms and the thick wrists of a practiced swordsman. Reflected moonlight glinted icily off the curved dagger in his right hand. Still staring deeply into Neferata's eyes, he placed the point of the dagger against his left wrist and slowly drew it downwards. The razor-edged blade cut cleanly through the flesh, drawing a thin line halfway to the prince's elbow. The blood came a heartbeat later, welling up from the cut and spilling in thick streams down Alcadizzar's arm.

"*The glory of the goddess!*" cried the priestesses, as the prince's blood fell heavily into the goblet. "*Behold the gift of Asaph!*"

A shiver went through Neferata as she watched the prince's lifeblood mingle with the offerings of the high priestesses. Her chest heaved, drawing in breath and expelling it in short, ragged gasps. Behind her ancient mask, her mouth opened slightly, revealing the tips of her leonine fangs.

Alcadizzar bled into the goblet, adding to the offerings there until the cup was nearly brimming full. Then he took the goblet from the priestesses and they fell away to either side, opening a path for him to ascend the dais and offer the cup to Neferata.

"For you, holy one," he intoned. "An offer of love and life eternal."

Neferata bowed her head solemnly, though her heart was racing and her body ached with sudden thirst. With slow, ceremonial restraint, she reached out to the prince and took the warm cup from his hands. Sighing faintly, she brought the goblet close. With a practiced motion, she shifted her mask slightly and raised the cup to her lips. The taste of the blood sent waves of delicious heat pulsing through her body. Knowing that part of its power came from Alcadizzar himself only added to its savour.

When she was finished, she raised the empty cup and gazed lovingly on Alcadizzar and the cultists. The prince closed his eyes and swayed slightly under the full weight of her stare. The priestesses cried out in exultation; several succumbed completely, collapsing onto the floor in a dead faint.

Neferata beckoned, and a high priestess emerged from the shadows to the right of the dais with another cup held carefully in her hands. At the same time, a second high priestess emerged from the left, bearing an ornately carved wooden box. The final act of the initiation was at hand.

The immortal took the cup from the high priestess, exchanging it for the empty goblet in her hand. It brimmed with a dark red elixir crafted from Neferata's own vital fluid. She turned back to Alcadizzar and offered him the cup.

"Drink, faithful servant," she said, her words crackling with power. "Drink, and know the power of the goddess herself."

The prince opened his eyes. With solemn ceremony, he accepted the cup, and raised it reverently to the white face of Asaph. His gaze then fell to Neferata, and he brought the cup to his lips. In one long draught, he drained the goblet to the dregs.

As near to her as Alcadizzar was, Neferata could feel the transformative effects of the elixir on his body. The prince's heart raced and his muscles swelled with vigour. Heat radiated from him like metal drawn from the forge. Though he had partaken of the elixir almost a dozen times, first as an initiate and later as a priest of the temple, he had never had so much at once. The effect on him was profound. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened in shock. A low, almost bestial groan rose from his throat. He shuddered, his muscles tightening until every tendon stood out like taut cords beneath his skin.

Neferata could feel the torrent of emotions raging through the prince, tasting the fear, the wonder and the ecstasy as though they were her own. She felt it through the bond forged by the elixir, as though she and Alcadizzar now shared the same heart and mind. The intensity of the connection stunned her as well; for a moment she was as stricken as he was. It was an intimacy unlike anything she had known before.

They stared at one another for what felt like an eternity. At last, Neferata took a long breath and said, "The blessings of the goddess fill you, Alcadizzar. Can you not feel the power of Asaph's gift?"

Alcadizzar replied in a subdued voice. "I do, holy one."

"You are one with the divine, now," she said. "Do you accept what you have been given, with all your heart?"

“I do.”

“Then show us your devotion,” she said. “Prepare yourself.”

The prince nodded solemnly. He handed the empty goblet back to the high priestess and then, moving as though in a dream, he unbelted his robe and let it fall to the floor. As he did, Neferata turned to the high priestess carrying the box and gestured for her to come forwards. She opened the cedar lid and reached inside.

Clad now only in britches, Alcadizzar waited with his hands at his sides, breathing deep, calming breaths. Already, the wound on his arm had closed, thanks to the power of the elixir. Now he closed his eyes and prepared himself for the trial to come.

Neferata gently lifted out the contents of the box. The asp was blacker than night and around three feet long. In ancient times, the queens of Lahmia held court with two live asps curled about their wrists as a sign of Asaph’s favour. The serpent obediently wound about her forearm and coiled a third of its length upon her open palm. Its unblinking eyes glittered like chips of onyx and it tasted the air with a flickering, blue-black tongue as Neferata turned to face the prince once more.

She extended her hand to him. “Prove to us your devotion,” she said. “Trust in Asaph’s blessing, and you will prevail.”

Alcadizzar opened his eyes. His breathing slowed and his body grew still. She could sense the tightly harnessed energies of the elixir humming like plucked chords along his lean, muscular limbs. Slowly, gracefully, he raised his right hand, palm out, and extended it towards the coiled serpent.

At once, Neferata felt the asp grow tense. The serpent’s head drew back slightly as the prince’s hand came closer. The asp was one of the swiftest and deadliest serpents in all Nehekhara; a single bite could kill a grown man in less than a minute. But Alcadizzar showed no fear. For the last twenty-five years he had devoted himself to the teachings of the temple, learning through meditation and intense physical training how to harness the full power of both body and mind. The training was not unlike that which the great Ushabti received in ancient times; only instead of calling upon the blessings of the gods, Alcadizzar drew upon the power of Neferata’s elixir.

Inch by inch, the prince’s hand drew closer to the serpent. The asp’s coils slithered across Neferata’s palm, gathering tightly together. Its tongue angrily lashed the air. And then, without warning, it struck.

The asp’s head darted forwards, almost too fast for Neferata’s eye to follow. It closed the distance between her and the prince faster than the blink of an eye, mouth open and fangs distended.

Alcadizzar’s hand snapped shut—and suddenly the asp spasmed, writhing impotently in his iron grip. As Neferata watched, the prince bent his head and kissed the serpent gently atop its head, and then carefully unwound the rest of its length from her arm.

“Asaph be praised,” she said softly, feeling a flush of heat across her face and down her slender neck. Quickly she mastered herself as Alcadizzar placed the asp back in its box. “Bear witness, sisters!” she called to the other priestesses. “The goddess has shown her favour! Behold Alcadizzar, the temple’s first high priest!”

With cries of joy, the high priestesses rose up and gathered around the prince. They touched him lightly and whispered their congratulations as a new robe of purest

samite was draped about his broad shoulders. He nodded his head and smiled a little sheepishly at the masked women, clearly uncomfortable being at the centre of such intimate female attention.

Neferata dismissed the priestesses with an unspoken command; they scattered like a flock of birds, vanishing quietly into the shadows. She stepped forwards and held out her hand to Alcadizzar.

“You are one of us now,” she said. “It is time you were welcomed into the inner sanctum.”

The prince, his face flushed with triumph, gave Neferata a dazzling smile and placed his hand in hers. His eyes widened faintly in surprise.

“Your skin,” he said. “It’s so cold. Are you well, holy one?”

“I have never been better. Come.”

Pulling gently on his hand, Neferata led him from the dais and into the shadows behind the statue of the goddess. Her hand found the small wooden door set into the wall and pushed it open. Orange lamplight spilled through the doorway from the corridor beyond.

They walked in silence for a time, down the narrow, dusty passageways and through the richly appointed chambers of the inner sanctum. Alcadizzar studied each room with interest, drinking in every detail of his surroundings.

“This part of the temple is much older than the rest,” he observed, brushing his fingertips along the curved flank of a marble pillar.

Neferata nodded approvingly. “So it is. We are walking in what was once the Women’s Palace. Now these chambers are set aside for the comfort and edification of the temple’s higher orders.”

“Hmpf,” the prince replied with a frown. “A far cry from the bare walls and the wooden cot of an initiate’s cell.”

“An initiate’s purpose is to learn, not luxuriate,” Neferata replied. “Now that you’re enlightened, you may reap the rewards of your hard work and dedication.”

They passed through a long, columned gallery and found themselves at the edge of the former palace’s old garden. Once it had been a carefully manicured refuge, with profusions of gorgeous, exotic plants, rambling gravel pathways and serene reflecting pools. Now, after centuries of benign neglect, it was a dense wilderness of dark fronds, glossy native vines and stands of Eastern bamboo. Frogs chirped to one another in the darkness, while late-summer cicadas droned from the depths of the bamboo groves.

New pathways had been worn through the undergrowth over the decades, lit by the faint glow of the moon. Neferata led the prince down one such track, navigating more by memory than eyesight. After several minutes, they emerged at the centre of the garden.

Here, the area had been kept mostly clear and remained much as it had been centuries before. A dense carpet of soft, springy grass surrounded a broad, deep pool, ringed by old, well-tended ornamental trees. Neru was bright and full overhead, transforming the surface of the pond to quicksilver.

Neferata let go of Alcadizzar’s hand and walked towards the still water. The tips of the thick grasses brushed her feet through the gaps in her sandals. “This has

always been one of my favourite places,” she said softly. So many memories, she thought, their edges blurring now with the passage of time. Neferata could not say for sure whether that was a blessing or a curse. “The temple at Khemri will need a place like this as well. Remember that, when you lay its foundations.”

“That’s a long way away,” the prince said with a sigh. “It’s possible that the temple won’t even be completed in my lifetime.”

Neferata laughed at the notion. “Don’t be foolish. Of course it will!” She turned back to him. “Look at how far you’ve come since joining the temple. In just a few more years, you’ll be ready for the final initiation, and then the west will be yours.”

Alcadizzar walked towards the moonlit pool, his face pensive. “But for how long?” he asked. “I’m fifty-five years old. There is so much to do. I hardly know where to begin.”

Neferata joined him at the edge of the pool. “Look at you,” she said, pointing to his reflection. “Still as young and handsome as ever. That’s the power of the divine, Alcadizzar. In ancient times, our people lived a much longer span of years. A man wasn’t considered to be in his prime until he was *eighty*. You’ll enjoy a life at least as long,” she said to him, “as a hierophant of the temple, perhaps even longer.”

The prince looked at her wonderingly. “Is such a thing possible?”

Neferata smiled behind her mask. “That depends upon you, my prince. Tell me, if you could rule Khemri for a hundred years, what would you do?”

Alcadizzar smiled. “Rebuild the city, for a start. There are still entire districts inhabited by nothing more than rats.” He folded his arms. “After that, focus on the docks, and get the river trade with Zandri going again. If Lahmia would permit it, I’d build a trading post along the river, where it touches the Golden Plain to the north-west of here. That would bring goods to the west far quicker than the overland route through the mountains.”

“And avoid all those troublesome tolls passing the goods through Quatar,” Neferata noted wryly.

“There is that,” the prince answered slyly. “After that... I don’t know. There are so many things I’d like to do. Build a collegium, like the one at Lybaras, and a great library that would serve scholars and citizens alike.” His smile widened and his voice grew more animated as he continued. “I’d rebuild the army, of course, and fund expeditions to explore the lands beyond Nehekhar. And of course there’s the matter of stemming the growth of the Great Desert...” He spread his hands and gave a shrug. “You see? I don’t even think a century would be enough.”

Neferata slipped her arm around the prince’s broad shoulders. “Two centuries, then,” she whispered. “Or *five*. There are... higher mysteries... that you have not yet plumbed, Alcadizzar. There is so much more I can teach you, if you are willing. Perhaps... perhaps you need not ever die at all.” She leaned close to him, intoxicated by his warmth. “Think of it. You would be greater than Settra himself!”

“Or as terrible as Nagash.”

The woman’s voice was melodious and yet forbidding, as cold and pure as the silvery tones of a bell. Alcadizzar and Neferata jolted apart like a pair of guilty young lovers, searching amid the surrounding trees for the source of the sound.

A lithe figure glided from the shadows on the far side of the glimmering pond. She was dressed in fine silken robes from the lands of the Far East and moved with

an artful, almost mesmerising grace as she stepped into the moonlight. Her porcelain features were delicate and exotic, with high, rounded cheekbones and large, oval-shaped eyes. Jade pins glowed from her raven-black hair, bound tightly atop her head to reveal the slender curve of her throat. After spending so many years among the masked priestesses of the temple, the woman's uncovered face both disturbed and fascinated Alcadizzar.

"Death is what separates mankind from the gods, young prince," the woman said. "And for good reason. Immortality brings us nothing but misery."

Neferata growled deep in her throat, like an angry lioness. "Naaima!" she spat. "What is the meaning of this?"

Suddenly, the serene atmosphere of the clearing was charged with tension. Alcadizzar stiffened, surprised by the vehemence in Neferata's voice, but Naaima's expression was implacable.

"There is news from Rasetra," she said, glaring an accusation at Neferata. "The old king, Aten-heru, is dead. He has gone into the realms of the dead, never having seen the face of his eldest son."

Alcadizzar said nothing. A frown creased his brow, as though the young man was uncertain what he should feel. After a moment, he sighed. "Who will rule in Aten-heru's place?" he asked.

"Your younger brother, Asar," Naaima told him. "He sends you his greetings and his love, and begs you to quit Lahmia and come home for your father's interment."

The prince's frown deepened into a scowl. "Home?" he said. "No. I cannot. I am pledged to the temple—"

"Cannot?" Naaima said. "You are to be the king of Khemri! There is *nothing* you cannot do! Leave this place, Alcadizzar. Now. Before it's too late—"

"*Silence!*" Neferata snarled, and this time Naaima flinched at the power in her voice. Eyes glittering like a serpent's, Neferata turned to Alcadizzar. "Leave us," she said curtly. "Return to the inner sanctum and offer up prayers to the goddess for your father's safe passage into the underworld. It is the proper thing for a son to do."

Alcadizzar hesitated for a moment, his gaze shifting from Neferata to Naaima as he tried to read the invisible currents of anger between them. When no further explanation was forthcoming he gave a reluctant nod. "Yes, holy one," he said at last.

The prince withdrew quietly from the clearing, casting long glances over his shoulder at the rigid, angry figures of the two women.

Silence descended on the clearing. Neferata said nothing for a long while, until Alcadizzar's stealthy footfalls had faded from the garden entirely. Naaima waited for what was to come, her expression calm but her dark eyes glinting defiantly.

"I'm trying to recall the last time I saw you," Neferata said at last. "How long has it been? Forty-five years? Fifty? You've avoided me for half a century, and now here you are." She began walking slowly towards Naaima, as if the former courtesan were a wild animal that was easily spooked. "After everything I've done for you, this is how you repay me?"

"Yes," Naaima shot back. "How else? Long ago, you saved my life. Can't you see that I'm trying to do the same?"

“You know how important he is!” Neferata snarled. “Alcadizzar represents the future! Together we’ll lead Nehekhara into a golden age—an *eternal* age of peace and prosperity!”

“No. You won’t.” Naaima shook her head sadly. “Alcadizzar will never be your consort, Neferata, no matter what you think. Once he realises what you truly are, he will become your sworn enemy.” Tears glimmered at the corners of her eyes. “He will have no choice. Can’t you see that? All he knows is duty and sacrifice. That’s the way you made him.” Naaima wiped at her cheeks. “Then you will have to kill Alcadizzar, or let him go. Either way, Lahmia will burn.”

Neferata reached up and tore off her golden mask. Her fangs glinted coldly in the moonlight. “What do you know of Alcadizzar, you Eastern slut?” she said. “It was *my* blood that saved him as a babe, when his own mother could not, and it’s *my* blood that courses through his body even now! His first duty is to *me*, and no other!”

More tears stained the former courtesan’s face. This time she did not bother to wipe them away. “I’m sorry,” Naaima said. “I know it must be hard for you, after everything you’ve lost. But Alcadizzar will not make you a queen again. He cannot. Nor will he ever love you.”

“Get out of my sight,” Neferata said. Her voice had grown as hard and cold as stone. “Now. Or so help me, I’ll rip out your traitorous little heart.”

Naaima closed her eyes in resignation. “As you wish,” she said, with as much dignity as she could muster. She withdrew slowly, stepping back into the all-concealing shadows. Her voice rose like a ghost from the darkness.

“Always, I have loved you,” she said. “And I will do so until the end. Remember that, when all the others have betrayed you.”

“*I said go!*” Neferata cried. She rushed forwards, claws raised. Night birds leapt from the branches of the trees, their forlorn cries echoing from the distant garden walls.

Unwelcome Conclusions

*Nagashizzar, in the 99th year of Ualatp the Patient
(-1290 Imperial Reckoning)*

“Hsst!” The scout-assassin raised a clawed paw and lashed his tail sharply. One ear was pressed against the rough, weeping stone of the tunnel, and his eyes were shut in concentration as he listened to the faint sounds vibrating through the rock.

A chorus of shrill, serpentine hisses echoed up and down the narrow passage, and the dust-covered sappers at the far end froze in place. Bits of broken stone spilled from their clenched fingers, the noise magnified a thousandfold in the tense air. Down the length of the tunnel, the rest of the skaven silently readied their weapons. They were close now; the sappers had been digging underneath the foundations of the tower for more than an hour and the last of the supports were nearly exposed. This was the point where things most often went wrong.

The scout-assassin held himself absolutely still as he waited for the sound to repeat itself. It might have been nothing more than wagon wheels rumbling across a paved roadway, just a few dozen feet above them—or it might have been a sudden fall of stone from a counter-sapping tunnel heading their way. A breach could fill the tunnel with roiling clouds of poison gas and spear-wielding skeletons—or worse, packs of howling, frenzied flesh-eaters. The campaign against the creatures’ foetid nests had driven the flesh-eaters to new depths of savagery against the invaders—especially the distinctive, black-robed scouts. Better a swift death than to be captured by the monsters and dragged back to their hilltop lairs.

Long moments passed. Pink noses twitched nervously in the gloom. Clouds of fine, grey dust drifted through the air, stirred by the faint exhalations of the sappers and their guardians. One of the skaven stirred, ever so slightly, drawing savage looks from his companions.

By degrees, the scout-assassin relaxed. His paw lowered and the skaven let out a collective hiss of relief. Moments later, the soft sound of claws on stone resumed at the far end of the passageway.

Eekrit straightened as the sappers continued their work. “That’s the fifth one in the last ten minutes,” he muttered. The warlord grimaced as he tried to work a cramp from between his scarred shoulderblades.

Lord Eshreegar coughed faintly—the closest sound to laughter he could manage. “Better than the alternative,” the Master of Treacheries answered. Five years after the

inferno in mine shaft seven, his voice was still little better than a whispering rasp. "The last time we had a breach, the flesh-eaters nearly made off with you."

The warlord snorted in derision. "They never laid a hand on me. Not that you noticed, of course." Eekrit's sword paw clenched at the memory of the vicious, close-quarters fight. It had been a nearer thing than he cared to admit. He attempted a dismissive shrug, wincing as the scar tissue across his shoulders drew tight. "I'm more like to die of a heart rupture from all these false alarms." He bared his long teeth at the sharp-eared sentry, several dozen paces down the tunnel. "I'm starting to think Velsquee's put him up to it."

Eshreegar gave the warlord a sidelong glance. He had to turn his head to do it; the left side of his face was a patchwork of bald, pinkish scar tissue, and a golden skull gleamed in the ravaged pit where his eye used to be. "We've been pulling down the burning man's towers for the last eight months," the Master of Treacheries replied. "We're outnumbered a thousand to one, and his warriors are getting better at catching us with every passing night. You think the Grey Lord needs to go to all the trouble of *bribing* an assassin to kill you?"

Eekrit glowered at Eshreegar. "He might," the warlord muttered darkly. "It's been five years since we brought down mine shaft seven, and we're still alive. He could be getting impatient."

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Lord Velsquee certainly wanted Eekrit dead. By all reports, the Grey Lord had been near apoplectic when he'd learned of the mine shaft's collapse and the attendant destruction that had followed. The levels around shaft number seven had grown so honeycombed with side-passages and murder holes that the collapse touched off a wave of secondary cave-ins for more than a week afterwards. The aftershocks reverberated as far down as the under-fortress itself, and only the desperate efforts of the army's engineers prevented the loss of mine shaft eight as well. How the raiding party managed to escape the destruction and reach the safety of the lower levels, only the Horned God himself knew.

Had Eshreegar and a couple of his scouts not pulled Eekrit from the collapsing mine shaft, he would not have survived at all. As it was, both he and the Master of Treacheries nearly succumbed to their burns during the long weeks that followed. Eekrit's clan spent large sums on his behalf, summoning surgeons from as far away as the Great City to tend his injuries. Eshreegar's wounds were even more severe; the scout-assassins closed ranks around their leader and kept him in seclusion for more than a month until they were certain that he would survive. All the while, Velsquee seethed, wanting nothing more than to drag them before a summary trial and lay the entire blame for the disaster at their feet.

The Grey Lord was eager to divert attention onto Eekrit and the destruction of mine shaft seven and away from the disaster of his would-be ambush of the *kreekar-gan*. The enemy's poison cloud had decimated the army's best troops, including Velsquee's own storm-walkers, and sent the rest in a panicked retreat that the Grey Lord himself had been hard-pressed to stop. Mine shaft eight had fallen to the burning man's warriors and hasty defences around mine shaft nine, comprised of shattered warrior packs and terrified slave mobs, likely wouldn't have held for long, even with Velsquee and Qweeqwol personally in command. Though stories of

Velsquee's heroic stand were now an established part of the lore surrounding the desperate fight, the truth was that the army had been pushed to the brink of defeat, and the lines had stabilised only after the collapse of the mine shaft had thrown the enemy advance into disarray.

Velsquee had gambled mightily and lost. The near-destruction of the *heechigar* and the severe losses suffered by many of the army's more powerful clans placed the Grey Lord in a precarious position, and it wasn't long before he was forced to abandon the notion of a show trial and focus on the intrigues of the army's many factions. The balance of power among the skaven lords shifted many times during the weeks that followed. It was only after concluding a hasty alliance with Clan Morbus—and a particularly brutal campaign of assassinations—that the Grey Lord was able to secure his position and restore order.

What mystified Eekrit for a long time afterwards was why Velsquee never made the obvious move of stripping him of command. The Grey Lord scarcely needed any real justification to do it, and no doubt Lord Hiirc thought that the alliance with his clan entitled him to the position. Eekrit could only surmise that he was being kept around to hold Clan Morbus in check. So long as he remained warlord, Morbus would have to contend with Clan Rikek first and foremost if they meant to claim the mountain for their own—but even now, five years after the army's near-defeat, neither clan had the strength to hold a clear advantage over the other.

As soon as Eekrit was fit enough to fight, Velsquee “advised” that he resume his dangerous raids against the enemy—only this time, instead of striking relatively defenceless villages or flesh-eater nests, the warlord and his raiders were aimed straight at the enemy's heart. They struck at the towers and storehouses of the fortress itself, undermining their foundations or kindling fires in their bowels. From a purely military standpoint, the raids were a bold, aggressive strategy, meant to keep the foe on the back foot while the skaven army rebuilt its strength. They were also extremely dangerous. One in three of the sappers' tunnels were discovered by enemy search parties and losses among the skaven were heavy, but Eekrit couldn't deny that the tactic had proven successful. It also served to keep him far away from the corridors of power in the under-fortress, where his presence would lead to a number of awkward questions that Velsquee and Qweeqwol could ill afford.

At the far end of the tunnel, the master sapper paused and made a series of paw- and tail-signals. The message was relayed down the line, and within moments a handful of scout-assassins were creeping forwards with oil bladders to douse the sappers' temporary supports. Eekrit watched them pass and fought down a shudder at the sharp smell of the lamp oil.

“Any word from the under-fortress?” Eekrit asked in a low voice.

The Master of Treacheries folded his arms. His head shifted this way and that, making sure none of the sappers were within earshot. “More reinforcements have arrived,” he answered in a low voice. “Velsquee sent them straight to the upper levels. Mercenaries from the lesser clans plus another pack of monstrosities from Clan Moulder, and several large packs of slaves.”

“All bought and paid for by Lord Hiirc, no doubt,” Eekrit muttered. The alliance between Velsquee and Hiirc had opened Morbus' coffers and the clan had spent huge sums to replenish the army's decimated ranks. Most of the replacement troops were

sell-swords from the lesser clans, lured to the killing grounds by the promise of coin and a share of the plunder from the mountain's vast store of god-stone. Others, like the bizarre beast-masters of Clan Moulder, or the fanatics of Clan Pestilens, joined the expeditionary force in hopes of enhancing their status amid the ever-shifting currents of skaven politics. They were a far cry from the fierce, well-armed packs of clanrats that had marched with the army at the beginning of the war. Most were dead within a few months, hurled against the enemy's defensive lines in one bloody assault after another, while Eekrit's raiders continued to gnaw away at the foe's sources of supply.

So far, Velsquee's two-pronged strategy seemed to be working. The enemy remained on the defensive, unable to replenish its losses, while the skaven managed to scrape together enough warm bodies to sustain a slow but relentless offensive. Much of mine shaft seven had been cleared over the past few years, and the skaven had pushed beyond it into levels that they hadn't reached since the beginning of the war. No one had seen the *kreekar-gan* at all since Velsquee's abortive ambush, and there hadn't been a major enemy attack for years. Victory now seemed inevitable, and the skaven lords were already manoeuvring to take full advantage of the aftermath. Between the mercenary companies and the slave troops, nearly half of the army had been bought with Morbus gold, and Velsquee couldn't kill them fast enough to blunt Lord Hiirc's growing influence. Eshreegar thought it was only a matter of time before the raiders were pulled from the front lines and his assassins put to work by the scheming clan lords.

"What of Velsquee's troops?" the warlord inquired.

The Master of Treacheries gave Eekrit a meaningful look. "Another pack of *heechigar* arrived late last week," he replied. "They're still laired up with Lord Vittrik's engineers on the far side of the main cavern."

Eekrit's eyes narrowed as he tallied the numbers. Velsquee had been quietly rebuilding his cadre of elite troops since the disaster, bringing them in a pack at a time and quartering them in the one place where they would be certain to avoid prying eyes—among the unpredictable and deadly engines of Clan Skryre.

"That brings Velsquee nearly back to full strength," the warlord mused. "And they're still working closely with the warlocks?"

"Nearly every day," Eshreegar confirmed. "There's no telling what tricks they've got up their sleeves now. You can bet that the *kreekar-gan* won't be able to slaughter them like he did last time."

"Do you think the other clan lords suspect how many warriors Velsquee's got?"

Eshreegar shook his head. "Unlikely. The Grey Lord's been careful, and the others are too focussed on positioning themselves for the end game." His tail flicked thoughtfully. "I still don't understand why Velsquee's hiding his true strength. A show of force by the storm-walkers would secure his position and make the other lords think twice about siding with Hiirc."

"That's true enough in the short term," Eekrit agreed, "but then it would only be a matter of time before Hiirc and the other clan lords began pressuring Velsquee to send them into action, and that's the last thing the Grey Lord wants. The *heechigar* are being saved for one task and one task only."

"The destruction of the *kreekar-gan*."

Eekrit nodded. “Velsquee overplayed his hand last time. He had good reason to believe that the burning man was about to fall into his paws, and nearly lost everything as a result. This time, he’s being much more careful.” The warlord’s lip curled in irritation. “I just wish I knew where he was getting his information from. Or *who*.”

The Master of Treacheries sighed irritably. “He *does* have a grey seer at his beck and call, does he not?”

Eekrit’s tail lashed angrily across the tunnel floor, loudly enough to draw apprehensive glances from the scouts. “It’s not Qweeqwol,” he replied. “Velsquee would have killed him for failing to predict the poison cloud. No, the Grey Lord is getting his information from someone else.”

“Well, it’s none of my rats,” Eshreegar declared.

“Of that I have little doubt,” Eekrit replied, his whiskers twitching sarcastically.

“Then who...” Eshreegar began. His good eye narrowed thoughtfully. “It would have to be a traitor. Someone within the enemy’s own ranks.”

The warlord nodded. “And privy to the enemy’s senior councils. Someone who has likely been close to the *kreekar-gan* all along.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Eekrit admitted, “but I’d bet Qweeqwol knows. He’s been feeding Velsquee information since the beginning. How else does one explain the timing of the Grey Lord’s arrival?”

The idea made Eshreegar’s ears lie flat. “But, that means—”

“That means Velsquee and Qweeqwol knew about the burning man from the very beginning,” Eekrit said.

“Then why not tell us?” said the Master of Treacheries. “They want the god-stone just as much as the rest of us.”

The warlord sighed impatiently. “Of course they do,” he snapped. “They want *all* of it. You think it was an accident that Velsquee was the primary architect of the expeditionary force?”

Eshreegar frowned. “I thought the grey seers were behind the alliance?”

The warlord raised a clawed finger. “Yes, but Velsquee was their chief advocate among the Grey Lords. They came to him first, because he had the most influence on the Council. No doubt they agreed to split the riches of the mountain between them, once the rest of the clans had been bled white against the *kreekar-gan*’s horde.” The warlord shook his head ruefully. “In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if the grey seers were behind the scouts who ‘discovered’ the mountain in the first place, acting on information supplied by the traitor.”

Eshreegar folded his arms and considered what he’d been told. “A brilliant scheme,” he admitted. “Cunning and ruthless beyond belief.”

“Indeed,” Eekrit snarled irritably. “I couldn’t have done better myself.”

There was the sound of movement from the far end of the tunnel. The scouts were withdrawing back the way they’d come, followed closely by the sappers. They filed past Eekrit and Eshreegar quickly and quietly, eager to return to the relative safety of the lower levels.

The master sapper and his chief assistant were the last in line. “It’s-it’s ready,” the grizzled veteran hissed. At a nod from Eekrit, the sappers knelt and began fishing a pair of torches from their shoulder bags. Within seconds they were striking fat, orange sparks from their flints. Eshreegar and Eekrit watched the hungry flickers of light with expressions of sick unease.

“So now you know Velsquee’s plan,” Eshreegar said faintly. “What do you propose to do about it?”

One of the torches sputtered to life in a flare of crackling flame. Eekrit all but flinched at the sight. His teeth clenched in disgust at the smell of fear-musk in the close confines of the tunnel. The scars along his paws and shoulders itched and ached. He could still remember the searing pain gnawing at his limbs; still feel the smoke clawing at his eyes and throat. The memories were as vivid now as they’d been five years ago.

Abruptly, the master sapper straightened, raising his blazing torch over his head. The flame made a fearful whoosh and flared angrily as it passed through the air only a few feet from Eekrit’s face. Eshreegar made a choking sound and flinched a bit himself, haunted by his own memories of the inferno.

Angrily, the warlord reached out and snatched the torch from the master sapper’s grip. The scar tissue on the back of his paw tightened painfully, but Eekrit forced himself to hold the brand steady.

“There is-is nothing to be done,” he said in a grim voice. The warlord stared hatefully into the hissing flame. “Velsquee believes us powerless. With the support of Lord Hiirc, the Grey Lord no doubt thinks he has-has the upper hand.”

The master sapper and his assistant looked on worriedly as Eekrit left them, heading up the tunnel towards the oil-soaked supports. At a dozen paces from the tower’s foundations he stopped, holding the fire before him like a naked blade.

“For now, we-we wait,” he said, staring into the fire. “Sooner or later, Velsquee will have his reckoning with the *kreekar-gan*.” He drew back his arm, and with a snarl he hurled the torch through the air. The brand spun end-over-end and struck the closest support. With a baleful *whoosh* the wooden support was engulfed in a pillar of seething flame. Eekrit forced himself to stand still as the bloom of heat washed over him. He closed his eyes and counted slowly to five, then let out a slow breath and turned to face Eshreegar and his warriors.

“Let the burning man come. We shall see who survives the flames.”

The war-witch’s song was all but lost amid the deafening cacophony of the fight. Across the mine shaft, four companies of northmen stood shoulder-to-shoulder, roaring oaths and hacking away with their blades in the face of a howling tide of wide-eyed rat-creatures. The enemy were un-armoured and carried little more than crude daggers or heavy rocks, but they attacked the towering barbarians with fearless abandon. Their eyes shone a pale green and phosphorescent foam flecked their gaping mouths. Whatever they’d been fed, it had driven them into a berserker fury that disdained all but the most terrible injuries. Even in death, the monsters seized the arms and legs of the northmen and tried to pull them to the tunnel floor. The barbarians had learned that to fall was to die; if they lost their feet they would be

seized by a dozen pairs of hands and dragged into the mob. Those that did so were never seen again.

Standing at the opposite side of the mine shaft, Nagash could see that the barbarian formations were already dangerously close to breaking. For more than six hours the enemy had launched one wave after another against his defensive lines. Once they'd found the points guarded by his living troops, they had focussed their efforts on them and increased the pressure. Skeletons had no need for food or rest, but flesh and blood did, and now the lack was beginning to tell.

It galled Nagash that he had to depend upon the barbarians at all. When the war began, the northmen comprised little more than a third of his vast forces. Now, decades later, nearly half of the army was flesh and blood. He was forced to position his companies with great care these days, and to stand ready to lend his own power when the situation became desperate.

A figure in battered scale armour staggered away from the raging fight and hurried across the tunnel towards Nagash. It was Thestus, his heavy sword notched and red-stained and every inch of his exposed skin covered in cuts and scratches. His pale face was worn and deeply lined; it had been more than a month since he'd last been given a draught of the necromancer's elixir and the hunger was taking its toll.

Thestus pushed his way through ranks of yellowed skeletons massed in reserve behind the main battle-line and came to a lurching halt before the baleful stares of the necromancer's wight guard. "The line won't hold!" he said, shouting tonelessly over the din. "Bragadh has fallen and the warriors are at their breaking point! If you would strike, master, strike now!"

For a long moment, Nagash did not stir. Tattered grey robes hung across the bony planes of his shoulderblades. The deep hood, stained by old soot and frayed along the hem, hung listlessly around his skull. His arms hung loosely across his waist, hands hidden within the depths of his long sleeves. An aura of power still crackled invisibly about his withered frame, but to Thestus the necromancer somehow seemed less substantial than the wights surrounding him.

There was a strange ripple of motion beneath the layers of rotting cloth; first the right shoulder, then the upper arm, then down through the elbow and the bones of the hand. Nagash's arm rose, sweeping in an arc to encompass the low-slung figures that crouched beside him. The air grew dense with sorcerous energies, plucking at the decaying raiment of the necromancer's bodyguards.

There was a dry, rustling sound in the shadows by Nagash's side, like the sound of old bones being stirred in a fortune-teller's bowl. Sharp points scraped against stone and a rising chorus of ominous, clicking sounds swelled at the necromancer's command. Clusters of small, oval green orbs glimmered balefully out of the darkness.

A single word slithered like a serpent across Thestus' mind, resonant with the tones of Nagash's sepulchral voice.

Go.

With a manic scuttling of bony limbs, a dozen fearsome-looking shapes burst into murderous life, like a pack of hounds unleashed by their master. They raced from the shadows with unsettling speed; gleaming figures of polished bone and thin plates of bronze, each as big around as a northman's shield. They raced across the tunnel floor

on six segmented legs, their small, armoured heads swivelling left and right in search of prey. Their mandibles, each as long as a desert warrior's khopesh, trembled at the prospect of rending living flesh.

Had he been a denizen of distant Nehekhara, Thestus would have recognised them at once: they were monstrous replicas of tomb beetles, cunningly shaped from bits of broken bone and curved metal and animated with hideous unlife by the power of the burning stone. But while real tomb beetles were scavengers, feasting on the rotting flesh of the dead, these constructs had been built for war.

Directed by the necromancer's hateful will, the constructs' carapaces opened on cunning hinges, revealing thin, wing-like armatures made of metal and tanned human hide. They cracked like sailcloth as rope-like musculature shook them out and caused them to beat in a growing, bone-chilling hum. The constructs raced forwards, gathering speed, then, with a kick of their powerful hind legs, they leapt into the air and plunged like catapult stones into the midst of the enemy warriors. They landed in a welter of blood and broken bones, knocking the frenzied rat-creatures to the ground and slicing them apart with swift, scissor-like blows from their mandibles. Within moments, all was confusion behind the enemy lines, as the berserk rat-creatures turned on the scarab constructs instead of the thinly-stretched line of northmen.

The carnage was incredible. The scarabs severed legs and arms with terrible ease, and their razor-edged carapaces sliced through flesh and muscle as though it were old parchment. The constructs had no brain to speak of—only a series of commands carved into the inside of their skulls and animated by the necromancer's will. A small piece of *abn-i-khat* was lodged deep inside the thorax of each of the beetles, providing them with enough murderous energy to function for the length of a short fight. Nagash had envisioned them as shock troops, meant to carve their way through the enemy's defensive lines and open the way for his advancing companies. With enough time and resources, he could have built hundreds of the war machines; as it was now, he could manage barely a score, and those were being hurled into battle in a last-ditch attempt to stem the enemy advance.

He had come close to victory, five years past—bitterly, tantalisingly close. The poison vapour had slaughtered the enemy in the tens of thousands and sowed terror and confusion in their ranks. His undead warriors had pursued the fleeing ratmen into the very roots of the mountain, seizing rich mine shafts that he had not possessed in decades. Sensing that the enemy lay upon the brink of defeat, he pressed them closely with his skeletons, and it had proved to be his undoing. When the rat-creatures launched a desperate counter-thrust into mine shaft seven, Nagash had precious few reserves on hand to stop them. The collapse of the mine shaft had taken him entirely by surprise; it was by luck alone that he had escaped being ground to powder beneath tons of collapsing stone.

Cut off from reinforcements, his advancing troops were eventually stopped at mine shaft eight and destroyed over the course of several days by repeated enemy counter-attacks. The loss in resources had been staggering, so much so that when the enemy struck back the following week, the ratmen quickly regained mine shafts five and six, leaving Nagash in even worse shape than before.

Furious, he had lashed out at the enemy with a campaign of sorcerous attacks over the next few years, searching for the perfect weapon that would finally drive

them from the mountain, but the damned rat-creatures adapted swiftly to every new tactic he employed, from poison vapours to blood-boiling plagues. The ratmen suffered terribly, and occasionally one of the upper mine shafts would temporarily fall to his warriors, but every time his forces lacked the strength to consolidate his gains, and in short order they were lost once again. And all the while, his supply of the precious *abn-i-khat* was dwindling away. Where once he'd thought himself secure for millennia thanks to the riches of the great mountain, now he was forced to hoard each and every particle of the glowing rock, spending it only when he must.

Nagash had grown so attuned to the ebb and flow of the sorcerous power in his bones that he could feel it trickling away while he directed the actions of the tomb beetles. Such exacting focus was necessary, because more than ever his existence depended on ingesting the stone. After so many centuries, his leathery flesh was all but gone, consumed by the rigours of time and the strain of countless sorcerous rituals. His bones, permeated by layers of stone dust, were held together now by pure sorcery and the necromancer's implacable will. At first, the amount of power required was negligible, but it had grown fractionally with each passing year.

Nagash directed the movement of his right arm once more, reaching into the depths of his left-hand sleeve. He found what he sought by virtue of the power it exuded against the bones of his fingers. Grasping the pieces of *abn-i-khat*, he drew them free and raised them to his hooded face. The faded sleeve fell away to reveal the bones of hand and forearm, blackened with age and centuries of arcane ritual. A faint green aura flickered about the outlines of his bones and glowed sullenly in the narrow joints.

There were two pieces of stone resting in his skeletal palm, shaped into thin discs like Nehekharan coins so that they lay flat against the bones. Angrily, Nagash closed his fingers about the stones and mentally intoned a swift incantation. There was a hissing sound as the *abn-i-khat* dissolved, its power leaching into his bones.

Faint impurities curled from the gaps between his finger bones in thin wisps of smoke. Sorcerous energy flowed through him like molten metal, but its potency dissipated all too quickly. It flowed through him and was drawn away almost at once by the demands of his army, like water poured onto the desert sands.

Across the tunnel, Nagash saw Diarid force his way out of the press of barbarians. Though sorely wounded himself, the champion dragged the limp form of his master, Bragadh, behind him. From the necromancer's left, Akatha's war-song faltered as the witch caught sight of the wounded chieftain. Without asking for Nagash's leave, she pushed through the circle of the necromancer's bodyguard and rushed to Bragadh's side. For a moment, Nagash thought to force her to return to her place, but his resources were stretched too thin as it was to risk a battle of wills with the barbarian witch.

Nagash's hooded head shifted fractionally, focussing on Thestus. Without lungs to draw air, or flesh to shape words, he used still more of his precious energy to impose his will on the barbarian. *Rally the northmen*, he commanded. *Restore the line*.

Thestus recoiled at the lash of the necromancer's will. "But... what of the reserves?" he stammered. "We must commit the spear companies, master! The men are exhausted; they cannot continue much longer—"

Obey, Thestus!

The barbarian cried out at the fury in Nagash's unspoken command. Black ichor welled up at the corners of his eyes and mouth. He staggered backwards, pressing a hand to his face, then turned away and stumbled towards the still-struggling barbarians.

Beyond the battle-line, the enemy's foothold in mine shaft four was shrinking fast. The maddened ratmen proved their own worst enemy against the armoured scarabs, hurling themselves into the path of their snapping mandibles or slicing themselves to pieces against the scarabs' carapaces. The gore-streaked constructs scuttled nimbly over heaps of ravaged corpses, driving ever deeper into the enemy ranks.

Nagash poured his rage into his sorcerous engines, doubling, then tripling their speed and strength. Still more wild-eyed ratmen poured from the branch-tunnels and hurled themselves fearlessly into the path of the scarabs, only to be cut down in turn by the buzzing, snapping war engines. The enemy assault had been stopped in its tracks, and for the first time in years, was being driven back upon itself.

The necromancer relished the sight of the slaughter. He drove the scarabs onwards, pushing for the branch-tunnels, eager to drive the knife deeper into the enemy's line. There was no way to tell what lay behind the hordes of drugged ratmen; could there be a flaw in the enemy line that he could exploit? If he could push even as far as mine shaft five and hold it for a day or so, he might be able to seize enough raw stone to turn the counter-attack into a general offensive. After five years of punishing retreats, the urge to strike back was almost unbearable.

Thestus' dreadful voice rose above the tumult, shouting orders to the exhausted northmen. The companies ordered their ranks and slowly pushed forwards over the heaped bodies of the ratmen. The constructs had nearly reached the mouths of the branch-tunnels; they had been designed with the cramped confines of the passageways in mind and would be at an even greater advantage over the enemy.

Nagash considered the waiting ranks of skeletons before him. He had five hundred spearmen immediately at hand, plus his fearsome wights. They could pass through the barbarian lines and push into the tunnels behind the scarabs. If they cut deeply enough, quickly enough, they might be able to cut off a large part of the enemy's troops...

Just then, the necromancer caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye. A bloodied barbarian warrior had come running out of one of the branch-tunnels and was gasping out a report to Akatha and Diarid. The witch rose from beside Bragadh's unconscious form and reluctantly returned to Nagash's side. Her expression was grim.

"There is news from the interior," she said, referring to the end of the defensive line anchored at the deepest part of the mine shaft. "The ratmen have tunnelled around our warriors and emerged behind them. Our forces there have been thrown into confusion."

Nagash rounded on the witch, his skeleton warping unnaturally with the sudden movement before reasserting itself. *Rally them*, he seethed. *The line must hold!*

Akatha groaned at the savage pressure inside her skull, but the witch did not falter. "Bragadh himself might have been able to turn the tide, but now..." she

shrugged. "His wounds are deep. He requires a fresh infusion of your elixir before he can fight again."

There is none to give! Nagash raged. Thestus will go in Bragadh's place. The companies will follow him, or I will slay them myself!

Akatha did not reply. Her cold stare was answer enough. Of all his servants, she understood best how precarious their situation had become.

Nagash turned back to the fight at the far side of the tunnel. The advantage he'd seen there had been an illusion; the bloody assault had been but a diversion to distract him from the enemy's flanking attack. He had been outmanoeuvred again.

A stream of deadly curses stained the aether. Once again, his position had become untenable. He could continue to fight, and possibly even repulse the new attack, but the cost in troops would be great. Caught between two axes of attack, it was even possible that the barbarians would collapse under the strain, and he might find himself cut off from the surface.

The enemy war leader was cautious and cunning, Nagash had to admit. His slow and steady advance was crushing the necromancer's troops, like the suffocating coils of a river python. The more he fought, the weaker he inevitably became. The only viable tactic left to him was to avoid battle as much as possible, but even that played into the enemy's hands.

Somehow, the enemy understood that the burning stone was the key to victory. Every day brought his forces closer to defeat, as the store of *abn-i-khat* dwindled. Before much longer, he would need to hoard the last remaining bits of stone not to fight, but to stave off his own extinction.

Trembling with fury, Nagash brought the bone scarabs to a halt at the edge of the branch-tunnels. He had to conserve his strength, to wait for his enemy to make a mistake. Then he would strike and he would not stop until he held the enemy war leader's beating heart in his hands.

Until then, he had no choice but to retreat.

—<EIGHT>—

Meditations on Life and Death

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 99th year of Ualatp the Patient
(-1290 Imperial Reckoning)*

Lightning split the sky over Lahmia, burning white-hot against a backdrop of roiling black cloud. For a fraction of an instant the garden clearing was thrown into stark relief; each stunted, thrashing branch, each bent blade of grass, each frantic ripple across the wide, dark pond—then darkness rushed in and thunder beat at the back of Alcadizzar's head and shoulders. Rain lashed at his naked body, coursing down his forehead and into his eyes. After the heat of the day, the cold water wracked him with painful spasms in his arms and legs. It was all he could do to remain upright, focussing on the fading heat in his veins and drawing what little strength he could from it.

This is the day I die.

The thought echoed over and over in his mind. For seven days and seven nights he had been left alone in the garden to purify his mind and body and prepare for the ordeal to come. The high priestesses had stripped him of his robes and left him with neither food nor water; if he were worthy, the gifts of the goddess would be enough to sustain him.

This is the day I die.

Surprisingly, he'd felt no hunger. No thirst. After the first few nights, he'd felt no fatigue, either. The sun burned his skin by day, until he welcomed the thunderstorms that blew in from the sea at evening; then darkness would fall and the night air would chill him to the bone. The passage of time had become disjointed as he'd withdrawn deeper and deeper into his own mind. Meditate, the high priestesses had told him. When one had been cleansed of all worldly cares, only the goddess remained. That was the path to salvation.

And so he'd looked inwards, seeking the goddess. For the first time, he tried to put aside his dreams and ambitions, to stifle his hunger for a life outside the walls of palace or temple, but he found that he could not. The fact was that he didn't want to. He didn't want the gifts of the goddess. He wanted *Khemri*. He wanted to stride the world as a king and a conqueror, not spend his days pondering the mysteries of some esoteric cult. During the long years of study he'd tried to convince himself otherwise, that he could balance the duties of a hierophant with the drives of a monarch, but after the fourth day in the garden he could no longer deny the truth. Alcadizzar was no priest, and never would be.

The realisation had been a painful one. He could not turn aside now, not after pledging himself to the temple. He refused to forswear himself, even to save his own life. All that remained now was to endure as long as he could, and then go to the lands of the dead with his honour still intact.

This is the day I die, he thought calmly. Lightning flashed and the rain poured down, and he waited for the moment to come.

After a time, the storm's fury abated. Night drew on, with a bright, full moon rising above the sea to the east. The frogs began to sing from the depths of the garden and the cicadas murmured in the trees. Bats whirled high overhead, their darting shapes silhouetted against the starlight.

He was not aware of the high priestesses until they had emerged from the trees surrounding the clearing. Their golden masks shone like lamps beneath the moon, and their samite robes seemed to float about their bodies as they walked bare-footed across the damp grass. Alcadizzar smiled at the sight of them after so many days with nothing but his thoughts for company. Silently they glided up to the prince, forming a wide circle around him. Their eyes were flat and pitiless.

The prince straightened his back and turned his head up to the sky. He breathed deeply, tasting the night air. Salt and stone, green grass and murky water; these were the smells he would take with him into the afterlife.

Between one breath and the next, he felt her enter the clearing. He could feel her presence like a weight upon his soul. The pressure increased with every step she took, causing his pulse to quicken and a chill to race down his spine. He couldn't say how long she had affected him so; the connection he felt had grown slowly over the years, bound ever more tightly together with each ritual sharing of the goddess' cup. Until recently, he'd thought the bond was a measure of his devotion to the cult; now he wasn't sure what to believe.

The high priestesses seemed to share Alcadizzar's connection; they bowed their heads in unison as she approached the circle and two of the masked women stood aside to allow her to pass inside.

She glided silently across the grass to stand before Alcadizzar. From his perspective, she seemed to tower above him, like one of the lost gods. She wore a fitted golden breastplate engraved with twining asps, over a robe of white samite bordered at the hem and sleeves with bands of gold thread. A necklace of fiery rubies encircled her pale throat, glinting like fresh drops of blood. Her gold mask seemed to glow against the backdrop of her lustrous black hair. A broad-rimmed goblet was clasped reverently against her chest. Two high priestesses followed in her wake; one bore a second goblet in her hands, while the other held a heavy leather scourge.

For a moment she said nothing. He could feel her gaze against his skin like a caress. Gooseflesh ran along his arms and down the back of his neck. Alcadizzar gritted his teeth and tried to suppress a shudder.

Finally, she spoke. "Prince Alcadizzar of Rasetra, you have spent seven days and seven nights in solitary vigil, purifying your mind and body of worldly desires. We have gathered here to elevate you to the temple's highest rank, but first you must demonstrate your devotion and piety in a trial of suffering. Do you understand?"

Alcadizzar nodded gravely. "I do, holy one," he replied, his voice roughened by disuse.

"You will be tested unto destruction, oh prince," she said. Her voice was cold, but her dark eyes smouldered with suppressed emotion. "It is the only way. If your heart and mind are pure, the blood of the goddess will sustain you."

"I know," he said. Alcadizzar summoned his resolve, determined to accept his fate with dignity. "Let it be done."

"Then rise, oh prince, and drink from the cup of the goddess."

Alcadizzar took a deep breath and forced his cramped limbs to work. Slowly, carefully, he rose to his feet. Fiery pain blossomed from his shoulders all the way to his toes, but he forced the sensations into the back of his mind. Solemnly, he took the proffered cup and raised it to his lips. The metal rim was warm and the dark liquid soft. *Asaph's Kiss*, he'd heard it called by some of the priestesses. He drank, and this time the ritual offering was far more potent than he'd tasted before. Its heat spread through his body in an instant, taking away his pain and filling him with strength. His mind reeled, borne on a sudden wave of euphoria that seemed to emanate, not from the cup, but from *her*. She took the cup from his hands and he knew that she was smiling behind the curve of her mask.

"Do not be afraid," she said softly—or perhaps she had merely *thought* it. He could not say for certain anymore.

She withdrew from him then, and he felt it like an ache in his heart. It took all of Alcadizzar's concentration not to try and follow her. Instead, he focussed on the high priestess who stepped up to take her place. Without a word, she offered him the second cup.

"Drink," the priestess said in a husky voice.

He took the cup without fear and drained it in a single draught. The wine was sweet and spiced with a multitude of herbs, but not enough to hide the bitter taste of the poison within.

When he handed back the goblet, he met the masked priestess' eyes and was surprised to find that they were brimming with tears. Without thinking, he tried to give her a reassuring smile. She bowed her head and returned to her mistress' side. As she did so, the rest of the circle began a low, almost mournful chant.

The die was cast. Alcadizzar was surprised at how calm he felt. It might have been the effects of the elixir, but the prince wanted to think otherwise. Once more, he turned his face to the sky.

Forgive me father, he thought, and offered himself up for judgement.

The pain came on quickly. It began as a terrible burning in his guts that grew more intense with every passing moment, as though he were swallowing one hot coal after another. He clenched his jaw and kept silent for what felt like an eternity, thinking that eventually the agony would subside, but no such relief came. His body began to tremble uncontrollably and a strangled scream forced its way past his lips.

Moments later he was lying on the wet grass, his naked form curled into a foetal ball as the poison worked its way through his body. The muscles of his torso first began to ache, then, like the tightening of ropes, they began to contract and stiffen.

The suffering spread through his limbs, then up his neck and along the muscles of his face. His screams became agonised gasps, whistling through clenched teeth as an invisible fist closed about his chest. Every beat of his heart was like a red-hot dagger driving into his ribs. Darkness began to crowd the edges of his vision, until he was certain that he was going to pass out, but somehow the promise of oblivion never came.

Hours passed. Slowly, gradually, the agony began to ebb away. It receded like the tide, shrinking from his head and limbs and drawing back into his chest. Little by little his aching muscles sagged; when his head bent far enough for his temple to touch the cool grass, the sensation was so shocking it caused him to cry anew.

Slowly, painfully, he began to draw ever-deeper breaths, despite the red-hot bands that still wrapped around his chest. Each gulp of air tasted sweet and cool, and though it made his throat ache, he found himself gasping for more. He scarcely noticed when two of the priestesses came forwards and knelt beside him. Still chanting, they each gripped one of his wrists and with surprising strength they lifted him until he was able to get his knees underneath him and sit back shakily upon his heels. Then the women drew apart, stretching his arms to their full length between them. Alcadizzar felt their small hands tighten upon his wrists and wondered hazily why—then came the first, fiery lash of the scourge.

The scourge's seven leather tails—each one a six-foot length of braided leather that was studded with dozens of tooth-like shards of glass—raked across his shoulders like the claws of a lion. The pain was so sudden and so intense that it left him speechless; his whole body spasmed under the blow and the priestesses who held him were nearly hauled off their feet. Alcadizzar scarcely had time to draw a single breath before the next blow struck. Hot blood spattered the backs of his outstretched arms and began to flow in rivulets down the small of his back.

The priestess who wielded the scourge was an expert. By the seventh stroke, the skin of his back was in tatters from the nape of his neck to the top of his waist. And still the blows kept coming, tearing implacably into flesh and muscle. The agony was beyond anything Alcadizzar had ever known. After the tenth stroke he thought he could stand no more and that surely he would pass out from the pain, but his mind and body stubbornly refused to succumb. He felt each and every blow as vividly as the first.

In the public squares and aboard the slave galleys of Lahmia, twenty lashes with a scourge was regarded as severe punishment. Forty lashes was a death sentence. After a hundred lashes, the priestesses finally lowered Alcadizzar's twitching body to the grass.

He could not say how long he lay there, his blood soaking into the sward. Alcadizzar's entire body felt as though it were on fire. His face was pressed to the grass; eyes open and mouth slack, breathing in shallow, ragged gasps. He could see the silhouette of a number of the priestesses, but could not hear their chanting for the roaring in his ears. Not long now, he thought. Soon the stars would go out and blackness fall like a shroud, and then he would cross over into the realm of the dead.

But then Alcadizzar heard her voice. "Rise up, oh prince," she said. It was as though she were whispering softly into his ear. He could almost feel her breath on his skin.

“There is but one final test, Alcadizzar. Rise up.”

Alcadizzar coughed weakly. It was the nearest to a laugh he could manage. And yet, there was something in her voice that compelled him to try. He tried to focus on his limbs, using the tricks of concentration he’d learned in his years at the temple. After a moment, the searing pain began to ebb. His hands and feet twitched, and then, unbelievably, they obeyed his commands. Slowly, weakly, he pulled his arms in close, and then, with a shuddering breath, he pushed himself up onto his knees. The ground beneath him was dark with blood.

“That’s it!” he heard her say. “Rise up, beloved! Rise, and come to me!”

Another breath and he was rearing shakily to his feet. Alcadizzar’s head swam and he staggered backwards a step before catching himself. The pain flared again, clawing across his shoulders and down his back in lines of fire. His head swam, and for a dizzying second he thought he might fall to the ground, never to rise again.

“Here,” she said. Her words were like honey. “Here I am. Come to me.”

Alcadizzar blinked dazedly, struggling to focus on her voice. She was just in front of him, radiant in gold and white, her left hand outstretched to welcome him. Her dark eyes gleamed with passion from the depths of her polished mask.

He drew a deep breath and pushed back against the tide of pain. His right foot twitched and then shuffled forwards a half-step. Another breath, and his left foot moved as well. A collective, indrawn breath went up from the assembled priestesses.

His strength began to ebb almost at once. Alcadizzar felt his knees start to tremble. Staying upright demanded more and more of his concentration, allowing jagged spikes of pain to shoot up his spine with every step. Yet he kept moving forwards, his eyes fixed on her pale, slender hand.

Alcadizzar’s hand trembled as he reached for her. Her palm was cool and hard, like marble. The prince’s eyes widened in awe as she gently pulled him close, as though to embrace him.

The sudden pain in his chest was sharp and cold, and for a moment it left him baffled. The chanting stopped. Then he looked down and saw the silver hilt of the dagger jutting from his breast. The blade had slipped effortlessly between his ribs, transfixing his heart.

Alcadizzar frowned in bemusement. She let go of his hand, reaching up instead to grip his ragged shoulder. He looked up at her, trying to speak, but his lungs would not draw breath. A terrible ache spread through his chest, dulling his nerves and stealing away his strength. His legs buckled. She lowered him back to the grass, one hand still gripping the hilt of the dagger.

Her perfect, golden face floated above him, serene and inscrutable. Sensation faded swiftly. The last thing Alcadizzar clearly felt was a sharp pang of regret. His gaze drifted to the firmament of stars glittering overhead as he waited for the end to come.

Yet darkness did not come rushing in. One moment stretched into another, without discernible end. His thoughts drifted, as though in a dream, his sense of regret transforming into a leaden feeling of pure, mindless horror. He had died, but was not dead. *He was not dead!*

And then, faintly, he heard her sigh, and watched as she slowly withdrew the dagger from his heart. Inch by inch, the bloodstained bronze emerged from his chest, until the point came free in a single, sharp tug.

All at once, Alcadizzar felt his heart clench. A spasm of agony wracked his chest. His back arched and his lungs filled with air. The prince returned to life with a wordless cry of pain.

Alcadizzar collapsed back against the grass, chest heaving as he gasped for air like a drowning man. The pain in his chest spread like a fire through the rest of his body and he was powerless to stop it.

Robed figures crowded in around him, their ecstatic cries drowning out his own gasps of pain. Alcadizzar glanced from one identical mask to another, trying to make some sense of what was happening. The pain made it nearly impossible to think.

Finally, his eyes met hers. She stared down at him, her entire body radiating a terrible, almost primal joy.

“You see?” she said to the priestesses. Her voice was husky, like the growl of a hungry beast. “He was pierced by the knife, and yet he did not die! He is worthy, sisters! Alcadizzar has been chosen!”

And then, at last, the darkness rose up to claim him.

He awoke to gentle, perfumed breezes and the cool weight of silken sheets against his skin. After so many years sleeping on a simple priest’s cot, the sensation was both familiar, and yet eerily strange at the same time.

Alcadizzar slowly opened his eyes. He lay upon a vast feather bed, larger and more sumptuous than anything he’d known in the royal palace. The hour was very late; he could tell by the hushed sounds of the city that it was close to dawn.

The prince drew a long, deep breath. His chest ached from front to back, all the way down to his bones. It reminded him of the time, many years back, when he’d been kicked in the ribs by a horse during one of his first riding lessons. Moving as though he was in a dream, he rose weakly on his right elbow and peered down at his chest. The room was plunged in shadow, but he could see enough to tell that he’d been bathed and wrapped in a robe of yellow silk.

Hesitantly, Alcadizzar pulled back the left side of his robe. The knife wound was visible as a neat, dark line of scar tissue incised into the flat plane of pectoral muscle just above his heart.

“It is sweet, is it not?”

Her voice rose from the shadows at the far end of the room, where gauzy curtains stirred languidly in the faint sea breeze. Alcadizzar blinked in surprise. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could just make out the graceful curve of shoulder and hip as she leaned against the frame of one of the tall, open windows.

“Death is more than just an endless night,” she went on. “It’s cold and empty, in a way no living man can understand.” Silk rustled as she turned slightly, the perfect shape of her profile silhouetted against the pale, night sky. “The air tastes like wine now, doesn’t it? The feel of silk is like a lover’s caress.”

She continued to turn, stepping away from the window’s edge and regarding Alcadizzar’s recumbent form. The faint glow of false dawn limned her in silver. Her

dark hair was still bound up in tight curls, but she had divested herself of her jewels and ritual finery in favour of a simple, diaphanous cotton robe. Her eyes were pools of darkness, her cheek smooth and cold. The face of the goddess was inscrutable and alluring, pale as the death mask of a queen.

He watched as she took another step towards him. The breeze shifted the curtains behind her, letting in more of the outside light, and Alcadizzar's breath caught in his throat. Gooseflesh prickled his skin. The goddess' face was pale as alabaster and her perfect lips were quirked in a faint, enigmatic smile. The prince's mind reeled. Her unearthly features were not wrought from polished gold, but soft flesh and delicate bone.

"Blessed Asaph," he whispered. "The—the mask..."

Her smile widened. "You have endured the Trial of Rebirth, oh prince," she said, misreading the look of shock in Alcadizzar's eyes. "We are one and the same now, so there is no further need for artifice."

Before the prince could reply, she raised her arm and beckoned to the shadows at Alcadizzar's left. A robed figure shuffled painfully out of the darkness, clutching a golden goblet to his chest.

"Your body has already healed the worst of your injuries," she said, "but the ordeal consumed much of your strength. Drink this, and then we will discuss your future."

The servant approached the bedside. His shoulders were hunched awkwardly, as though beneath an invisible weight. Though the man's head was downcast, Alcadizzar recognised the faded tattoos that wound sinuously about his shaven skull. "Ubaid?" he said wonderingly.

Ubaid's head rose at the sound of his name. The old servant's expression was haggard, his lips slack and faintly trembling, but for all that, he hadn't aged a bit since he'd left the prince outside the temple some thirty years before. A tiny flicker of awareness shone in the depths of Ubaid's watery eyes as he offered his cup to the prince. It was all that Alcadizzar could do not to recoil from the pathetic figure.

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"He is my gift to you," she replied. "Ubaid will accompany you to Khemri and help you in the construction of the temple." Her perfect face clouded with a momentary frown, causing Ubaid's bony shoulders to tremble. "Be assured, despite his wretched appearance, he is a man of many talents, and will serve you in a multitude of ways."

It was all too much. The sense of unreality threatened to overwhelm Alcadizzar. He raised a trembling hand to his forehead. "How... how can this be?"

"The power of the blood," she explained, her tone growing slightly more insistent. Suddenly, she was standing at Ubaid's side, crossing the bedchamber in the space of a heartbeat. Her pale fingers gripped the rim of the heavy cup and plucked it from the servant's palsied hands.

"Drink," she commanded. "And all will be made clear."

His hand moved without conscious thought, driven by years of obedience to the rites of the temple. But his eyes fell to the dark liquid shifting turgidly in the depths of the cup, and for the first time, the sight of it repelled him. Alcadizzar lurched from

the bed, bare feet scuffing across the rug-covered floor as he staggered towards the open windows and the fresh sea air.

"You don't understand," Alcadizzar told her. He paused just before the window and drew in a deep breath. "I should have failed the trial. I meditated in the garden, and realised that I could not dedicate myself to the temple. By rights, I should have perished—and yet, here I stand!"

She did not answer at first. When she finally answered, her voice had turned hard and cold.

"You have a great destiny before you, Prince Alcadizzar," she told him. "Your sacred bloodline and the teachings of the temple spared you—"

Alcadizzar whirled. "Then what of *him*?" He levelled a finger at Ubaid's pitiful form. "Does he share in the sacred blood of kings?"

She recoiled slightly at the accusing tone of Alcadizzar's voice. "Don't blaspheme!" she snapped, her eyes glinting angrily.

"How then does this poor man still live?" the prince demanded. "Look how he suffers! He was an old man when I was but a boy; by rights he should have gone on to join his ancestors years ago. Yet he has aged barely a day since I first saw him. What manner of sorcery is this?"

"Enough!"

The bedchamber suddenly grew cold. Alcadizzar felt his body go rigid, as though an invisible hand had reached into his body and taken hold of his spine. The shadows deepened and within the darkness her pale skin shone like a brand. He felt his eyes drawn irresistibly to hers. Alcadizzar felt as though he were being dragged to the edge of a precipice; he gritted his teeth and fought with every ounce of his will, but slowly, inexorably, the prince was overcome.

Her voice caressed his aching skin. "*Drink*," she said. The word sank into his flesh and made his bones ache with need.

One foot lurched forwards, then the other. It felt as though he were falling, drawn unerringly to the waiting cup. And yet, a small part of his mind rebelled against its pull. Terror lent his thoughts an icy clarity Alcadizzar had never known before.

"What are you?" he groaned.

Her smile was terrible. It sank into his heart like a knife.

"I am Neferata," she said. "And I have always ruled here."

Alcadizzar tasted metal against his lips. He could smell the bitter tang of the liquid inside the golden cup.

"You are mine, Alcadizzar," Neferata said. *"Together we shall rule Nehekhara until the end of time."*

The prince gasped. Warm fluid poured into his mouth. He choked, spilling some of the elixir down his chin, but the rest found its way down his throat. His body responded at once, veins singing and muscles swelling with vigour. Once, the sensation had exhilarated him; now he felt nothing but terror.

Worse, Alcadizzar could feel her grip on him growing stronger by the moment. Her implacable will closed about his brain like a fist, slowly crushing all thoughts of resistance.

And then, abruptly, the crushing pressure was gone. There was a muffled ringing sound as the goblet bounced across the layered rugs and a howl of bestial rage rent the darkness. Alcadizzar staggered backwards, torn from Neferata's hypnotic grip. The shadows receded once more and he saw what had saved him at once.

It was Ubaid. The old servant had thrown himself at Neferata, catching her unawares and knocking her to the floor. He clawed at her face like an animal, his nails raking deep into her eyes. Dark ichor flowed down her pale cheeks and stained the old servant's fingers.

Alcadizzar cried out in horror and rushed forwards, intending to save Ubaid from the creature. But the servant rooted him to the spot with a stern glare. In that instant, a small measure of the old man's spirit seemed to return.

"Go!" Ubaid pleaded. "In the name of all the gods! *Run!*"

Before the prince could reply, a slender hand shot upwards and seized the old man's throat. Ubaid's eyes bulged; cartilage popped wetly and blood burst from his lips. Then, with a monstrous howl, Neferata reared up, jaws agape, and sank her fangs into the back of his neck. With a single, convulsive wrench, she tore the old man's head from his shoulders in a fountain of crimson gore.

Ichor streaming from her wounded eyes, Neferata turned to Alcadizzar. A bubbling growl rose from her throat. In another moment, he would be lost.

Without thinking, the prince whirled and leapt for the open window. Neferata charged blindly after him, her nails rending the expensive rugs.

He tore through the thin curtains and lighted on the stone windowsill. A long way down spread the sloping flank of the great temple, then the walled expanse of the palace grounds. Beyond that lay the great hill, crowded with the villas of noblemen and wealthy merchants; then the sprawling coastal districts of the city itself. The great sea shone like a polished silver coin in the first, feeble rays of dawn.

Already, a plan was forming in the prince's mind. Once he escaped the city, he would have to make his way to Rasetra. He had to spread the truth about the temple and the evil that lurked in its heart. He had to warn the great cities about Neferata.

Cold fingers clutched at his robe. With a prayer to the gods upon his lips, Alcadizzar leapt into the morning air.

Acts of Last Resort

*Nagashizzar, in the 99th year of Usirian the Dreadful
(-1285 Imperial Reckoning)*

Sound carried a very long way in the bare, stone halls of the *kreekar-gan*. The scout-assassins darted into the deep shadows at the first, faint sounds of movement in the corridor ahead. Ears wide, nostrils twitching the veteran raiders gauged the nature of the threat. Paw-signs were passed along the line: *skeletons, small group, coming this way*.

Eekrit shrank back against the cover of a rough-hewn stone column. Eshreegar was close by, flattened against the far wall of the wide hallway. Next to Eekrit, one of the scout-assassins shifted silently into a fighting stance. A pair of needle-pointed daggers slid from the black sheaths at the skaven's belt. The warlord caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and gave the raider a baleful glare.

"Put those damned things away," Eekrit hissed. "You want to get us all killed?"

The scout-assassin was a young skaven named Shireep, one of a handful of new replacements from the Great City. His tail lashed in irritation at the tone of Eekrit's voice.

"We're here to kill the enemy," Shireep replied, his eyes narrowing disdainfully. "Lord Hiirc's orders were clear on that, were they not?"

Eekrit fought the urge to reach for his own blade. The newcomers were properly respectful to their master, Eshreegar, but they regarded the warlord with thinly veiled contempt.

Another of Hiirc's pawns, Eekrit reckoned. They were turning up with irritating regularity now that the end of the war was finally in sight. This one clearly had more ambition than guile, which either meant that Lord Hiirc was having a hard time finding useful allies, or else his position was strong enough now that he didn't care what Eekrit thought. The warlord feared that it was probably the latter.

"Up here, you take orders from *me*," Eekrit snarled. He rose to his full height, moving close enough that the two skaven stood almost nose-to-nose. "The *kreekar-gan* knows everything his skeletons know. Kill one of them—just *one*—and you'll bring the rest of the fortress down on our heads." The warlord leaned still closer. "Is that what you're after, ratling? Is it?"

Shireep's hackles started to rise. Eekrit tensed slightly, suddenly very much aware that the skaven's twin knives were just inches from his throat. But it was the

assassin that blinked first. He shrank back slightly beneath the warlord's fierce gaze, ears folding tightly against his head. Without a word, he slipped the daggers back into their sheaths.

Eekrit gave the fool a disdainful flick of the ear and settled back against the column, quickly tugging his hood down over his snout and then tucking his paws deep within his wide sleeves. No sooner had he done so than the corridor was filled with a cacophony of scraping bone, clattering armour and the rattle of sword and shield.

Peering out from beneath the rim of his hood, Eekrit watched a pair of skeletons shuffle slowly into view. They were tall and broad of shoulder, still covered in places with scraps of rotting flesh, and their heavy, bronze blades were notched from hard use. The stench of decomposition hung about them in a suffocating fog. Eekrit reckoned that the warriors had been dead less than a week; it was likely that one or more of them had died by his own paw during the raids of the last fortnight.

The first pair of corpses shuffled past Eekrit's hiding place, nearly close enough to touch. Another pair followed, then another, and then yet another. The rattle of marching feet echoed from the walls and the warlord realised with mounting dread that this was no mere patrol. An entire company of undead warriors was marching past, no doubt heading for the barricades in the lowest vaults of the fortress.

Eekrit scarcely dared to breathe. His small force was heavily outnumbered, and there was nowhere to run. If even one of the scout-assassins were noticed, it would be the end of them all. He turned his head fractionally to see what the young fool next to him was doing, but of course he couldn't see a thing through the heavy folds of the dark hood. If he gives us away, I swear to the Horned One that I'll kill him myself, Eekrit thought balefully.

The ghastly procession seemed to continue for hours. Eekrit held absolutely still, fighting to keep his whiskers from twitching at the miasmic stench of decay. At one point, he thought he distinctly heard a sneeze somewhere close by; fortunately the sound was all but lost amid the noise of the march.

Finally, the last of the company shambled past and vanished into the gloom farther down the passageway. Still Eekrit waited, senses strained to the utmost, until well after the sounds of movement had faded away. This deep in the heart of the enemy's defences, there was no such thing as too much caution.

At last, Eekrit allowed himself to relax. His joints ached as his shoulders slumped and his paws slipped from the sleeves of his robe. Eshreegar and the other scout-assassins were moving as well, edging carefully back out into the corridor. The warlord drew back his hood and went to join the Master of Treacheries.

He found Eshreegar and a number of veterans crouched together, muttering softly to one another as they studied dozens of small objects scattered along the length of the passageway. The Master of Treacheries glanced up at Eekrit's approach, his good eye narrowed thoughtfully.

"What do you make of this?" he rasped.

There was a trail of debris littering the corridor. Eekrit saw pieces of rotting leather, bits of tarnished bronze scale—and bones. There were scores of bones, large and small, left behind by the shambling company of northmen. The warlord spied

finger bones, ribs, even a few jawbones, their surfaces still glistening with vestiges of decay.

“Not holding together too well, are they?” Eekrit mused, prodding a curved rib bone with a clawed toe. That was troubling news, as far as he was concerned.

Shireep crouched next to Eekrit, his paws resting on his knees. His ears were folded against his skull and his tail was curled tightly around his feet. Clearly the brush with the northmen had unsettled him. “What-what does it mean?” he asked in a subdued voice.

Eekrit gave the rib bone a kick, sending it skittering across the corridor. “It means we’re wasting time,” he growled. The warlord reached down and hauled Shireep to his feet by the scruff of his neck. “Show us this secret chamber you’ve found.”

Shireep led the raiding party across the lower levels of the fortress, pausing only occasionally to check his bearings against the tiny runes scratched into the walls by previous scout parties. For the last year, as skaven forces closed in on the last of the *kreekar-gan*’s mine shafts, Eekrit and his raiders had been ordered to penetrate the lower vaults and storehouses of the fortress in preparation for the final assault. In addition to building a detailed map of the lower levels, the scout-assassins ambushed isolated parties of northmen or flesh-eaters, set fires in unguarded warehouses or laboratories, and otherwise sowed confusion among the enemy’s ranks.

It was dangerous, nerve-wracking work; there was no way to create new tunnels inside the fortress itself, and for the first time, the enemy knew the territory far better than they did. Undead patrols were everywhere and the burning man could reinforce them with unsettling speed and efficiency. Eekrit had been forced to divide his forces into smaller and smaller packs in hopes of avoiding detection, sometimes despatching scout parties of three skaven or less into the most heavily patrolled areas. Many of them ventured into the dark vaults and were never seen again.

As bad as things were, Eekrit went to great lengths to make it appear even worse to Velsquee and the other skaven lords. After fighting for so long to defeat the *kreekar-gan* and his undead horde, now the warlord found himself struggling desperately to delay the inevitable. Over the last few years the skaven army had been entirely on the offensive, seizing one mine shaft after another in a series of brutal but ultimately victorious battles. The speed of the skaven advance had been so swift and decisive that Velsquee and the other warlords had been forced to relocate from the under-fortress to a temporary camp at mine shaft four, the better to coordinate the movements of their far-flung companies. Now they were massing a huge force opposite the enemy’s final set of barricades and Velsquee was waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Eekrit did everything in his power to keep the Grey Lord guessing. He left large gaps in his reports to Velsquee, and what information he did share hinted at the possibility of unseen enemy reserves and hints of deadly traps being readied in the fortress depths. It was a delicate balancing act, playing on Velsquee’s calculating nature without exhausting his patience entirely. In the meantime, Eekrit was searching the fortress for anything that would give him leverage over Velsquee, Hiirc and the rest of the skaven lords. He knew perfectly well that the moment the war was over, his life wouldn’t be worth a plugged copper coin. If Velsquee didn’t strip him

of his rank and title and have him executed outright, he'd be dangled like a prize before Hiirc and the other lords, like a piece of meat before a starving pack of ratlings. Either way, his future was certain to be as short and brutal as the Grey Lord could possibly manage.

The raiding party crept through the dark and twisting tunnels for more than an hour, heading into a series of large, low-ceilinged storehouses that the scouts had thoroughly explored many months before. Eekrit reckoned that the cavernous rooms had once held tools and supplies meant for the mine excavations going on in the lower levels. Here and there one could still find coils of rope and stacks of wooden pick handles, rotting wicker baskets and the sagging ruins of empty carts. As far as the warlord could tell, the chambers hadn't been used in decades; in fact, that had been the point of sending the young fool into this part of the fortress in the first place, so he couldn't report anything useful back to Lord Hiirc.

They were three levels above the enemy's barricades, and heading further into the heart of the mountain with each passing moment. Eekrit's impatience grew; he was just about to give the order to turn back when Shireep gave the paw-sign to halt. Eekrit and the rest of the raiding party settled onto their haunches, ears open and noses twitching for signs of danger. They were in the centre of one of the storage chambers, surrounded by musty darkness on all sides. Eekrit peered warily into the shadows around him; though he couldn't see any obvious signs of danger, there was something in the air that raised the hackles on the back of his neck. The warlord's paw crept to the hilt of his sword.

Faint sounds of movement drifted back from the head of the column. Shireep crept back to where Eekrit and Eshreegar waited.

"Up-up ahead," the young skaven whispered. "In the chamber next to this one. That's where I saw them."

"Skeletons. You're certain?" Eekrit asked.

"Of course!" the scout replied, a trifle impatiently. "A score of them, at-at least."

Eshreegar leaned forwards. "How do you know they're guarding something?" he asked.

Shireep sighed. "Why else would they be all-all the way down here?" he replied.

Eekrit gave Eshreegar a sidelong glance. "We'll see for ourselves," the warlord said. "Show us."

Eshreegar passed orders to the rest of the raiding party to find hiding places in the deeper shadows surrounding the cavern, then Shireep led Eekrit and the Master of Treacheries to the threshold of the chamber just beyond. Through the wide entryway the air was as thick and dank as a tomb.

Shireep lowered himself to all fours, just to one side of the opening. He glanced back at Eekrit and Eshreegar, his ears folded tight. "There are three skeletons watching the entrance," he whispered. "Once inside, move to the right along the outer wall." Without waiting for a reply, the scout lowered himself even further, until his belly nearly scraped the floor—and then he was gone, flitting like a swift, silent shadow into the chamber. A moment later, Eshreegar darted after him.

The warlord shook his head, suddenly feeling very thick-limbed and clumsy. He waited for a space of ten heartbeats and then scampered after the two scouts as swiftly and as silently as he could.

Eekrit very nearly ran full-tilt into the side of a stack of rotting wooden boxes set just inside and to the right of the entryway. This particular storage space was still piled with decaying mounds of mining gear and other supplies. The sagging boxes and bulging wicker sacks provided the skaven with ample sources of cover, but the same could be said for the undead sentries scattered about the cavern. Opening his ears wide and scanning the darkness for the glowing pinpoints of unliving eyes, Eekrit scuttled into the narrow alley between the stacked supplies and the rough stone of the cavern wall where the others waited.

Eshreegar and Shireep traded a rapid series of paw-gestures, then they headed deeper into the cavern. For a time they followed the cavern wall, then abruptly cut left down a tunnel-like alley formed by tall stacks of sagging boxes. At times they even crawled through empty containers, or wormed their way through narrow gaps between tumbled stacks of spare roof-beams. From time to time, Eekrit caught passing glimpses of distant pinpoints of green light; the watchful, unblinking eyes of undead guards, standing watch over the conventional routes into and out of the cavern. The warlord tried to remember the last time that one of his scouts had searched the great storehouses. Had it been three months ago, or as much as six? Regardless, there hadn't been reports of activity then.

After nearly an hour of cautious travel, Shireep emerged warily into another narrow aisle, somewhere near the centre of the cavern. Across the aisle was a tall stack of rectangular support beams that rose twenty feet into the air. He pointed at the pitch-covered beams with a clawed finger. "The wood is-is still strong," he whispered. "It will support our weight, but we should go up one at a time."

At this point, Eshreegar stepped forwards. "I go first," he hissed, "then Lord Eekrit, and then you." The scout ducked his head in a nervous bow, and the Master of Treacheries crept silently up to the stacked beams. He studied them for a moment, tested their surfaces with his claws, then in moments he was climbing up the side of the pile. Seconds later he vanished over the top.

Eekrit drew a deep breath and flexed his scarred paws. The amulets he wore beneath his robes and the potions he drank nearly every day were supposed to maintain his youthful vigour in every respect, but the fact was that he'd never been particularly vigorous to begin with. Whiskers twitching grimly, he stepped up to the stacked beams and searched for a good set of pawholds.

Centuries later, chest heaving and muscles aching, Eekrit dragged himself onto the top of the pile. Shireep appeared at his side seconds later. He leaned over Eekrit, his beady eyes intent. "Are you well, my lord?" he asked.

Eekrit pushed the skaven away. The question didn't merit a reply, and he didn't have the wind for it, anyway.

After a few moments, the warlord composed himself. When he rolled onto his belly, he found Eshreegar beckoning to him from the opposite side of the wide stack. His paws made a flurry of signals. *You need to see this.*

His discomfort forgotten, Eekrit squirmed forwards on his belly and settled down beside Eshreegar. The stack of roof beams rose nearly to the cavern ceiling, giving them a panoramic view of the dimly lit space.

Eshreegar pointed. Less than ten yards away, a space some twenty paces across had been cleared. A large, flat piece of stone, almost like a paving stone but the size

and shape of a wagon wheel, had been lifted from the floor and set to one side, revealing a deep, dark hole. Small units of skeletons ringed the hole with shields and spears held ready, watching over the opening with deathless vigilance.

Shireep settled down beside Eekrit. “You see?” he hissed. “It-it must be important. A treasure vault, perhaps, or a cache of god-stone?”

The warlord flicked both ears in irritation. Ever since they had been ordered to scout the fortress, the raiders had been searching for the *kreekar-gan*’s god-stone vaults. Short of getting close enough to assassinate the burning man himself, seizing his dwindling hoard of the sacred rock was the surest way of ending the war that Eekrit could think of.

“No, I don’t think so,” the warlord said thoughtfully. “Look at the guards. They aren’t there to keep people away from the hole; they’re meant to keep something *inside* from getting *out*.”

“We’re at the far eastern end of this level,” Eshreegar mused. “What’s beneath us at this point?”

Eekrit tried to visualise their position on the map of the fortress he’d memorised. After a moment, he shook his head. “Nothing but rock,” he answered.

“Perhaps a mine shaft?” the young scout suggested.

“Don’t be stupid...” Eekrit began—and then fell silent as a strange sound began to echo up from the darkness of the hole. It was a hollow, rhythmic clatter, thin and hollow and yet heavy at the same time. The warlord felt his hackles rise once more. He studied the waiting phalanxes of undead guardsmen, but they didn’t react to the noise.

The rattling beat swelled in volume. After a minute, Eekrit thought he could see a faint, greenish glow radiating from the depths of the hole. Then a long, curved appendage, black as coal and engraved with glowing runes, extended over the rim and rested its tip on the cavern floor. Seven more appendages, equally long and curved like sword blades, extended around the circumference of the hole. They flexed upwards, dragging the rest of the thing’s body into view.

It was a spider, long-legged and bulbous like the giant hunters of the swamps around the Great City—only this one had been fashioned entirely from the slender bones and teeth of some huge sea creature. The sight of the construct sent a thrill of pure terror through Eekrit’s body. Shireep let out a muffled yelp and the pungent smell of fear-musk filled the air.

The construct was nearly the size of one of Lord Vittrik’s war engines; easily the largest that Eekrit had ever seen. The *kreekar-gan* had seeded scores of similar constructs through the lower levels in the wake of his retreating forces, where they would lie in wait and ambush unsuspecting skaven. Of all the murderous weapons that the burning man had unleashed on the skaven, it was the constructs that filled the clan warriors with fear. A company of undead spearmen came at you face-to-face, in ordered, predictable ranks; even a wall of poison gas could be survived with enough caution and a little advance warning. But the constructs could be *anywhere*, sitting in the darkness with absolute, eternal patience, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Some of them had even penetrated as far as the under-fortress itself.

Blade-like legs rattling against the stone, the construct lifted its bulbous abdomen from the hole. Like the rest of the body, it was formed from large, curving bones

instead of flesh. The cold glow of sorcerous runes revealed a dark, huddled shape trapped inside.

Eshreegar stiffened. "That's a skaven," he hissed.

"Are you sure?" Eekrit squinted. He couldn't tell much at this distance.

"He's right," Shireep confirmed. "I can see a tail."

"Slave or clan warrior?" Eekrit asked.

Eshreegar shook his head. "Neither. He's wearing armour and decent robes. Probably a pack leader of some kind."

Down by the hole, the units of undead guards moved aside to let the construct pass. It scuttled forwards with surprising speed, bearing its prize down a wide lane across the chamber and into the heart of the fortress. Within moments, it was lost from view.

"I thought the *kreekar-gan* didn't take prisoners," Shireep said, his voice heavy with dread.

"He does now," Eshreegar said grimly. "The question is why."

Eekrit studied the scene, putting the pieces together. "Information," he said at length. "What else?" He pointed to the hole. "That's a murder hole, just like the ones we used to dig in the lower levels. It probably comes out somewhere between mine shafts one and four, otherwise we would have discovered it by now."

The Master of Treacheries shook his head. "They couldn't have dug that deeply that fast," he said. "We searched this cavern just a few months ago and none of this was here."

"Yes, it was," Eekrit replied. "It must have been. They just covered the hole with that slab and buried it under debris so we wouldn't find it."

Shireep's eyes widened. "That means they dug the tunnel long before we'd taken the upper mine shafts."

Eshreegar gave Eekrit a troubled look. "So the burning man expected us to capture the upper levels."

"Or he *allowed* us to," the warlord replied. Suddenly, the enemy's swift retreat made sense. "Too easy. I *knew* it was too easy." He turned to the Master of Treacheries. "How fast can we get back to mine shaft four?"

"From here? Four or five hours, if we're lucky," Eshreegar replied. "A single messenger could make the trip faster—"

"There's no guarantee a message will reach the Grey Lord," Eekrit replied. "He'll take an audience from me, though. At least, I hope so."

Shireep looked from Eekrit to Eshreegar and back again. "I don't understand. What's happening?" the young scout asked.

Eekrit paused, staring at Shireep. He reflected that this was probably as good a time as any to cut the skaven's throat. One quick signal to Eshreegar, and Shireep would be dead before he knew what hit him.

The warlord started to raise his paw, but abruptly reconsidered. He could sort out Shireep later. If his suspicions were right, they were all going to be fighting for their lives in the next few hours, and he was going to need every able paw he could get.

He beckoned to the two scout-assassins to follow him. “We’ve got to get back to Velsquee,” he told Shireep. “The *kreekar-gan*’s laid a trap for the entire army and the Grey Lord’s marched right into the middle of it.”

* * *

The rat-thing shrieked and squirmed in the grip of the spell. Runes carved into its scalp flared with crackling, greenish flames and the stench of burnt, greasy fur hung thick in the cold air of the necromancer’s great hall. Nagash continued to chant, focussing his will to a razor-keen edge as he tried to carve out the knowledge he sought from the wretched creature’s brain.

A roiling froth of memories and emotions flowed across the surface of his mind, rushing past almost too swiftly to grasp. The taste was bitter and strangely potent, utterly unlike the human essences he had consumed over the centuries. The thought processes were difficult to grasp, much less understand. The necromancer redoubled his efforts. This was the highest-ranking prisoner his constructs had ever caught. Such an opportunity might not come again for months, by which point it would be far too late. The war would not—*could not*—last for more than another thirteen days. His power—and by extension, his very existence—would not last beyond that point.

Glimpses of battles fought in the last few years flitted across Nagash’s mind, yet when he tried to grasp them, they broke apart like quicksilver. *More power*, he thought, his anger mounting. *I must use more power*.

There had been no new supplies of *abn-i-khat* since the fall of mine shaft three, close to two and a half years ago, and the demands of the war had consumed his remaining stores at a prodigious rate. Like a miserly river merchant, he knew down to the ounce how much of the stone he had left. Every iota he consumed hastened the moment of his extinction.

Reluctantly, Nagash reached with bony fingers for the small leather bag hanging at his waist. With deft, spider-like strokes, he undid the thick cords securing the mouth of the bag and reached carefully inside. A moment later he drew out a fragment of stone the size of a sesame seed, pinned between the pointed tip of thumb and forefinger. A moment later, the piece of *abn-i-khat* flared like a hot coal. He absorbed the spark of energy hungrily and fed it into the ritual circle surrounding the tormented rat-thing.

At once, the creature’s thoughts took on more weight and clarity, but Nagash knew the effects were temporary at best. He reached deeper into the prisoner’s mind, mercilessly looting its memories. The creature’s screams turned to a choking rattle. Bloody froth tinged the corners of its mouth and its tail lashed spasmodically against the stone floor.

Nagash saw the tunnels leading up to the stone barricades guarding the lowest levels of his fortress, only this time it was through the eyes of an invader. He saw companies of ratmen crouching in the bastions once held by his own warriors, and thousands more teeming in the echoing tunnels of mine shafts one, two and three. Excavation work at mine shaft four had been suspended, he saw, and the tunnel converted into the invaders’ new base camp. Cook-fires burned by the score along

the length of the passageway, amid the small forges of field armourers and sprawling caches of weapons, ammunition and other supplies.

The necromancer seized on these memories in particular, sifting through them carefully for what he sought. And then he saw it—a huge pavilion of wood and tanned hides, situated roughly in the centre of the disorderly camp. Hulking, broad-shouldered ratmen stood guard at each corner and at the entrances to the enclosure. A steady stream of slaves came and went from within, bearing trays of food and jars of wine.

Nagash stopped chanting. Cold, mirthless laughter echoed through the minds of the barbarian immortals gathered in the hall. Released from the necromancer's sorcerous grip, the rat-thing's corpse slumped to the floor.

A dozen pairs of cold, unblinking eyes watched Nagash as he turned and slowly climbed the steps to his shadow-haunted throne. Bragadh, Diarid, Thestus and Akatha waited in a loose semicircle on the far side of the ritual circle, their pale flesh glimmering faintly in the dim light. Their robes were ragged and faded with time; the battered scale armour of the warriors was tarnished nearly black. Their faces were etched by the constant thirst for the necromancer's elixir. Grim and tormented as restless ghosts, they waited in uneasy silence for their master's command.

Eight of Bragadh's distant ancestors stood guard around Nagash's throne, gripping bared blades that flickered with baleful corpse-light. The wights were the first undead warriors that Nagash had raised from the barrows that had once littered the plain at the foot of the great mountain. These days they accompanied him wherever he went, for the enemy now infested the halls of his own fortress, skulking about and slitting throats with near impunity.

There were other things abroad in the halls of Nagashizzar as well. Nagash settled carefully onto his throne, his burning eyes sweeping the great hall for signs of intrusion. For some time now he had been catching glimpses from the corners of his vision: fleeting images of distant, glowing forms that vanished whenever he tried to focus on them. The figures seemed to follow him, dogging his heels like a pack of hungry jackals.

Of late, the sightings had grown more numerous. They seemed to be edging closer, as though sensing that he was reaching the limits of his power. Once, on a moonless night close to the hour of the dead, he had roused from his meditations and seen a figure staring at him from the shadows at the foot of the throne. A woman, clad in the finery of lost Khemri, pale-skinned and as beautiful as Asaph herself. Her eyes were pools of darkness, depthless and cold as death. By the time he'd roused himself from his throne the apparition was gone, but the memory of it troubled him still.

The last time he'd seen Neferem was in the barren wastes far to the west of Nagashizzar and the Sour Sea, when he'd wandered, raving and alone, after his defeat in Nehekhar. In life she had been Queen of Khemri and the embodiment of the sacred covenant between the Nehekharans and their gods; for that he had taken her from her husband and enslaved her, bending her divine power to his will. Later, when it suited his purposes, he destroyed her, breaking the power of the old gods forever. Now, her soul lingered in the dark limbo that lay beyond the realm of the

living, unable to find her way to the afterlife now that the covenant with the gods had been broken.

Neferem had haunted his steps through the wasteland, watching him weaken with every passing night and savouring his torment. She spoke of the thousands of lost souls who waited for him across the threshold and the terrible reckoning he would face. But then the ratmen had found him, and from their corpses he learned the power of the *abn-i-khat*. She did not appear to him after that. As Nagash regained his strength, he had dismissed the apparition as a fever dream—the by-product of deprivation and a festering head wound and nothing more. What her return meant now, at the darkest hour of the war, he did not care to speculate.

The necromancer's burning gaze raked the shadows of the great hall. Finding them empty, he turned his attention to his lieutenants. The time had come at last. After five bitter years, he would finally put Bragadh and the others to the test.

The ratmen are at the barricades, Nagash declared, the words grinding together like stones in the minds of his immortals. *They have massed by the tens of thousands in the upper mine shafts. The final assault could come within days. The last battle of the war is upon us.* Nagash leaned forwards, his bony fingertips scraping across the arms of the black throne. *Now we shall strike.*

A ripple of unease passed through the assembled immortals. Bragadh looked to his companions and then gazed bleakly up at the throne.

"Death in battle is preferable to surrender," he said, the words bubbling thickly from his throat. Both lungs had been ravaged by deep wounds during the defence of mine shaft four; the ratmen's poisoned blades had etched scars that never healed, despite the power of Nagash's elixir. "The ratmen will pay a bitter price before we are destroyed."

Nagash's burning eyes narrowed on Bragadh. *I do not speak of surrender, northman. When we attack, it will be to drive the vermin from the mountain once and for all.* The necromancer clenched a fist. *We will tear the heart out of the enemy in a single stroke and send the rest fleeing whence they came.*

Once again, Bragadh exchanged uneasy glances with Diarid and Thestus before facing his master. "The enemy outnumbers our warriors almost a hundred to one," he said, "and there is little of the magic stone left. How can we possibly defeat them?"

"Bragadh speaks truly," Thestus said, stepping forwards and resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. "We cannot prevail here, master. If each of us killed a score of the creatures before we were slain, it would still not be enough." He hesitated, uncertain how to proceed. "Would... would it not be wiser to quit the mountain altogether? What if we took the army north, back to the hill forts? We could make war on the greenskins and replenish our depleted warbands. Then, when we had regained our strength, we could—"

There will be no retreat.

The words sliced like a knife into their minds. Thestus made a choking sound and staggered backwards. Dark ichor oozed from the corners of his eyes.

All is going according to plan, Nagash told them. *We are not so weak as the enemy has been led to believe, nor quite so desperate. Every defeat, every withdrawal for the last five years, was made with one purpose in mind, to lure the invaders into a trap from which they will never escape.*

Bragadh frowned. "What trap, master?" he replied. "We were told nothing of this."

All the better to convince the enemy that they held the upper hand, Nagash replied. *The ratmen had to believe that our strength was nearly spent. The desperation of you and your men no doubt helped to convince them.*

Thestus spread his arms. "But why, master? To what end?"

To tempt the enemy into carelessness, Nagash said. *The speed of our retreat has forced the enemy to pursue us, stretching their lines of communication and complicating their leaders' ability to control their troops. The leaders of the ratmen have been forced to leave the safety of their subterranean fortress and relocate to mine shaft four so they can direct the army and further their own petty schemes.*

The necromancer leaned back against his throne. *What they do not know is that there are hidden tunnels that open into all four of the upper mine shafts. The enemy has been too preoccupied to find them, and that will be their undoing.* Nagash pointed at Bragadh with a skeletal finger. *Tonight, you will quietly withdraw your warriors from the barricades, and we will lead them through the tunnels to mine shaft four. We will overrun the enemy's base camp, kill their leaders, and then fall upon the enemy army from the rear. By the end of the day tomorrow, the invaders will be in full retreat.*

Bragadh folded his powerful arms. "A cunning plan, but a risky one," he said. "It will leave the barricades very thinly held. If we were to be cut off, even for a short while, the enemy could break through our defences and seize the fortress with ease." He eyed the necromancer warily. "Unless there are other reserve forces you've kept hidden from us as well."

"It does not matter. Nagash is right. The time to strike is now."

Bragadh turned, his dark eyes widening in surprise as Akatha stepped forwards. "It's not your place to speak of such things, witch," he said darkly.

"I decide my place in things, Bragadh, and you well know it," Akatha replied. "And I say we must attack. Our people were not born to cower behind stone walls, nor slink back to our hill forts and yield our possessions to the enemy." She glared hard at Thestus, who visibly shrank beneath the witch's gaze. "Let the Faithful hear the war-song and spill the blood of their foes, as is proper."

"We will be beset from all sides!" Bragadh protested.

Akatha raised her chin defiantly. "It has ever been thus," she replied. "Perhaps you have forgotten, Bragadh Maghur'kan, but I have not."

"This could mean the end of us," Bragadh told her. "Can you not see that?"

The witch uttered a cold, mirthless laugh. "I see more than you know, Bragadh," she said. "Never doubt that for a moment."

Bragadh took a step towards Akatha, his hand falling to the hilt of his sword. An angry protest rose to his lips, but suddenly, all of the northmen froze, their bodies going rigid as though gripped in the fist of a giant.

Nagash studied his lieutenants in silence for a moment, watching them suffer under the weight of his terrible will.

Heed the witch, the necromancer told them. *For once, she and I are in accord. Prepare yourselves, for tomorrow the war ends, in victory or in death eternal.*

The Dispossessed

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 99th year of Usirian the
Dreadful
(-1285 Imperial Reckoning)*

Lord Ushoran walked slowly around the blood-spattered wooden frame, studying the gasping, wide-eyed wreck of a man hanging from its leather straps. The immortal pursed his fleshless lips and reached for the round knob of a long, gold needle that jutted from the angle where the man's neck and shoulder met. He twisted it ever so slightly and the victim's body tensed in agony. A thin hiss escaped the man's ragged lips; leather creaked as his back arched in a bow, bringing him up from the frame's central support. Flayed muscles knotted across the man's chest and shoulders, sending fresh rivulets of blood coursing down his bare torso.

The Lord of Masks smiled. Behind the bland illusion of his handsome nobleman's face, he ran his long tongue over the tips of his fangs. How he wished he'd taken more than a cursory interest in Nagash's books when they'd first come into King Lamashizzar's possession all those centuries ago. The necromancer's druchii tutors had been truly gifted in the arts of inflicting pain.

Ushoran continued to circle around the suffering man, his sandals tracking noisily through the puddles of dark blood congealing on the marble floor. The stench of death hung heavy in the chamber, its suffocating weight all but impervious to the braziers of incense that burned next to the dais at the far end of the room. Once upon a time, the Hall of Reverent Contemplation had been a grand and refined space, where the cloistered Queen of Lahmia would appear on high, holy days and give her blessings to the royal family and the city's most prominent nobles. After the creation of the temple and Neferata's elaborate, illusory funeral, the hall became her throne room, where she continued to rule Lahmia through the auspices of her Deathless Court.

All that had been forgotten since the treachery of Ubaid and the disappearance of Alcadizzar. Now the chamber was little better than a charnel house, devoted to the queen's insatiable thirst for vengeance. The floor beneath the dais was crowded with implements of torture: wooden racks and bronze cages, vats of oil, and tables lined with a grisly array of needles, hooks, saws and knives. Day and night, the chamber reeked like an abattoir. An ocean of blood had been poured onto its marble floor over the last few years, and the tide showed no signs of abating.

The Lord of Masks counted slowly to five and then twisted the needle once more. The man sagged back against the wooden frame with a ragged groan, his arms and legs trembling. He was a leather worker, according to his agents; by his lean, vulpine features and the dark, weathered cast to his skin, Ushoran reckoned he was from the desert tribes of the far west. A great many of them had turned up in the city over the last few years, seeking whatever work they could find in the Traders' Quarter. Most turned to thievery—something the desert nomads knew well—but this one had been carrying a leather satchel and proper tools when he'd been snatched from the street by Ushoran's men. Perhaps he'd lingered too long in his shop, finishing a belt or a set of fine boots for a caravan master or a ship's captain, or had decided to stop by one of the local wine shops and lost track of the time. Or perhaps he was new to the city, and ignorant of the risk of being caught out on the streets after dark. These days, most people knew that you didn't tarry in the Traders' Quarter or down by the docks after nightfall—not if you valued your life.

Ushoran paused for a few moments, listening carefully to the man's laboured breathing. There was an art to gauging how much real pain another person was suffering and how lucid they were from one moment to the next. When he judged that the time was right, he circled around to the front of the wooden frame and took the man's narrow chin in his hand. Ushoran was pleased to see the man flinch at his touch. He raised the leather worker's chin until he could gaze into the man's eyes.

"How long this lasts is entirely up to you," Ushoran said. "You understand? Answer my questions and the pain will end."

The man on the frame drew a hitching breath. A thin whine escaped his lips. "Don't—please... I don't know," he whispered, the words almost too faint to hear.

Ushoran's fingers tightened on the man's jaw. "No, no," he said slowly, as though he were a tutor with an exceptionally slow pupil. "You're a clever fellow. *Think*. This man has been seen in the Traders' Quarter before; he is tall and broad of shoulder, and has a grip like a blacksmith. Likely he was dressed like a commoner—even, perhaps, like a beggar—but he would have been handsome and well spoken, like a noble. Such a one would stand out from the crowd, yes? You may have only glimpsed him in passing. Just tell us where and when. That is all."

The leather worker blinked at Ushoran, his dark eyes wide and unfocussed. He groaned, a sound torn from the depths of his soul. Tears of frustration trickled from the corners of his eyes. "Please," he begged. "I don't know. I... I swear it! Why... why won't you believe m-me?"

Ushoran sighed in mock disappointment. The fool was too proud to lie, even to spare himself further suffering. He would provide hours more entertainment before his young heart gave out. Careful to conceal any trace of pleasure, the Lord of Masks turned to glance at the dais.

"He is stubborn, great one," Ushoran said to the apparition seated upon the ancient wooden throne. The Lord of Masks shrugged. "On the other hand, it's possible that he is telling the truth. Shall we release him?"

Neferata studied the weeping man with the eerie, serpent-like stillness of an immortal. She had not worn her golden mask since the night of Alcadizzar's betrayal and her pale, otherworldly face was as cold and pitiless as the desert night. Likewise, the eternal queen disdained the gleaming finery of the temple; her white silken robe

was dingy and tattered, stained at sleeve and hem with layers of grime and spots of old blood. In truth, she looked like a corpse freshly dug from its tomb, her unblinking eyes brimming with hate for the cursed world of men.

Ushoran watched her fingers slowly tense upon the arms of the throne. Long, curved claws scraped faintly over the priceless wood. A slender figure in a ragged priestess' robe stirred at the queen's feet. Like Neferata, the woman was as pale as alabaster, her cheeks smeared with dirt and dried blood. Sensing the change in her mistress' mood, the young immortal fixed Ushoran with a feral, catlike gaze and bared her fangs in a silent hiss. The Lord of Masks stiffened at the challenge, only just managing to refrain from baring his own teeth at the whelp in response. As Neferata's hatred of the mortal world had grown since the betrayal, so too had her distrust of her fellow immortals. Now she surrounded herself only with creatures of her own creation—women who had come as orphans to the temple and had risen through the ranks to become its first high priestesses. Their will and self-determination crushed long ago by Neferata's ruthless mental control, they were little better than animals, but their loyalty to the queen was absolute.

Lost in her dreams of vengeance, Neferata had withdrawn almost entirely from the affairs of the kingdom. In the wake of Alcadizzar's escape she had gone out into the streets herself in search of him; screams would echo from the Travellers' Quarter or the refugee slums in the dead of night and in the morning there would be another gruesome spectacle for the City Guard to find.

Wild tales of a savage, flesh-eating spirit gripped the populace. For the first time in centuries, terrified citizens flocked to the decrepit temples of Neru and Ptra, begging the startled priests for deliverance. When they proved powerless to halt the slaughter, the city nobles decided to take matters into their own hands. They pointed to the squalid population of immigrants in the western part of the city, accusing the former desert dwellers of unleashing a curse upon them all. Lost in the hysteria was the simple fact that the victims of Neferata's reign of terror had almost exclusively been immigrants themselves; the citizens had rioted, and the slums had burned for three straight days. It was only thanks to the sea breeze and the spine of hills that cut across Lahmia from north to south that the fire was kept from consuming the entire city. The air in the palace had reeked of smoke and burning flesh for a week. Afterwards, Lord Ankhat managed to persuade Neferata to restrain herself, but only after assuring her that the search for the prince would continue without pause. As a result, Ushoran had been allowed—nay *encouraged*—to indulge his secret appetites to a degree he had never before imagined possible. For every victim snatched from the street to answer the queen's relentless questions, three more found their way into his private houses of amusement.

At the foot of the gore-spattered dais, Lord Ankhat watched the spectacle with sour disapproval. He was the only principal of the Deathless Court who still paid any attention to affairs of state, managing the city and its affairs through a complex web of ministers and noblemen. Neferata's obsession with the young prince had badly strained her relationship with Ankhat, once her staunchest ally in the court. He kept his own counsel for the most part these days, making state decisions by fiat and abandoning all pretence of consulting with the queen. The once affable aristocrat had

grown cold and aloof, eyeing everyone around him with a mix of suspicion and arrogant disdain.

Perhaps it was just the passage of time, Ushoran mused. With every year our powers increase, he thought, as do our appetites. We grow ever more territorial, ever more jealous of our prerogatives. Before long we will have grown too hungry and too paranoid to share the city between ourselves, and what then?

Ankhat folded his arms and glared at the luckless fool on the rack. "This is ridiculous," he spat. "Doesn't anyone mark the passage of time anymore? It's not been five weeks since he's been gone, or even five months. It's been five *years*. No one's seen or heard from him since. For all we know, his bones are lying in a shallow grave somewhere on the Golden Plain."

Neferata fixed Ankhat with a smouldering glare. Ushoran cleared his throat. "The facts do not support this," he interjected. "Rasetra has made no inquiries about the prince's wellbeing since his disappearance. Clearly, he has been in contact with them somehow—"

"Then where is he, spymaster?" Ankhat shot back. "Khemri *still* lacks a king. You think he's taken up work serving tables in the Travellers' Quarter?" He turned and glared back at Neferata. "What in all the world could be more important to him than the crown of the Living City?"

Ushoran turned his attention to his victim in an attempt to conceal his unease. Ankhat was right—Alcadizzar ought to be in Khemri now, well on his way to restoring the city's wealth and power. The fact that he hadn't claimed the throne filled the immortal with a growing sense of dread.

"Alcadizzar is here," Neferata declared, in a voice as cold and hard as stone. "I *know* it." She leaned forwards, hands gripping the arms of the throne. "Ask him again," she hissed at Ushoran. "Strip away his flesh until he speaks the truth. He will give up his secrets soon enough. They always do."

Ushoran bowed to the queen and turned his attention to a table lined with gleaming tools. Behind him, he heard Ankhat snarl in disgust; there was a gust of icy wind as the immortal took his leave.

The Lord of Masks selected a long, serrated blade from the table and inspected its edge. The man on the rack started to thrash weakly against his restraints.

Neferata was right. Eventually the miserable wretch would talk. He would say whatever it took to make the agony stop, and leave the queen with yet another wild rumour to pursue. The orgy of blood and pain would continue.

As Ushoran returned to his labours, he silently prayed that the lost prince would never be heard from again.

The slow-moving caravan raised a pall of churning dust that stretched for half a mile down the arrow-straight course of the great trade road that travelled westwards along the Golden Plain. It glowed reddish-ochre in the sullen light of the setting sun, visible for leagues to the north and south.

Any bandit worth his salt quickly learned how to gauge the size and speed of a caravan based upon the trail of dust it left behind. This one was plodding along at barely more than a mile per hour; that meant laden wagons and slow, stolid oxen. Half a mile of dust wasn't much—the huge spice caravans that left the city every

three months raised a trail that could stretch for up to a league or more, depending on the strength of the wind. Alcadizzar reckoned there were perhaps a dozen wagons, all told, plus outriders ahead and to the flanks. They'd left the city late in the day—far later than was wise—so by the time night fell they would be well beyond the reach of the Lahmian forts on the eastern edge of the plain. Easy pickings for a bandit gang that knew its trade; either the caravan master had taken leave of his senses, or there was more going on here than met the eye.

Nawat ben Hazar did not share in Alcadizzar's concern. The bandit leader fairly rocked in the saddle with anticipation, a gap-toothed grin stretching from ear to ear. "Not long now," he said, breaking into a wheezing chuckle. "They'll hit the caravan just before sunset, when the fools are thinking of nothing but making camp and drinking a little wine." He shifted his lanky body and glanced at Alcadizzar, who walked his horse just a pace or two behind Nawat and to his right. The bandit leader's dark eyes glittered beneath shaggy grey eyebrows. He tapped the side of his narrow nose with a grimy fingertip. "Mark my words, *khutuf*. We'll have a bit of gold and meat for our bellies tonight."

The prince nodded absently, his eyes still fixed on the drifting ribbon of dust along the northern horizon. The bandits knew him as Ubaid, a former soldier and exile from Rasetra, but Nawat called him—and any other man not descended from the tribes of the Great Desert—simply *khutuf*. In the dialect of the tribes, the name meant "house dog", and referred to the pampered pets of merchants and other fat, indolent city dwellers. Nawat never let his men forget that he was of a different breed than the rest of them. He was a *nazir*, a desert lion, who could trace his lineage back to the great chieftains of the *bani-al-Akhtar*, the fiercest of the desert clans. He was as lean and as tough as a strip of rawhide, his dark skin weathered and wrinkled by years of exposure to the unforgiving sun. Though he wore simple cotton robes of Lahmian cut—plundered from a spice trader's chest and now stained a uniform brown by the dust of the road—the wide leather belt of a desert horseman circled his waist. Its cracked surface was tooled with precise notches that signified the battles he'd fought as a tribal warrior, and the scores of men he'd killed.

Alcadizzar had no reason to doubt Nawat's claims. The bandit leader wore a fine pair of ivory-hilted daggers tucked into his belt and carried a sleek, curved sword of the type favoured by the tribes. The old bandit sat his stolen horse with the ease of a man born to the saddle, which was more than Alcadizzar could say for himself. But he doubted that Nawat had been exiled from his tribe for loving the chieftain's daughter, as the man so often boasted. He suspected it had more to do with the telltale black stain of lotus root on the bandit's few remaining teeth.

For certain, Nawat's days of glory were far behind him. His gang, such as it was, consisted of barely a score of hungry-looking men and women, clad in a motley assortment of grimy rags and bits of finer, recently stolen garb. Most of the band struggled along on foot, while Nawat and the best-armed men of the gang sat upon lean, dispirited horses stolen from the scenes of previous raids. Most of the bandits carried little more than short clubs of knotty wood or dull-edged bronze knives; none wore anything resembling useful armour. The gang had no bows or spears—not even so much as a shepherd's simple leather sling. They were far and away the most pathetic bunch of would-be raiders that Alcadizzar had ever seen, surviving off the

leavings that larger, stronger gangs left behind, but they were also the only outlaws on the Golden Plain desperate enough to take him in.

Five years ago, Alcadizzar's only thought had been to escape from the City of the Dawn and warn Nehekharu of the evil that lurked in the depths of the Temple of Blood. Ironically, it was only by virtue of Neferata's terrible elixir that he had managed to survive the long drop to the palace courtyard; from there, his knowledge of the royal compound had allowed him to evade the guards and slip quietly into the city proper. By then, alarm gongs were clashing stridently within the palace, and startled City Guardsmen were prowling the early morning streets with cudgels in hand. The prince had spent his first day of freedom huddled inside an enormous ceremonial urn at the back of a potter's storage shed, his body trembling and his mind numb with shock as he struggled to make sense of everything he'd learned.

Neferata had responded swiftly and decisively to Alcadizzar's escape. Over the course of the day the search for him had intensified, and on several occasions he could hear the potter and his son arguing bitterly with City Guardsmen who came prowling through his shop. The prince tried to treat it as just another of the countless exercises that Haptshur, his battlefield tutor, had subjected him to. *You've been trapped deep in enemy territory with nothing but the robes on your back and your foes are hunting you. You must find a way to escape and return to your people.*

That was far easier said than done, of course. Alcadizzar had no weapons, no gold—not even sandals for his feet. Though his robes were now as filthy and torn as a beggar's, the rich, white silk would attract the attention of every watchman in the city. And it was safe to assume that his description was being circulated around the docks and at the city gates; there might even be a reward offered for his capture. To make matters worse, his nearest allies were in Rasetra, hundreds of leagues away. Even if he made it out of the city, he would still have a long and gruelling journey to reach the city of his people.

By the end of the first day, Alcadizzar had come to the conclusion that he would not be getting out of Lahmia any time soon. He would have to bide his time and gather resources while he waited for the search to eventually subside. That night, he slipped from the potter's shed and climbed silently onto the artisan's roof where freshly cleaned robes had been laid out to dry. Alcadizzar took a set of the son's robes, silently vowing to repay the family later, and then slipped into the crowded streets. The stained white robes were left in an alley deep inside the Travellers' Quarter, where he hoped they would convince the City Guard that he was trying to slip out of Lahmia with one of the many outbound merchant caravans. Instead, the prince made his way down to the teeming districts around the docks and looked for ways to earn some coin.

For nearly eight months, Alcadizzar, prince of Rasetra and would-be King of Khemri, lived like a harbour rat among Lahmia's busy docks. He looted and he stole; he gambled on games of dice and drank sour beer in reeking alehouses no City Guardsman dared enter. He killed his first man in a vicious, back-alley brawl, when a gang of sailors tried to pressgang him onto their ship. For a time he worked as hired muscle for one of the most notorious brothels in the Red Silk District, and there fell into the company of a gang of jewel thieves who preyed upon the old noble families

who lived in the shadow of the royal palace. That association had ended in blood and betrayal on a moonless night in early spring; Alcadizzar had escaped with nothing more than a handful of copper coins and a dying woman's kiss. She'd been his first love, and she'd nearly been the death of him.

Finally, the prince judged that his time had come. He was certain that Neferata was still looking for him, but her attention was still fixed on the caravans and the Travellers' Quarter. The guards at the city gates had slipped back into their daily routine, and his description was changed from the night of his escape. He was much thinner now and his features were hidden beneath a full, black beard. Dressed in faded desert robes and laden with a leather pack filled with food, spare clothing and other supplies, he passed through the eastern gate in the middle of a torrential afternoon rainstorm. The guardsmen, scowling from the doorway of the gatehouse, waved him through without so much as a second glance.

But the prince soon learned that escaping the city was only the first of many challenges that lay between him and distant Rasetra. Beyond the watch-forts at the eastern end of the plain the land was wild and lawless, infested with roving gangs of outlaws that preyed on unwary travellers. His hopes of falling in with an eastbound caravan were quickly dashed, as the paranoid merchants and their hired guards feared that he might be a spy for the caravan raiders. Alone and on foot, Alcadizzar's skills were tested to the utmost over the next few months as he struggled his way across the plain. He was forced to fight for his life on more than one occasion, but his training and the lasting potency of Neferata's elixir saw him through.

The road became less dangerous but no less easy once he had left the Golden Plain behind. Alcadizzar made his way to Lybaras, thinking that Rasetra's ancient allies would lend him aid, but the prince found the City of Scholars in a sad and decrepit state. The famous collegiums were all but deserted and the Palace of the Scholar-Kings was closed even to its citizens. Alcadizzar lingered there for almost a month, waiting in vain for an audience with King Pashet, but the royal viziers refused to even listen to him. In the end, he left Lybaras as road-weary and penniless as he'd been when he'd arrived.

Finally, almost a full year and a half after his escape from the Temple of Blood, Alcadizzar passed through the formidable gates of Rasetra, the warlike city of his people. The prince was pleased to see that the city prospered under the rule of his younger brother, Asar. This time, he knew better than to approach the palace directly. He was sure that Lahmia had agents in the city and they were certain to be on the lookout for him. Instead, he made inquiries in the market, and that evening he found his way to the home of his uncle Khenti.

Though Khenti was an old man now, his strength gone and his vision fading, he recognised Alcadizzar at once. The prince was welcomed with tears of joy. Later, when he had told Khenti of what he'd seen inside the temple, his uncle wasted no time in arranging a secret meeting with Asar inside the palace.

Accompanied by Khenti, Alcadizzar was ushered into the king's privy council chamber, where he met his younger brother for the very first time. Though Asar did not possess his brother's extraordinary physique and magnetic charisma, the kinship between the two could not be denied. Asar welcomed his brother warmly, and over goblets of strong southern wine Alcadizzar told Asar his horrifying tale.

This had been the moment that the prince had been waiting months for. Sitting in the filth of Lahmia's back-alleys, he'd envisioned his brother's face lighting up with righteous rage as he learned of Neferata's crimes. Swift messengers would be sent across the length and breadth of the land, spreading the news and summoning their armies to war. Alcadizzar would return to the City of Dawn as a conqueror, at the head of a vast army made up of warriors from every city in Nehekhara.

But Alcadizzar was to be disappointed. The King of Rasetra listened to the prince's tale, his expression thoughtful. When Alcadizzar was finished, Asar took a long sip of wine, and then gave his brother a frank stare.

"Where is your proof?" the king asked him.

Nawat altered their course as the sun sank behind the hills to the west, aiming the bandit gang towards the distant trade road. If the old raider's instincts were correct—and Alcadizzar had to admit, Nawat was rarely wrong—then the caravan would be attacked just at sunset, while they were busy making camp. Timing was critical; if they arrived too early, they risked walking into the middle of a battle. Too late, and they would need torches to pick their way through the caravan's remains, which meant they would likely miss what few valuables remained.

Alcadizzar shifted impatiently in the saddle, his hand falling to the hilt of the sword at his hip. It had been the sword of his uncle Khenti, a heavy, bronze khopesh that had spilled the blood of countless lizardmen in its time. Asar had tried to provide him with a fine gelding from the royal stables and a suit of bronze scale to aid him on his mission, but Alcadizzar knew such things would attract unwelcome attention on the Golden Plain. Instead, he'd gone to Rasetra's horse market and purchased a sturdy Numasi mare, and then plied a desert trader with gold to part with one of his personal possessions.

The *rakh-hajib*, or raider's robe, was a heavy cotton outer garment reinforced with bronze discs sewn into the inner lining to cover the wearer's vitals. It wasn't as good as proper armour, but it was proof against arrows, spears and knives. Best of all, it was discreet; he could not risk appearing too well equipped, or the bandits on the plain would think he was a spy for Lahmia's City Guard. Mistrust and paranoia were the only constants on the trade road leading to the City of the Dawn.

The same could be said for Nehekhara in general, Alcadizzar had learned. That night at the palace, Asar had laid out the political situation among the great cities. Though there was a great deal of resentment and discontent towards Lahmia, the centuries-old policies of King Lamashizzar and later, Queen Neferata had been so effective at playing the other cities against one another that none of them were strong enough to challenge the Lahmians directly. Even Rasetra, which had clawed its way back from the brink of ruin after the war against Nagash and had rebuilt its powerful army, still lacked the resources for a protracted war against the Lahmians. And though many of the great cities now possessed iron weapons and armour that were the equal of Lahmia's, none of them had a counter for the fearsome dragon powder that Lamashizzar's army had used to destroy the Usurper's army almost five hundred years ago. Not even the Lybaran scholar-priests had succeeded in unravelling the secrets of the mysterious eastern powder, and no one knew how much of it the City

of the Dawn possessed. As Alcadizzar knew firsthand, the Lahmians guarded their secrets jealously.

Of course, a coalition of armies would almost certainly triumph against the Lahmians, but there was too much ambition and too little trust among the other cities to make such an alliance possible. Of the great cities, only three were strong enough to present themselves as possible rivals to Lahmia's power—Rasetra in the east, plus Zandri and Ka-Sabar in the west—but none were willing to take the first step and risk standing alone in the face of Lahmian reprisal. It would take something truly portentous and terrible to persuade the rival kings to put aside their ambitions and come together in a common cause against Lahmia. Alcadizzar's discovery was just such a revelation—but only if it could be proven beyond a doubt. Without proof, the other kings were just as likely to suspect that it was nothing more than a Rasetran ploy to trick them into a ruinous war.

Asar had made it clear that he believed every word of the prince's story and vowed to send agents to uncover proof of Neferata's crimes—but Alcadizzar knew that such efforts were doomed from the start. No stranger to the city would stand a chance of penetrating the palace compound and slipping undetected into the temple—and none of the temple's high priestesses could be persuaded to betray their mistress' secrets. That left only one possible alternative. If the great cities needed proof of Lahmia's hidden evil, then Alcadizzar would have to obtain it himself.

He had remained as his uncle's guest for many months, formulating his plans, then slipped quietly from the city amid the guards of a merchant caravan bound for Lybaras. Six months later he found himself, once again, friendless and alone, upon the lawless expanse of the Golden Plain.

Alcadizzar had thought that slipping back into Lahmia would have been a simple matter. It had been years since his escape; for all that the rest of the world knew, he might as well have been dead. But Neferata still hadn't given up looking for him; if anything, her search had turned far darker and more terrible than before. The city docks and the poorer districts lay under a constant pall of dread. The streets were all but deserted after dark, because people were disappearing almost every night and were never seen again. Informers were everywhere, searching for men who matched his description. The City Guard had tried to detain him at the west gate; when no amount of gold would dissuade them, he'd been forced to draw his sword and fight his way out. Mounted riders had scoured the trade road for weeks afterwards, searching for him. He'd only managed to escape by fleeing deep into the abandoned farmland, where the bandits held sway.

He'd known from his early days inside the city that there were two kinds of bandits on the Golden Plain. There were desperate, pitiful folk like Nawat's band of cutthroats, and then there were the descendants of the desert tribes who had migrated there in the years after the war against the Usurper. Nagash's armies had shattered the once-proud tribes, and the loss of their patron god Khsar had forced them to abandon the burning sands that had sheltered them for centuries. In those days, Lahmia had been the richest of all the great cities, and caravans journeyed there from as far away as Zandri to partake in the exotic goods of the distant east. Where there was wealth, there was banditry, and the desert tribes were superlative caravan raiders. They struck like lightning out of the scrub forests that now grew wild across the

plain, taking what they pleased and vanishing before the City Guard could respond. There were also many former desert dwellers living inside Lahmia as well, eking out a miserable existence in the city slums. The Lahmians regarded them with suspicion and thinly veiled hostility, suspecting them of spying for the raiders out on the plain.

Alcadizzar saw at once that the desert tribesmen had the potential of becoming powerful allies against the Lahmians, but they were a clannish and secretive bunch at the best of times. He had spent a year on the plain trying to earn their trust, but to no avail. When Nawat had agreed to accept him into his gang, Alcadizzar had joined up in the hopes that the old raider might still have some friends within the tribes, but if he did, Nawat refused to speak of them.

The prince suppressed an irritated sigh. Another dead end, he thought, watching the gang slink across a wide, stony field that had once grown corn and wheat for nearby Lahmia. He was better off on his own, he reckoned. Perhaps it would be easier to move about inside the city now. It had been another full year—surely Neferata was growing tired of the search.

Just then came the distant, skirling cry of a horn, off to the north. Nawat sat straight in his saddle, listening then nodded in satisfaction. “It’s begun,” he said to the gang. “They’re a little early. We should pick up the pace a bit.”

The old raider nudged his horse into a faster walk and the bandits limped along in his wake as best they could. Alcadizzar touched his heels to his mount and she responded at once, breaking into an easy, ground-eating trot. He searched the darkening sky above the road where he knew the caravan to be. After a few moments, he frowned. “No signal arrow,” he said, half to himself.

Nawat turned to the prince. “What’s that?”

Alcadizzar gestured in the direction of the road. They were less than a mile away now, their movements concealed by a line of low, wooded hills. “The caravan hasn’t called for help.”

The old raider straightened in the saddle. Every caravan within easy riding distance of the Lahmian watch-forts kept a bow and a pitch-soaked arrow close to hand, in case of attack. A fire arrow shot skywards would have a troop of Lahmian cavalry riding to their aid within minutes. Nawat rubbed his chin. “Maybe the arrow failed to light,” he mused. “It’s been known to happen.”

“You think so?” the prince asked, sounding dubious.

Nawat shrugged. “What else?”

They rode onwards in tense silence for a bit longer, drawing closer to the base of the hills. A horn sounded again—two short notes, then a long one, repeated in quick succession. Alcadizzar stiffened. He knew that sequence all too well. Moments later, another horn answered, perhaps a league to the west.

“Those are cavalry signals,” Alcadizzar told Nawat. “The caravan had a troop of horsemen trailing them.”

“Where the dust trail from the wagons would hide their presence.” Nawat muttered a curse and spat into the dust. “When did the *khutuf* get so clever?”

Alcadizzar could hear other sounds coming from the far side of the hill now: the faint clatter of blades and the shrill, woman-like shriek of a dying horse. The caravan had been nothing but bait, drawing the raiders into a deadly ambush. The prince

thought quickly, considering his options. He reached down and loosened his sword in its sheath.

Nawat cursed again and turned his horse about. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he snarled to his gang. “Back to camp, and quickly. If the Lahmians catch us—”

Suddenly, the old raider’s mount shied sideways as Alcadizzar spurred his horse to a gallop and charged up the wooded hillside.

“Ubaid!” Nawat called after him. “What in the seven hells are you doing?”

The long-legged Numasi mare lunged up the slope in graceful bounds. Alcadizzar gave the horse its head, letting it find its own way amid the gnarled, spiky trees. The sounds of battle grew louder as he reached the hill’s summit and plunged down the other side. He drew the heavy, bronze sword with a graceful sweep of his arm and tried to catch glimpses of the battle unfolding along the road below.

Alcadizzar could see seven or eight wagons—wide-bodied, wooden affairs with four wheels and high, wicker sides. Half a dozen archers stood in each one, drawing back yard-long reed arrows and loosing them at the swift-moving horsemen circling in the open ground north of the road. The desert raiders were armed with quivers of bronze-tipped javelins and short, recurved bows made of polished horn; they drew and fired on the move, sending broad-headed arrows thudding into the wagons’ flanks. But instead of plunging through the painted wicker they stuck fast, or the shafts broke from the impact. No doubt the wicker was a screen, concealing a wall of wooden shields that protected the archers to just above the waist.

The bodies of riders and horses alike littered the ground before the wagons and the gaps between them. A favoured tactic of the desert raiders was to race in among the wagons and strike down their drivers with a few well-placed javelins. The Lahmians had waited until the raiders were virtually in their midst before springing their trap, cutting down the first wave of raiders at point-blank range. The rest had drawn up short in the killing ground north of the road, where they offered more targets for the swift-firing bowmen.

The caravan guards—Lahmian soldiers clad in the motley gear of hired blades—had withdrawn behind the wagons as soon as the attack had begun, and now they were making short work of the wounded raiders who’d had their mounts shot out from under them during the first charge. Alcadizzar caught sight of a dozen of these soldiers surrounding a large knot of dead horses and their riders. As he watched, a lean, robed figure darted up from behind one of the fallen mounts and flung a javelin at one of the Lahmians. The soldier screamed and fell, clutching at the shaft protruding from his chest. Arrows hissed through the air, but the raider had already ducked back down out of sight and the shafts passed harmlessly overhead.

A shout went up from the raiders north of the road. Alcadizzar watched in surprise as a dozen of them broke from the group and charged the line of wagons. Horse-bows twanged; one of the Lahmian archers pitched over backwards with an arrow in his eye. The raiders closed the distance swiftly, their mounts fairly gliding over the stony field. They plunged fearlessly into a storm of arrow fire. Horses screamed and plunged to the ground; their riders leapt free, only to be shot in turn. Only two of the brave riders made it past the wagons, hurling javelins at their tormentors as they raced by. Alcadizzar watched them rein in for a moment on the other side of the line, their heads turning this way and that as though searching for

something. One of the riders fell a second later with an arrow in his throat; the second man caught sight of the mound of dead horses that the Lahmians had surrounded, and spurred his horse towards them with a cry of challenge. Three arrows struck the man in quick succession, piercing him in the leg and chest. Still, he struggled onwards, driving his mount forwards, until another pair of arrows struck him in the side and sent him plunging to the ground. The raider's horse came to a stop, its flanks heaving—but then a whistle caused its ears to perk up. At once, it started to trot towards where the stranded raider was hiding, but was brought down by a well-placed Lahmian arrow.

Now Alcadizzar understood why the desert raiders hadn't simply withdrawn as soon as the ambush had been sprung. Their chieftain had been brought down in the first charge and was now trapped by the Lahmians among the bodies of his retainers. Honour demanded that they rescue him, or die in the attempt.

The Lahmian soldiers pushed forwards, tightening the noose around the desert chieftain. To the west, Alcadizzar could hear the faint thunder of hooves. The cavalry would arrive in moments and then the raiders would have no choice but to withdraw; the chieftain's fate would be sealed.

There was no time to think. Alcadizzar raced down the slope, angling his course towards the downed chieftain. With the latest rescue attempt having failed, the Lahmian archers had turned their attention northwards once again. He might succeed where the gallant raiders had failed.

The prince broke from the concealing woods at a full gallop, his horse kicking up a cloud of dust as she raced across the level ground towards the encircling soldiers. The Lahmians didn't see him at first. Alcadizzar crossed the intervening distance in the space of a few heartbeats. By the time one of the soldiers on the far side of the circle caught sight of him and shouted a warning, it was already too late.

Alcadizzar plunged into the circle of warriors, his bronze sword flashing. Blood splattered in a wide arc as he split one soldier's helmet and carved into the skull beneath. The prince jerked his blade free with a bloodthirsty shout and struck another man in the shoulder, the sword cutting through the warrior's leather armour and shattering his collarbone. Screams rent the air; Alcadizzar spurred his mount forwards, leaping over the bodies of horses and men. He caught sight of the chieftain, hunched down next to his dead stallion, a sword and dagger clenched in his bloody hands.

The prince leaned down, extending his left arm. The desert chieftain's face was hidden behind a chequered headscarf, but his dark eyes glinted fiercely as he gripped Alcadizzar's forearm and swung easily onto the back of his horse. There were shouts all around them as the Lahmians surged forwards; with a cry, Alcadizzar spurred his mount once again—not northwards, into the teeth of the enemy bowmen, or southwards, towards the wooded hill but west, down the length of the caravan and in the direction of the oncoming Lahmian cavalry.

Arrows hissed through the air as the wagons flashed by. An arrow struck Alcadizzar in the left side, but the point failed to penetrate the rings of mail sewn into his raider's coat. Only a few of the archers could fire on him at any one time, and the speed of his horse made him a difficult target.

In less than a minute he reached the last wagon in line and was galloping out into the open. Shouts rose behind him and he expected a fusillade of arrows to rain down on him, but just then the Lahmian cavalry arrived on the scene, their yellow silk standards flapping in the wind. He charged full into their midst, dashing straight down the column of charging riders. The Lahmian archers had no choice but to hold their fire, and within moments Alcadizzar had vanished in the churning dust cloud kicked up by the cavalry troop.

A fist pounded at the prince's shoulder and laughter boomed in his ear. "That was boldly done!" the chieftain said. Alcadizzar glanced over his shoulder and saw that the raider had pulled aside his headscarf. He was a young man, no more than twenty-five or so, with a handsome, tanned face and a brilliant smile that was more than a little mad.

"I am Faisr al-Hashim, of the *bani-al-Hashim*," the young man said. "And I am in your debt, stranger. Ask of me anything, and it is yours."

A half-mile down the trade road, the prince reined in his mount. In the distance, the Lahmian cavalry were chasing the rest of the bandits northwards. Alcadizzar glanced back at the chieftain. Nawat and his rabble were forgotten; this was the opportunity he'd been looking for.

"Anything?"

The chieftain laughed again, drunk from his close brush with death. "Anything, upon my honour! What is your heart's desire?"

The prince smiled. "I wish to ride with the *bani-al-Hashim*."

—<ELEVEN>—

Into the Trap

*Nagashizzar, in the 99th year of Usirian the Dreadful
(-1285 Imperial Reckoning)*

“Out of the way, damn you! *Move-move!*” Eekrit laid about with the flat of his blade, striking shoulders and backsides. The clanrats yelped and snarled, glaring back at the warlord with pure murder in their eyes—then lowering their heads and squeezing against the walls of the narrow tunnel once they realised who he was.

Eekrit drove onwards, shouldering his way through the press of armoured bodies. The journey from the lower levels of the fortress had taken nearly twice as long as expected. After successfully dodging enemy patrols and slipping past the *kreekar-gan*’s barricades, they’d emerged into a scene of utter pandemonium at mine shaft one. Some kind of massive troop movement was under way, with the army’s assault troops being pulled from the battle-line and replaced with yowling mobs of slaves. Every passageway to the lower levels was packed tight with snarling, cursing skaven going in one direction or the other, slowing movement to little better than a crawl. Eekrit was exhausted already from fighting his way through one crowded passageway after another. His arms ached and his patience had long since worn thin. The only thing preventing him from using the sharp end of his blade was the fact that the maddened clanrats would likely turn on him in an instant. The army had enough problems already without touching off a bloody melee within its own ranks.

The warlord shoved his way to the front of the pack, with Eshreegar and the rest of his raiders close at his heels. The leader of the clanrats started to hiss a curse as Eekrit stalked past, but a glare from the Master of Treacheries left the warrior cowering in a cloud of fear-musk.

Just past the clanrats was yet another shuffling mass of stinking fur and rustling armour, but this time Eekrit pulled up short. It was a pack of the Grey Lord’s *heechigar*, standing shoulder-to-shoulder and probably thirty rats deep. The warlord paused, his narrow chest heaving. His whiskers twitched, sensing the movement of air currents up ahead. They had to be close to their goal now, he reckoned, and the storm-walkers were moving along at something approaching a slow march. At the moment, that was good enough for him. Eekrit fumbled for his scabbard twice before he finally managed to put away his sword.

“How long?” he asked, as Eshreegar came up beside him.

The Master of Treacheries took a deep breath, focussing his tired mind. “Seven hours,” he replied. “Maybe a bit more.”

Eekrit spat a sulphurous curse. “The *kreekar-gan*’s probably on the move right now. The attack could begin at any minute.”

Eshreegar cocked his head at the warlord. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because it’s the worst possible thing that could happen,” Eekrit growled. “That’s been the one constant in this whole, miserable war.”

They followed the *heechigar* for several minutes before a bone whistle blew up ahead, and the storm-walkers surged ahead at a loping, rattling trot. Moments later, Eekrit found himself standing at the mouth of the branch-tunnel leading into mine shaft four.

The army’s base camp had expanded dramatically in the weeks since the raiders had last been there. Huge piles of food and supplies, separated by clan and guarded by anxious packs of warriors, stretched from one end of the long tunnel to the other. Smoke from cook-fires and hissing furnaces created a bluish-black haze along the roof of the mine shaft; the air was hot and reeking from the copper stink of the swordsmiths’ forges. The slave pens that he could see had been emptied and units of heavily armed warriors were hastening down the narrow lanes to the call of screeching bone whistles or the bark of clan chiefs.

Eshreegar surveyed the chaos and scowled. “What in the Horned God’s name is going on?” he said.

Eekrit wasn’t quite sure what to make of it himself. “We’ll know soon enough,” he replied, and set off at a trot for the Grey Lord’s pavilion.

They made better time cutting across the mine shaft and reached the sprawling collection of wood-and-hide enclosures within a matter of minutes. A pair of *heechigar* stood watch at the pavilion’s main entrance, nervously clutching the hafts of their fearsome-looking polearms. Their hackles bristled as Eekrit and the raiders approached.

Eekrit was in no mood for displays of dominance. “I must speak with Lord Velsquee at once,” he said without preamble.

“Lord Velsquee is meeting with the war council,” rasped one of the storm-walkers.

The warlord glared up at the broad-shouldered warrior. “How convenient,” he replied. “I’m on the war council.”

The two *heechigar* exchanged sly looks. “That’s not what we were told, black-robe,” the burly guard said, baring his teeth in a lopsided sneer. “Aren’t you supposed to be past the barricades, sniffing up the *kreekar-gan*’s bony arse?”

“You shut your teeth,” Eshreegar warned, his voice low and full of menace.

The storm-walker’s smile broadened. “Do your worst, one-eye.”

Eshreegar stepped forwards, a pair of cruel-looking knives appearing in his paws as if by magic. His answering smile was wicked and cold. “You asked for this,” he told the storm-walker. “I want you to remember that once I’m finished with you.”

“Enough,” Eekrit snapped, and the tone of his voice was enough to get even the *heechigars*’ attention. “We don’t have time for this.” The warlord stepped up to the towering guard. “You listen to me,” he told the storm-walker. “The leader of the army’s scouts has an urgent message for the Grey Lord and the council. If he doesn’t

get that message *immediately*, then Velsquee will hold the both of you responsible. Do you care to take the blame for the army's defeat?"

The guard's eyes narrowed, searching Eekrit's face for signs he was bluffing. Finally, the storm-walker shrugged. "No need for that," he muttered, and then sent his companion into the pavilion with a jerk of his head.

Eekrit and Eshreegar fumed in silence, tails twitching, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, the second guard returned. "All right," he said, with no sign of deference. "You two come with me."

The Master of Treacheries tensed again at the guard's insolent tone, but Eekrit forestalled him with an upraised paw. "Lead on."

They followed the storm-walker past the hanging hide flap and into the noisome darkness of the pavilion. Foul-smelling incense—some acrid swamp fungus that was currently fashionable in the Great City—curled listlessly about the ceiling of the narrow antechamber beyond. Slaves from a number of the army's prominent clans abased themselves as Eekrit passed by.

The *heechigar* led them down a maze of twisting, close-set passageways, fashioned to suit skaven sensibilities and confound would-be assassins. After several minutes, they emerged into a slightly larger antechamber, this one laid with expensive rugs and stinking of slightly less acrid smoke. More slaves, these belonging exclusively to Velsquee, crouched silently in the far corners of the chamber as they awaited their master's summons. Another passageway opposite led deeper into the pavilion. From somewhere beyond came the faint murmur of voices.

As they entered the chamber, the hide flap across the room was pulled aside. Eekrit came to a sudden halt as he caught sight of the skaven lord who'd come to meet them.

Lord Hiirc was clad in rich robes embroidered with gold and silver thread. Tokens of burning stone gleamed balefully from fine chains around his neck. Like Eekrit, the lord of Clan Morbus could afford the best charms and potions that money could buy back at the Great City. He looked like a skaven barely half his true age, Eekrit noted irritably. Hiirc's gold-capped teeth glinted coldly as he spoke.

"What in the-the Horned God's name are the two of you doing here?" he said. His voice was thin and shrill, like a poorly tuned whistle. The lord's fur was tangled and unkempt, and his ears twitched apprehensively.

Eekrit wondered at his appearance, but then realised that it was very early in the morning for the clan lords, who were accustomed to the luxuries of camp life.

"There's going to be an attack, Hiirc," Eekrit snapped. "The *kreekar-gan* has led us into an ambush."

Hiirc's ears folded back against his skull. "Is that so?" he hissed. "And how exactly do you know this?"

Eekrit growled under his breath and took a step towards Hiirc. His paw drifted to his sword hilt. He wanted nothing more than to bury his blade between the fool's beady eyes. The *heechigar* sensed this at once and let out a warning snarl, moving to place himself partially between the two lords. Eshreegar shifted slightly, paws at his sides.

The warlord caught himself at the last moment. However much he wanted it, painting the hide walls with Hiirc's blood would only complicate things with

Velsquee. Eekrit paused, took a deep breath, and told his erstwhile second-in-command what he'd learned.

Hiirc listened carefully to the story, even nodding thoughtfully at the description of the tunnel mouth and the captured clan chief. When Eekrit had finished his report, the Morbus clan lord snapped his fingers. Instantly a slave appeared, bearing a bowl of wine on a silver tray. Hiirc took the bowl and sipped its contents.

"Is that all?" he asked.

Eekrit stared at Hiirc. Even the *heechigar* seemed shocked.

"Isn't that enough?" the warlord snarled. "What is-is so hard to understand, Hiirc? The burning man and his warriors are likely moving through the tunnels even as we speak. They could attack at-at any moment—"

"We know," Hiirc replied, his tail lashing smugly. "We've known for hours, in fact."

"You *know*?" Then, suddenly, Eekrit understood. "The spy. Of course."

Hiirc shifted uncomfortably. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

Eekrit cut him off with an upraised claw. "Don't be more of an idiot than you have to be, Hiirc," he snapped. "There's been a traitor in the enemy's ranks all along. How in the Horned God's name did you get the warning so quickly?"

Hiirc finished the wine and tossed the bowl back onto the slave's tray. "That's none of your concern," he shot back. "Velsquee's summoned our best troops. When the burning man attacks, he'll walk right into a trap. In an hour, two at most, the war will be over," he said. Hiirc bared his golden teeth in a malicious smile. "Which means your services to the army are no longer required."

Before Eekrit could reply, Hiirc snapped his fingers once again. This time the hide flap behind him was drawn aside and twelve more storm-walkers filed ponderously into the room.

Eekrit glared at the broad-shouldered warriors. "What is the meaning of this?"

Hiirc turned to the leader of the *heechigar*. "Escort Lords Eekrit and Eshreegar to the under-fortress," he commanded. "Confine them to the warlord's lair and guard them closely."

The storm-walkers surrounded the two skaven. Eekrit bared his teeth, furious that he'd allowed Hiirc to trap him so easily. With the rest of the scout-assassins behind him he might have made a fight of it. But now...

Eekrit folded his arms in resignation. "Lord Velsquee will hear of this."

Hiirc's ears fluttered with amusement. "It was the Grey Lord himself who ordered this." He waved a paw in dismissal to the guards. "Remove them by one of the side entrances," he ordered. "If you even *think* they might give you trouble, hack them to bits."

The *heechigar* leader grunted in assent and nodded to his warriors. Lowering their polearms, they herded their two prisoners past Hiirc and back the way they'd come, past the hide flap and into another adjoining room connected by three branching corridors. Down a side-corridor they went, passing into another labyrinthine set of passageways that finally led them to an exit on the far side of the pavilion.

Outside the enclosure the air still rang with shouted orders and the shrill cry of whistles as the storm-walkers and the army's veteran clanrats prepared their hasty ambush. Eekrit paused, surveying the scene. The rest of the scout-assassins were nowhere in sight, and with so much noise there was no way to call for aid.

A sharp bronze point jabbed the warlord in the shoulderblade. "Move," said the storm-walker behind him.

The phalanx of guards started off towards the opposite side of the mine shaft. Eshreegar fell into step beside Eekrit. He gave the warlord a sidelong look.

"Any brilliant ideas?" he asked.

"I'm *thinking*," Eekrit muttered.

The Master of Treacheries leaned closer. "There's a slave trader in the under-fortress who owes me some favours," he whispered. "If we can get to him, he'll smuggle us back to the Great City for a price."

Eekrit walked along in silence, considering his options. After a moment, he looked up and considered the hulking forms of the storm-walkers.

The warlord took a deep breath. "Eshreegar, how much gold have you got?"

The preparations for the attack took hours to complete. Swift messengers carried orders to the barbarian companies, withdrawing them from the barricades and assembling them in four large contingents along the deserted storage chambers close to the approach tunnels. Large packs of flesh-eaters—nearly all that remained of the debased Yaghur tribes—prowled the tunnels around the assembled warriors, hunting for enemy scouts who might spoil their master's plans. The northmen, some four thousand strong, left behind a mere thousand skeletal warriors to man the barricades and hold the enemy at bay.

As the warriors gathered, Nagash went to the secret vault that contained the last of the *abn-i-khat*. The windowless stone chamber, carved from the very bedrock of the mountain, was large enough to rival the vast treasure houses of the kings of old Khemri; now its shelves and marble plinths sat empty but for a single, small table at the far end of the vault. There, flickering like a pair of baleful eyes, sat two fist-sized lumps of burning stone.

Nagash paused but a moment at the threshold, surveying the dark, empty place. Once a measure of Nagashizzar's wealth and power, now it spoke only of defeat and a long, bitter decline.

At length he entered the echoing vault, his bony footsteps making faint, scraping sounds upon the stone. His body moved with an unnatural gait more akin to a beast or a reptile than to a man. His arms and legs, unmoored by muscle or sinew, moved like serpents beneath the parchment-like folds of his ancient robe. His wight bodyguard followed at his heels, ghostly green fire flickering across their tarnished armour and down the length of their deadly blades.

The macabre procession halted before the table and Nagash spread his skeletal hands possessively above it. The magical stone seemed to respond to the necromancer's desires, flaring like coals in a furnace. The light of the burning stone played across the surface of the bronze and leather breastplate that they rested upon and the long, straight, double-edged blade that lay before it. The armour had been wrought by the smiths of the northmen and enchanted by Nagash's own hand; each

scale had been inscribed with a rune of protection to turn aside the spells and blades of his foes. The blade had been taken from an ancient northern barrow during the long war of subjugation, and had been wrought from obsidian in the days before men knew how to shape metal. The art of its making was a mystery even to Nagash; there was terrible power coiled within, a hunger for life that was depthless and cold as the abyss itself.

Nagash plucked the stone orbs from their resting place and weighed them in his hands. At once, the left-hand orb was wreathed with a shimmering green mist that soaked into the necromancer's blackened bones. At once, he stood straighter, his skeletal frame drawing together tightly as the arcane energies leapt from joint to joint. He craved more, but with an effort of supreme will he put his hunger aside. He had measured out each and every ounce according to his battle plan. Nothing would be held back. Either he would defeat the ratmen once and for all, or be destroyed in the process.

At his command, the wights gathered around him. For the first time in more than a century, they set aside their bared blades and reached for the wargear resting upon the table.

Slowly, with unspoken ceremony, the risen dead garbed Nagash for war. The weight of the armour upon his chest reminded him of ancient times, of past glories won beneath Nehekhar's burning sun, but the memories filled him with a strange sense of foreboding. As the champions went about their work, cinching cords and fastening ties, the necromancer found himself studying the vault's shadows for pale figures and ghostly, accusing faces.

* * *

"I should not be here," Akatha said, her voice echoing hollowly in the confined space of the tunnel. "I belong with Bragadh. It is an ill-omened thing to send a chieftain to battle without a witch to sing for him."

Nagash said nothing. Rock bubbled and hissed beneath his fingertip as he traced a magical circle on the floor. The tunnel had no exit—it merely ended at a rough-hewn wall of granite, some three feet thick. Magical runes had been etched into the surface of the rock and inlaid with *abn-i-khat* years ago; they formed a tall, wide arch, broad enough for two men standing abreast. His wight bodyguard formed a protective barrier between him and the archway, their dark blades held ready.

Behind the necromancer came the muted rattle of weapons and armour as his warriors awaited the call to battle. The tunnel was, in truth, a long, spiralling ramp that bored down through the bedrock and terminated at the far end of the mine shaft. Three others like it had been sunk through the stone on the opposite side of the shaft, each packed with a thousand northmen and led by Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus. A fifth tunnel, which had been opened months ago to allow his constructs to enter the mine shaft in search of useful prisoners, had been quietly sealed up just a few hours before to maintain the element of surprise.

Akatha stood with folded arms to Nagash's right, her expression hidden behind a fall of ash-stained hair. Her pale skin shone with unnatural vigour, throwing her ghostly blue tattoos into sharp relief. She had drunk deep from the necromancer's

cup, along with Bragadh and the other immortals, just before joining their mortal kinsmen in the fortress depths. The necromancer had been generous with his elixir, restoring his lieutenants to their former might. The witch radiated arcane power, like the churning clouds of a fierce desert storm.

“What is it you wish me to do?” she asked. “If I am not to sing the war-song, then what?”

Nagash finished inscribing the last of the ritual symbols. Kneeling amid them, he reached past the runes and etched a glowing green circle in the rock. He had consumed the most burning stone of all, and the sensation of raw, unbridled power filled him with a terrible, mirthless joy. The cold hilt of the obsidian blade fairly trembled in his hand, its ancient spirit stirring at the prospect of battle.

The necromancer straightened, calling to mind the words of the ritual he’d created years ago and held in reserve in anticipation of this very moment.

Bear witness, he said to her. Behold the vengeance of Nagash.

The incantation reverberated through the necromancer’s brain, fuelled by the power of the burning stone, and the runes carved into the rock blazed with light. Within moments, thin wisps of smoke rose from the sigils carved into the rock wall, and the temperature in the crowded tunnel began to rise. The northmen closest to Nagash began to shift uneasily and mutter blasphemous prayers as the wall began to blacken and a malevolent hissing sound filled the air.

Focussing his will, Nagash raised his left hand and slowly made a fist. The air shimmered with heat. When he reached the end of the incantation he punched his fist at the wall and unleashed a fraction of his pent-up energy; the iron-hard granite contained within the arch exploded outwards in a furious crack of thunder.

Hundreds of razor-edged fragments scythed through the mine shaft around the breach, followed by a roiling wall of blinding dust, heat and rushing air. The few ratmen unlucky enough to be caught within the blast were killed instantly; their pulverised bodies were caught by the Shockwave and hurled dozens of feet through the air. Stacked crates and wicker baskets were torn apart, their contents scattered across the mine shaft and in some cases ignited by the searing air.

A string of three more blasts ripped through the lower end of the mine shaft as the runic arches inset into the remaining assault tunnels detonated as well. A cyclone of dust and howling, furnace-like air roared up the shaft towards the ratmen’s pavilion, punctuated by the roaring war cries of the northmen.

Attack!

Nagash’s command echoed in the minds of his bodyguards and lieutenants. The wights swept forwards in a silent, deadly wave, their movements lent unearthly speed by another of the necromancer’s incantations. Nagash followed them, his burning gaze searching the battlefield for foes, and the barbarians came charging in his wake.

The necromancer glided like a ghost through the heat and the swirling smoke. Ahead of him ranged the wights, moving so swiftly their feet scarcely seemed to touch the ground. Shouts and screams filled the air. Nagash could hear the charge of Diarid’s barbarian warriors off to his right and the shouts of Bragadh’s barbarians to his left. Theustus and his men were somewhat ahead and to Bragadh’s left; his lieutenants were entrusted with blocking any would-be rescuers advancing from the enemy forces in the upper and lower mine shafts. They would protect his flanks

while he and his warriors raced to the pavilion and killed every rat-creature he found there.

For the first few minutes, the only ratmen Nagash found were the twisted and torn bodies of those caught by the initial blast. Shrill cries and panicked screeches sounded ahead and to either side of him, lost behind mounds of supplies and churning wisps of dust. His wight bodyguards had caught up to the rear edge of the smoke cloud he'd created; they were nothing more than wavering silhouettes, tinged by faint haloes of green grave-light. The undead warriors raced on without pause through the scalding cloud, driven by the hateful will of their master.

Nagash charged into the whirlwind after them. The hot dust filled his hood and blew it back from his blackened skull. It sang against his stone blade, causing it to utter a low, crystalline moan. His robes and the thick leather underlayment of his armour began to smoulder in the superheated air, but the necromancer scarcely felt its touch. He could dimly sense Akatha and the barbarians some distance behind him, loping like wolves in the dust cloud's wake.

They were some three hundred yards from the assault tunnels when Nagash heard screams and shouts in the dust clouds up ahead. Corpse-light flickered in sweeping, deadly arcs, and the cries of the ratmen were cut short. A heartbeat later he came upon the first of the corpses. The ratmen had been cut down in mid-stride as they stumbled blindly through the dust. Their fur had been burnt away, along with their ears and their deep-set eyes. Many were still toppling to the ground as the necromancer rushed past.

And then, without warning, there were ratmen everywhere. They came screaming out of the veil of dust from all sides, their snouts blistered and bleeding and their chisel teeth bared. Wight blades flickered through the air, slicing through armour and sinking into flesh. The blades froze the blood and silenced the hearts of those they touched; Nagash watched ratmen stagger beneath the blows, their last breaths billowing in jets of glittering vapour as they fell.

Still more of the creatures charged Nagash from left and right. Those that had managed to avoid being blinded by the storm rushed directly at him, their swords raised to strike.

He met them with a cruel laugh and a blasphemous incantation. Streaks of green fire burst from the skeletal fingers of his free hand, scything through the ratmen on his left. The creatures collapsed, shrieking in agony as their bodies boiled from the inside out.

No sooner had the sorcerous bolts sped from his hand than Nagash was turning to face the ratmen charging from his right. Roaring, exultant, he raised his obsidian blade and fell upon them. His sword flashed in blurring arcs, biting into armour, flesh and bone and snuffing out the life within. Their blows turned aside from his enchanted armour, or shattered against its scales. He beckoned to the wretched rat-things, daring them to do their worst, his burning eyes mocking them as they died beneath his blade. When there were no foes left to kill, he spun about and stalked back through the dust clouds, hunting down stumbling, blinded ratmen and slaying every one he could find.

The fight lasted barely a minute. One moment Nagash was lost in an ecstasy of slaughter and the next he was standing amid piles of lifeless bodies, watching the

surviving ratmen fleeing deeper into the dust cloud, towards the distant pavilion. The necromancer's bloodthirsty howl shook the aether as he and his wights set off after the retreating ratmen.

Nothing could stop him now.

Velsquee nervously fingered one of the god-stone tokens hanging from his neck as he watched the oncoming dust cloud. It filled the wide mine shaft from one side to the other, roiling up from the depths and swallowing everything it touched. A hot wind, dry as bone and reeking of charred flesh, blew full into the Grey Lord's face. Around him, the *heechigar* hunched their shoulders and eyed one another apprehensively.

They'd all known to expect an attack, but nothing quite like this.

At the far end of the killing ground they'd established around the former pavilion, a black-robed scout-assassin emerged from one of the camp's narrow lanes. Wisps of smoke rose from his scorched clothing and blood dripped from his blistered tail. The young skaven paused, chest heaving, and searched for the Grey Lord among the tightly packed ranks of storm-walkers. Velsquee let go of the token, took a deep breath, and beckoned to him.

The scout dashed over, making only the most cursory obeisance before the Grey Lord. Up close, Velsquee could smell the skaven's burned flesh and the bitter reek of fear-musk.

"He is-is coming!" the scout gasped in a ragged voice. "The *kreekar-gan* comes!"

"I can see that, Shireep!" Velsquee snapped. "Tell me something useful! How many does he have with him?"

"A-a few thousand," the scout replied. "No more. Two-two columns on the left, one column on the right. Humans. No bone-men."

The Grey Lord nodded. It was more or less what he expected. "How far away?"

The scout pointed back the way he'd come with a trembling paw. "Just-just the other side of the cloud. Two hundred yards, maybe less." Eyes wide with terror, Shireep reached out and grabbed Velsquee's sleeve. "We can't-can't stay here! The cloud, it-it burns! By the Horned One, it *burns*! We have to get out of here!"

With a snarl, Velsquee tore his paw from Shireep's grip. In one swift move, he drew his sword from its sheath and slashed at the terrified scout. The enchanted blade sank into Shireep's chest, and the skaven collapsed with a groan.

"There will be no retreat!" Velsquee screeched, brandishing his gore-stained blade for all the storm-walkers to see. "The *kreekar-gan*'s magic cannot harm us. The trap has been set, and he is marching to his doom! This is our moment of victory!"

As one, the *heechigar* cheered the Grey Lord, their lusty shouts echoing from the walls. Velsquee passed between the ranks of storm-walkers and beckoned for a messenger. The young clanrat scampered over and cowered at the Grey Lord's feet.

"Tell Lord Vittrik and Lord Qweeqwol that it's time," Velsquee said. "And pass the word to the left and right flanks to close in."

The messenger repeated what he'd been told in a high-pitched voice, and then raced back in the direction of the former pavilion.

Velsquee returned to the front ranks of the *heechigar*, his rune-etched sword held at his side. The dust cloud was much closer now, the screams within louder and more distinct. In a few more minutes it would be upon them.

The Grey Lord reached again for the god-stone token around his neck.

Nagash's sword chopped into the edge of the ratman's shield, carving through the bronze rim and splitting the wood beneath, before lodging in the bones of the warrior's forearm. The creature stiffened and let out an agonised shriek as the ancient weapon consumed his life essence.

A spear dug into the necromancer's side but could find no purchase among the enchanted scales. A sword struck his right shoulderblade and snapped in two with a discordant clang. The ratmen attacked from every direction, clambering over the bodies of the slain to try and reach him. Many were half-blinded by the searing dust cloud, but still they came on, their raw faces twisted into masks of hatred and rage.

Nagash's bodyguards fought in a loose semicircle around their master, each one beset by a half-dozen foes. They had pursued the retreating ratmen through the veil of dust, overtaking and killing nearly a score of the wretches before stumbling into another, much larger mob of the creatures just a hundred yards or so from the pavilion. These ratmen were just as ravaged by the dust cloud as the others, but they were far from panicked. Indeed, they almost seemed to be laying in wait for Nagash's arrival. They swarmed the wights and quickly isolated them; then the rest of the mob turned their attention on the necromancer himself.

Cursing the ratmen in ancient Nehekharan, Nagash swept his left hand in a wide arc, unleashing a storm of sizzling green bolts into the multitude. A dozen of the creatures fell screaming, but still more closed in to take their place. Snarling, he put a skeletal foot on the fallen skaven's shield and tore his weapon free. An enemy dagger slipped beneath the heavy sleeve of his armour and scored his upper arm. An axe crashed into his chest and was turned aside in a fan of sorcerous sparks. Nagash caught the axe-arm a glancing blow with his sword, slicing off the ratman's thumb and snuffing out his life like a candle.

A two-handed spear thrust struck Nagash in the back, and this time the blade found a chink in his armour. The triangular point punched between the bronze scales and through the leather underlayment, lodging fast between his ribs. Snarling, the necromancer tried to turn and reach his attacker, but the canny ratman dug in his heels and held on fast, effectively trapping Nagash like an insect impaled on a pin.

Sensing their opportunity, the ratmen closed in. A sword chopped into his upper thigh, carving a notch into the ancient, blackened bone. Nagash stabbed the sword-wielder through the throat, but another of the enemy leapt upon his outstretched sword arm and clung there, effectively trapping it. More blows rained upon his torso and back. Then the tip of another axe blade clipped his spine, just beneath his skull, and he realised how dangerous his situation had become. He threw off the creature that had grabbed him and swung his sword in a wide arc, catching one ratman as he leapt forwards and slicing open his throat, while mentally forming the words of another incantation.

Suddenly, the dust clouds immediately surrounding Nagash changed their course, rushing towards him and spiralling around his body in ever-swifter circles, until he

was entirely hidden within a howling, opaque column of pulverised stone. With a crack of thunder, the column collapsed—only to reappear again a dozen yards back. The ratman who'd impaled the necromancer found himself staring at his bare spear-point, while Nagash emerged from the smaller column of dust directly behind him.

Laughing, the necromancer unleashed another storm of sorcerous bolts that wrought havoc among the mob of rat-creatures. A score of his attackers died where they stood, and the rest turned and fled. The retreating ratmen sowed panic among their fellows and within moments the entire mob was in full flight, disappearing into the swirling dust cloud.

Nagash paused a moment to assess his strength. He still possessed sizable reserves of power, though he'd spent far more than expected since the attack began. His wights awaited him, tireless and deadly as ever, though their armour was badly battered and their bones had been chipped and scored in dozens of places by enemy blades. What was more, he could hear more sounds of fighting off to his left and right. His flanking columns had come under concerted attack. What should have been a swift, devastating raid on the enemy camp was rapidly turning into a pitched battle. The question was whether or not the ratmen were present in sufficient numbers to save their leaders from destruction.

Onwards. Quickly! The swifter they reached the pavilion, the greater the chance that the plan would succeed.

The wights turned without hesitation and fell in alongside Nagash as he rushed through the swirling dust. He could still hear the panicked cries of the ratmen somewhere ahead. Just a few dozen yards more...

Nagash didn't notice the sudden thickening of the dust clouds until he was well within it. An instant later he felt the unmistakable sensation of passing through a membrane of magical energy—and then he and his wights burst through the gritty cloud and into open air.

They were standing at the edge of a wide, cleared space possibly two hundred paces square, its edges clearly defined by the churning walls of dust held at bay by a powerful magic ward. A hundred paces away, safe from the dust's touch, stood hundreds of hulking, heavily armoured ratmen, arrayed in ranks eight warriors deep and holding heavy bronze polearms at the ready. Standing at the centre of this powerful formation stood a tall ratman in gold-chased armour. Tokens of burning stone glittered like a constellation of stars around his dark-furred neck and a larger, oval stone blazed from the hilt of his curved sword.

Yet it wasn't the fearsome sight of the waiting enemy warriors, or the baleful figure of the enemy warlord that gave Nagash pause. It was the forest of bare, wooden stakes that spread across the cleared ground a few dozen paces beyond the ratmen. The hide walls of the vast pavilion, Nagash saw, had been taken down, and the furniture within had been cleared away. All that remained was a high, broad dais, at what would have been the centre of the enclosure. More ratmen moved atop the platform; Nagash could not make out what they were doing, but there was no mistaking the seething aura of magical energy gathered there. This was the source of the magical ward protecting the enemy leader and his warriors.

Raising his sword in challenge, Nagash drew upon the power of the *abn-i-khat*. Sorcerous thunder rolled in counterpoint to the incantation that reverberated in the

necromancer's mind. The air about him crackled with energy, gaining intensity until arcs of green lightning lashed angrily all around him. Nagash stoked the power of the magical storm until its fury threatened to consume him, then flung out his hand and unleashed it on the enemy warriors.

Faster than thought, the curtain of lightning raced across the open ground, its arcs of fire carving channels in the bare rock—and then Nagash felt the power atop the dais flare into life. Invisible energies attacked his spell, unravelling its weave with a deftness that the necromancer never thought possible. The arcs of lightning paled, diminishing swiftly from one moment to the next, until finally fading from existence just a few feet from their intended target.

Incredulous, Nagash roared a second incantation. Arcs of sorcerous power burst from his extended hand and sped at the dais, but the bolts detonated harmlessly against a second, smaller ward that surrounded part of the platform.

Reflexively, the necromancer summoned up a portion of his power to guard himself from a counter-blow from the dais. When no such attack came, he hurled another volley of bolts, this time aimed at the enemy warlord. Once again, the wizard atop the dais deflected the attack. Whoever the ratman was, his mastery of the burning stone's power was impressive; not as great as Nagash's own, to be sure, but countering a spell required far less power and control than it did to cast one.

The ratmen had once again surprised him. Here was a skilfully prepared defence that would cost him dearly to overcome, and he was left with no other choice but to assault it. The leaders of the enemy army were finally within his grasp. Here was the victory he'd sought for nearly a hundred years.

Nagash gathered his wights to him and then turned his attention to the dust storm raging about the square. He dispelled the magic holding the burning cloud together and scattered it with a wave of his hand. The veil parted, revealing Akatha and the thousand northmen who had been following along behind him. They were less than twenty yards away, and when they saw the waiting ratmen they charged forwards, filling the air with their war cries.

The necromancer turned his gaze back to the enemy warlord. He let the power of the burning stone flow along his limbs and levelled his sword in challenge at the distant figure.

Attack!

"Here they come!" Velsquee snarled. "Get back in line, damn you! Stand fast!"

Pack leaders repeated the Grey Lord's orders along the length of the formation, shoving and cursing recalcitrant warriors back into their proper place. Discipline reasserted itself swiftly: backs straightened, tails uncurled and ears unfolded as the northmen came charging across the killing ground. The sight of the *kreekar-gan* and his champions had been bad enough, but the sorcerous duel that had raged over the storm-walkers' heads had left them badly shaken. The sight of a flesh-and-blood enemy did much to restore the veteran warriors' resolve.

Velsquee took a deep breath and tried to calm his racing heart. The thunderous magical barrage had shaken him as well, even though he'd known that Qweeqwol was ready to counter whatever the burning man threw at them. He'd heard all the stories about the ferocity of the *kreekar-gan*'s magic, but actually experiencing it was

something else entirely. The grey seer had assured Velsquee that he was up to the task of countering the burning man's sorcery. At the time, the Grey Lord had no reason to doubt the master wizard. Now, however, he wasn't so sure. He suspected it would come down to whoever ran out of power first. In that, at least, he was certain that they held the upper hand.

The humans were a mere thirty paces away now. The air shook with their howling battle cries. Nagash's terrifying lieutenants led them; green fire blazed malevolently from their eye sockets and leaked from rents in their ancient, tattered armour. Their bony jaws gaped in a macabre echo of the howling northmen that flanked them.

He couldn't see the burning man any longer, but a rattle of detonations over the heads of the *heechigar* told Velsquee that he was still close by. Qweeqwol was going to have his paws full holding the *kreekar-gan* at bay, but that would be enough. In a battle of flesh and blood, sword and polearm, the skaven were certain to win, because he had an advantage that the burning man didn't.

The northmen were nearly upon them. The rock floor trembled beneath their tread, and the air shook with their savage cries. Velsquee planted his heels and brought up his enchanted blade. One of Nagash's wights was running directly at him, its movements swift and fluid as a serpent's. The black blade in the skeletal lord's hand shone like polished midnight.

Vittrik's aim had better be good, the Grey Lord hoped.

* * *

The two sides came together in a rolling crash of metal, flesh and bone. The northmen in the front rank struck the wall of polearms and were killed almost immediately, cut down by the storm-walkers' heavy blades. The second rank of barbarians suffered a similar fate, but now Nagash's lieutenants were past the enemy's long-hafted weapons and striking at the ratmen with their fearsome blades. The northmen quickly followed suit, hacking with sword and axe at the wooden hafts of the enemy's weapons and forcing their way deeper into the opposing formation. The clangour of battle became punctuated by the thudding of metal against flesh and the screams of the maimed and the dying. Northmen and rat-creatures fell by the score. The enemy line bowed backwards at the fury of the barbarians' charge, but refused to give way.

Nagash unleashed another storm of magical bolts, this time aimed at raking the top of the dais. The streaks of fire arced over the melee, falling like thunderbolts, but once again they were dispelled before they could find their mark. Again and again he struck at the foe, but each time the enemy sorcerer was able to counter the spell. The battle raged back and forth across the killing ground, with neither side able to claim the upper hand. Frustrated, the necromancer switched tacks and turned his magic on his bodyguards. He added to their vigour, increasing the wights' speed and strength, and this time the enemy made no move to counter him. His lieutenants tore into the ranks of the ratmen, toppling enemy warriors left and right, but he knew that they were too few in number to carry the fight alone. Beside the necromancer, Akatha sang the war-song of the northmen, stoking the bloodlust of the barbarian warriors.

As the battle raged, a lone figure appeared to the left of the killing ground. It was one of Bragadh's northmen, his armour battered and bloody and his right arm useless at his side. He caught sight of Nagash and Akatha and ran to them, his expression grim.

"Master!" the warrior shouted. "Master! Lord Bragadh says that the ratmen are attacking from the tunnels in great numbers! Theustus has been driven back, and Bragadh is hard-pressed! He asks for Diarid to lend his strength to them, or else they cannot hold!"

Nagash turned and glared at the messenger. *There will be no retreat!* The power of his thoughts was such that even the barbarian's living mind could not help but feel its weight. *Bragadh must hold to the last! To the last!*

The wounded northman staggered beneath the lash of the necromancer's black thoughts. "But... Diarid..." he stammered.

Diarid had problems of his own. Nagash could hear the sounds of battle off to his right clearly enough. Both flanks were being hard pressed. Before he could reply, however, a chorus of dry, crackling hisses echoed across the killing field, followed by a drumbeat of hollow detonations and a chorus of agonised screams.

The necromancer whirled, just in time to see a trio of small green globes loft into the air from the dais. They flew high overhead, trailing thin plumes of smoke and a crackling hiss, before plunging into the ranks of the northmen. They struck with a flash of greenish light and a *whump* of hot air, bathing the warriors around the impact point with a gout of sorcerous fire. The ravening flame scoured its victims down to bone in seconds and sowed panic among the barbarians close by. The northmen wavered under the onslaught, and with a hoarse shout the ratmen began to push back, forcing the barbarians and wights onto the defensive.

At once, Nagash saw the full scope of the trap the ratmen had laid for him. The tide of battle was shifting quickly; in another few moments the ratmen would have a decisive advantage.

The moment of truth had come.

Nagash turned to Akatha. *This ends now, he told her. I will kill the warlord of the ratmen myself.*

The necromancer raised his obsidian blade and strode forwards. Barely a dozen yards separated him from the rear ranks of the northmen. Another three yards past that, and he would be in the thick of battle. He oriented himself on the last place he saw the enemy leader, and headed that way. From the dais, another volley of fire-globes lofted into the air on hissing streaks of fire. Nagash prepared a counter-spell, thinking that he might be able to at least dissipate the sorcerous power of the flames.

He did not sense the death-bolt until it was already upon him.

The spear of magical energy struck Nagash squarely between the shoulderblades. The protective wards woven into his armour flared to life, attempting to turn aside the blow, but the power behind the spell was too great. Bronze scales glowed red-hot as the bolt transfixed the necromancer, tearing through his body and erupting from the front of his scale breastplate.

Nagash howled in anger and pain. The impact of the bolt spun the necromancer halfway about and threw him to the ground. Such a blow would have turned a living man to ash; as it was, Nagash's spine and ribcage had been shattered, and his access

to the power he'd consumed was suddenly disrupted. For the first time in centuries, the necromancer felt a moment of horror as his vision blurred and the blackness of oblivion yawned before him. It was only by a supreme effort of will that he was able to claw his way back from the brink.

The vision of darkness faded just as Akatha launched a second attack. The bolt of power sped from her fingers like an arrow; Nagash uttered a counter-spell, but there was little power behind it. He deflected enough of the witch's attack that his armour absorbed the rest, leaving behind a palm-sized patch of melted bronze scales across his chest.

Instinctively, Nagash flung out his hand and unleashed a stream of glowing darts at Akatha, but again, there was little power behind the spell; once again, the unseen rat-wizard atop the dais wove a counter-spell to nullify it. The darts flashed and popped harmlessly about the witch's body. Akatha threw back her head and laughed.

Nagash struggled to regain his feet. His limbs wavered, threatening to collapse beneath him, but with an angry cry he forced himself upright. His voice echoed hollowly in Akatha's mind.

The traitor reveals herself at last.

That gave Akatha pause. She studied him intently from behind her fall of hair. "You knew?"

There were too many coincidences. No enemy is so lucky in war. He took a step towards her. You were careful, and clever. I suspected, but I could never be certain. Until now.

Nagash reached out his hand. His skeletal fingers made a fist, as though closing around the witch's heart. *Body and soul, you are mine to command, witch. You have broken your oath to me, and thus your life is forfeit.*

He reached into her, seizing upon the potency of the elixir that gave Akatha her power—but when he tried to wrest it from her, nothing happened. A magical ward, subtle but potent, prevented him from draining her vitality.

The witch laughed again, a sound both joyous and full of contempt.

"Did you imagine I'd forgotten?" Akatha replied. "You damned fiend. The witches of the north forget *nothing*." Her fingers brushed a small token of burning stone hanging about her neck. "I've had centuries to plan your demise, Nagash of the Wastes. Nothing has been left to chance."

She swept her hand in a vicious arc, hurling another bolt of power his way. His weak counterspell did little to deflect it. The spell bored into his midsection, disrupting his spiritual corpus even further. Darkness, cold and empty, began to seep into the corners of his vision. Nagash staggered, but did not fall.

It was you who brought the ratmen here.

Akatha's pale lips curved in a mirthless smile. "Their love of the burning stone was well known to us," she hissed. "I began sending visions to their seers from the first night I set foot in these accursed halls. It took years, but eventually they came." The witch chuckled cruelly. "How sweet it was, watching the vermin undo everything you'd built."

Nagash struggled to regain his strength. The darkness ebbed from his sight, but did not vanish completely. Akatha stood alone; Bragadh's messenger had fled when

the witch unleashed her first spell. Behind him, the sounds of fighting had grown desperate. The northmen were on the verge of breaking. The necromancer began a new incantation, feeding it power a bit at a time.

When you heard my plan to attack the pavilion, you believed that your time had come.

The witch raised her hand, preparing to cast another spell. “At first, I thought that I had been found out,” she said. “Why else go to all the trouble to dig the tunnels in secret? Then, when you ordered me to accompany you, I wondered if perhaps you were leading *me* into a trap.”

Nagash’s burning eyes narrowed on Akatha. *I was.*

They lurched and staggered from the darkness and the smoke behind the barbarian witch, eyes flickering with green fire. The corpses of dozens of ratmen, their bodies covered in black blood from the bite of the wights’ killing blades. Akatha didn’t hear their halting steps over the tumult of battle until their hands were reaching for her throat.

They seized the witch, dragging her nearly off her feet. Akatha screamed in fury, struggling in their grip. The bolt she’d meant for Nagash ripped through their ranks instead, turning many of them to ash. Claws and fangs tore at her pale skin. She struck back with an immortal’s supernatural strength, breaking bones and crushing skulls with her fists. The witch fought like a desert lion, but the undead were implacable. They kept coming for her, reaching for her, until finally a hand closed about the magical token around her neck and ripped it free. Akatha’s body went rigid in an instant, gripped by Nagash’s hateful will.

I knew that the enemy would be forewarned, he said to her. His voice was cold and cruel. *I counted upon it. Now the enemy’s best troops are here, facing me, instead of at the barricades.*

Laughter filled Akatha’s mind. *Darkness waits for you, witch. Darkness eternal. Go there, knowing that your life—and your treachery—have given me the final victory.*

Nagash reached inside the witch’s undead body and took that which belonged to him. Akatha, last witch of the northlands, uttered one final scream, then was gone. The ratmen pulled down her shrivelled husk and began to tear it limb from limb.

High above, in the dark vaults of the fortress, a stir went through the ranks of the undead manning the barricades. Obeying their master’s command, the spear companies began to pull aside the barriers that separated them from the tunnels below.

The going was slow at first, but before long the sounds of movement began to echo down the passageways from the levels above. One company of spearmen after another began to file into the vaults, their bones wreathed in cobwebs and the dust of decades. Long had they waited in secret, marshalled in great halls far from the eyes of the northmen or the spies of the invaders. They were Nagash’s reserves, clad in the best weapons and armour the foundries of Nagashizzar could make and held ready for the last battle, whether it was fought within the mine shafts, or the great hall of the necromancer himself.

Behind the spear companies came a score of fearsome, armoured war engines, shaped in the guise of scarabs, or scorpions, or swift desert spiders. Some were the size of round shields, while others were larger than chariots. As the barriers were pulled aside they clattered without pause into the dark tunnels and began to hunt.

The slave-rats opposite the barricades were caught entirely unprepared. They had been rushed into position to take the place of their betters, and the slave masters had been told that they would not be sent into battle. A counter-attack from the enemy was the very last thing they expected.

The constructs attacked without warning, leaping from the shadows or falling from the ceiling into the midst of the slaves. Scores were dead before the slave masters understood what was happening. Most reacted as best they could, trying to rally the terrified slaves with curses, threats and the touch of the lash. Others panicked and ran, and their slaves fled moments after.

By the time the spear companies struck, there were already gaps in the enemy battle-line. Runners were sent to the lower levels, begging for reinforcements, but by then it was already too late. The relentless slaughter broke the slaves, who turned on their masters and ran, desperate to escape the oncoming skeletons. Nagash's warriors followed, tireless and implacable, heeding their master's call.

The energy of the reclaimed elixir replaced a portion of the power that Nagash had lost. It was not enough to restore his shattered bones, but it lent strength to his limbs and allowed him to focus once more.

The necromancer turned back to the battle. Between the ratmen and the globes of fire, his warriors had been reduced to little more than two hundred men. The wights alone were keeping the ratmen from driving the barbarians back, but now there were less than a handful left. Two of them were trading blows with the enemy warlord, whose armour appeared to be proof against the effects of the wights' deadly blades.

Nagash ordered the undead ratmen into the battle, directing them to work their way around the flanks of the enemy formation. Then he spread his arms and spent another portion of his waning power to raise the bodies of the northmen who'd been slain. The necromancer sensed a flare of power upon the dais as the rat-sorcerer grasped what Nagash was doing, but his attempts to counter the spell were feeble at best. Hundreds of bodies stirred fitfully, then began to climb back to their feet. At the same time, more globes of fire arced over the struggling warriors and plunged into the ranks of the newly raised undead. Scores of the slow-moving corpses were caught in the detonations; seconds later their charred bones collapsed to the ground and did not rise again.

Nagash glared at the far-off dais. Between the rat-sorcerer and their damned fire globes, the enemy could withstand anything he threw at them. They had to be destroyed, and quickly. The enemy would move to counter any further attempt to raise more undead warriors, and the northmen would not last much longer.

The necromancer called upon his fading reserves of power once more. The incantation reverberated through his mind. From the dais, he sensed a surge of power as the enemy began his counter-spell, but the move was a fraction of a second too late.

Streamers of dust raced across the killing ground and entwined themselves about Nagash. They swallowed him up like a desert whirlwind; then he vanished from sight.

The rat-sorcerer was still casting his counter-spell when the necromancer emerged from the veil of dust onto the centre of the dais. Nagash found himself standing in the midst of a score of slave rats, who screeched in panic and scattered in all directions when they saw the terrifying figure in their midst. He saw the enemy sorcerer at once, standing close to the edge of the dais and raising a gnarled wooden staff over his head as he cast his spell. To the necromancer's left, a large group of ratmen was lifting fire-globes from straw-filled wooden boxes and loading them into the baskets of a trio of small metal catapults. Standing to one side of the catapult crews was an old, bent-backed ratman whose shrivelled frame seemed two sizes too small for the ornate bronze armour that he wore. A multitude of strange metal devices and glowing tokens of burning stone festooned the ratman's war harness, reminding Nagash somewhat of the engineer-scholars of far-off Lybaras. The ratman turned at the panicked cries of the slaves and his one eye widened in shock.

Nagash wasted no time with elaborate spells. As the one-eyed rat-creature let out a warning screech, the necromancer seized a slow-moving slave rat by the scruff of his neck and hurled him at the nearest crate of fire-globes. The impact upended the crate, sending three glowing, glass orbs bouncing across the stone. The catapult crew screeched in terror; the quicker ones leapt for the bouncing globes, while the rest fled for their lives. None of them were quite fast enough.

One of the globes bounced high and came down with a thin, brittle crack. There was a malevolent hiss as the mixture inside mixed with the open air and then the globe detonated. Half a dozen ratmen disappeared in an expanding ball of fire that touched off the remaining globes in a cacophonic drumbeat of explosions.

Velsquee had just about convinced himself that they had the upper hand when the air around him was suffused with bright green light and the noise of the battle was drowned out by a flurry of angry blasts emanating from the dais. The Grey Lord felt a wave of heat prick the back of his head and neck; on reflex he cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the source. What he saw stunned him. One entire corner of the dais, including Vittrik's catapults and their crews, had vanished in an expanding ball of flame. Molten shrapnel from the war engines buzzed through the air, trailing glowing arcs of green fire.

The momentary lapse in concentration nearly cost him his life. The *kreekar-gan*'s skeletal champions were uninterested in explosions or balls of fire. They took advantage of the distraction, though, and pressed their attack against Velsquee. One blade slipped easily past the Grey Lord's guard and was only just turned aside by the plates of his enchanted armour. The second wight's sword sliced at his neck and it was only the Horned God's luck that it failed to kill him. Instead of slicing through his neck, the blade glanced off the rim of his thick gorget and tore a long, cold gash from his right jawbone to just behind his ear.

Velsquee staggered from the blow, screeching in pain at the sword's icy touch. The last of his god-stone tokens went dark, its power vanishing in a puff of smoke as it deflected the blade's deadly magic. The battle against the two enemy champions

had been the hardest fight of his life; the wights were fast as serpents and ferociously skilled. He'd managed to land a number of blows against them that would have killed a living man, but the wights took little notice. In return, he'd been wounded several times, and only the quality of his wargear had saved him from certain death. As it was, an ominous sensation of cold was spreading through his body and sapping his strength. Sooner or later, his guard was going to slip, and the fight would be over.

There was nowhere to run, even if Velsquee wished it. The enemy had driven a wedge partway into the storm-walkers formation, its point aimed squarely at him. To his left and right, the *heechigar* were locked in combat with the northmen, and more storm-walkers formed a jostling wall of flesh behind him. The hafts of their polearms battered his shoulders as the *heechigar* struggled to bring them to bear.

The wights surged forwards, preparing to strike again. Suddenly, Velsquee had an idea. As the enemy champions lunged at him, the Grey Lord dropped into a crouch. The movement didn't faze the wights in the least; they simply shifted their aim and lowered the points of their blades. But now the storm-walkers behind the Grey Lord had room to bring their heavy weapons to bear, and they began hacking desperately at the skeletal warriors. The wights shifted targets effortlessly, bringing their swords up to deflect the fearsome polearms—and giving Velsquee the opportunity to attack their spindly legs.

The burning stone set in the pommel of Velsquee's blade flashed angrily as he chopped through the knees of the champion to his left. The wight toppled, still slashing and stabbing at his foes. Its black blade struck the Grey Lord's right shoulder at the same time Velsquee's sword swept down and crushed its skull. The wight's spirit uttered a despairing wail and its body collapsed into a heap of mouldering bones.

Now the tables were turned. The remaining wight was beset by three attackers, and no amount of speed and skill was enough to hold them all at bay. The skeletal warrior's blade stabbed one *heechigar* through the throat, but the second warrior's polearm crashed through the wight's left shoulder, severing the arm and shattering ribs like kindling. Velsquee surged upwards, slicing off the wight's sword arm and then chopping off the champion's head. In a fit of pure spite, he grabbed the bouncing skull with his free paw and flung it at the barbarians with a curse. The northmen immediately opposite him recoiled at the sight of their fallen champions, giving the Grey Lord a moment's respite.

The battle still raged unabated. Velsquee reckoned that the northmen had suffered the worst, but they were still stubbornly hanging on. The Grey Lord glanced about, searching for the *kreekar-gan*, but the enemy sorcerer was nowhere to be seen.

Behind him, the explosions had ceased, but part of the wooden dais was still ablaze. Velsquee spat a bitter curse at Vittrik and his damned inventions. The Skryre lord had assured him there would be no accidents. There was no sign of Vittrik or Qweeqwol from where Velsquee stood. If the human witch had failed and the old seer had fallen, the army was in dire peril indeed.

The Grey Lord turned back to the second rank of storm-walkers and grabbed the arm of one of his lieutenants. "Push forwards!" he told the warrior. "The northmen must be close to breaking!" He pointed to the dais. "I'm going up there to find Lord Qweeqwol!"

The *heechigar* nodded curtly and reached for the bone whistle hanging about his neck. Velsquee pushed past the burly warrior and began working his way back through the formation. A grim sense of foreboding quickened his steps. Despite all their careful planning, something had gone terribly wrong.

Nagash focussed his will and reached for the power of the *abn-i-khat*. Slowly, cautiously, he took stock of his battered body. The chain of explosions had struck him like an invisible wall of stone, smashing bones and flinging him like a child's doll to the far side of the dais. Once again, his armour had spared him from the full force of the blasts, or else his body would have most likely been torn apart.

As it was, the damage was still great. His bronze armour was scorched nearly black, and was pierced in more than a dozen places with jagged pieces of metal from the enemy's wrecked catapults. The red-hot shrapnel had wounded his corpus in ways a mere blade could not, costing him much of his magical reserves.

Slowly, unsteadily, Nagash rose to his feet. Thin tendrils of smoke curled about his ravaged frame. Flames licked at the corner of the dais where the catapults once stood. The war engines were gone; their frames had melted in the heat and the tension of their own tightly-wound springs had ripped them apart. Nothing remained of the old rat-engineer and his crews except smears of ash and a few blackened chunks of bone.

The rest of the dais was covered in smouldering bodies and melted pieces of bronze. Nagash searched among them for the rat-sorcerer. After several long minutes, the necromancer found him.

The wizard's body lay sprawled on the steps of the dais, opposite where the catapults had been sited. He was by far the oldest ratman Nagash had ever seen, with patchy white fur and a face covered in a patchwork of deep wrinkles. Like Nagash, the rat-sorcerer had been caught in a storm of red-hot shrapnel from the exploding catapults. Despite the many protective talismans wrapped about his robed body, a single piece of metal about a foot long had penetrated the sorcerer's wards and lodged in his neck. His blood spread like a crimson carpet down the dais' wooden steps. The sorcerer's eyes, made from polished orbs of burning stone, fixed Nagash with twin pinpoints of cold green light. Hungrily, the necromancer reached for one.

A scuff of claws on wood brought Nagash's head around just in time to see the enemy warlord rushing at him, his curved sword held high. The necromancer surged to his feet, bringing up his obsidian sword just in time to block the ratman's downwards blow. The force of the impact drove Nagash back a step, nearly sending him tumbling down the steps of the dais.

The enemy warlord was a fearsome figure at close quarters, his fine bronze armour streaked with blood and hung with a half-dozen charred magic tokens. His scarred face was contorted in a mask of pure, bestial rage as he unleashed a storm of terrible blows against Nagash's head and upper chest. The warlord's skill with the blade was great, and the necromancer, in his weakened state, was hard-pressed to match him.

Nagash tried to drive the ratman back, feinting at his face and then slashing quickly at his legs. The obsidian blade rang against the warlord's armour but its magic turned the sword aside. The ratman refused to give ground, however. With a

vicious curse he took the blow on his leg and chopped down with his sword. The magic blade sheared through the necromancer's weakened armour and buried itself in his left shoulder.

The necromancer reeled from the blow. Darkness seeped back into the corners of his eyes. Without thinking, he reached up with his left hand and seized the warlord's sword wrist. Snarling, he turned in place, pulling the warlord off his feet and throwing him down the steps of the dais. The ratman lost his grip on his sword and landed hard, sprawling onto his back.

Nagash reached up and pulled the warlord's blade free from his shoulder. Casting it contemptuously aside, the necromancer glared coldly at his foe. The ratman was struggling to stand, though it was clear that he was in terrible pain.

It was a pity there wasn't time to savour the moment. Nagash raised his hand, calling upon one last mote of power. At the bottom of the dais, the warlord looked up at the necromancer. An expression of shock registered on the ratman's face, and then he ducked, covering his head with his arms.

Nagash laughed at the warlord's futile attempt to save himself. He was still laughing when the glowing green orb struck the dais just behind him.

Green flames were spreading swiftly along the wooden steps by the time Eekrit and Eshreegar reached the edge of the dais. Shielding his face against the heat, Eekrit squinted into the blaze in search of the *kreekar-gan*'s body. Other than some scraps of charred leather and some blobs of molten bronze, there was no sign of him. The burning man had vanished.

"You missed!" the warlord snarled.

The Master of Treacheries scowled at Eekrit. "I tried to tell you those orbs are heavier than they look, but you wouldn't listen."

Around them, the *heechigar* were skirting the flames and rushing to Velsquee's side. Off in the distance, towards the upper branch-tunnels, the sounds of battle were growing more intense.

"See if you can find the rest of our raiders and get them heading into the lower levels," Eekrit said. "Be quick. We don't have much time."

Eshreegar nodded and vanished silently into the shadows. Moments later the storm-walkers returned, carrying Velsquee on a makeshift stretcher made from the Grey Lord's cloak and two polearm hafts. Despite his pain, when he caught sight of Eekrit he tried vainly to pull himself upright.

"What in the Horned God's name are you doing here?" Velsquee rasped. "You're under-under arrest!"

"It's well for you that I'm not, my lord," Eekrit answered coolly. "Another moment and you would have been dead."

The Grey Lord glared at him. "You were guarded by a dozen *heechigar*. How did you possibly escape?"

Eekrit flicked his tail smugly. "How else? I bribed them with more gold than they'd earn in a lifetime," he answered. "Storm-walkers or no, they were still skaven and every child of the Horned God has his price." He folded his arms. "We had to fight our way through a barbarian warband that was blocking the lower branch-

tunnels. We finally drove them back, but by then it was too late. We saw the explosions and ran to the dais as fast as we could.”

“What happened to the *kreekar-gan*? Did-did you destroy him?”

Reluctantly, Eekrit shook his head. “When Eshreegar found an unbroken fire-globe at the bottom of the far side of the dais, we thought we had our chance. I’ve no doubt we hurt him, but somehow he escaped.”

“How-how can you be so sure?” Velsquee demanded.

“Because the damned corpses are still fighting,” Eekrit snapped. “They’re all over the mine shaft. Our warriors are in full retreat. If we don’t get out of here right now, we’re going to be cut off from the under-fortress.”

“No!” Velsquee protested. “We-we can hold them here!”

“That’s exactly what the burning man wants you to think,” Eekrit shot back. “We have to withdraw, while we can still salvage this situation. Otherwise, the *kreekar-gan* could drive us from the mountain entirely.”

For a moment, Velsquee looked as though he was going to argue further, but then his body was wracked with a spasm of pain that left him gasping and semiconscious. The Grey Lord lay back against the stretcher. It was a few moments before he could master himself enough to speak.

“The army is yours, Warlord Eekrit,” Velsquee told him. “Do as you see fit.”

Eekrit drew a deep breath. From this moment forwards, the decision to retreat would be laid squarely on his shoulders. Even half-delirious from pain, Velsquee was careful to cover his own tail. Gritting his teeth, he bowed to the Grey Lord, then turned to the storm-walkers.

“You,” he said to one of them. “Find a pack leader with a whistle and tell him to sound the retreat. The rest of you carry Lord Velsquee to the under-fortress and find him a healer. Go!”

The *heechigar* obeyed with gratifying speed. In moments, Eekrit was alone on the burning dais, tasting ashes on his tongue. The battle was lost and possibly the war as well. Much depended on how steep a price the burning man had paid for his victory.

Thinking bitter thoughts, the warlord turned to leave. Just as he did so, something stirred beneath a pile of dead slave rats just a few feet to his right.

Eekrit’s paw flew to the hilt of his sword. There was a high-pitched moan from the pile of corpses, then a pair of bodies rolled away to reveal the burnt and bloody face of Lord Hiirc.

“Is-is he gone?” Hiirc asked. The skaven lord clawed his way out from under the pile of bodies, his eyes darting frantically around the dais. “The-the burning man. Is he gone?”

The warlord stared at Hiirc in surprise. Slowly, his eyes narrowed. “Oh, yes,” he said. “The *kreekar-gan* has fled. There’s no one here now but you and I.”

“Thank the Horned One,” Hiirc exclaimed, too rattled to recognise Eekrit’s voice. He let out a fearful groan as he turned away from the warlord and took in the devastation around him.

“Listen carefully,” he said to Eekrit. “When we get back to the under-fortress, you must tell everyone that I fought the burning man.” Hiirc nodded to himself. “Yes. I *fought* him, and-and I was *winning*. But then that fool Vittrik dropped one of

the fire-globes, and the blast knocked me out.” He turned back to Eekrit. “You can remember that, can’t you?”

The skaven lord froze. His eyes widened as he recognised at last whom he was speaking to.

Eekrit smiled cruelly. “Oh, yes. I’ll remember every word.” He took a step towards Hiirc, his blade rising slowly. “By the time I’m done, they’ll be talking about your heroic death from here all the way back to the Great City.”

—<TWELVE>—

Children of a Hungry God

*The Golden Plain, in the 101st year of Sokth the Merciless
(-1265 Imperial Reckoning)*

The bani-al-Hashim rode northwards for nearly a week, beyond the abandoned farmlands and into wild country where few Lahmians had ever dared tread. They moved only at night and burned no fires, eating unleavened bread and sleeping on the cold ground, because that was the tradition the *bani* had brought with them out of the desert. In ancient times, the children of the desert had to be wary of gathering in great numbers, lest they draw the attention of their many foes.

By the time Faisr al-Hashim and his people reached the rolling foothills along the northern edge of the great plain, there was already a vast city of brightly coloured tents pitched along the grassy slopes, their roofs rippling like banners in the chilly autumn wind. Dawn was breaking and herds of lean-limbed horses were stirring in the lower meadows; their guardians, keen-eyed youngsters armed with javelin and bow, straightened in their saddles and nudged their charges out of the path of the new arrivals. Faisr and his warriors, nearly a hundred in all, nodded to the young men and women as they passed, and favoured their herds with a polite degree of predatory interest. The sentries puffed out their chests and accepted the compliments with raised lances and their best, most intimidating stares.

Alcadizzar rode alongside Faisr al-Hashim and nodded solemnly at the sentries as the *bani-al-Hashim* went by. He was dressed in layered desert robes and a chequered headscarf like the rest of the tribe's warriors and after twenty years among the desert raiders he sat in the saddle nearly as well as they. If the youngsters realised he wasn't a true son of the desert, they gave no sign of it.

As they left the last of the herds behind, the prince turned his full attention to the vast tent city spread out before him. Older women and mothers in dark robes were already stirring, coaxing the cook-fires back to life and making preparations for the morning meal. Young children were dashing among the narrow lanes, fetching wood or water. Dogs raised their heads and barked wildly, warning their masters of the *bani-al-Hashim's* arrival.

"Ah, curse the luck," Faisr muttered as he surveyed the vast assembly of tents. Like Alcadizzar and the rest of the warriors, the lean desert raider was swathed in heavy robes of black and dark blue to keep out the morning chill. His headscarf hung loosely about his shoulders, leaving his bearded face bare. Cold or no, one did not

approach a gathering of tents with one's face covered, unless one meant to spill blood.

Faisr winced. "We're the last to arrive. That's a dozen pieces of gold I owe Muktil, the old thief."

Alcadizzar chuckled. "Give him two dozen, then, for pity's sake. When was the last time he rode against the caravans? We're late because we were busy filling our bags with Lahmian gold."

Faisr threw back his head and laughed, his dark eyes sparkling. "True enough! And maybe I'll have you give him the coin, just to watch him squirm."

Every one of Faisr's warriors sported clinking bags of coin and rich ornaments, from jewelled daggers to gold earrings, worn to catch the eye of prospective mates and to show the gathered tribes how the *bani-al-Hashim* had prospered since they'd last met. Over the last twenty-five years, the tribe had gone from near-extinction to one of the wealthiest and most famous of the desert clans. Though the *al-Hashim* bloodline was an ancient and venerated one, it had fallen on ill luck over the last few generations. Faisr al-Hashim, the only son of the last chieftain, had a reputation of recklessness and impetuosity—both counted as virtues among the desert clans, but not exactly the best qualities one wanted in a leader of men. His time as chieftain might have been brilliant and altogether brief had it not been for his chance meeting with Alcadizzar. The prince could counsel the hotheaded bandit leader in ways that a tribesman would have never dared to do, and his knowledge of Lahmian military tactics was worth its weight in gold. With a relatively small number of fighting men, the *bani-al-Hashim* had gone on to perform a string of brilliant raids that were the envy of the rest of the tribes.

"Where do we fit into all this?" Alcadizzar asked, waving his hand at the tents.

Faisr nodded proudly towards the centre of the sprawling settlement. "A space will have been left for us, close to the chieftain's tent. We'll rest and take our breakfast while the women and children make camp, then there will be horse races and games of dice until the gathering this evening." He winked at the prince. "And drinking. *Lots* of drinking."

Alcadizzar's nose wrinkled. "Not *chanouri*, I hope. I'd rather drink salt water." The desert raiders' favourite libation was a mix of fermented mare's milk and sour date wine. He had tried it once, on a dare, and was sick for hours afterwards.

"Effete city dweller," Faisr waved a hand disdainfully. "I suppose we can persuade a child to part with his wineskin so you don't go thirsty." The chieftain turned and regarded Alcadizzar thoughtfully. "Are you certain you want to go through with this?"

The question surprised Alcadizzar. "*Me*? All I'm risking is my life. You've got much more to lose than I."

"Hmph," Faisr replied, but didn't deny the prince's assertion. If Alcadizzar failed the trials to come, Faisr would lose face among his fellow chieftains. That was a fate much worse than death.

The long procession of riders edged their way slowly into the sprawling settlement. Mothers watched the mounted warriors with wary interest, while the children gawped and pointed at the glittering trophies the riders wore. Faisr nodded respectfully to the elders he met along the way, guiding the procession unerringly

down the close-set lanes. Each tribe's place in the settlement was determined by its status and relative strength, with the most prominent tribes closest to the gathering tent at the centre of the camp.

There had been many gatherings since Alcadizzar had joined Faisr's band, but this was the first that he had ever been permitted to attend. The prince studied every detail of the great camp, trying to gauge the power and prosperity of the tribes. He knew from Faisr that there were nearly two-score tribes of varying size living on the great plain, moving constantly to confuse would-be enemies of their size and strength. Here, Alcadizzar counted tents, jugs of water and loaves of bread being laid out for the morning meal. He then weighed that against the number of horses grazing the fields below to separate the women and children from the fighting men. Even by a conservative estimate, the numbers surprised him. There weren't hundreds, but *thousands* of them—a force to be reckoned with, in the right hands.

There was still much about the tribes that he did not know. Though he was Faisr's most valued lieutenant, the chieftain was careful to keep tribal business and tradition to himself. For all of his contributions to the welfare of the tribe, Alcadizzar had remained an outsider.

Not that the past decades had been a total loss. The tribesmen were wary about their own politics, but made free with news about the Lahmians. The atmosphere within the city grew more nightmarish and oppressive with each passing year. More and more citizens were disappearing in the night and all manner of outlandish stories were being told in the wine houses. It wasn't enough to stay off the streets after sunset; now people were being taken right from their very homes, never to be seen again. Only the aristocracy seemed to be safe, which naturally fomented all sorts of suspicious rumours in the poorer quarters of the city.

The plague of disappearances had grown so severe that it was even having repercussions on Lahmia's economy. Fewer and fewer caravans made the journey to the city each year, and those that did rarely stayed for long. The slums were emptying out as well, depriving the docks of their labour force. The exodus had grown so severe that the government was now imposing a substantial "departure tax" on citizens attempting to leave the city for any reason. Once the greatest city in Nehekhara, now Lahmia's citizens lived as virtual prisoners within its walls.

The reign of terror that gripped Lahmia hadn't gone unnoticed by the other great cities, of course, but a few chilling stories and the misery of the common folk weren't enough to provoke the other kings to war. Neferata's puppet rulers managed the dance of trade and diplomacy as well as ever, playing the other cities against one another and keeping them too off-balance to risk an open confrontation with Lahmia. Alcadizzar kept in regular contact with his brother, apprising King Asar of everything he learned about the goings-on inside the city, but the word from Rasetra was always the same: *give me evidence*.

Slipping inside the city now would be dangerous in the extreme; escaping Lahmia with damning evidence of Neferata's crimes would be nearly impossible. Alcadizzar knew that the desert tribes had ways of getting word to and from their kinfolk within the city walls, but such secrets were not shared with outsiders.

That would change tonight, Alcadizzar vowed to himself.

True to Faisr's word, the tribe had a spot reserved for them: a great square of sunlit hill-slope just north and east of a vast meeting tent of dark blue linen. In keeping with tradition, Faisr and his warriors ringed the open space and remained in their saddles while the tribe's women and children dismounted and unpacked the tents. In less than an hour, the first tent poles were going up, and the thudding of wooden mallets filled the air. Faisr's tent went up first, followed by those of his lieutenants, and then the rest of the tribe. Finally, the *ani mukta*, the oldest mother of the tribe, called out that the camp was ready and the desert warriors eagerly dismounted.

By that point, a crowd of men from the other tribes had gathered around the *bani-al-Hashim*, standing a polite distance outside the perimeter of horsemen and shouting greetings and friendly jibes to Faisr's men. When the old mother dismissed the menfolk a cheer went up from the crowd; the tribesmen came forwards to embrace Faisr and his kinfolk, and the celebrations began in earnest.

The tribesmen spent the rest of the day outside the sprawling camp, lounging on ancient rugs down by the grazing herds. Faisr and the other tribal chiefs shared bulging skins of date wine and *chanouri*, and boasted of the daring raids they'd made against the city dwellers over the last few months. Boys and girls were sent down to the herds to fetch horses for the men to admire and haggle over, while young maidens came and went bearing platters of flatbread, cheese and olives. Laughter and rude jokes filled the air. Men had their best horses brought up from the herds and soon the ground shook with the pounding of hooves as they raced back and forth across the slope. Cups of dice were produced and bags of finger bones, and fortunes were gained and lost. Alcadizzar kept to a corner of the vast rug laid out for Faisr and his personal guests and sipped sparingly from a small skin of wine. He pretended to admire the new horses born to the tribal chiefs and offered a cheer or two when one of the *bani-al-Hashim* took part in a race, but mostly he sat back and observed the people around him.

Alcadizzar noted that most of the chiefs drank little and gambled not at all. Though they talked and joked as raucously as their warriors, their dark eyes were keen and wary. They studied the herds of their peers, gauging their strengths and weaknesses. Alliances were made over the purchase of colts, or the arrangement of breeding rights. Lesser chiefs came and went, kneeling and kissing the rough hem of the ancient rugs before they sat beside their betters. Perhaps half a dozen younger chieftains sat around the edge of Faisr's rug, enjoying his hospitality and offering him gifts of friendship. By comparison, the rug next to Faisr's belonged to Bashir al-Rukhba, currently the richest and most powerful of the desert chiefs. There were more than a dozen men crowding one another upon the great rug, each one vying for the great chieftain's attention. Bashir sat in the centre of it all with a look of mild agitation on his bearded face. When he tired of someone's presence he waved a hand at one of his three lieutenants, who shooed the lesser chieftain away like a mother would chase off an especially stubborn crow.

By the end of the day, Alcadizzar knew several important things. Firstly, that Faisr al-Hashim, while admired by the younger chiefs, had little in the way of political influence among the tribes. Bashir, whom Alcadizzar knew by reputation to have once been a formidable raider, held sway over the others by virtue of the size of his retinue and the wealth he'd painstakingly acquired. Also, judging by the way

Bashir studiously ignored Faisr during the afternoon, it was apparent that there was little love lost between the two men. If the state of affairs troubled Faisr at all, he was careful not to show it.

Finally, as the sun began to settle to the west, a stir went through the assembled warriors. Alcadizzar straightened, just as the lesser chiefs all rose in a great flock and took their leave of Bashir, Faisr and the rest of the great chieftains. The prince looked about, frowning in bemusement—and then saw the dark-robed figure approaching the rug of Bashir al-Rukhba.

The man was tall, and moved with strength and purpose. He was clad in black desert robes, shot through with golden thread that shimmered in the mellowing sunlight. He carried no weapons, which surprised Alcadizzar, for that was a badge of manhood among the tribes. What was more, his face was covered, but not in a conventional fashion. His headscarf had been wrapped loosely about his head to form a kind of hood, and a thin veil of black silk covered his entire face. In his hands, he carried a large, ornate goblet made of gold. The sight of it stirred memories that made the prince's hair stand on end. He caught himself just before his hand closed on the hilt of his sword and forced himself to relax.

Alcadizzar glanced over at Faisr. When he'd caught the young chieftain's eye, he whispered, "Who is that?"

The lesser chieftains stared at Alcadizzar as though he were a fool. Faisr scowled. "The chosen of Khsar, the Hungry God. He serves the Daughter of the Sands."

"Who?"

Faisr waved his hand in agitation. "Hush!" he warned, and said no more.

The chosen man made no obeisance to Bashir; rather, he stood at the edge of the chieftain's rug and the great chief came to him, edging his way across the ancient mat. He bowed deeply, touching his forehead to the hem of the rug and the hooded man bent, offering his cup. Bashir straightened, accepting the goblet and taking a small sip of its contents. As he did, the chosen one murmured something and the great chief nodded in return.

Then it was Faisr's turn. The hooded man approached and Alcadizzar's chieftain edged forwards. He bowed and accepted the goblet, and the priest spoke softly to him. The words were in the tongue of the desert people, too soft for the prince to make out. Faisr nodded, and murmured a short reply. For a moment, Alcadizzar felt the weight of the chosen one's stare, and then he moved on to the next chieftain in line.

Faisr rose without a word and his lieutenants followed suit. Alcadizzar's head swam with questions, but he knew that this was neither the time nor the place to ask them. Bashir and his retinue were already heading back up the slope towards the settlement; the day's festivities were clearly at an end.

Alcadizzar fell in beside Faisr. After they'd walked for a bit, the prince turned to the chieftain. "What happens now?" he asked quietly.

Faisr grinned. Despite having drunk his weight in spirits, his steps were swift and sure. "We prepare for the gathering. Then the fun really begins."

Alcadizzar nodded. He jerked his chin at Bashir, who was striding among his retinue some way ahead. "He doesn't like you very much."

"You noticed?"

“He wasn’t exactly subtle,” Alcadizzar replied. “Will he be a problem?”

Faisr chuckled grimly. “Oh, yes,” he said. “You may count upon it. Don’t take it too personally, though; he just wants to try and keep me in my place.”

“He’s going to try to have me killed. How do I not take that personally?”

Faisr laughed and clapped the prince on the shoulder. “This is a world of suffering and strife, my friend. Death surrounds us every day. Would you rather be known as a man who died choking on a olive pit, or one who perished at the hand of an assassin, struck down by the order of Bashir al-Rukhba?”

Alcadizzar frowned. “I would rather be known as a man who lived a long and happy life, surrounded by his wife and children in a richly-furnished mansion.”

The desert chieftain sighed. “You city dwellers,” he said, shaking his head bemusedly, “have some strange notions about life.”

They dressed in their finest robes for the gathering of chiefs. Faisr gifted Alcadizzar with new garments of fine, white linen, and an over-robe of midnight-blue silk plundered during a raid a few months earlier. Outside, darkness settled over the tents, and in the distance, groups of young girls paced the perimeter of the camp on horseback, shaking silver bells and singing to the face of the rising moon to keep the evils of the night at bay.

Faisr raised a warning hand as Alcadizzar reached for his sword. “We carry no weapons,” he said solemnly. “You may wear a dagger, to cut meat or settle the odd quarrel, but nothing more. If you need a blade later, we’ll send for it.”

Alcadizzar swallowed his misgivings and nodded, tucking his jewelled knife into his belt. He straightened, and Faisr studied him intently for a moment, making certain that nothing was amiss. The chieftain nodded. “It will serve,” he declared, then his expression turned grave. “I must ask, are you certain you wish to proceed? There is no shame in withdrawing at this point. You can stay here in the tent until the end of the gathering, and tomorrow things will be no different between us.”

The prince sighed. He wanted to tell Faisr that there was nothing the chiefs could do to him that was any worse than what he’d endured in the gardens of the Temple of Blood. Instead, he waved impatiently at the tent flap. “Lead on.”

Faisr bowed, favouring Alcadizzar with a dazzling smile. “As you wish, my friend.”

The chieftain led Alcadizzar out into the cold night. The sky was clear and bright with starlight. Neru’s face was full and bright, shining her blessings down upon the camp. Sounds of revelry drifted through the air from the surrounding tents; muted laughter and women’s voices mingled with the chanting songs of the desert. The prince drank in the sounds and the smells of smoke, leather and canvas, and smiled contentedly.

It felt more like home to him than any palace or mansion ever had.

The gathering tent loomed large in the darkness. Two smaller tents had been pitched to either side of its single entrance, flaps drawn back on all four sides and lashed down in “caravan fashion”, so those within had a clear field of view in every direction. Rugs had been laid down in each, and small braziers had been lit to keep the night’s chill at bay. Nearly a score of tribesmen took their ease beneath the tents,

sampling platters of food and drinking wine offered to them by demure maidens. More desert warriors milled about in small groups outside, speaking to one another in low tones. They all turned and bowed their heads in respect as Faisr went by.

“Wait here for a time,” the desert chieftain said, indicating the caravan tent to his right. “Eat and drink, or don’t, as it suits you. Once the business of the night is done, I’ll send for you.” Without waiting for a reply, Faisr ducked his head and stepped inside the gathering tent.

Alcadizzar watched Faisr disappear from sight and suppressed a sigh of irritation. The desert gatherings apparently shared one thing in common with the courts of Nehekhar; both involved a lot of sitting around and waiting. Scowling, he found a clear patch of rug inside the tent and settled upon it. A young girl edged towards him at once, holding out a bowl of sour-smelling *chanouri*. The prince held up a hand so the girl wouldn’t see him wince. “Perhaps a bit of watered wine?” he asked.

And so the prince waited, watching Neru chart her course across the sky as the hours passed. His neighbours mostly kept to themselves, their minds intent on whatever grievance or request they intended to present to the gathered chiefs. Within the tent came a steady drone of muted conversation, punctuated by the occasional shout or peal of laughter. Once, Alcadizzar heard angry shouts break out and for a moment he thought a riot had erupted amid the gathering, but the other tribesmen paid the noise little mind, and within a few minutes the disturbance had subsided as quickly as it had begun.

One by one, the men seated around him were summoned into the presence of the chiefs. Some audiences lasted longer than others and nearly always the men emerged with stoic faces, giving no sign as to whether their wishes had been honoured or not. Once, a pair of black-robed men emerged from the tent, half-carrying one of the petitioners. The tribesman was doubled over in pain, one hand pressed against his belly. Blood ran freely between his clenched fingers. Alcadizzar listened to the man’s muffled curses as he disappeared into the night.

By midnight, he was alone in the tent. The maidens had withdrawn and the coals in the braziers were nearly spent. The sounds of conversation within the tent showed no signs of abating. The prince sighed and sipped at his wine, wondering if Faisr had gotten so deep into his cups that he’d forgotten Alcadizzar was waiting outside.

Beyond the gathering tent, the rest of the camp had fallen silent. The night air was still and cold, luminous with the light of the full moon. Alcadizzar breathed in the chill air, grateful for the way it cleared his head and focussed his senses.

Little by little, a sense of unease crept up the back of the prince’s neck. He was being watched.

Alcadizzar continued to breathe deeply, careful to show no outwards sense of alarm. As his eyes searched the deep shadows beyond the empty caravan tent opposite his, he drained his watered wine and set the cup aside. He casually rested his empty hand on top of his thigh, just inches from the hilt of his dagger, and waited for his unseen observer to reveal himself.

Minutes passed, and the sensation did not abate. If anything, it seemed more focused, more intent. Alcadizzar thought he saw a flicker of movement in the shadows near the wall of the gathering tent. He shifted slightly, presenting his right

shoulder to the oncoming figure. His fingertips slid to the jewelled pommel of his dagger.

There! He could see a slender figure outlined against the flank of the great tent, creeping slowly and somewhat tentatively his way. Alcadizzar could see no weapons in the figure's hands, but the sheer weight of his stare was astonishing. Was this a sorcerer, or some restless spirit that haunted the dark hills north of the great plain?

After a moment, the figure paused, still well hidden in the shadow cast by the tent. Alcadizzar felt goose-flesh race along his forearms. Finally, he could stand no more.

"I see you there," he said, rising slowly to his feet. "What sort of man are you, to skulk in the shadows like a jackal? Are you thief, or assassin? Show yourself!"

The figure recoiled at the sound of his voice. Alcadizzar thought he might turn and flee into the darkness—but then, the person straightened his shoulders and took a bold step forwards, into the moonlight.

Alcadizzar's eyes widened. The figure before him was short and lithe, clad in fine, black robes shot through with silver thread that shimmered faintly in the light. This was no assassin, nor a restless, hungry spirit, but a young girl of about fourteen years, her face wreathed by the folds of a silken headscarf. She had a long coltish face and a sharp nose, and large, leonine yellow eyes. A sinuous line of henna tattoos climbed up the right side of her slender neck, and traced its way along her jawline.

The prince stared at the girl in surprise. She studied him as a scholar would an ancient scroll, as though he wore his deepest secrets upon his sleeve. Not even Neferata had reached so deeply into his soul. He tried to speak, to ask who this girl was and what she wanted with him—but just then the entry flap of the gathering tent was drawn aside, and a black-robed servant stepped out into the night. The spell broken, the girl retreated at once, slipping back silently into the shadows.

The servant, unaware of the girl's presence, beckoned to Alcadizzar. "Faisr al-Hashim bids you to join him," he said.

Alcadizzar searched the darkness beyond the tent, but the girl had vanished. The servant paused, his brows knitting in a frown. He started to beckon again, but Alcadizzar shook his head, as though to clear it. "Lead on," he replied.

The prince followed the servant into the hot, noisy gloom of the great tent. He had expected it to be subdivided by cloth partitions into discrete chambers, as he'd seen Faisr do with his own tent; beyond the entrance was a small antechamber, where a pair of maids came forwards with golden bowls and cloths to ritually wash his feet and hands. When the ritual was done, the servant led him onwards, past another tent flap and into the presence of the chiefs.

Alcadizzar had expected a large, open space, layered in fine rugs and thick with a haze of incense, where the chiefs lounged in small cliques as they'd done earlier in the afternoon. To his surprise, he found himself standing at the edge of a circular space containing an immense wooden table, large enough to accommodate almost two-score chiefs with room to spare. The surface of the table was covered in a thin sheet of gold, hammered by the hands of an artist into curious, uneven contours. The prince stared at its surface for several moments before he realised that the play of shadow and light created by the contours suggested the rolling dunes of a desert. Long, curving lines had been etched into the gold; he knew from his studies that

some of them matched the ancient caravan routes that had crossed the Great Desert in ancient times. Other lines were less obvious in their meaning. Perhaps they represented the nomadic paths of the desert tribes themselves.

The perimeter of the chamber was crowded with high-ranking tribesmen from each of the clans, who sat upon rugs and observed the proceedings with interest. The air was hot and thick, almost stifling, and spiced with the aromas of food and *chanouri*. Alcadizzar felt the eyes of the entire assembly fix on him as he followed the servant to the great table.

Faisr rose from an ornately carved chair as Alcadizzar approached and went to stand beside him. The servant indicated for the prince to stand a few feet from the edge of the table, where the gathered chiefs could take their measure of him. Alcadizzar met the gaze of each and every man seated at the table, and found not a single mote of warmth or welcome in their eyes. A few, like Bashir al-Rukhba, glared at him with obvious contempt.

Then the prince felt a familiar prickling along the back of his neck. He stiffened, his eyes drawn to the shadows on the opposite side of the great table. There, he saw the silhouette of a robed woman seated upon a wooden chair similar to those used by the chieftains. Her face was hidden in the gloom, but Alcadizzar knew she was staring at him with the same intensity as that of the girl he'd seen only minutes before. At her side stood Khsar's chosen one, the hooded man that he had seen out on the hillside that afternoon. Instead of a golden goblet, the chosen one now held a tall, black staff in his right hand. Though apart from the rest, Alcadizzar noted that there was an empty space at the table so that the woman had a clear view of the proceedings.

Faisr laid a hand on Alcadizzar's shoulder. "Here is the man I spoke of," he said to the assembled chiefs. "Ubaid has ridden as a friend to the *bani-al-Hashim* for twenty years, as our customs require, and in that time he has acquitted himself as a warrior and a cunning raider. Look you the marks upon his belt," Faisr said, pointing to the dense rows of kill-marks inscribed in the leather. "Fifty men, dead by his hand! He has earned the esteem of my people and has shed his own blood on our behalf many times. Indeed, he has saved my life not once, but *three* times." The young chieftain spread his hands and winked at the other chiefs. "Of course, he still rides like a soft-arsed city dweller, but no man is perfect, eh?"

Many of the chieftains laughed and Alcadizzar accepted the jibe with a self-deprecating grin. Bashir and a handful of other chiefs just stared at Faisr, their faces set in stony masks.

"Ubaid's loyalty and honour are beyond question," Faisr said. "He has put aside his past and has embraced the ways of the desert. I tell you, he is like a brother to me and deserves to be a part of my tribe."

"He is an outsider!" Bashir cried. The chieftain leaned forwards and pounded on the golden table for emphasis. "A city dweller! For all we know, he could be a spy for the Lahmians!"

At once, Faisr's chosen men were on their feet, shaking their fists and shouting angrily at Bashir. Bashir's men quickly followed suit, yelling at Faisr's men. Daggers were drawn, their blades glinting in the lamplight. The chiefs caught in between took turns yelling at Bashir, at Faisr, and at one another.

Faisr let out a lusty shout and leapt upon the golden table. With a flourish, he drew his dagger and levelled it at Bashir. "If any man doubts Ubaid's worth, then put him to the test! Challenge him, by wit, by blade or by horse!"

Alcadizzar saw Bashir smile hungrily at Faisr's outburst and understood that this was the opening the older chief had been waiting for. He rose from his chair, his hand reaching for his own knife—when suddenly, Khsar's chosen man stepped from the shadows and brought his staff down upon the table with a thunderous blow.

The entire crowd was struck silent in an instant. The chiefs all but leapt from their seats, their eyes wide with shock. Even Bashir looked stunned.

When the hooded man was certain that he had everyone's undivided attention, he straightened slowly and drew back his staff. Alcadizzar saw that it was thick and obviously heavy, shaped from a kind of black wood unlike anything he had seen before. The faces of monstrous spirits had been carved into the wood, their fierce, inhuman expressions contorted into masks of rage and mindless hunger.

"Hearken unto the Daughter of the Sands," the chosen one intoned. His voice was rough and deep, rumbling like the warning growl of a lion. At once, the spectators all sank to their knees. Bashir's face paled with rage, but even he sank back into his chair. Alcadizzar hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Faisr quickly sheathed his dagger and the prince followed suit.

Slowly and painfully, the robed woman climbed from her chair. She was very old, Alcadizzar saw at once, her leathery face creased in a complex tapestry of wrinkles. As she stepped into the lamplight, the prince was startled to see that her eyes were a leonine yellow, just like those of the girl he'd seen outside.

The old woman approached the chiefs, and her eyes rose slowly to Faisr's. "Were you raised in a wine shop, Faisr al-Hashim?" she growled. "Get off my table, boy."

To Alcadizzar's surprise, Faisr hung his head like a child. "My apologies," he said, and hopped back down onto the rugs next to Alcadizzar.

The woman's gaze turned to Alcadizzar; once again, he felt his skin prickle with the intensity of her stare. "You say that this one has observed all the customs of adoption?"

"He has," Faisr replied.

"He has lived among your tribe for a span of twenty years?" she asked.

"As I said before, yes," the chieftain replied.

"He has fought at your side and shed blood for the sake of the tribe?"

"Many times."

The old woman's eyes narrowed on the prince. "And in all that time, he has never given you cause to doubt his loyalty, or his devotion?"

"Never once," Faisr answered proudly.

Alcadizzar found himself struggling to meet the woman's stare. There was much that Faisr did not know about him. The chieftain was unknowingly risking his own honour on his friend's behalf.

"Has he put aside his past life," the woman asked, in a voice as pitiless as the desert sands, "and devoted himself entirely to the ways of our people?"

Before Faisr could answer, Alcadizzar cut in. "As much as any man can forget his people and the place of his birth," he said. Faisr shot him a sidelong look, but the prince ignored him.

The Daughter of the Sands stared at Alcadizzar for a long moment. "Then let it be so," she declared. "From this day forwards, you are one of the *bani-al-Hashim*."

The assembled chiefs glanced at one another in amazement. Only Bashir al-Rukhba felt bold enough—or angry enough—to speak. "But the customs of adoption are meant only for desert dwellers!" he protested. "They are for adopting a man of one tribe into another, not... not this!"

The old woman turned and glared at Bashir. "An exception was made once before, Bashir al-Rukhba," she said coldly. "Or have you forgotten?"

Bashir stiffened. "I have not," he replied.

"Then you must presume to know the will of Khsar better than I," the old woman snapped. "Is that so? Do you mean to gainsay me?"

All at once, the air in the tent was fraught with tension. Alcadizzar saw Bashir's warriors shrink back from their chief, their expressions stiff with fright.

Bashir's gaze fell to the tabletop. "No," he answered in a subdued voice. "I would never do such a thing, holy one."

"Then our business here is concluded," said the Daughter of the Sands. "The hour is late and my bones ache. Let an old woman have her rest."

As one, the chieftains rose from the table. Nervous murmurs rose from their warriors. The atmosphere was still tense and unsettled. Something momentous had happened, Alcadizzar knew, but he had no idea what. His thoughts were interrupted by a tug on his sleeve.

"It's done," Faisr said. For the first time since Alcadizzar had met him, the chieftain sounded shaken. "Let's go."

Alcadizzar turned to follow Faisr from the tent. As he went, he once again felt the stares of the entire assembly upon him, but they were as light as a feather compared to the weight of the old woman's gaze upon his back. It took an effort of will not to hasten his steps and run headlong into the night.

* * *

Faisr and Alcadizzar were quickly surrounded by members of the tribe as they departed the great tent. A few offered quiet congratulations, but most were silent as Faisr led them all back to the tribe's tents. Once there, some of the older tribesmen began stoking a fire and rousing their youngest sons to fetch wine and *chanouri*. Across the camp, the rest of the tribes seemed to be following suit, hewing to tradition and indulging in one last celebration before they scattered to the winds on the morrow.

But Faisr was in no mood to celebrate. The chieftain stood for a moment, staring into the depths of the fire his warriors were coaxing to life, then plucked a wineskin from a passing boy and stalked off into the darkness. Without thinking, Alcadizzar followed.

Faisr said nothing as he made his way through the camp. He avoided the tents of the great clans and their fire-lit gatherings, and before long he emerged from the camp onto the hillside's lower slopes. He led Alcadizzar down the hill towards the silent horse herds, finally settling down on the cold, damp ground not far from where they had lounged just twelve hours before.

The chieftain acknowledged the herd's sentry riders with a wave of his hand, then pulled the stopper from the wineskin and passed it to Alcadizzar. The prince took it and squirted a swallow's worth into his mouth, then handed it back.

"I take it that didn't go as planned," he said.

Faisr chuckled ruefully. "Observant as ever," the chieftain replied, and filled his mouth with wine. He gulped it down and drank again.

"Who was that woman?" Alcadizzar asked. "A priestess of some kind?"

The chieftain let out a snort. "The tribes have never had much use for priests," he said. "Instead, we have the Daughter of the Sands. She is given to Khsar, the god of the wastelands, as his bride. She is the arbiter of his laws, and when she speaks, it is with his voice. Do you understand?"

Alcadizzar frowned. "Yes, but..." He chose his words with care, uncertain how devout Faisr was, not wishing to cause offence. "The covenant with the gods was broken centuries ago."

Faisr shook his head. "Forget about the covenant. That was made between the gods and *your* people, the Nehekharans."

The prince nodded thoughtfully. Many Nehekharans thought of the desert folk as barbaric cousins, but the truth was that they were an entirely different race of men, whose history and culture stretched back thousands of years before the birth of the great cities.

"So... the tribes still enjoy the blessings of Khsar?"

Faisr threw back his head and laughed. "Blessings? If Khsar doesn't burn your eyes from your head or suck the marrow from your bones, that's a blessing," he said. "He is the god of the desert. His breath gives life to sandstorms. The Hungry God gives no blessings, Ubaid. Only tests. By those tests we are made strong, or else we perish. There is nothing else."

Alcadizzar spread his hands. "Then... what? Am I being tested?"

Faisr didn't reply at first. He frowned up at the sky and then took another drink. "It's possible," he said. "Or perhaps there is a test yet to come."

"I don't understand."

The chieftain sighed. "Once in every generation, a daughter is born to the tribes with the eyes of a desert lion. It has always been thus. Such women have the ability to look into a man's soul and see what the fates have written there. For that reason alone, they have great influence among our people."

The thought sent a chill down Alcadizzar's spine.

"When I was waiting in the caravan tent outside, I saw a girl with those same eyes," he said softly.

Faisr gave him a startled look. "You didn't touch her, did you?"

"What kind of question is that?"

The chieftain relaxed slightly. "Forgive me. It's just that it's considered terrible luck to lay hands on one of Khsar's chosen." He sighed. "That would have been Ophiria. She will become the Daughter of the Sands when Suleima dies. Did she say anything to you?"

Alcadizzar shook his head. "No, but I will remember those eyes for the rest of my life."

Faisr shook his head. "In all my time as chieftain, I've never known Suleima to take a hand in tribal matters. Now, in a single stroke, she affirms your adoption into the tribes and upsets the old order of the chiefs. Rebuking Bashir like that will cost the old jackal dearly."

"The Daughter of the Sands has that much power over the chiefs?"

Faisr shrugged. "These days, yes. It wasn't always so. The Daughter of the Sands used to serve as an advisor to the *alcazzar*, the chief of chiefs, but there hasn't been one of those since Shahid the Red Fox died during the war against the Usurper." The chieftain shook his head. "The seers were the reason that the tribes came here from the desert, centuries ago."

Alcadizzar stared at Faisr, his curiosity piqued. "Why is that?"

Faisr glanced over at the prince and started to reply, but then appeared to think better of it. "That's a tale for another time," he said with a tired grin. "Too many revelations might spoil the wine, eh, Ubaid?"

Faisr raised the wineskin to his lips and took a deep draught, but Alcadizzar caught the haunted look in the chieftain's eye nonetheless.

Alcadizzar looked away, out over the sleeping herds.

What had Ophiria and the old woman seen when they looked at him? How much did they know? The words of Faisr came back to him once more.

The Hungry God gives no blessings, only tests. By those tests we are made strong, or we perish. There is nothing else.

—<THIRTEEN>—

The Price of Victory

*Nagashizzar, in the 102nd year of Tahoth the Wise
(-1250 Imperial Reckoning)*

“When is Lord Velsquee coming back?”

Eekrit sighed, rubbing a paw wearily over his eyes. He didn’t like where this conversation was heading. “Four months, if he encounters no trouble. Why?”

“Because the *kreekar-gan* is getting ready to attack.”

The warlord beckoned with a claw and a trio of slave rats scuttled from the shadows of the throne room. Two of the slaves carried a carved wooden chair between them, which they set on the rug-covered floor behind Eshreegar. The Master of Treacheries nodded his head to Eekrit in thanks and took a seat. Of all the skaven left in the under-fortress, he alone was permitted to sit while Eekrit presided from the throne. The third slave climbed the dais with a golden tray bearing two bowls of wine. The warlord chose one bowl for himself and then the slave served Eshreegar the other.

Eekrit’s whiskers twitched as he breathed in the wine’s heady vapours. “You’ve been wrong in the past,” he pointed out. “Sometimes *spectacularly* so.”

“As you never cease to remind me,” Eshreegar replied. He swirled the dark liquid in his bowl for a moment, then drained half the contents in one long draught and wiped his whiskers clean on his sleeve. “The signs are there, nonetheless.”

“Such as?”

Eshreegar frowned at the warlord. “Spear companies, for a start. Some of my scouts went over the barricades a few nights ago and got as far as mine shaft two. The ones that made it back said there were four or five companies of bone-men there. Looked like they’d just arrived recently.”

Eekrit shifted uncomfortably on the throne. “How recently?”

The Master of Treacheries finished off his drink and beckoned for another. “There was no mould on the bones or wrappings, so they couldn’t have been in the lower tunnels for more than a day or two.” The air in the active mine shafts was so hot and humid that mould was a constant problem.

“Not a good sign, I grant you.”

“There’s more.” Eshreegar turned to an approaching servant and traded his empty bowl for a full one. “One of the survivors said he saw at least two war engines at the far end of the mine shaft. Big ones.”

Eekrit winced. “Any chance he could have been mistaken?”

“Not likely. It was Joreel who spotted them. You remember him, don’t you? He was one of the old hands.”

The warlord’s tail lashed irritably. “Yes, I remember Joreel, damn it. It hasn’t been *that* long.”

Eshreegar snorted. “Thirty-five years, almost to the day,” he said. He carefully avoided making eye contact with the warlord, but the tone in his voice said it all. *Much has changed since then.*

Indeed it had, Eekrit thought bitterly. With Velsquee incapacitated by his injuries and Hiirc dead, the task of saving the army had rested entirely in Eekrit’s paws. The days following the failed ambush at mine shaft four had been a nightmarish ordeal of chaos, confusion and death. By the time he had managed to convince the surviving clan lords of his authority and organise a credible defence against the burning man’s attacks, the skaven had been driven all the way back to mine shaft eight, and almost half of the army had been destroyed. Even worse was the loss of materiel; for all intents and purposes, the army’s entire baggage train had been captured or destroyed when mine shaft four had been overrun. Even with access to merchants at the under-fortress, the army would have a hard enough time feeding itself in the near term, much less fighting the enemy.

Weeks passed before Eekrit was able to return to the under-fortress, only to find Velsquee gone. The official explanation was that his injuries required the attentions of the best surgeons in the Great City, but it was obvious to Eekrit that the Grey Lord was trying to get as much distance from the debacle as he could. Velsquee would make certain that the blame for the defeat rested squarely on Eekrit’s shoulders. It was the skaven way.

Eekrit fought back the only way he could—by making certain that regular shipments of god-stone found their way to the Great City. He still clung stubbornly to the notion that the *kreekar-gan* could be defeated and then the mountain would be his. So he endured Velsquee’s expert slanders and the inevitable disgrace that the Council heaped upon him. He knew that he could never go back home, at least not until he was wealthy enough to reform his image.

The warlord also went out of his way to publicly thank Velsquee for his many years of helpful “advice” during the long war, plus his continued support for the expeditionary force—whether such support still existed or not. Eekrit even went so far as to hire an orator to deliver a grandiloquent speech to the Council of Thirteen to commemorate the day that the army first departed from the Great City, and went to great length to extol Velsquee’s virtues as a warrior and a leader. Finally, he made sure that the Grey Lord received a regular allotment of god-stone from the mines and made very sure that the other lords on the Council knew about it.

Velsquee got the message. His fortunes were tied to the great mountain, whether he wanted it or not, so it was in his best interests to support the expeditionary force as much as possible.

The fact was, Eekrit needed all the support he could get. The great clans had grown weary of the long war beneath the mountain; many had lost so much blood and treasure over the last forty years that their positions on the Council had become vulnerable. In the months and years following the defeat at mine shaft four, the

alliance of clans that made up the expeditionary force began to unravel. Clan Morbus was the first to withdraw its warriors, followed by the survivors of Clan Skryre soon after. Eekrit hadn't the power or influence to stop them. All he could do was try to lure as many of the lesser clans as he could to take their place, plus whatever mercenaries his depleted fortunes permitted.

All the while, the *kreekar-gan* continued to batter away at the skaven. With new stores of god-stone in his possession, he hurled wave after wave of skeletons and flesh-hungry corpses against Eekrit's defences. The days of digging murder holes and launching bold flanking moves were long gone. The most Eekrit could do was hold what he had and inflict as many losses on the enemy as possible.

His warriors destroyed the enemy by the hundreds, but it was never enough. The burning man never relented. As his losses mounted, Eekrit was forced to surrender one mine shaft after another. Slowly but surely, the skaven were being driven from the mountain.

All they had left now was mine shaft twelve. If that fell, the enemy would be at the tunnels to the under-fortress itself.

Eekrit drank deep from his bowl. "It's just four months," he said, swirling the bitter dregs. "We can hold."

"With what?" Eshreegar said. "I wouldn't give a ratling's fart for half the hired swords you've got manning the barricades. The instant one of those bone-engines comes charging down on them, they'll turn tail and won't stop running until they reach the Great City. Then all you'll have left are a few thousand poorly-armed clanrats and whatever slave packs you can scrounge."

The warlord's paw tightened on the wine bowl. "We'll collapse the upper branch-tunnels if we have to. That should slow them down a bit."

Eshreegar shook his head irritably. "You'll just be delaying the inevitable."

Eekrit scowled at the Master of Treacheries. "I don't think so," he snapped. "The *kreekar-gan* has all but one of the mountain's mine shafts under his control. With that much power he should have crushed us years ago. Why hasn't he?" The warlord shook his head. "I don't think he's as strong as he wants us to believe."

"And yet here we are, hanging on to the under-fortress by our toe claws."

Eekrit jabbed a finger at Eshreegar. "No one's seen the *kreekar-gan* since the fight at mine shaft four. Why is that? All we ever see these days are skeletons and shambling corpses." He leaned forwards. "Our problem isn't that the burning man's so much stronger; it's that we've been getting weaker by the year. When Velsquee shows up with the reinforcements he promised, all that will change."

The Master of Treacheries let out a snort. "I'll believe that when I see it, and not before."

Just then, the double doors at the far end of the chamber creaked open and a slave came scampering through. He dashed to the foot of the dais and stretched himself upon the stones. "Master-master!" he said breathlessly. "The Grey Lord has come! Velsquee is-is here!"

Eekrit straightened, ears fluttering in surprise. "In the great square? Now?"

"No-no master. He-he waits without!" the slave replied.

Eshreegar rose from his chair and carefully set his wine bowl aside. “I don’t like the sound of that,” he said quietly.

The warlord shot Eshreegar a hard look. “Let him in,” he snapped at the slave. As the skaven dashed back to the double doors, Eekrit felt the hackles rise on the back of his neck.

Moments later, the doors opened wide, and Grey Lord Velsquee made his painful way into the great hall. Despite the best elixirs and sorcerous charms gold could buy, Velsquee’s fur had gone almost uniformly white and his face was deeply lined by years of strain. The Grey Lord still stubbornly wore his fine suit of armour and curved sword, though his fighting days were now far behind him. The surgeons had worked wonders, but Velsquee’s shattered hip had never set properly. He leaned heavily on a gnarled cypress cane as he limped towards the dais. Behind him came a dozen heavily armed *heechigar*, marching with exaggerated slowness so as not to overtake their master.

Eekrit fought down a sense of foreboding at the sight of the storm-walkers. The places along the great hall where his bodyguards customarily stood were conspicuously empty, because every able-bodied skaven was needed to man the barricades. He glanced at Eshreegar and noted that the Master of Treacheries had retreated a few steps away from the throne and turned slightly to face the *heechigar*. His arms were folded, paws tucked into his sleeves.

Remembering himself, Eekrit quickly rose from the throne, but Velsquee waved for him to stop. “Sit down, whelp,” he snapped, his voice rough with age. He nodded at Eshreegar’s seat. “This one will do.”

The warlord waited until Velsquee had settled himself in the chair before he sat back upon the throne. His throat suddenly felt very dry.

“Welcome back to the under-fortress, my lord,” Eekrit grumbled. “Forgive me for not greeting you in the great square with the fanfare you deserve, but you’ve arrived much, *much* earlier than expected.”

Velsquee winced as he tried to get comfortable on the hard wooden seat. “I moved much faster without an army to slow me down,” he said in a cold voice.

There it was, stated in bald terms. Eekrit shook his head slowly, not quite willing to believe what he’d heard. “You... you travelled on ahead of the army, you mean.”

The Grey Lord growled. “It’s over, Eekrit. The Council of Thirteen doesn’t want any more to do with this place. They call it the *Cursed Pit* these days. I couldn’t get one other Grey Lord to support the call for more warriors.”

“What about all the god-stone buried here?” Eekrit asked. “We’ve been at it nearly eighty years, and we’ve barely scratched the-the surface!”

“And look what it’s cost us,” Velsquee shot back. “It’s even got the grey seers at each others’ throats.” He shook his grizzled head. “No, Eekrit. It’s done. The Council sent me here with an official declaration dissolving the alliance of clans and disbanding the expeditionary force.”

Eekrit stared at the Grey Lord. “This is lunacy,” he snarled. “We can still triumph here, Velsquee. You haven’t been here in almost forty years! I *know* we can defeat the *kreekar-gan*—”

“You know nothing of the kind, ratling!” Velsquee shouted, half-rising from his chair. “Qweeqwol tried to warn me, but I wouldn’t listen—” the rest of the outburst

was lost in a fit of terrible, racking coughs that left the Grey Lord wheezing and doubled over with pain. Eekrit gestured frantically for a slave, who rushed a bowl of wine to the struggling skaven.

Velsquee took the bowl with a trembling paw and drank deeply. Eekrit waited until the old skaven had composed himself before he continued.

“Qweeqwol warned you of what?”

The Grey Lord didn’t reply at first. His gaze wandered the room, lost in memories of the past. Finally, he sighed and rubbed a paw across his whiskers.

“Qweeqwol saw a great deal more than just visions of god-stone buried beneath this damned mountain,” he said. “The god-stone was immaterial to him. He lent his influence to the alliance of the clans and marched with the army because he’d seen what the burning man planned for the world. If the *kreekar-gan* wasn’t stopped, it wouldn’t mean the death of the skaven. It would mean the death of *everything*.”

The haunted look in Velsquee’s eyes made Eekrit’s blood run cold. “How could such a thing be possible?”

The Grey Lord shook his head. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I didn’t believe a word of it at the time.”

“Have you told the Council of this?” Eekrit asked.

Velsquee’s eyes widened. “Are you mad? Those fools would think I’d finally gone soft. There would be a dozen daggers in my back by the end of the day.”

“But if Qweeqwol was right...”

“Qweeqwol also said this, the burning man could not be defeated by the hand of the living,” Velsquee replied. “The *kreekar-gan* is not bound by the laws of life and death. He can only be defeated by someone like himself, who is dead, yet lives on.”

The Grey Lord sighed. “Qweeqwol thought he had the answer. He was sick, you see. A corruption of the blood. The Horned One alone knows how he managed to live so long.” Velsquee shook his head bitterly. “Qweeqwol thought it was a sign. We know better now, of course.”

Eekrit fought the urge to beckon for more wine. He glanced at Eshreegar. “My scouts tell me that the *kreekar-gan* is getting ready to launch another attack.”

“Can you hold him off?”

The warlord gritted his teeth. “Perhaps.”

“Then if you’ll listen to one last piece of *advice* from me, you’ll clean out every scrap of god-stone you can from the mine shaft and clear out before the burning man strikes. Leave the mercenaries behind as a rearguard. If you move quickly enough, they won’t realise they’ve been abandoned until it’s too late.”

Velsquee’s bald words stunned Eekrit. Before he could reply, the doors at the end of the hall swung open yet again and the same slave came dashing towards the dais. He wove his way nimbly around the *heechigar* and prostrated himself before the skaven lords. “Master! Master!”

“In the Horned One’s name, *what now?*” Eekrit snarled.

“A-a message from the barricades!” the slave cried. “A corpse-man has come!”

The corpse-men were the *kreekar-gan*’s barbarian lieutenants. There were only three left, as far as Eekrit knew, and none of them had been seen in more than a decade. The news sent a chill down the warlord’s spine.

“How many?”

The slave hesitated, glancing uncertainly from Eekrit to Velsquee and back again. “How-how many what?”

“Warriors, you wretch!” Eekrit snapped. “The corpse-man isn’t standing in front of the barricades *by himself*, now is he?”

The slave’s ears began to flutter nervously. Fear-musk spread through the air. “But-but he *is*, master. The corpse-man came alone. He says he bears a message for-for you.”

“Terms? Your master wishes to offer us *terms*?”

The *kreekar-gan*’s lieutenant looked as though he had just climbed from a dusty crypt. Though tall and broad-shouldered, the northman’s face was gaunt and etched by dozens of battle scars. His black hair was tangled, and layered with dust and grime. The corpse-man’s armour of leather and bronze was notched and torn by countless blows, and still bore the stains of past battles.

The northman stood just ten feet from the foot of the dais, where Eekrit and Velsquee sat. The burning man’s emissary bore no weapons, but Eekrit knew all too well how swift and strong the corpse-men were. Velsquee’s *heechigar* virtually surrounded the creature, their polearms ready to strike. Eshreegar was nowhere to be seen, but Eekrit knew that the Master of Treacheries was lurking somewhere in the shadows, just a quick knife-throw away.

Words rasped from the emissary’s mouth. “Remove your warriors from the mountain and abandon your mine,” the corpse-man hissed, “and henceforth my master will provide you with *abn-i-khat* in exchange for slaves and other tribute.”

Eekrit’s eyes narrowed. He assumed that *abn-i-khat* was what these monsters called the god-stone. “Tribute?” he snarled. “You insult us, corpse-man! The Under-Empire pays tribute to no one—”

The Grey Lord cut off Eekrit’s protest with an upraised paw. “You are saying that your master is willing to trade with us. Is that it?” Velsquee asked.

The emissary turned his head fractionally to regard the Grey Lord. If the corpse-man recognised the sudden tension between the two skaven on the dais, he gave no sign. “He will trade with you, yes. But your warriors must leave here, and you must abandon your mine. Those are his terms.”

“This is a joke!” Eekrit spat. “Surely you don’t—”

Once again, Velsquee interrupted. This time his voice was hard as stone. “What Lord Eekrit wishes to say is that the Under-Empire will accept your master’s terms. We will remove our warriors immediately, and cease work on our mine. When will you provide the first shipment of god-stone?”

“You will receive one half-pound of *abn-i-khat* for every hundred pounds of metal or slaves that you provide. The sooner you deliver them, the sooner you will receive your stone.”

Velsquee did not hesitate. “Done. When will we meet your master to seal the bargain?”

“There is no need,” the corpse-man hissed. “Remove your warriors and empty the mine before dawn tomorrow; that will be enough.”

“And if we don’t?” Eekrit snarled.

“Then by sundown your corpses will be mining stone for my master.”

Eekrit started to rise from the throne, his paw reaching for his sword, but the Grey Lord forestalled him. “Take the emissary back to the barricades!” he commanded, and his storm-walkers quickly obeyed. They closed ranks around the corpse-man, effectively isolating him from Eekrit or anyone else, and marched him out of the room.

Eekrit rounded on the Grey Lord the instant the double doors closed. “Have you lost-lost your mind?” he shouted. “After all-all we’ve done here, you’re just going to-to *surrender*?”

Velsquee’s cane crashed to the floor of the dais as the Grey Lord shot to his feet. Crippled or not, his paw closed around the hilt of his sword. “Mind your tongue, ratling!” he snarled back. “I’ve given them nothing that they didn’t already possess! This is a victory for us, not a defeat.”

“But the *kreekar-gan* is bluffing!” Eekrit shot back. “Can’t you see that? Do you imagine he sent that mouldering corpse to talk to us because he’s suddenly grown tired of fighting? If he could have driven us out as easily as he claims he can, we’d be fighting for our lives right now. The only reason he’s negotiating is because he’s *weak*.”

“Then answer this, can you beat the burning man with the warriors you have on hand?”

Eekrit paused. “I... don’t know.”

“Then it doesn’t matter how damned weak he is,” Velsquee said. “Because there’ll be no more help coming from the Great City. I can guarantee you that.”

The two lords stared at one another for a moment. Finally, Eekrit relented and sat heavily back down upon his throne. “I need a drink,” he growled.

“That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve said in the last ten minutes,” the Grey Lord replied. He bent painfully to retrieve his cane, then settled heavily back into his own seat with a sigh. “*Think*, ratling. Before that corpse-man turned up, we were getting ready to abandon the mountain altogether. This way, we still get access to the god-stone, and at a cost that no one on the Council can object to. And since the expeditionary force has been officially disbanded, who does that place in charge of all output coming from the mountain?”

Eekrit eyed the Grey Lord. “You and I.”

Velsquee smiled. “That’s right. We’re both about to become obscenely rich.”

The warlord thought things over while a slave poured him some wine. “That’s all well and good,” he said at last, “but it still leaves us with a problem.”

“Which is?”

“The fact that the burning man is going to end life as we know it.”

“Yes. Well. Assuming Qweeqwol was right, of course.”

“Did you ever know him to be wrong about such things?”

“Honestly? No.”

“Then what do you propose we do?”

“At the moment, there’s not much we can do,” Velsquee replied. “But we can turn this situation to our advantage. Someone will have to stay here at the under-fortress to supervise the exchange of goods between us and the *kreekar-gan*.”

“By which you mean *me*,” Eekrit said.

“You may as well,” Velsquee replied. “You’re not rich enough yet to buy your way back into the Council’s good graces. In the meantime, you and your black-cloaked friends can see what you can learn about the *kreekar-gan* and his plans. Find out his weaknesses, then, when the time is right—”

“We stick a dagger between his ribs,” Eekrit said.

Velsquee smiled mirthlessly. “Just so, ratling, just so.”

—<FOURTEEN>—

Blood and Sand

*The Golden Plain, in the 103rd year of Basth the Graceful
(-1240 Imperial Reckoning)*

The Lahmian watch-forts along the eastern edge of the Golden Plain were stout, sturdy affairs, having changed little since their creation almost a hundred years before. The first two had been built athwart the trade road, where it descended from the plain and wound through the wooded hills on the way down to the city. Four more had been built in quick succession, two to the north and two to the south, stretching in an arc that would allow Lahmian cavalry patrols to venture deep into the wilderness to either side of the road and interdict the bandit gangs that preyed on the western caravans.

Each stronghold was built according to the same specifications: a high, outer wall made of stone, wide enough at the top for four men to walk abreast, with a massive wooden gate made from cedar logs and secured with iron pins as long as a man's forearm. Within the compound were stables, barracks, a forge and storehouses piled with enough stores to sustain a garrison of a thousand men for at least a month. In the centre of the compound sat a squat, thick-walled citadel, containing the fort's armoury, its apothecary, quarters for its officers, a small cistern and a small shrine to the Temple of Blood. In the event the walls were taken, the entire garrison could retreat into the citadel and hold out for weeks, if need be; more than enough time for a rescue force to arrive from the fort's neighbours and drive the attackers away.

It was a sound design—and a formidable stronghold for an attacking force to overcome—but much depended on the discipline and determination of the men tasked with the fort's defence.

For the first few decades, the forts were a great success. Captains were paid lavish rewards for bandit heads, so they were aggressive and cunning in their patrols. Hundreds of outlaws were slain and hundreds more fled the plain for easier pickings elsewhere, until only the swiftest and cleverest of the caravan raiders remained. The desert tribes never came within a day's ride of the forts and were far too wily and swift to be caught out by a patrol of city-bred horsemen. As the pickings grew slim, the rewards dwindled as well and the patrols rode out less and less. And since no outlaw band had ever been so foolish as to mount a direct attack on the strongholds, a sense of complacency became inevitable. Late-night sentries found better ways to pass their time than walking the ramparts, like playing dice in the marshalling ground, or sneaking a cup or two of beer from the fort's ample stores.

Once upon a time, it had been a scourging offence to allow the ground to become overgrown within a thousand paces of the forts. At the northernmost of the strongholds, dense underbrush and young trees had been allowed to creep to less than a dozen yards from the outer walls. With so much cover, the warriors of the *bani-al-Hashim* could have approached the fort on a full moon night and none would have been the wiser.

As it was, Alcadizzar waited for a cold, moonless winter night before attempting the raid. First, a pair of archers was sent forwards to watch the ramparts and ensure that there were no sentries about. They watched for nearly an hour; when no guards were spotted, one of them let out the low cry of a hunting owl. Immediately, a quartet of tribesmen was sent forwards, carrying a light, slender ladder between them. Within minutes, the ladder was resting against the outer wall and Alcadizzar had waved the assault party forwards.

A dozen of the tribe's quietest, most efficient killers crept up the ladder and over the wall. Armed with powerful, compact horse-bows and long knives, they hunted down the sentries one by one, then went to open the outer gate. It was foul luck alone that they were discovered moments later, when a soldier came stumbling sleepily from the barracks to empty his bladder and caught sight of them. The Lahmian let out a yell a half-second before an arrow found his throat; instead of taking the entire fort by storm the desert raiders found themselves with a pitched battle on their hands.

"They fought well," Sayyid al-Hashim said, and then shrugged. "For the first few minutes, at least." The stocky desert warrior paused to wipe blood from his eyes with the back of his hand. A deep cut across one temple had soaked his headscarf and turned his shoulder crimson.

Bodies littered the open ground between the barracks and the outer gate, feathered by thick, red-fletched arrows. Most were clad only in their linen under-tunics; others had died in little more than their britches. They'd grabbed whatever weapon was close to hand and rushed out to fight the dozen men of the assault party. Still more bodies were heaped around the open gate, where the tribesmen had held the Lahmians at bay long enough for the rest of the raiding party to arrive. Six of the assault party had been slain, and a seventh writhed on the ground with the broken haft of a spear buried in his guts. Alcadizzar knew each and every one by name and made a silent promise to the gods that their widows would be well taken care of.

He and Faisr stood beneath the archway of the outer gate, surveying the bloody scene. They were both clad in breastplates of thick leather armour and skirts of flexible bronze mail, and wore round bronze skullcaps beneath their silk headscarves. Faisr glowered at the bodies of the dead soldiers, his hand clenched about the hilt of his sheathed sword. It had gone against his impetuous nature to hang back with Alcadizzar and let his tribesmen do all the fighting. By the time they had rushed into the fort with the raiding party's small group of reserves, there was no one left to fight.

"What happened then?" Alcadizzar asked.

Sayyid nodded in the direction of the citadel. "As soon as the first of our brothers came running through the gate, the city dwellers turned tail and shut themselves up inside there."

The raiders had pulled a pair of wagons into the marshalling field and turned them onto their sides, providing them with some cover from the desultory arrow fire coming from the citadel. The rest were hard at work looting the fort's outbuildings. Tribesmen were shouldering past Alcadizzar with bundles of armour, stacks of swords and shields, jars of beer, and pretty well anything else that wasn't nailed down. Nervous whinnies from the fort's stable told the prince that several of the tribesmen were relieving the cavalry squadron of their mounts as well.

Alcadizzar rubbed his chin. By any reasonable measure, the raid could already be counted as a huge success and a humiliating blow for the Lahmians. He'd wanted to test the defences of the watch-forts and see how the desert raiders took to proper military tactics; he'd been satisfied on both counts. But the idea of leaving the fort intact stuck in his craw; he'd hoped to disarm the defenders and turn them out into the countryside, then put the stronghold to the torch.

"Have they sent any signals?" the prince asked.

Sayyid shook his head, scattering ruby droplets around his feet. "None."

Faisr sighed. "It will be dawn in just a few hours," he said. "Signal or no, we have to be miles from here by first light."

Alcadizzar nodded at the chieftain. When he'd first met Faisr, the young bandit would have probably opted to remain, more than willing to gamble his life and the lives of his men in an all-or-nothing assault on the citadel. But now, at seventy, the chieftain was wealthy and powerful and the *bani-al-Hashim* was considered the greatest of the tribes. Though his courage and his ambition remained undimmed, he also now had far more to lose.

Faisr al-Hashim had aged well, despite the hard life of a nomadic raider. The desert tribes still largely enjoyed the longevity of years that the ancient Nehekharans once had. Now comfortably middle-aged, the handsome chieftain had a touch of grey in his beard and streaks in his raven-black hair; years of squinting against the sun and wind had etched deep wrinkles around his eyes, but his body was still strong and his steps swift and light.

By contrast, Alcadizzar seemed to have aged hardly at all. By his reckoning, he was a hundred and ten years old, but he possessed the physical qualities of a man still in his prime. Though Neferata's elixir had long since faded in strength, it had not disappeared entirely. He was still stronger and swifter than any normal man and his wounds healed with extraordinary speed. Perhaps it was because he'd been fed the blasphemous liquid while still forming in the womb—Alcadizzar had numerous theories, but no real answers. Though Faisr and his fellow tribesmen could not have failed to notice, they never questioned it, either. Such was the loyalty—and the secretive nature—of the tribes.

Certainly, he and Faisr had become a fearsomely effective pair since Alcadizzar's adoption into the tribe. As the chieftain's prominence had grown in the wake of Bashir al-Rukhba's decline, he had entrusted much of the tribe's raiding strategies to the prince, which allowed Alcadizzar to refine his tactical skills and test the capabilities of the desert raiders to their fullest. The *bani-al-Hashim* had quickly become the scourge of the Golden Plain and, more importantly, had earned the respect and support of many of the other tribes.

All of which made the problem before Alcadizzar that much more irksome. Their choices for dealing with the stronghold were limited. They couldn't very well starve the garrison out and the only way inside was through the single reinforced gate. No doubt there was timber in the fort that could be put to use as a battering ram, but breaking through the gate would be costly and then the soldiers inside would fight like trapped rats. The prince shook his head, thinking of great commanders like Rakh-amn-hotep, who sent thousands of men to their deaths during the war against the Usurper. He'd lost six brothers tonight and had no interest in losing any more just to make a point.

He was just about to tell Sayyid to complete the plunder of the fort and then instruct the raiders to withdraw, when the stocky warrior straightened and pointed a finger at the citadel. "What's that?"

The prince glanced past the upturned wagons, and saw that the citadel's heavy gate had been partially raised. A hand was extended from beneath the gate, holding out an empty sword scabbard for all to see. Alcadizzar blinked in surprise.

"They want to parley," he told Faisr.

The chieftain was just as surprised as he. "Why?"

Alcadizzar shrugged. "We'd have to ask them."

"It's got to be a trick," Sayyid growled. It was well known among the tribes that the city folk had no conception of honour.

Alcadizzar could hardly argue with the veteran warrior, but his curiosity was nevertheless piqued. On impulse, he said, "Let me talk to them."

"Are you mad?" Sayyid exclaimed. "They'll shoot you full of arrows!"

The prince managed a grin. "I'm not worried. The Lahmians are terrible shots. Faisr remembers. Don't you, chief?"

Faisr grunted, and then slowly, his face split in one of his dazzling smiles. "I remember," he said. "All right, Ubaid. See what they have to say. We can't leave until we empty the stables, anyway."

Alcadizzar nodded in gratitude to the chieftain, then strode towards the overturned wagons. "Parley!" he cried to the tribesmen, pulling his headscarf away from his face. "Let the city dwellers send out their emissary."

No one stirred within the stronghold until Alcadizzar had emerged into view from around the wagons. He crossed the open ground between the barricade and the stronghold and stopped at the halfway point, arms folded. A moment later, a stunned-looking Lahmian in a lieutenant's iron scale armour ducked underneath the gate and stepped warily into the marshalling ground. From the look on his face, the soldier expected to be filled full of arrows at any moment.

"What do you want, city dweller?" Alcadizzar shouted.

The Lahmian officer drew a long breath. "My captain, the honourable Neresh Anku-aten, wishes to discuss terms."

Alcadizzar fought to keep his expression neutral. Who did this aristocrat think he was? "Tell your captain that he is not in a position to dictate terms. He has nowhere to go."

The lieutenant paled. With an effort, he managed a nod. "Captain Neresh is well aware of this," the Lahmian replied. "But he wishes to avoid further bloodshed."

“Then tell the honourable captain to surrender!” Alcadizzar shot back.

“He will, so long as you guarantee safe passage for his men,” the lieutenant replied.

For a moment, Alcadizzar wasn’t certain he’d heard the man correctly. “Your captain wishes to surrender?”

“Only if his terms are met. He is adamant on that.”

Alcadizzar didn’t reply at first. It didn’t make any sense. His mind raced, trying to divine what the captain was thinking. Why abandon a perfectly secure stronghold when all he had to do was wait for a few more hours? If it was a trick, he was hard-pressed to discern it. Finally, the prince spread his hands.

“Very well,” Alcadizzar told the man. “Tell your captain that he and the garrison are free to go. If they leave their weapons and armour inside the stronghold, they may leave freely. Upon my honour, no harm will come to them.”

The lieutenant eyed Alcadizzar dubiously for a moment more, then ducked his head in a quick bow and hurried back inside the stronghold.

Alcadizzar waited, still not quite daring to believe what he’d been told. But a few minutes later, the stronghold’s gate began to creak upwards. When it was fully open, the first survivors of the garrison emerged into the night air, clad only in their under-tunics and britches. They filed past the prince with downcast eyes, heading for the gate.

Over the next few minutes, nearly a hundred and fifty Lahmian soldiers marched by—more than double the small force that Faisr had brought with him. Last of all came the fort’s captain, a tall, black-haired noble whose handsome face was twisted in a bitter scowl. He stopped in front of Alcadizzar and inclined his head curtly to the prince.

“You are the leader of the raiders?” he asked.

Alcadizzar shook his head. “I serve Faisr al-Hashim the Great, chieftain of the *bani-al-Hashim*.”

“My men will come to no harm?”

“Have I not already given you my word, Captain Neresh?”

The Lahmian grunted in reply, as though not quite daring to believe what he’d been told. “I suppose you have my thanks then,” he grudgingly said.

Neresh made to leave, but Alcadizzar’s curiosity got the better of him. He stopped the captain with a touch on his arm. “A question, captain?”

The Lahmian turned. “What is it?”

“Why surrender?” the prince asked. “You must have known we couldn’t have taken the stronghold without a fight.”

Neresh’s expression turned bitter. “Of course,” he replied. “That wasn’t the point.”

The Lahmian sighed. “Eventually you’d have broken down the gate. Once inside, the fight would have been bloody, I promise you that.”

“I have no doubt as to your courage, captain,” Alcadizzar said. “Which is why this confounds me so.”

Neresh sighed. "Perhaps we could have held the stronghold. Perhaps not. What is certain is that many of my men would have died, and that would have been a terrible crime."

Alcadizzar frowned. "When is it a crime to defend the honour of one's city?" he asked.

The captain stared at Alcadizzar for a moment, his expression haunted. "That's something I've been asking myself for a very long time," he said, and turned away.

Alcadizzar watched the captain go. Forty years ago, such a reply from one of the city's nobles would have been inconceivable. Had the spirit of Lahmia's citizens truly sunk that far?

The prince followed after the captain, considering the possibilities. He found Faisr still standing at the outer gate, speaking tersely with a dust-stained rider. Belatedly, Alcadizzar realised the man was clad all in black.

"Things have changed," Alcadizzar said to Faisr as the chieftain turned his way.

"Yes they have," Faisr agreed. His expression was sombre. "We have to go. The Daughter of the Sands is dead."

According to custom, the tribes never gathered together at the same location from one gathering to the next. This time, it was decided by Suleima's last wish that the tribes would gather far to the north and west, at the very edge of the Golden Plain. This was wild country that had never been tamed by any man, Lahmian or otherwise, with unspoiled woods and a bubbling spring in the centre of a thicket-bound forest. It was hard going, even for the desert horsemen, but the tribes pressed doggedly on, determined to honour Suleima's passing.

The *bani-al-Hashim* now numbered almost four hundred warriors, born from many advantageous marriages to the other tribes or adopted into the ranks over the years. This far from Lahmia, they rode in their full panoply. Silk standards crackled in the cold wind blowing off the mountains and their fine robes fairly glowed in the sunlight. Gold and silver twinkled at ear, neck and wrist, from the buckles of their wide leather belts and the scabbards of their swords.

The raising of the tents was a sombre affair. The men touched neither wine nor *chanouri*, out of respect for the dead, nor did they tempt the fates by gambling. In the afternoon, the chiefs all came together and offered gifts to their ever-hungry god: stallions' blood, gold and silver coin, fine iron swords taken from the Lahmians, and more. Then they went into the forest to gather wood for a funeral pyre.

In the camp, the women were baking bread mingled with ash for the ceremonial meal at sunset. The children had been left to watch the herds at the edge of the forest, several leagues distant, so the tent city was eerily silent. The men kept to their tents, resting after the long night's ride and waiting for the funeral rites to begin.

Alcadizzar spent the long afternoon alone in his tent, musing over the raid at the fort. All the tribes were abuzz with the news, and jealous at the wealth of plunder that the *bani-al-Hashim* had taken—not just weapons and armour, but fine horses and a chest full of coin that had been kept inside the fort's stronghold. He had little doubt that several of the other tribes would be tempted to raid the other forts now, eager for loot and bragging rights. He had little doubt that the first few attacks would be successful, even forewarned as the Lahmians were sure to be. What interested him

was how the city dwellers would respond at that point. With perhaps as many as half of their watch-forts put to the torch, they would have to respond in some fashion—either a massive military campaign to punish the tribes and drive them from the plain, or else a retreat back to the safety of the city walls. When he'd begun planning the raid, Alcadizzar had thought the former response was likely. But after speaking with Captain Neresh, he suspected the latter.

Year by year, little by little, Lahmia had been growing increasingly isolated. The caravans had dwindled to a fraction of their former numbers and the waves of immigration from poorer cities like Mahrak and Lybaras had ceased entirely. Though Lahmia still maintained its preeminence in Nehekhara by virtue of its economic and financial influence—and, he suspected, because Neferata was twisting the minds of the other cities' emissaries—its position was becoming increasingly tenuous. News from the few desert immigrants left inside the city spoke of a pervasive atmosphere of terror. Deaths and disappearances were a way of life; anger and frustration at the impotence of the City Guard had given way to the cynical belief that the royal court was actually in league with the monsters. Even the Temple of Blood was coming under suspicion, something that would have been unthinkable twenty years before. But the more restless the populace became, the more the Lahmian king tightened his grip on the city. The gates were guarded zealously, day and night, and none could pass through without papers signed by one of the royal viziers. Even an approach from the sea was fraught with risk, as the Lahmians patrolled the beaches and the dockside day and night.

The prince reclined against the cushions and rubbed at his eyes. How much longer, he thought? How many years had he already sacrificed for the sake of his duty? How many more must he give up before he could finally begin the life he'd craved since childhood?

Soon, he told himself. It has to be soon. The city is falling apart from within. Cracks will start to appear. Have faith, and wait a little longer.

"Faith," the prince muttered. "Faith in what?"

"The gods of Nehekhara are gone," spoke a woman's voice. "Believe in yourself, if nothing else."

Alcadizzar whirled, scattering cushions and nearly tangling himself in his own robes. Across the tent from him sat a young woman, clad in black silk robes. A black neckscarf framed her sharp-featured face and contrasted against the burnished gold of her eyes. The line of henna tattoos along her jawline and down her slender neck reminded him at once of that night outside the gathering tent, twenty-five years before.

The prince stared at her in shock. "How did you get in here?"

Ophiria sniffed derisively. "Had you a wife and a few daughters, I would never have gotten within a mile of your tent," she said. The seer spread her hands, taking in the well-appointed but otherwise empty tent. "You have no one to watch out for you. You don't even keep a *dog*. Do you enjoy being so lonely?"

Alcadizzar scowled at her. "What do you want?"

Ophiria leaned back slightly, tucking her feet beneath her knees. "You could be a proper host and offer me some tea, to begin with," she said, with a haughty tilt to her chin.

The prince stared at her blankly for a moment. "I don't think you should be here," he said.

Ophiria merely blinked at him with her sphinx-like eyes. "Remember to put a bit of honey at the bottom of the cup before you pour the water," she said.

Alcadizzar sighed and went to the silver tray that one of Faisr's daughters had brought him a short while ago. The water in the brass kettle was still quite warm. He poured her a cup of tea while he tried to collect his thoughts.

A few moments later, Alcadizzar set the small, ceramic cup before the seer. Ophiria took it in both hands and raised it to her chin. She breathed deeply, and a faint smile crossed her face. "Treasures from the far east," she murmured, and took a tiny sip. She raised her eyes to Alcadizzar. "Thank you."

"Why are you here, Ophiria?" Alcadizzar asked.

The seer arched a slender eyebrow. "You know my name? Then you must know that in a few hours, Suleima will be gone, and I will be given to Khsar as his new bride. After that, you and I will never have the opportunity to speak like this." She took another tiny sip of tea. "Before that happens, there are some things you and I must discuss."

Bemused, Alcadizzar settled onto the rugs across from Ophiria. "What is there to talk about?"

Ophiria peered at him over the rim of the cup. "For starters, why have you lied to Faisr all this time? What is your real name?"

The prince was taken aback. "My name? Why, it's—"

"Carefully now," Ophiria said. Her voice was soft, but her eyes glinted coldly. "Do not presume to lie to me, city dweller. Especially when so much is at stake."

Alcadizzar paused. Suddenly, his mouth had gone completely dry.

"Very well," he said. "My name is Alcadizzar. I am a prince of Rasetra."

"You lie."

Alcadizzar's eyes widened. "No! It's the truth—"

"You are no prince," Ophiria said, cutting him off with a raised finger. "I see you resting upon a throne, with a crook and sceptre in your hands. You are a king."

Alcadizzar clenched his jaw. "In time perhaps, but not yet. There is something that must be done first."

"And what does this task of yours have to do with my people?"

Ophiria's gaze was sharp and direct, like a poised blade. It unnerved him, to a degree, but at the same time he found himself eager to finally be able to speak of the secrets he'd kept for so many years. After a moment, he reached his decision. Without a word, he went back to the tray and poured a second cup of tea, then sat before Ophiria and told her everything.

She listened to it all in perfect silence, nodding at times and sipping her tea. When his story was done, she stared at him thoughtfully.

"And what happens once you've obtained this evidence of Neferata's crimes?"

Alcadizzar sighed. "Then the other great cities will have no choice but to take action. We'll march on Lahmia, and—"

"I mean, what happens to my people once you've used us to get what you're after?" Ophiria said.

The prince shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I would go to the chiefs and ask for their help," he said. "I suppose Faisr will be angry with me, but I will beg his forgiveness. The evil at Lahmia's heart threatens all of Nehekhar. Everything I've done has been for the good of the entire land. I hope he'll understand that."

"And if the chiefs help you, what then?"

"I don't understand."

Ophiria put down her cup and leaned forwards. "Once you've driven out these creatures and claimed your throne, what becomes of the people who adopted you as one of their own, twenty-five years ago?" She swept her hand through the air, gesturing at the walls of the tent. "Will you bring us to your city and keep us at court like trained hounds?"

A pained expression came over Alcadizzar's face.

"I see," he said in a hollow voice. "You think I see the tribes as just a means to an end. That as I soon as I've gotten what I want from them, I'll forget my oaths and cast them aside."

"It's happened before. Many times."

"That's true," Alcadizzar said. "But not by me. I'm no city dweller, Ophiria. This is my home, as it has been for many years. These are my people. Let me ask you a question now, what is it that the tribes truly want? Tell me, and if it's in my power, I will give it to them."

Ophiria studied him carefully, searching for any sign of deception. Her expression softened, and she leaned back. Her gaze fell to the teacup.

"We want forgiveness," she replied.

"What?" the prince gave her a baffled look. "Who am I to forgive you anything?"

"On the contrary," Ophiria replied. "I think you're the man we've waited hundreds of years to meet."

Alcadizzar shook his head. "I don't understand."

"No, of course not." Another ghostly smile crossed Ophiria's face. "You've only been with us for a quarter-century. We haven't given up *all* of our secrets." She sighed. "Have you ever wondered why the tribes came here, so long ago, and why we still remain?"

"Of course. I've asked Faisr about it several times, but he never would tell me."

The seer nodded. "That is because he was ashamed. It is a hard thing for any man, least of all a chieftain, to admit that his people are oathbreakers."

Alcadizzar straightened. "Oathbreakers? What do you mean?"

Ophiria sighed. "The people of the desert live and die by their oaths, Alcadizzar. It has always been thus. Khsar is a terrible and pitiless god, but our oaths to him allowed us to prosper in a land that confounds and kills other men. We lived in the Great Desert for centuries and we were content. Then came Settra, the Empire-Maker, and we were sorely tested."

The prince nodded. "I've studied his campaigns. The desert tribes came the closest to defeating him of any army he ever faced."

"Yes," Ophiria agreed. "Long and bitter were the battles and many brave men were lost. But Settra's armies were endless. We won every fight except the last, but that one defeat changed everything." Her face twisted into a grimace. "The Empire-

Maker brought together the surviving chiefs and made them swear powerful oaths to him. Oaths to serve his kingdom and to protect it unto death. We swore it before Khsar, mingling our blood with his sacred sand. And we honoured that oath for many hundreds of years,” she said, then her face grew troubled. “Until the Usurper came.”

“I don’t understand,” Alcadizzar said. “Your people fought the Usurper during the war. In fact, desert riders under Shahid ben Alcazzar saved the host of Ka-Sabar at the battle of Zedri.”

“That is true,” Ophiria said. “And we harried his retreating army for many days afterwards. But then the Usurper sent his lieutenant, Arkhan, to claim vengeance. He struck at our very heart, falling upon Bhagar with his army. Shahid fought like a lion, but when his own brother was slain by Arkhan, his heart was broken. To our everlasting shame, the Red Fox surrendered to the enemy and cast aside the honour of his people.”

Ophiria brought up her knees and hugged them against her chest. “And so Arkhan took from us our beloved horses—the one and only gift Khsar ever truly gave us—and he slew them all. After that, we became his slaves, toiling in the desert to build his black tower and to die upon his sacrificial altar.”

“And when the war ended?”

The Usurper was overthrown, but what did that matter? We had broken our oath to Settra, and Khsar took no pity on us. The desert, which had once been our refuge, now turned against us. Our wells dried up and storms erased all our safe routes through the desert. Soon it was clear that we could not remain in the desert and survive.

“And so the tribes left the desert in shame. They travelled first to Khemri, intending to offer themselves as slaves in hopes of redeeming their honour. But the city was in ruins, its people fled.”

Ophiria picked up the teacup and drained it to the dregs. Staring into its murky depths, she said, “Just then, when all hope was lost, the Daughter of the Sands went into the ruined palace, where Settra himself once ruled. She knelt before the dais where the great throne had stood and sought guidance. That was when she received the prophecy. She said that Settra had come to her in a vision, and told her to seek the City of the Dawn. There we would find the next king of Khemri and the old oath would be made new again.”

Alcadizzar listened, and a chill went down his spine. “That seems very difficult to believe,” he said.

“And yet, here you are,” Ophiria said. “Suleima saw it, too. That was why she intervened at the gathering all those years ago. She saw our salvation in you.”

The prince was silent for a long while. Outside, the sun was setting and the camp was beginning to stir. Ophiria set aside the teacup. “The hour grows late, Alcadizzar,” she said. “And you haven’t answered my question.”

Alcadizzar sighed. His hand fell to the knife at his waist. “Give me your hand,” he said.

“Why?”

The prince drew his knife. After a moment’s pause, he drew its edge against the palm of his left hand. He gritted his teeth at the sting and watched beads of blood

swell up from the cut. "I have no sand of the desert," he said. "So I must ask for your hand instead."

Ophiria studied him for a moment, her face inscrutable. Slowly, she held out her hand.

Alcadizzar clasped it at once. Her skin was smooth and very warm.

"By my blood and by my honour, when I am king in Khemri, the sacred oath will be made new again," he said.

Ophiria smiled and withdrew her hand. "So be it, son of Khemri."

"But first, Lahmia must fall," Alcadizzar said. "My own honour requires it."

The seer stared down at the bloody imprint on her palm. She closed her hand.

"Watch the skies, oh king," she said. Her voice had a strange, distant quality that made the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. "Look for the sign. A pennon of fire across the night sky, forked like the tongue of the asp."

Alcadizzar frowned. "When?"

"In the fullness of time. When the pennon fills the night sky, wait in the woods to the north of the city and Lahmia will deliver itself into your hands."

"I—" A thousand questions raced through Alcadizzar's mind. But before he could ask them, Ophiria was gone, ducking out of the tent as silently as she'd appeared.

It was growing dark inside the tent. Alone in the growing gloom, Alcadizzar clenched his cut hand. "I will. By all the gods, I will."

The Crown of Nagash

*Nagashizzar, in the 105th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1222 Imperial Reckoning)*

The great chamber had been carved from the heart of the mountain with a single purpose in mind. Shaped purely by sorcery, it was precisely octagonal in shape, and measured a hundred and twenty-eight feet across from side to side. The soaring, arched ceiling reached its apex a hundred and twenty-eight feet from the flat, stone floor, above an octagonal pit sixteen feet across. Every inch of the chamber's surface—walls, floor and ceiling—had been inscribed with thousands of lines of precise runes. Each had been inlaid with the dust of the burning stone, causing them to pulse in precise, arcane patterns. Many of the runes were part of a complex formula designed to focus the magical energies of any ritual performed inside the space. Other runes, laid in concentric patterns along the floor and around the border of the chamber's sole doorway, were part of a series of complex wards designed to keep the spirits of the restless dead at bay. Of all the brooding towers and shadow-haunted vaults of Nagashizzar, this place had taken the longest to create; more than twenty years of tireless research and complex incantations had been employed and now, at last, its arcane purpose was about to be fulfilled.

At the far end of the great chamber, opposite the arched doorway, stood a towering throne carved from the living rock. It rose like a jagged stalagmite from the chamber floor, and was flanked on all four corners by squat, stone pillars topped by rune-etched braziers of thick bronze. Fist-sized chunks of burning stone sent up a pulsing, greenish mist from each of the braziers, wreathing the awful skeleton seated upon the throne.

Nagash had been carried into the sanctum upon a golden palanquin as soon as the chamber had first taken shape and had rested upon the throne ever since. His crushed bones had been fitted back together by a combination of sorcery and silver wire, but despite this, his grip on the physical world had continued to deteriorate. The damage wrought by Akatha during the battle at mine shaft four had proved impossible to repair; the broken bones would not fuse together again, no matter how much power Nagash employed. Far worse, though, had been the scorching heat of the ratmen's damned green fire. Had the fire-globe struck him directly, Nagash was certain that he wouldn't have survived; as it was, the sheer heat of the blast had somehow damaged his skeleton's ability to store the energies of the burning stone. The power leached from his bones constantly now. At first, Nagash had been forced to consume more

abn-i-khat on a daily basis in order to survive; now he required new infusions every minute, or his skeleton would disintegrate.

The victory at mine shaft four had been a narrow one. Despite losing many of their leaders, the enemy had managed to finally restore their lines at mine shaft eight; Nagash had not the forces necessary to overcome them. He had fallen well short of his goals and for the first few years after the battle, the necromancer had grimly prepared for the inevitable counter-assault. But, inexplicably, the enemy never managed to regain their strength. They remained on the defensive, allowing him to fight a war of attrition and slowly wear away at their defences. Within thirty-five years, his warriors had reached the last of the enemy's mine shafts, but Nagash could press no further. His forces had been reduced to just a thousand skeletons and a pair of war engines and he lacked the power to create any more. Despite the enemy's battered state, he was not confident he could overcome them, and any day could see the arrival of reinforcements that could well seal his doom.

As much as it galled him to do so, the only option was to negotiate. He mustered every warrior he could outside the enemy barricades as a show of force, let the enemy's scouts get a good look, and then sent Bragadh to offer terms. The very idea of treating with the ratmen as equals felt like a defeat of sorts, but Nagash was determined to at least profit from the exchange.

The vermin capitulated at once, never realising how precarious the situation truly was. Nagash reckoned that a few decades of trade with the ratmen was a small price to pay for a steady stream of slaves and raw materials that would allow him to rebuild Nagashizzar and restore his decimated army. A final reckoning with the ratmen could wait. At long last, Nagash could turn his attention back to Nehekhara and the vengeance he was due.

The necromancer's burning gaze swept across the great chamber. Around the edge of the great pit in the centre of the room, Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus were arrayed at cardinal points around a ritual circle of pulsing runes. Their droning chant reverberated through the air, intoning the first of the five great incantations Nagash had taught them. The ritual chant stoked the energies of hundreds of pounds of *abn-i-khat* that had been painstakingly gathered and arranged in layers inside the pit. A twining column of sorcerous fire rose from its depths, whirling and pulsing in the air above the pit like the heat of a vast forge.

Beyond the hissing column of flame, Nagash could see pale, nebulous shapes hovering beyond the chamber door. The ghosts of the past had lingered there for years, watching and waiting for his demise. Was Neferem there, he wondered, or Thutep, or that damned priest Nebunefer? He hoped so. He wanted them to look upon his labours and despair.

Nagash studied the roaring furnace. He felt its heat and the currents of power that flowed within it. Far above, beyond the surface of the great mountain, the dreadful green moon burned full and bright. Satisfied, he turned his attention to his immortals.

All is in readiness, he told them. Attend to the crucible.

Resting on the floor at the foot of the dais was a great crucible of stone. Shaped by sorcery and weighing many tons, its mouth had been etched with a thick band of magical runes that corresponded to the second great incantation. Silently, the immortals withdrew from the furnace and proceeded to a pair of low, broad tables set

to either side of Nagash's throne. From there, they gathered flat, hexagonal plaques of pure *abn-i-khat* and placed them carefully inside the crucible. The plaques were arranged in a specific order, so that the runes etched into their surface came together to form a complex sigil, one that Nagash had spent many years creating.

Once the burning stone was in place, the immortals filled the crucible with alternating ingots of lead and a silvery-grey metal unlike anything known to humankind. It was far stronger than bronze, and the secrets of working the metal with hammer and anvil were unknown even to Nagash. The skaven said it was called *gromril*, and claimed to have plundered it at great cost from an underground realm far to the north. He had recognised its value at once.

When the last of the *gromril* had been laid in the crucible, the immortals took up position around the stone vessel and, at Nagash's command, began the second great incantation. Power crackled in the air between them, until finally, with a ponderous sound of grating stone, the crucible began to move. It dragged slightly across the floor, then rose slowly into the air. Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus raised their arms, hands outstretched, and began to guide the floating vessel towards the waiting furnace.

It was slow, difficult work. The massive crucible, suspended solely by the power and will of the novice sorcerers alone, inched along at a wearying pace. Finally, hours later, the vessel slipped over the edge of the pit and into the roaring column of unnatural flame. The crucible bobbed like a cork over the magical updrafts, rising easily towards the ceiling, until it floated nearly ten feet above the surface of the floor. Ribbons of flame boiled along the crucible's rough surface and poured over the vessel's rim. Slowly but steadily, the runes etched into its surface began to glow with mounting intensity.

The second great ritual ended; now the third began. This time, Nagash began the rite, quickly subordinating the immortals as they worked to keep the crucible poised in the heart of the flame. Soon, a turbulent, multi-hued glow began to emanate from inside the vessel as the elements within were forced to combine.

Impurities boiled away in hissing bursts of poisonous steam as Nagash patiently worked his will upon the molten materials. The mists surrounding the throne dissipated swiftly as the powerful ritual consumed them.

For hours Nagash shaped the metal. When at last he judged that the molten ore was ready, he commanded his immortals to bring forth the moulds.

Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus returned to the long tables beside Nagash's throne. Each one lifted a heavy block of obsidian and struggled to carry them back to the roaring flames. Each of the immortals made four trips in all, until twelve blocks of glossy stone stood at the edge of the glowing pit.

The three immortals were moving with great difficulty now. Their ancient armour and tattered robes were starting to disintegrate from the proximity to the furnace. Bragadh's dark hair was gone, singed away, and his skin had taken on the colour of brittle parchment. Still, the northmen returned to their places around the pit and the fourth great incantation began.

Once again, the immortals reached out with their magic and gripped the floating crucible. Guided by Nagash, the vessel was pulled from the furnace. Bragadh, Diarid and Thestus limped around the perimeter of the pit as the crucible shifted, closing in

around the vessel from three sides. Balancing the huge container precariously, Nagash and his immortals tipped it towards the first of the moulds. The fiercely glowing ore rose thickly to the brim and then a thin, precise stream of metal fell from the vessel and splashed onto the mould's fill hole. Air howled like a tormented spirit as it was forced from the mould by the seething metal and currents of uncontrolled magic whiplashed through the air. Theustus and Diarid staggered as they were struck; their armour flaked away like ash, the flesh beneath blackened in an instant. The two immortals recoiled in agony, but Nagash froze them in place. Once begun, the rite had to be seen through to the end.

When the first mould was filled, Nagash moved on to the next. One by one, the blocks were filled, and the three northmen bore the brunt of the merciless heat and the wild magic. It flayed their flesh and burrowed into their bones, but the necromancer would not relent. He forced them to return the crucible to the fire and then ordered them to begin the fifth invocation.

Diarid and Theustus limped painfully to the first mould, while Bragadh staggered like a broken puppet towards the table on Nagash's right. With charred hands he gripped the haft of a stone hammer and then made his way painfully back to his kinsmen.

Now came the most difficult part of the rite. Still concentrating on the rite and holding the immortals in place, Nagash turned his attention to his own shattered body. After a moment, his finger bones twitched, then, with a hollow, scraping sound, his elbows and knees. The dust of years seeped from his joints as the necromancer rose slowly to his feet.

One step at a time, Nagash descended from his throne. Tendrils of wild magic wrapped about his skeletal frame, creating livid, thread-like arcs of power along his bones. As he approached the first pair of moulds, Bragadh lifted his ravaged arms and struck the first stone block. Pent-up energies blazed from the stone, leaving glowing scars along Bragadh's forearms, but the northman lifted the hammer to strike again.

On the third blow, the mould split apart. The two stone halves fell to the floor with a crash; within one lay the curved, red-hot surface of a dark metal breastplate. Nagash turned his gaze to Diarid and the northman reached for the armour with bare, trembling hands. Dead flesh sizzled as he gripped the metal and pulled it free. Then Diarid turned and laid the breastplate against Nagash's chest. Moments later, the second mould was broken open, and Theustus lifted the armour's backplate free. When the two pieces were joined together, their seams fused in a flash of blazing, green light. The heat was agonising, far worse than anything Nagash had known as a mortal, but still he commanded the immortals to continue.

For hours, the process continued. One piece of metal after another was laid atop Nagash's skeleton and fused into place, creating a suit of all-enclosing armour more complex than anything human hands could produce. When the metal cooled, its surface was rough and black as night. Though designed with surpassing cunning, the armour itself was plain, even ugly. Like everything else in Nagashizzar, it was not made to please the eye, but to serve its master's purpose.

As the pieces of armour were sealed about him, Nagash felt the change at once. The constant draining of power from his bones ebbed... then stopped entirely. The

uncontrolled energies contained within the chamber's layered wards began to flow towards him, sinking through the armour and becoming trapped there. His strength increased with every passing moment, far surpassing that of mortal men.

Finally, the last pieces of armour were fitted over Nagash's feet. The heavy, stone hammer fell to the floor of the chamber with a dull thud. Bragadh's ruined body swayed unsteadily on bony feet. The strain of the great rite had all but destroyed him and his kinsmen, reducing them to pathetic collections of pitted hide and brittle bones. Their faces—what was left of them—were frozen in masks of unspeakable torment. Compelled by Nagash's will they gathered before him.

The necromancer raised his armoured hands and studied them, savouring the power that pulsed like living blood beneath the dark metal. Only his skull had been left exposed; it seemed to float above the throat of the breastplate, wreathed in ribbons of cold, sorcerous flame.

You have done well, Nagash told the suffering immortals. Better than I expected. But now your usefulness is at an end.

The necromancer held out his hands and, with a thought, stripped the immortals of their power. In an instant, their remaining flesh shrivelled and their bones collapsed as their souls were cast into the realms of the dead. They departed from the mortal plane with awful, soul-wrenching moans, drawing a cruel laugh from Nagash.

Go and tell Neferem that she will never know vengeance, he said to the wretched ghosts. I am Nagash, the Undying King! Death has no dominion over me!

When they were gone, the necromancer turned his gaze to the chamber doorway. The lingering spirits were nowhere to be seen.

One day, they would be made to suffer, he vowed. One day, when the world was his, he would call them back from the bleak lands and enslave them for all time. He savoured the thought for a moment, but then set it aside.

Nagash strode through the tangled piles of bone that had once been his champions and headed towards the crucible. He plucked the stone hammer from the floor.

There was one thing left to be done.

At the edge of the furnace, Nagash extended his open hand. The massive crucible wavered amid the flames and then obediently drifted towards him. The enormous pile of burning stone that had fuelled the rite had been nearly consumed; the crucible was floating much lower in the air than before. Only a small amount of the magical ore remained, bubbling away in its depths.

Nagash drew the crucible from the fire and set it upon the floor with a bone-jarring thud. Baleful green vapour rose from the molten ore within. As it cooled, the necromancer stared into its seething depths and began a sixth incantation, one far greater and more complex than the rest. The liquid metal stirred in response to the incantation, its components ordering itself in response to Nagash's commands.

After half an hour, the metal had cooled enough to hold a rudimentary shape, a rough disc, the size of a small shield. Nagash continued to pour magical energy into the metal, until he was aware of every mote and its position in relation to the rest. He was creating a structure within, similar to the one he'd built into the Black Pyramid centuries ago, although far more sophisticated and refined.

When the structure was locked in place by the solidifying ore, Nagash reached into the crucible with his left hand. The red-hot metal came away easily from the polished surface of the vessel. The necromancer turned the disc-shaped ingot this way and that, inspecting it for any flaws. Satisfied, he uttered a swift incantation. Dust and ash rose from the floor, surrounding him—

—and were swiftly torn away by the teeth of a howling wind, high atop Nagashizzar's tallest spire. Thick, heavy clouds roiled overhead, almost close enough to touch. The great fortress spread beneath him in a dense profusion of towers, manufactories, curtain walls and hulking redoubts. To the west, the poisoned sea heaved restlessly, churned by the dreadful occultation occurring high above.

Nagash cast his gaze skywards, to the ghostly smear of green light seeping like a bloodstain through the heavy overcast. He raised the disc of steaming metal overhead like an offering and spoke words of power that punched a whirling tunnel through the clouds. The bale-moon was revealed in all its terrible glory, eclipsing the face of Neru and blazing like the glaring eye of a malevolent god.

A few paces away, illuminated by the ghastly glow, sat a hulking bronze anvil. Beneath the awful moonlight, Nagash laid the disc on the anvil and lifted the stone hammer. As the words of the seventh and greatest of the night's incantations rang through his mind, he began shaping the red-hot ore.

Each ringing blow reverberated through the stones of Nagashizzar, down into the mountain and through the dark depths of the mines. It rippled through the earth like the beating of a terrible heart, reaching into stone crypts and worm-ridden graves the length and breadth of the young world. Mouldering bones twitched, stirring up the dust of ages. Bruised eyelids fluttered and blind eyes slithered in their sockets, searching for the source of the portentous sound. In the desert, packs of jackals forgot their carrion and filled the air with their chilling cries.

Slowly but surely, the glowing metal bent to the necromancer's will. The work was difficult, for Nagash was no metalsmith, but for the object to serve its purpose, it had to be shaped by his own hand and mind. The smithing was every bit as much a part of the rite as the incantation itself.

As the wide, heavy circlet took shape, Nagash poured not just magical power into the metal, but memories as well. From his bitter days as hierophant in Khemri, to the violent overthrow of Thutep, to his years of iron-fisted rule over all Nehekhara. He infused it with his lust for Neferem and his hatred for the gods of the once-Blessed Land; with his slaughter of the people of Mahrak and his fury at the betrayal of the army of Lahmia. More than anything else, he filled the metal with his lust for vengeance and his desire to rule over all mankind.

The hammer fell tirelessly, fuelled by hatred and ruthless ambition. There was no beauty or grace in the crown Nagash forged, only a dark and eternal purpose: to draw a veil of night over the world, and rule as king over a realm of the dead.

Forged by dark magic and infused with Nagash's necromantic essence, the crown would magnify his powers a thousandfold. It was both a symbol and a potent tool, one that would seal the doom of the great cities of Nehekhara.

The green moon passed across the sky as Nagash worked, heedless of the ambitions of necromancers and men. By the time that the last hammer blow fell, the clouds had passed westwards and dawn was paling the sky to the east.

The stone hammer was charred black, riven with hundreds of cracks. When Nagash tossed it aside it struck the flagstones and shattered with a splintering *crack*.

Nagash the Undying lord of Nagashizzar and Master of the Wastes, gripped the jagged, smouldering crown and raised it like a challenge to the eastern sky.

The necromancer placed the dark crown upon his brow. Darkness fell over the great mountain like a funeral shroud.

A Howl from the Wasteland

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 105th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1222 Imperial Reckoning)*

The tale of Ptra's virtuous wife Neru and his jealous concubine Sakhmet were well known to the people of Nehekhara, even in an age bereft of gods and their blessings. While Ptra the Father ruled in the heavens, so the stories went, Neru the Mother tended the gardens of the afterlife, and welcomed the souls of the dead who had earned their place in paradise. In the garden she was attended by her many daughters and guarded by a pack of ever-vigilant sphinxes, but when her husband's daily labours had ceased and he passed beyond the rim of the world to the west, she would rise from the garden and watch over her beloved children by night, keeping them safe from the beasts of the wild and the spirits of the waste. And each night, the vindictive Sakhmet would follow in her wake, glaring balefully at the children of the gods and scheming to usurp Ptra's beloved wife. Most nights, Neru would triumph, her swift feet guiding her across the heavens—but once in a great while, Sakhmet's wiles would bedevil her, and the Green Witch would usurp Neru's place in the sky. When that happened, all the land trembled in fear, as the creatures of the darkness and the deep earth would rise up and work their evils on mankind.

Never before in human history had Sakhmet usurped Neru during the year of Djaf, god of the dead. The implications, thought W'soran, were momentous indeed.

In keeping with her spiteful nature, Sakhmet did not follow a predictable course through the sky. A great many priests had attempted to divine it, particularly those of Settra's Mortuary Cult, who had devoted themselves to the resurrection of the souls of the dead. Of them all, Nagash had come the closest to predicting her movements, drawing on the accumulated observations of the cult and applying formulae more complex and visionary than any other liche priest had attempted before. An entire volume of Nagash's tomes was dedicated to his observations and they predicted an occultation during the one hundred and fifth year of Djaf's ascendancy.

True to the Undying King's predictions, that fateful night had arrived.

W'soran had begun his preparations for the night's ritual many months in advance. The proper sigils were studied, refined, and laid out on the floor of the sanctum with a mixture of quicksilver and ground human bone. The ancient skull of the cursed king, Thutep, was brought forth, and still more rituals were performed upon the relic, to better attune it to W'soran's spells. His thralls combed the dockyards and the slums in search of young children, who died each night beneath

the necromancer's sacrificial knife. Their life energies boiled within W'soran's shrivelled veins, held in readiness for the coming eclipse.

Over the last few days, he'd sensed it: a growing disturbance in the aether, like the rising wind before a fierce summer storm. Each evening, Sakhmet's course came closer and closer to matching Neru's. W'soran noted each observation with care, his shrivelled lips drawn back in a death's-head grin as the celestial pieces slid neatly into place.

Tonight, the conditions would be ideal. W'soran could not possibly fail. When Sakhmet's power parted the veil between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead, he would call forth the spirit of Nagash.

The ritual's first steps were begun at sunset, just as the Green Witch appeared on the horizon. A dozen thralls attended upon the necromancer, clad in robes of red and black, their breasts marked in chalk with arcane sigils of power. Incense was lit in braziers of polished bone. As the first, telltale ripples spread through the aether, W'soran began the first of seven rituals of warding, preparing the chamber for the whirlwind to come.

The preparatory rites took many hours, while Sakhmet stalked Ptra's wife across the heavens. Beyond the temple walls, the people of the city shuttered themselves inside their homes and prayed to the forsaken gods for protection, sensing that something terrible was approaching. Trading ships at anchor in the harbour threw offerings of gold and silver into the dark waters; even the City Guard abandoned their nightly patrols and retreated to the safety of their barracks. As far as they were concerned, anyone foolish enough to ignore the signs and go about on the streets tonight deserved whatever fate befell them.

By midnight, Neru had reached her zenith and Sakhmet had crept up behind her like an assassin, nearly close enough to touch. Jackals gibbered and howled in the rocky lands south of the city, while off to the north-west a strange, otherworldly display of lights roiled and flickered on the horizon. And then, in what seemed like the space of just a few moments, the Green Witch overtook her prey, smothering Neru's light with her own and bathing the earth in a bilious green glow.

Deep inside the temple, a gust of wind rose inside the windowless sanctum, stirring the clouds of incense into ghostly shapes and plucking at the pages of Nagash's tomes. The aether began to roil.

And then, a faint, tolling sound, like the portentous note of a temple bell. It reverberated in the necromancer's bones. W'soran sighed in satisfaction, the breath rattling in the back of his throat. Dusty robes flapping, he rushed to the lectern that had been placed before the summoning circle. His thralls shuffled forwards, obeying W'soran's will, and formed a semicircle to either side of him. The necromancer's hands rested lightly upon the ancient pages of the tome.

Another bell-like note rippled through the aether, rhythmic as a hammer upon an anvil, or a fist against a door. W'soran raised his arms. "I hear you," he rasped. "Lord of the Dead, I hear you. Come forth!"

W'soran began to chant the first of the invocations he had prepared, focussing his energies on the yellowed skull of Thutep in the centre of the summoning circle. Timing was critical, for the occultation would only last until dawn, and the great rite would take hours to complete.

Words of power rolled easily from W'soran's lips as the invocation took shape. Stolen energies flowed from his body into the cursed king's skull and the necromancer felt his perceptions beginning to expand, reaching beyond the walls of the sanctum and into the dark lands of the dead. As he worked, the aether continued to tremble with hammer-like blows, each one louder and more penetrating than the one before.

The physical world grew dim to W'soran's eyes. A bleak, twilit plain stretched before him, lit by a vague, greyish luminescence. The air within the sanctum turned cold and dank in the space of a single instant. The breath of the chanting thralls made ghostly plumes of vapour in the air. Glittering frost radiated outwards from the summoning circle across the stone floor.

Time ceased to have meaning. Gradually, as the invocation reached its conclusion and W'soran's mind adjusted to his new-found perceptions, he realised that there was movement upon the plain. A vast multitude of shadowy figures surrounded him, stumbling wearily through the dimness. In the echoing silence between the hammer blows, W'soran thought he heard faint sounds—the desperate cries of the lost, begging for release.

All at once, W'soran felt himself teetering upon a precipice. The twilit plain pulled at him, threatening to tear his soul from his shrivelled body. But the necromancer was prepared for this. Quickly he began a second incantation, one that created an arbitrary threshold between the realms within the confines of the ritual circle.

The hammer blows were coming faster now. The vibrations from one blow had barely ended before the next one began and they exerted a strange kind of weight on W'soran's soul. The necromancer could not account for it, but neither could he let it stop him. He forged ahead with the second incantation, drawing deeply from his reserves of stolen vigour.

There was a crash. Several moments passed before W'soran could discern whether it was a physical or a spiritual sound. Still chanting, he turned his head, and with an effort, the boundaries of the sanctum swam into focus. Ushoran leaned drunkenly against one of the heavy wooden tables, knocking a stack of scrolls and leather-bound books onto the floor. Just then, another ringing blow thundered through the aether, and W'soran saw the immortal's face twist into a grimace of almost childlike terror.

Ushoran's lips moved. W'soran could not hear his voice over the keening of the dead, but he could read what they said. *That sound! What is it? What's happening?*

W'soran felt a flicker of surprise. How could Ushoran sense what was happening? For a moment he nearly lost control of the second incantation. Swiftly the necromancer tore his attention away from Ushoran and focussed once more on the summoning circle.

Doom. Doom. Doom. W'soran was buffeted by the ringing blows. His bones felt as heavy as lead. The necromancer redoubled his efforts, shouting the words of the invocation into the aether. Slowly but surely, the threshold took shape.

The unearthly pressure was mounting. W'soran could almost feel his bones beginning to warp beneath the strain. Snarling, he launched into the third invocation as soon as the second one was complete. His spirit responded to the arcane

commands, extending from his body according to his will and approaching the threshold he'd created. The wails of the lost grew louder, tearing at his senses.

DOOM.

W'soran pushed his spirit onwards, drawing ever closer to the precipice. He could feel the emptiness of the space beyond and, for the first time in ages, the immortal felt afraid. This was what awaited him, should his mortal body be destroyed. The thought chilled him to the core. And yet he did not turn back.

DOOM.

At the threshold, the power of the bleak land increased tenfold. W'soran struggled against its terrible pull. His reserves of power were reaching their limits; before long the ritual's demands would begin to consume his physical body, until there was nothing left to anchor his soul. Then he would become one with the lost, trapped for eternity on a plain without end.

DOOM.

W'soran could not last much longer. He summoned up the last of his strength and crossed partly over the threshold, into the realm of the dead.

At once, the spirits of the lost sensed his presence. They turned on him in an instant, grasping at his soul like drowning men. Hundreds upon hundreds, dragging him under...

W'soran fought back. He lashed at them with his sorcerous might. *Nagash! Undying King! Master of life and death! Hear me! I, W'soran, summon you forth!*

His command echoed through the emptiness. The spirits that surrounded him recoiled for an instant at the utterance of the Usurper's name, but then they fell upon him with a vengeance. Their keening wails were now tinged with anger.

Come forth! I command you!

DOOM!

The last blow was discordant and terrible, a splintering crash of shattered stone. And then something vast moved upon the face of the aether and the realm of the dead trembled. The spirits receded from him, wailing in misery and fear.

His power all but spent, W'soran tried to draw back from the threshold—but he was held there, transfixed by a force of will a thousand times greater than his own. The twilight plain vanished, replaced by the vision of an ancient, smoke-wreathed mountain, its splintered flanks bathed in unholy, greenish light. A vast fortress crouched atop the mountain, and upon the tallest tower of that fortress stood a giant, clad in armour that glowed with icy, sorcerous flames. The giant gripped a jagged metal crown in his armoured fist and when his face turned skywards, W'soran saw only a leering skull, wreathed in necromantic flames. Bale-fires burned from the depths of the skull's eye-sockets, scorching W'soran with their glare. The immortal gazed into their depths and saw the end of the world of men.

W'soran writhed like an insect in Nagash's grasp, howling in terror. Then came a crushing impact that blotted out the immortal's senses, plunging him into oblivion.

W'soran lay upon his back, shoulders pressed hard against the floor of the sanctum. His ears roared with the fading echoes of the aetheric storm and the incense-laden air crackled with the dissipating energies of the massive ritual. Gasping in shock, the

necromancer's parchment-thin eyelids fluttered as he tried to push himself upright—but a cold hand tightened about his throat like a vice and slammed him roughly back against the stone.

The rough impact jolted W'soran's senses. His vision snapped back into focus and he found himself staring into Neferata's snarling, bloodstained face. Spatters of gore dotted her slender arms and the front of her dust-stained robes. The heavy wooden lectern lay in pieces around them, shattered by the queen's fearsome blow.

"W'soran," she said. Her voice was little more than a low, liquid growl. "You withered fool. What have you done?"

The necromancer writhed like a serpent in Neferata's grip. A blistering incantation came to mind, powerful enough to crush the queen's bones to powder and hurl her carcass the length of the chamber—had he but the strength to cast it. The rite had consumed every mote of his carefully hoarded power, leaving him helpless before Neferata's wrath. But instead of fear, the realisation only filled him with rage.

W'soran's ragged lips drew back, baring his fangs in a death's-head grin. "You felt it, too, didn't you?" he wheezed. His narrow chest heaved with ghastly, wheezing laughter. "You felt it in your bones, just as I did. The master's fist upon the door!"

Neferata understood at once. W'soran could see the flicker of realisation in her dark eyes—and perhaps, the briefest glimmer of fear.

The queen glanced back over her shoulder. Belatedly, W'soran realised that they were not alone. Ushoran still leaned against the wooden reading table, glaring angrily at Lord Ankhat, who stood just inside the sanctum's entrance with a heavy iron sword in his hand. Neferata's white-robed progeny circled the room, their jaws and clawed hands dripping with fresh gore. W'soran's thralls had been ripped apart and left to bleed out their precious fluids upon the stone.

Ankhat looked to the queen and frowned. "I told you he was behind this. He's been trying to call back Lamashizzar, somehow. He's all but admitted it!"

"Lamashizzar? Do you think I would call that capering fool my master?" W'soran's voice rose to a shriek. "No, I speak of Nagash, the Undying King! I have seen him!" His laughter echoed from the walls. "All this time, I have searched for him, but I was looking in the wrong place! He could not be found among the souls of the dead because *he still reigns upon this earth!*"

Neferata's fist tightened about W'soran's throat. "You *lie*," she hissed. "Nagash was destroyed—"

"Not so," the necromancer croaked. "He escaped the battle at Mahrak; his body was never found." He pointed a clawed finger at Ankhat. "Ask him. He marched with the army to Khemri. He knows!"

"This is some kind of trick," Ankhat snarled, but the look in his dark eyes belied the nobleman's bravado.

"He is nowhere in Nehekhara. We searched from one end to the other!"

"Imbecile!" W'soran sneered. "All this time, the Undying King has been rebuilding his strength in secret, far from the eyes of men. He has taken a great mountain and made it his fortress. I have seen its towers wreathed in the smoke of countless forges, where his servants make ready for the day of Nehekhara's demise! And that day swiftly approaches! Already, Nagash is clad in the panoply of war, and

he holds a dark and terrible crown in his hand! The days of mankind are numbered—
”

Neferata snarled. Her hand closed tighter, until the necromancer’s leathery tendons creaked, and his spine began to bend.

“Let him come,” she said, pitching her voice so Ankhat and Ushoran could hear. “When he arrives outside my gates, your head will be there to welcome him.”

But if Neferata thought to see W’soran quail in fear, she was disappointed. The necromancer merely grinned, his eyes glittering defiantly. “Do it!” he spat. “Tear my head from my shoulders, just as you did to Ubaid. With my last breath I will utter a curse so terrible that Lahmia will be blighted until the stars have burned down to embers.”

The queen snarled in fury, and for a fleeting instant, W’soran thought that she had seen through his bluff. But then he felt her grip loosen ever so slightly and he knew that he had won. More laughter bubbled from W’soran’s throat.

“He is coming,” the necromancer hissed. “And when he does, you will grovel like a worm at his feet.”

Neferata bent over the necromancer, until their faces nearly touched. Her charnel breath gusted cold against his face.

“A pity you shall never see it.”

The queen’s empty hand snatched up a splintered length of the wooden lectern. W’soran’s eyes went wide. His cry of protest transformed into a wordless scream of rage as she drove the dagger-like fragment into his heart.

Ushoran’s nails etched deep scars into the wood of the table at his back as he fought to maintain an outwards appearance of calm. His head still ached from the dreadful, bell-like tolling that had brought him to the sanctum. The blood in his veins, so freshly stolen from a young beggar mere hours before, had now lost its heat. His limbs felt as heavy as lead. From the tense cast of Ankhat’s face, it was clear that the nobleman had been profoundly affected as well. Ushoran’s gaze fell to the iron sword in Ankhat’s hand and he debated whether he could slip through the door of the sanctum and escape before the nobleman could strike. If he tried, though, and failed, it would only confirm his complicity in W’soran’s crimes. It was all Ushoran could do to maintain his bland facade and conceal his mounting desperation.

Neferata rose slowly from W’soran’s limp body. “Find a barrel and stuff him inside,” she said to Ankhat. “Then bury him beneath the temple.”

Ankhat scowled at the necromancer’s skeletal form. “That should be easy enough. Is there any place in particular you want me to put him?”

“Somewhere that no one will ever find him,” the queen replied. Then Neferata turned to Ushoran.

“And what role did you play in all of this?” she demanded.

The Lord of Masks raised his hands in protest. “None whatsoever, great one,” he said quickly. “I’m no necromancer, as you well know.”

Neferata took a step towards him. Her priestesses stopped pacing about the sanctum and turned to face Ushoran, their expressions disconcertingly intent.

“And yet, here you are,” she replied.

“Clearly we shared the same idea,” Ushoran said, thinking furiously. The best lies, he knew, always began with a splinter of truth. “When that awful pounding began, I naturally assumed that W’soran would have some idea of what it was. As did you, apparently.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed. “And you happened to know exactly how to find him.”

The Lord of Masks affected a shrug. “It is my business to know such things, great one.”

“And yet you have no word of Prince Alcadizzar,” the queen snapped. “How is that, my lord, after all these years?”

Ushoran paused, considering his reply with care. He’d escaped one snake pit and stumbled into another. “We will find him, great one,” he answered. “I’m sure of it.” He licked his lips. “With every passing day, I become more convinced that you are right, and he is somewhere close by. Just a... a few more interrogations and I am sure we will learn something of value.”

Suddenly, Neferata was at his side, her dark eyes peering hungrily into his own. Ushoran’s fists clenched reflexively; he smothered the instinct to bare his fangs at the queen’s wordless challenge.

“I am pleased to hear it,” Neferata growled. “Because my patience is wearing thin. I confess that it’s confounded me why your network of spies has been so successful in every other inquiry except the one that matters to me the most.”

Ushoran kept his voice under careful control. The slightest sense of nervousness was certain to be misinterpreted. “No one is more confounded by Alcadizzar’s disappearance than I, great one,” he said.

“I hope so. I hope the matter has your *undivided* attention,” the queen said. “Because if he isn’t found soon, you will come to *envy* W’soran’s fate.”

Later that night, as the hour of the wolf approached, the wind came howling in from the sea, tossing about the ships at anchor and rattling doors along the city streets. Lahmians crouched around their fires, many whispering prayers to Neru and ringing silver bells in hopes of keeping the unquiet spirits at bay. Strange sounds echoed from the darkness outside: angry mutterings and groans, frantic screams and the mocking laughter of jackals. Fingers scratched at the doors of wine shops and pleasure houses and tentative steps paced across the rooftops of many homes, as though searching for a way inside.

In the city’s vast necropolis, one spirit in particular woke in darkness, summoned across the wide gulf by a call he was powerless to deny. Bony hands twitched, scrabbling at the sides of a simple, stone casket. On the exterior of the casket’s lid, complex sigils carved into the stone and inlaid with silver started to glow with heat. Tendrils of steam curled from the protective wards as the will of the spirit contained within fought against its bonds. Within seconds, the silver inlay began to bubble and then drip in molten streams down the sides of the casket. There was a creak of tearing metal as the lead seal covering the seams of the lid slowly gave way, followed by a crash as the stone lid was hurled aside and broke into pieces on the mausoleum floor.

The figure within did not move at first, as though listening to the call that had summoned him out of the darkness. It was his master’s voice, commanding him to

rise and serve, as he'd done in centuries past. Once upon a time, the thought would have filled him with dread; now, he felt only triumph and a sense of savage joy. If it meant a release from that endless plain and the wailing of the damned, he would serve Nagash gladly, and drown the world in nightmares.

Ligaments creaking the mouldy skeleton sat up in the casket. His robes hung about his bones in tatters, held in place more by layers of grimy cobwebs than anything else. Beetles and swift, brown spiders scuttled from burrows dug into the desiccated flesh of his ribcage as he gripped the edge of the casket and climbed his way out.

Standing amid the broken shards of the casket's lid, the skeleton reached into the casket and drew out his skull. The few scraps of flesh that still clung to the bone were dark and curled like patches of old leather. Green fires guttered balefully in deep-set eye sockets and grave-mould clung to his blackened teeth. A stub of broken vertebrae hung stubbornly from the base of the skull, the lower knob sheared halfway through by a powerful sword-stroke.

Slowly, haltingly, the skeleton turned the skull about and lifted it onto its severed neck. The sheared ends gripped together at once, bound by sheer force of will. With a faint, grating sound, the head turned left and right, studying the cramped confines of the pauper's tomb that he'd been sealed into. Bitter, ethereal laughter echoed in the dank space.

The figure bent, hands searching the darkness inside the casket once more. Finally, the fingers closed about a familiar hilt. The skeleton drew out a long double-edged iron sword, its surface spotted with rust and sheathed in layers of cobwebs, and growled in satisfaction. Then he turned his attention to the crypt's narrow door.

On the third blow, the thin stone slab broke apart and fell to the ground. Arkhan the Black strode into the night air and raised his sword to the bale-moon gleaming above the western horizon. Then he turned his face to the north-west, where his master waited, and went to serve him.

—<SEVENTEEN>—

Preparations of War

*Nagashizzar, in the 106th year of Asaph the Beautiful
(-1211 Imperial Reckoning)*

A black-robed scout-assassin emerged from the wide, shadow-filled lane across the great cavern and skittered silently up to Lord Eshreegar. The two conversed quietly for a moment and the Master of Treacheries nodded stiffly. As the scout disappeared back into the shadows, Eshreegar turned his hooded head and nodded to Eekrit. The skeletons were coming.

Eekrit could feel Nagash's minions approaching long before he saw the green glow of their eyes, or heard the dry rustling of their steps. He felt it in his old joints and in the back of his throat, as the thick, reeking air of the great cavern turned cold and dank as a grave. Gritting his teeth and leaning heavily on the gnarled cypress cane in his paw, he rose painfully from the wooden chair his slaves had brought down from the great hall. Behind him, the shackled herds of greenskins noticed the change as well and filled the echoing space with a rising chorus of growls, barks and shrieking cries.

Slavers snarled at the drug-addled beasts, lashing at their scarred backs with metal-studded whips to keep them in line.

Within moments, a pair of eerie grave-lights emerged from the gloom. Bone rasped along rough, slimy stone. A figure emerged, clad in mouldy rags and carrying a rust-spotted iron sword. Eekrit had seen this particular corpse several times before, but couldn't say for certain what it was. It radiated power, like one of the *kreekar-gan's* wights, but held far more intelligence than the rest. Its teeth were black and jagged as splintered ebony, giving its skull a permanent, broken snarl.

Behind the figure marched a long line of hunched, yellowed skeletons, swathed in rotting fragments of clothing and scraps of mouldy flesh. They moved in pairs, each carrying a heavy wooden chest between them. Their knobby skulls turned this way and that, snouts raised as though sniffing the air for their lost clan mates. Though Nagash no doubt held thousands of human skeletons in thrall, it apparently amused the liche-king to send skaven corpses to trade with the Under-Empire.

"By the scales, damn you," Eekrit snarled, pointing with his cane to the towering wood-and-bronze apparatus at his right. Every three months, it was always the same. As the black-toothed creature glared hatefully at the skaven, the skeletons slowly turned, staring at the scales as though they'd just sprung up from the cavern floor. Then, one pair at a time, they shuffled over and set down their burdens for appraisal.

Eekrit waved a paw impatiently and a small gang of skaven hurried forwards to weigh the chests of god-stone and tally the results. The former warlord surveyed the process with a sour look on his face and wondered once again if he hadn't made a terrible mistake.

"A poisoned cup or an assassin's knife has to be a better fate than this," he muttered to himself.

"Not from my experience," Eshreegar replied, as he joined Eekrit near the creaking scales. Though nearly blind now from age and his injuries during the war, his hearing was as keen as ever. "But, each to their own."

Eekrit glared at the Master of Treacheries. "Shall we trade places, then?" he sneered. "I could give orders to your scouts and send reports back to Velsquee, while you stare at mouldy ledgers and put up with... with *this*—" he waved an arm at the noisome herds of shifting greenskins, "each and every day."

Eshreegar folded his arms and sighed. "Well, Velsquee isn't exactly happy with the reports, for what it's worth."

"No, I expect he isn't," Eekrit said, tail lashing irritably. The liche-king had begun rebuilding his strength the very day that the trade agreement had been set and he hadn't stopped since. The foundries ran day and night, spewing vast clouds of choking fumes into the air above the mountain, while gangs of undead labourers bored dozens of new mine shafts deep into the mountainside. Toppled towers and collapsed buildings had been rebuilt at an ever-increasing pace, as a growing number of northern barbarians were sent to serve in the liche-king's halls. Looking back now, it galled him to think how close they'd been to victory. He should have listened to his instincts from the outset and thrown everything he'd had into one, final attack. It would have been far better to have tried—and possibly failed—than to sit amidst this rubbish heap from one miserable year to the next.

The appraisers went to work opening each of the chests. Green light flared brightly from each one; within lay carefully stacked ingots of refined god-stone. At a half-pound of stone for every one hundred pounds of flesh or treasure, the skaven had learned to maximise their profits early on by trading in big, muscular greenskins and crates of heavy ores. The wealth they were reaping from the mountain was nowhere near the amount they had mined during the war, but was still a fabulous sum by any normal measure. The sight of so much of the precious stone in one place never failed to set Eekrit's nose twitching.

One by one, the chests were weighed; two scribes—one from Velsquee's clan, and one employed by Eekrit himself—noted down the value in their ledgers. When the process was complete, they would be placed under heavy guard until the morrow, when a contingent of Velsquee's *heechigar* would come to collect them and carry them back to the Great City. There, Velsquee would sell the stone to the other clans and share the profits with Eekrit and Eshreegar. Eekrit had no doubt that Velsquee was robbing them blind in the process, like any self-respecting skaven would. Despite this, the former warlord had already amassed a sizeable fortune over the last few years. Another decade or so and he might be able to buy his way out of exile.

There certainly didn't seem to be any point in staying. Nagash had grown far too powerful. If mad old Qweeqwol had been right about the necromancer's designs,

Eekrit didn't want to be anywhere near the mountain when the liche-king put his plans into motion.

"So many chests! Such *magnificent* wealth! It-it is pleasing to the eye, yes?"

Eekrit blinked, roused from his reverie by the nasal voice to his right. He glanced over at the wiry, younger skaven who had sidled up beside him. His ears flattened slightly in irritation. "Don't start, Kritchit. I'm not in the mood."

Kritchit wrung his knobby paws and gave the former warlord his most unctuous smile. Eekrit thought the slaver looked like a half-chewed lump of gristle. His shoulders were hunched, the left slightly higher than the right, and there was a noticeable hunk of flesh missing from his left thigh, which caused him to drag the leg when he walked. Kritchit's head and arms were patterned with dozens of old scars and his ears had been chewed down to mere nubs. He was a genuine horror to look upon and reeked of spoiled meat besides. For years he and his band of savages had taken Velsquee's gold and scoured the mountains for human and greenskin slaves. He was cunning, ruthless, and as greedy a wretch as Eekrit had ever met.

"Mood? How can your mood be anything but grand, my lord?" Kritchit spread his paws, taking in the long line of chests. "Are you not *blessed*? Is this not a great bounty of wealth laid before you, greater than any conqueror's due?"

Eekrit's eyes narrowed angrily. "We carved this much out of the mountain every *day* during the war."

Kritchit chuckled. "Oh, no doubt, no doubt," he said patronisingly. "But this here... this is a gift, yes? Dropped like ripe fruit into your outstretched paw. Did you sweat, and suffer, and bleed for this treasure? No, certainly not. You had but to recline here, in luxury, while my bold raiders and I hunted day and night on your behalf."

The former warlord folded his arms. "You're doing this for Velsquee, not me," he growled. "I'm nothing more than a *clerk*."

Kritchit sighed with theatrical weariness, ignoring Eekrit's reply. "The life of a raider is a hard thing, my lord. Much deprivation. Much danger. Days and nights in the cold, open spaces, without so much as a burrow to shelter in."

"Really? I had no idea."

"And the greenskins... there are only a few herds left and those are the meanest, cleverest of them all." The slaver shook his scarred head sadly. "There was much fighting. I lost many good warriors. Some were like litter-mates to me."

Eshreegar made a disgusted sound. "That's it," the Master of Treacheries said. "I'm killing him."

The former warlord forestalled Eshreegar with an upraised paw. "One share, Kritchit. Same as ever."

Kritchit drew himself up to his full height, which had the unfortunate effect of making him seem a bit lopsided. His right paw fell to the butt of the coiled whip that hung from his belt. "Where is-is the justice in that?" he said. "I do all the work, take all the risks! I have warriors to pay, kinfolk to bribe. I-I have *expenses*."

"One share, Kritchit."

"It's been one share for the last ten years! You know how much things cost these days?" Kritchit pointed to the milling herd of slaves. "These beasts killed a dozen of

my warriors when we took their camp and then mauled two more-more on the way here! How do you expect me to-to replace them?” Kritchit licked at his long, front teeth. “Three shares, this-this time.”

“Am I speaking too quickly for you, Kritchit? Should I use smaller words? One. Share.”

“Two shares!” The slaver swept his paw at the line of chests. “Look-look at all that! Velsquee will never miss it!”

Eekrit sighed. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “Eshreegar, kill him.”

“Now, look here—”

Eshreegar had a knife drawn and was bearing down on Kritchit when a commotion suddenly erupted at the far end of the cavern. Greenskins bellowed and snarled, shaking their heavy chains and stirring up the entire herd. The slavers shouted back, their whips hissing malevolently through the dank air. Eekrit turned and saw a column of burly, armoured skaven shoving the slavers aside as they forced their way into the cavern from one of the wide tunnels that led from the mountain towards the Great City.

“What’s this?”

Eshreegar paused, knife poised to strike Kritchit. He squinted his one eye at the distant skaven. “Velsquee’s *heechigar*,” he grunted. “They’re early.”

The storm-walkers poured into the cavern in a great column, polearms at the ready. Behind them, Eekrit caught sight of a gang of bent-backed slaves carrying a swaying wooden palanquin. His eyes widened.

“By the Horned One. What’s he doing here?”

“Velsquee?” Eshreegar asked. “After all this time?”

“So it would seem.” The former warlord’s tail lashed agitatedly. For the life of him, he couldn’t fathom why the old Grey Lord would risk the long and arduous journey from the Great City and that made him very uneasy.

Eshreegar gave a discreet cough. He nodded his head at the slaver. “Do you still want me to...?”

The former warlord glanced back at Kritchit. “No,” he told Eshreegar. Then, to Kritchit, he said, “What luck! Here is Grey Lord Velsquee, no doubt come to partake of all those *luxuries* we’re so famous for here.” He gestured to the palanquin. “You should go at once and demand your extra shares from him. My lord is famous for his compassion and generosity.”

Kritchit shuddered from his whiskers to the tip of his tail. “Oh, no!” he squeaked. “No, I-I would not dream of-imposing on Lord Velsquee.” The slaver gulped. “No. One share will-will do.”

“Truly, Kritchit, you’re an example to us all,” Eekrit sneered. “Now get your gang moving and hand over the slaves double-quick.” The former warlord sighed irritably. “I have guests to entertain.”

* * *

Eekrit and Eshreegar reached the great hall just ahead of Velsquee. The former warlord brandished his cane and snarled orders at the few slaves he had left, sending

them scurrying to clear the worst of the rubbish out of the passageways before the Grey Lord arrived. While they worked, Eekrit had Eshreegar force open the one door to the hall that still hung on its hinges; the old skaven managed to shove it most of the way before the rotted wood tore free from its mountings and crashed to the floor in a cloud of dust and mould. After that, there was nothing left to do but stand by the dais and wait.

Minutes later, a company of storm-walkers came tramping up the passageway and filed into the hall. Velsquee was borne along in their wake, riding in a litter carried by eight exhausted-looking slaves. They passed between the ordered ranks of the *heechigar* and carefully lowered the chair to the floor, just a few feet from where Eekrit waited.

Velsquee rose from the padded seat with great care, his trembling paw leaning heavily on a rune-carved cypress cane. Eekrit reckoned that the Grey Lord was nearly two hundred years old now, his span of years extended by sorcerous means to well past that of a typical skaven. He could no longer bear the weight of weapons and armour, instead wrapping himself in layers of heavy, grey robes. His white fur had thinned around his paws and face, revealing the wrinkled skin beneath, and his ears hung listlessly against his skull. Grunting in discomfort, the Grey Lord found his feet and took a slow step forwards. Glowing charms of god-stone strung around his neck clinked softly together as Velsquee surveyed the mouldy, rotting tapestries and the pile of worm-eaten wood that had once been Eekrit's expensive throne. When he spoke, his voice was a bubbling rasp. "How the mighty have fallen, eh, Eekrit?"

Eekrit's tail lashed, stirring up more dust. "We wouldn't want Nagash to think we still had a claim to the mountain, would we?"

The Grey Lord chuckled, breath wheezing past his lips. "Just so. Just so." He raised a palsied paw to wipe at his mouth. "Have you any wine?"

Eekrit sighed. "Wine we have, my lord. Bowls, however, are in short supply. I have my slaves looking for some now. Forgive me, but we had no idea you were coming."

Velsquee grunted. "No. Of course not. That was the entire point. No one knows I'm here."

"Not even the Council?"

"*Especially* not them." Velsquee took a few halting steps towards the two younger skaven. "As far as those idiots know, I've taken ill and retired to my sickbed."

The news surprised Eekrit. The journey to the mountain from the Great City and back again took many months. Velsquee was risking a great deal; by feigning illness for so long, his rivals on the Council would think him easy pickings and begin manoeuvring against him. By the time he returned home, Velsquee might find his power base swept away and assassins lurking in every shadow.

"What in the Horned One's name is going on?" Eekrit blurted.

Velsquee leaned with both paws upon his cane. "Your reports over the last few years have been very troubling," he began.

"So you've read them, have you?" Eekrit snapped. "At what point did you first become concerned? Was it the mention of the *legions* of undead warriors Nagash has

raised? Or perhaps it was the *vast necromantic ritual* the liche-king performed on the Night of the Horned God, some *eleven years ago*?”

Velsquee’s eyes narrowed. The *heechigar* filled the audience chamber with threatening growls, their paws tightening on the hafts of their polearms.

“Now is not the time for sarcasm,” the Grey Lord said.

Eekrit paused, drawing himself back from the brink. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said grudgingly.

“Good,” Velsquee said. He sighed. “You’ve stated in your reports that you no longer think we can defeat Nagash.”

Eekrit met the Grey Lord’s stare. “That’s right. He’s far stronger now than he was before the war and not just in the number of warriors at his command. His necromantic powers have increased as well.” He pointed a claw in the direction of the great cavern. “Did you see those skeletons? Did you *feel* the cold clinging to their bones? They’re much more potent than the ones we’ve faced before.” The former warlord shrugged. “He’s got too much god-stone in his vaults and he’s had time to improve his defences throughout the tunnels. Even with the full weight of the Under-Empire arrayed against him, I doubt we could prevail.”

The Grey Lord nodded. At length, he said, “I think you are right. In fact, I’ve suspected it for some time.”

Eekrit clenched his fist. Anger and frustration threatened to overwhelm him. He forced himself to speak as calmly as he could. “Then why are we still here? Why continue feeding him slaves and increasing his strength?”

“Because it allows us to maintain a presence near the centre of the liche-king’s power,” Velsquee said.

“To what end?”

The Grey Lord glanced at the nearest storm-walker and nodded, sending the *heechigar* striding swiftly from the chamber. “Ever since the end of the war, there have been troubling reports from the Seer Council,” Velsquee said. “Visions of darkness and death, spreading like a stain across the face of the world. They were vague things at first, but ever since the Horned God’s Night, the clarity and intensity of the visions have increased.”

Eekrit felt his hackles rise. “So Qweeqwol was right all along.”

The Grey Lord’s expression turned bleak. “Given the things I’ve heard recently, it’s possible that the mad old rat may have understated things quite a bit.”

Eekrit laughed helplessly. “Then what in the Horned One’s name do you think I can do about it?”

Velsquee did not answer at first. A few moments later, the storm-walker returned, labouring under the weight of a long, narrow case cradled in his powerful arms. He walked carefully across the chamber to stand beside the Grey Lord and set the case on the floor between him and Eekrit. Its surface was covered with intricate runes of protection; its lid bore thirteen elaborate magical seals.

The former warlord squinted at the case’s grey sides. “Is that made of *lead*?” he asked.

“It is,” Velsquee said grimly. “And sealed with potent sorceries to boot. Otherwise we would all be dead right now.”

Eekrit shrank back slightly from the container. “What’s inside?”

“A weapon,” the Grey Lord said simply, but there was a trace of awe in the old skaven’s voice. “A weapon more terrible than anything our people have made before. The finest warlock-engineers in the Under-Empire gave their lives to make it. I commissioned its forging in secret, just after the end of the war. It took nearly all my wealth and influence to see it finished.”

Eekrit stared at the case, feeling the first stirrings of greed at the power contained within. “Such expense,” he murmured, feeling the temptation to reach out and touch the enchanted lead.

Velsquee shrugged. “All the gold in the world doesn’t make much difference if you’re dead,” he said. He nodded at the case. “If any weapon in the world can destroy the liche-king, it’s this one. And I’m leaving it here with you.”

“*Me?*” Eekrit said. “*Here?* Right under the-the liche-king’s nose?”

“Better here than the Great City, hundreds of leagues away,” Velsquee snapped. “Do you imagine that you could get close enough to Nagash to kill him at this point?”

The former warlord glanced sidelong at Eshreegar, who snorted in disdain.

“Of course not,” Eekrit said. “We’d get turned to ash—or worse—before we got within a mile of him.”

“I suspected as much,” Velsquee replied. “But the liche-king is marshalling all this power for a reason. Sooner or later, he’ll put it to use. His armies will march and great spells will be cast.”

Eshreegar folded his arms. “Providing us an opening,” the Master of Treacheries said.

Velsquee nodded. “And when the moment is right, you must strike.” He pointed to the case. “Among the many enchantments worked into the seals is a spell that will alert me and the Seer Council when the case is opened. When that happens, we will gather in the Great City and lend you all the aid we can. In the meantime, we will see to it that you receive the very best potions and amulets to maintain your health and vigour. We wouldn’t want you dying of heart failure before the task is complete.”

Suddenly the case didn’t seem nearly so attractive anymore. In fact, Eekrit felt a bit sick just looking at it. “How am I to know when the moment has arrived?” he protested.

The Grey Lord shook his head. “I have no idea. Not even the seers can say for certain.” He sighed and made his way slowly back to his litter. “Watch and wait, Eekrit, watch and wait. And one more thing.”

“What is that?”

Velsquee settled back onto his chair. “Remember Qweeqwol’s warning. Only someone who is dead himself has any hope of defeating the liche-king.”

At a gesture from the Grey Lord, the slaves lifted the litter onto their shoulders. Without a word of farewell, Velsquee turned about and departed the great hall, probably for the very last time. Stunned, Eekrit turned to Eshreegar.

“Oh, no. Don’t give me that look,” the Master of Treacheries protested.

“Why not? You’re the master assassin.”

“He didn’t say the job called for an assassin,” Eshreegar snarled. “Just some stupid bastard who’s already dead—and doesn’t know it.” He folded his arms irritably. “That could be either one of us.”

Try as he might, Eekrit couldn’t very well deny it.

Portents of Doom

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Ptra the Glorious
(-1200 Imperial Reckoning)*

Down in the temple quarter, the great prayer lamps had been lit for the first time in hundreds of years. From his perch atop the square roof of a nobleman's residence close to the royal palace, Ushoran could hear the faint chanting of the priests and the frightened, almost pleading cries of the throng that filled the great square outside the decaying temples. Elsewhere, the great city was dark and still, even though the hour was early by Lahmian standards. He could remember a time when the market squares and the pleasure districts were noisy and bustling well past midnight, and richly-appointed palanquins would come and go at all hours between the houses on the city's great hill and the gambling dens down near the docks. Now the houses were shuttered; the houses of pleasure had shut their doors. Even down in the harbour, the crews of the trading ships went below and barred the hatchways leading to the upper decks. Those citizens who weren't begging for deliverance down in the temple quarter were huddled in the darkness, fearful of the terrible omen that stained the eastern sky.

No one could say for certain what it was. Certainly no one alive in Nehekhara had ever seen such a sight. It stretched like a streamer of glowing smoke across the heavens, a twin-tailed pennon of shifting, opalescent colour arcing high above the course of Neru and vengeful Sakhmet. The head of the pennon was rounder and brighter than the rest, shining with nearly the same intensity as Neru herself. It reminded Ushoran of a glowing catapult stone, like the orbs of bone that fell from the sky at Mahrak, so many centuries ago. He remembered the dread he felt, watching them hang suspended in the air over the battlefield, wondering when they would fall.

A palpable sense of doom hung over the city. Lahmia's citizens were growing desperate; they'd been afraid for much too long, trapped within the walls of the city and watching friends and neighbours go missing, night after night. Ushoran's agents warned him of angry murmurs in the market squares and the wine shops. People had lost faith in the king and the divinity of the royal bloodline. Offerings at the Temple of Blood had been dwindling for years, then dropped off altogether when the celestial portent appeared. The people of Lahmia were no longer looking to their rulers for succour, which was a very bad sign indeed.

It would only be a matter of time before Neferata noticed the lack of offerings at the temple. Edicts would be issued through the palace, demanding the worship of the

people. Blood would flow, but it would be in the gutters of the city rather than the offering bowls of the temple.

At the moment, however, that was the very least of Ushoran's problems.

The Lord of Masks crouched on the edge of the building's high roof and launched himself into the air. The steep hill dropped away beneath him and for a dizzying instant he seemed to hang suspended in the warm night air. Ushoran's lips drew back in a ghastly grin as he plunged earthwards, tasting the salt breeze as he fell towards the close-set roofs of the houses sixty feet below. He landed easily, broad feet splayed across the baked mud bricks, propelling himself forwards on all fours like a loping jungle ape and leaping skywards once more.

Rooftop to rooftop he went, from one quarter to the next, down the long slope and eastwards, towards the docks. The further he went, the more the city's decline became apparent. The nobles' quarter was still relatively clean and small groups of paid watchmen stood at the street corners to preserve the illusion of order. The neighbouring district, where the city's wealthier tradesmen and ship owners lived, was filled with walled homes that had been turned into small fortresses over the years and were now showing signs of increasing decrepitude. More than once, Ushoran's preternatural senses detected groups of night watchmen prowling the courtyards of the wealthier homes, or peering into the darkness from shadowed rooftops. None marked his swift and silent passage—or if they did, they huddled in fear and dared give no alarm, for fear of drawing attention to themselves.

Where the money ended, the city's decline became sharply apparent. Past the tradesmen's district were the modest, single-storey homes of Lahmia's ship fitters and dockhands, which Ushoran had come to know well. Once, in the heyday of trade with the Silk Lands, the district had been bustling and well kept, if rough about the edges. Now it was dark and squalid. Piles of refuse rotted in the alleyways and behind the shuttered shops and the mud-brick walls of the homes were pitted and crumbling from neglect. Many of the families kept dogs in their courtyards and homes, to keep thieves—and packs of hungry rats—at bay. One began barking hysterically as Ushoran landed upon its master's roof, prompting others to take up the cry as well. By the time he reached the far end of the district, the air was full of their harsh, yapping cries.

Further east, conditions grew steadily worse. Poor neighbourhoods where unskilled day labourers had once been able to live and eke out a meagre existence had become despair-ridden slums. Empty, crumbling homes presided over streets filled with puddles of liquid excrement that had seeped to the surface from blocked or broken sewer pipes. It was not uncommon to find corpses rolled into the filthy gutters, where they would fall prey to rats or packs of hungry dogs. The people living in the decrepit buildings were little better than animals themselves. For a while they had offered Ushoran some interesting sport, but he'd quickly tired of their dead eyes and scrawny, battered bodies.

Beyond the slums lay the sprawling merchant districts, markets and pleasure dens that were fed by the sea trade and catered to rich and poor alike. This was the true heart of the ancient city, where the people of Lahmia made and lost their fortunes, celebrated victories or drowned their sorrows with wine, lotus or the pleasures of the flesh. During the glory days of Lamashizzar's reign, when the city was the richest in

the civilised world, the shops never closed and throngs of people from all over Nehekhara would ebb and flow through the streets in a human tide. No more; now most of the merchants and wine-sellers barred their doors at sunset and the dens of vice were frequented only by the wretched and the desperate.

Ushoran alighted upon the roof of a shuttered wine-seller and crouched there, listening intently. The murmur of the multitudes in the temple district and the chorus of barking dogs at his back blended together into a surf-like rumble of distant noise. The immortal closed his eyes, breathing deeply and tasting the air for a very particular scent. His head turned slowly left and right, searching for telltale sounds among the streets and alleyways between him and the docks.

He crouched that way for hours, arms wrapped around his knees, listening and tasting the scents of the furtive world around him. He heard the shuffling footsteps of beggars, the phlegmatic murmurs of drunkards and the tremulous invitations of street-corner whores. Once, he cocked his head at the sounds of a scuffle in a nearby alley. Fists pounded into flesh and a man grunted in pain. When Ushoran heard a pair of voices arguing over the man's meagre possessions he settled back down with a scowl and continued his vigil.

Finally, well past midnight, came the sounds that he had been waiting for. Off to the south-east, perhaps four or five streets away, the strangled shout of a man, followed by the frantic, hysterical shrieks of a young woman. Then, moments later, Ushoran caught the coppery, acrid scent of fresh blood.

The immortal sprang into motion, leaping across alleys and rooftops in the direction of the screams. By the time the woman's shrieks came to an abrupt end, Ushoran was only two streets away. The smell of spilled blood burned in his nostrils and set his cold flesh tingling. It drew him unerringly, like iron to a lodestone.

At the last moment, as he crossed the rooftop of a dice house that rose above the source of the tantalising scent, the immortal considered his appearance. Hastily he shrouded his true features with the bland, noble facade he presented to Neferata and the rest of the Blood Court and then leapt lightly down into the alley yawning before him.

He landed amid piles of refuse, startling a pack of enormous rats that had been gathering near the lifeless body of an emaciated woman near the mouth of the alley. Her body lay sprawled in the stinking slime, her shabby robe undone and the side of her head crushed in like a broken wine jar. The whore's face was frozen in a wide-eyed rictus of terror, her cheeks spotted with droplets of fresh gore.

"She wouldn't stop screaming."

Ushoran turned at the sound of the high-pitched, nasal voice. To his right, less than a dozen feet away, a heavysset man lay sprawled in a pile of rubbish, limbs contorted in death. The corpse's head had been pulled back and the thick neck torn open, exposing glistening bits of broken cartilage. Blood soaked the front of the corpse's brown robes and spattered the rubbish pile in a wide arc to either side of the body.

A slender figure in dark, filthy robes crouched over the man's ravaged corpse, dark blood drooling from his chin. Zurhas had changed a great deal since Ushoran had seen him last. His flesh was white as a corpse and glowed with a translucent sheen under the faint moonlight. Dark veins crawled up his narrow throat and across

his bald, bulbous skull, pulsing with stolen life. The skin had drawn tight around Zurhas' face, emphasising his pointed cheekbones, receding chin and prominent, angular nose. His eyes were dark and beady, with tiny pupils that reflected the light like polished coins. More than anything else, he reminded Ushoran of a pale, hairless rat. He even clasped his strange, unusually long-fingered hands to his chest in a curiously rodent-like manner.

"I didn't want her," the immortal told him. "I told her to be quiet, to go away, but she wouldn't listen. She screamed and screamed, so I had to quiet her." Zurhas unfolded his hands and gestured towards the dead woman. Drops of cooling blood dripped from dark, curved claws. "You may have her, if you wish."

Ushoran stared at Zurhas. There was no mistaking the gleam of madness in the immortal's rodent-like eyes. Not for the first time, he debated the wisdom of his plan. But time was running out. Neferata's patience was very nearly at an end. Something had to be done, and quickly, before it was too late.

"I have already fed," the Lord of Masks replied. He managed a bland smile. "But the offer is appreciated."

Zurhas shrugged and turned his attention back to the dead man at his feet. "This is the one I wanted," he explained. "He cheated at dice. Not once, but many times." He touched a claw to one long, slightly pointed ear. "Shaved dice make a very distinctive sound, I have learned. A shame I could not hear it when I was younger. How different my life might have been." He leaned over the dead man and dipped two fingers into the gaping wound. Zurhas drew them out again and began licking the tips clean with delicate flicks of his bluish tongue. "Are you any good at dice, Lord Ushoran?"

Ushoran's smooth brow showed the slightest hint of consternation. "I don't much care for gambling."

Zurhas rested his hands on his knees and stared up at the Lord of Masks. "And yet here you are," he said. "Why else go to all the trouble to find me?"

Ushoran felt his hackles rise, purely as a matter of pride. "Trouble? Nothing could have been simpler—"

To his surprise, Zurhas let out a wheezing snort. "You have been searching for weeks," the immortal said. "I have watched you creeping across the rooftops, wearing one guise or another."

For a moment, Ushoran was too stunned to speak.

His mind reeled. If Zurhas had seen through his guises, what about Ankhat, or Neferata? "I... I had no idea you were so perceptive," he managed to say.

"I don't see why you should," Zurhas replied. "None of you ever paid the least attention to me." He showed his teeth in a ghastly, jagged smile. "I bet you couldn't even tell me the last time I attended the queen's court."

Once again, the Lord of Masks bristled. "As I said, I don't much care for gambling," he answered stiffly.

Zurhas shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Honestly, neither did I," he said. "But I wasn't smart enough for the priesthood, nor brave enough to be a soldier, so what else was there to do?" The immortal chuckled grimly. "At least when I had coins to wager and a pair of dice in my hand, people paid attention to me."

“You rode with the king’s bodyguard at the Battle of Mahrak,” Ushoran pointed out. “I remember that clearly.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed,” the immortal said. A small, bitter smile tugged at his bloody lips. “My father paid Lamashizzar a handsome bribe so I could join the king’s retinue. He reckoned it cheaper than paying for another year of gambling debts—and if I were to die on the battlefield and spare them future embarrassment, so much the better.”

Zurhas sighed. “There was no chance of that happening, of course. The dragon-staves saw to that. I watched the battle from behind a wall of iron-shod infantry, and watched the Usurper’s champions shot to bits from fifty yards away. The most I suffered were saddle sores and red eyes from the clouds of dragon powder.” He shook his head. “Afterwards, when the battle was done and everyone was looting the enemy’s siege camp, I had my one moment of glory. I found a chest full of gold coin hidden in one of the tents belonging to Nagash’s immortals. Everyone else had missed it, but I turned it up straightaway. You can’t hide gold from a gambler. My father knew that lesson well.”

The immortal spread his stained hands. “I saw a great deal of the king after that. Spent most evenings in his tent, drinking wine and pissing away my new-found wealth.” Zurhas let out a low hiss. “He was the worst cheat I’d ever seen, but then, he could afford to be. He was the king.”

Zurhas’ gaze fell to the gambler’s contorted body. He studied it in silence, as though seeing it for the first time.

“By the time we reached the Living City I hadn’t a coin to my name, but I was still one of Lamashizzar’s personal guests.” He sighed again. “I flattered myself that he and I had become friends. One night, he asked me for my help. *Asked* me, as though he and I were equals. Naturally, I agreed. And then the next thing I knew, we were following Arkhan the Black into the heart of Nagash’s pyramid. By then, of course, there was no turning back.” Zurhas glanced up at Ushoran, his deep-set eyes strangely haunted. “We carried Arkhan’s body and Nagash’s tomes back to camp in the dead of night. The whole way, I wondered when Lamashizzar would turn his dragon-stave on me. But he never did.”

Ushoran tried to sound sympathetic. “Whatever else, he was still your cousin.” And some menial tasks were too delicate to trust to slaves, the Lord of Masks thought.

“I should have refused him,” Zurhas said. “When we returned to Lahmia, I should have told the king I wanted no part of his schemes.” He scowled. “But what would that have got me? A knife in the back, or poison in my cup, most likely. As long as I kept playing the game, there was the chance my luck would turn. The king would need me for some important task, and I would become someone of value—someone like you, or Lord Ankhat.”

“Is that what you want, Zurhas?” Ushoran asked. “To be someone of import? A person of power and influence?”

“No chance of that now,” Zurhas replied. “Neferata saw to that.”

The Lord of Masks smiled grimly. “What if I were to tell you that the queen’s luck had finally turned?”

Zurhas gave Ushoran a sidelong look. “What do you mean?”

“Is it not obvious?” Ushoran spread his hands. “The signs are all around us. Look how the city has suffered, ever since she became obsessed with that fool Alcadizzar. She thinks of no one but herself now and Lahmia has been pushed to the edge of revolt. The time is ripe for change.”

The immortal stared up at Ushoran, his beady eyes bright with fear. “You cannot challenge her,” he said. “None of us can. She is too powerful.”

Ushoran smiled. “Perhaps. But what if we had help?”

Zurhas frowned. “I don’t understand. What kind of help?”

“An alliance,” Ushoran said. “With the one being on earth powerful enough to tip the scales against Neferata—the Undying King.”

“Nagash?” Zurhas recoiled from Ushoran, eyes widening in fear. “You don’t know what you’re saying!”

“He lives, Zurhas! How I do not know, but ever since the Battle of Mahrak he has been biding his time in the wastelands, gathering his strength!” Ushoran pointed to the north. “You felt his presence during the night of the Green Witch, the same as the rest of us. Do you deny it?”

Zurhas reluctantly shook his head. “No,” he replied.

“For ten years, I have had agents searching the wastes for Nagash’s fortress,” Ushoran said. “The cost was enormous, but in the end, I found it.” He took a step towards Zurhas, his voice lowering almost to a whisper. “He is very near, Zurhas. Just a few weeks’ ride north along the coast. And he is preparing for his return to Nehekhar. My agents have seen the smoke from his forges. Soon, very soon, his armies will march once more.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Zurhas protested. “Lahmia was neutral during the war.”

“Up until the moment we betrayed Nagash, you mean,” Ushoran shot back. “Do you imagine he has forgotten? No, Lahmia will be the first city to feel Nagash’s wrath—unless we reach an accommodation with him first.”

“What kind of accommodation?”

Ushoran smiled. “Simply this. If he helps us depose Neferata and seize control of the city, then Lahmia will ally with him in his campaign against the rest of Nehekhar.”

Zurhas frowned, clasping his hands together against his chest. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “What about Ankhat? He is loyal to the queen.”

“Ankhat is loyal to whoever holds the crown,” Ushoran replied. “If Neferata falls, then he will change sides quickly—or else he will suffer the same fate. With Nagash behind us, he won’t stand a chance. Think on that! There would be no more need for secrets, no more skulking about in the shadows. We would rule the city openly, and the people would worship us as gods!”

Zurhas stared at Ushoran for a moment, his expression growing ever more suspicious. “Why tell me any of this?” he asked.

“Because I can’t do this alone,” Ushoran said. “Someone must go to the Undying King and negotiate the alliance. I cannot go, because Neferata requires my presence at the temple every night. You, on the other hand, could leave the city for weeks at a time, and not raise anyone’s suspicions.”

On impulse, he reached out and gripped the immortal's arm. The flesh beneath the grimy robe was hard and cold as marble. "Don't you see? This is the moment you have been waiting for, Zurhas. Your luck has finally turned. Now the future of the entire city rests in your hands."

Zurhas' gaze fell to his bloodstained palms. After a moment he gave a faint smile. "We would share the throne?" he asked.

The Lord of Masks smiled. "We would discuss matters of state and make important decisions jointly, but the crown would be yours alone. I don't care for that kind of attention."

Zurhas nodded. Then his smile turned wicked. "You're taking a great risk," he said. "What is to stop me from making my own deal with Nagash and taking everything for myself?"

Because you haven't the wit or the nerve, Ushoran thought. Why do you think I picked you in the first place? He affected a nervous grin, and tried to cover it up with a shrug.

"The advantage is yours. But I make a far better friend than an enemy," Ushoran replied.

Zurhas laughed—a ghastly, barking sound, like the cry of a jackal—and slapped Ushoran on the shoulder. "You're right, of course," he said, but the wicked gleam never left his beady eyes. "I just wanted to make certain we understood one another."

"Of course," Ushoran said. He had already begun laying plans for Zurhas' demise, just as soon as the deal with Nagash had been finalised.

"When do I leave?" Zurhas asked.

"As soon as we can manage," Ushoran replied. Time was growing short. He could sense that Neferata's patience was nearly exhausted. If something didn't happen soon, he would be the one hanging from the torture rack in the queen's audience chamber. "I must draft documents for you to present to Nagash, detailing the terms of the alliance. I will provide you with a number of trusted agents to serve as your retainers, along with falsified letters of transit that will allow you to leave the city."

"If Nagash's fortress lies to the north, why not travel by boat up through the straits?"

Ushoran shook his head. "Too conspicuous. Lord Ankhat has agents of his own, and they watch the docks closely. Better to travel overland, with as small a group as possible. Your retainers have been well trained; they will find you suitable shelter by dawn and guard you during the heat of the day." He gestured at Zurhas' tattered clothing. "We will also need to find you garments suitable for a royal envoy."

"Of course," Zurhas said. His smile widened, revealing a mouthful of jagged, discoloured teeth. "We wouldn't want to give a bad impression."

The immortal threw back his head and cackled at the sky. Ushoran smiled, masking his contempt. He had to work with the tools at hand, he reminded himself. Once the alliance was sealed and Neferata dealt with, there would be ample time to dispose of Zurhas.

The dice had been loaded from the start, and the fool hadn't suspected a thing.

The hooting of an owl echoed from the woodland to the south-west of the bandit camp. Alcadizzar was awake at once, casting aside his heavy cloak and rising silently to his feet. Around him, the dozen tribesmen who'd stood the daytime watch slept on, heads resting upon their saddles and hands gripping the hilts of their swords.

Their camp was ten yards inside the tangled forest that stretched along the foot of the mountains north of Lahmia's cramped necropolis. Faisr and the rest of the night watch crouched under the shadows just inside the tree line, peering warily across the rough ground that stretched in a crescent almost half a mile south and west in the direction of the city's western trade road. The Crystal Sea was a cobalt-blue line stretching along the horizon to the east. Lahmia's central hill, ringed with white manors and the towers of the royal palace, rose just above the line of broken ridges to the south. A mounted party heading north from the city would be hidden from view as they passed through these foothills. Faisr and the rest of the *bani-al-Hashim* agreed that it made an ideal spot for an ambush.

The twin-tailed comet blazed in the sky above the distant city, bathing the ridgeline and the rocky ground with pale blue light. His Lybaran tutors had spoken of such sights and had voiced many theories as to their purpose in the cosmos. Some believed that they were fragments of broken stars, careening across the heavens. Others insisted that they were portents of occult knowledge; arcane riddles posed by Tahoht, the god of knowledge. Whatever the truth about their origins, the celestial philosophers all agreed that they were harbingers of conflict. Fire and tumult followed in their wake.

This was the pennon Ophiria had warned him about, all those years ago. He'd known it from the first night that Faisr had pointed it out to him, weeks before. Alcadizzar had asked the chieftain for a dozen tribesmen and had ridden off before first light, racing eastwards as fast as his horse could carry him. Two weeks later, Faisr had joined him with another dozen warriors, and they had been waiting ever since—for what, Alcadizzar could not say.

Not a single human soul had passed through the foothills since Alcadizzar's arrival. The area was desolate and foreboding, home to packs of jackals that stole into the city's necropolis each night to forage for scraps. The tribesmen had found evidence of hunting trails through the woods when they'd first arrived, but the paths were overgrown and hadn't been used in many years.

The cry of the night owl echoed from the woods again, low and insistent. Faisr listened closely as Alcadizzar settled down on his haunches close by. "Riders approaching, moving fast," the white-haired chieftain said. He gave Alcadizzar an appraising look. "Is this what you've been waiting for?"

"It is," Alcadizzar replied. "It must be." He leaned over and tapped one of the tribesmen on the shoulder. "Yusuf, go and wake the others."

The warrior nodded silently and vanished back into the trees. The rest of the night watch went to work stringing their powerful horn bows. Faisr loosened his sword in its scabbard and made quick adjustments to his raider's robe, but his eyes never left Alcadizzar. "Ubaid, you know I trust you above all others," he said. "When you asked for a dozen of my best men, I gave them to you without question. When you said you were bringing them *here*, of all places, I did not so much as bat an eyelash. But perhaps now you could explain to me just what in the frozen hells is going on?"

Alcadizzar's stomach fell. He'd known this was coming, sooner or later. How could he possibly explain more than eighty years of deception? What would Faisr do when he realised he'd been lied to all along?

He sighed. "All will be made clear, chief. Once the arrows have flown and the riders are dealt with, I'll explain everything. You have my word on it."

Faisr narrowed his eyes, but gave a reluctant nod. "After, then."

The rest of the raiding party came up from camp and settled quickly into position. Black-fletched arrows were driven into the sandy soil next to each crouching archer. A horse whickered softly a few yards behind them; Alcadizzar turned to see half a dozen men mounted and ready, just in case any of the riders escaped the initial ambush. The desert warriors were all chosen men, each one a veteran of countless raids. They knew their trade as well or better than Alcadizzar himself. All he could do was ready his blade and wait as the sound of hoof-beats echoed across the broken ground from the south.

Sound travelled strangely along the foothills. The thunder of hooves reverberated through the night air for many minutes before the first riders came suddenly into view, rising out of a patch of dead ground a hundred yards to the south-east. Alcadizzar counted six men, all clad in dark robes and dun-coloured headscarves, riding hard towards the north-west. They were travelling in a tight group, paying no mind to the dark woods or the concealing terrain surrounding them. They were trading caution for speed, clearly thinking that there was nothing to fear this far from the city. Alcadizzar glanced at Faisr and bowed his head respectfully. The honour of springing the ambush belonged to the chieftain.

Faisr accepted the honour with a nod and a predatory grin. He gauged the riders' approach and raised his hand. Bowstrings creaked as the archers chose their marks. The riders made easy targets, silhouetted by the light of moon and comet as they drew closer to the tree line.

Forty yards. Thirty. Twenty. At just under twenty yards the riders started to draw away again as they altered course to skirt the dense forest. Alcadizzar clenched his fist.

"Loose!" Faisr hissed.

Sixteen bowstrings snapped and sang. Heavy, broad-headed arrows flickered through the air, almost too fast for the eye to follow. At such close range, every shaft found its mark. Horses screamed and thrashed, hurling men from the saddle as they crashed to the ground. One rider struggled to his feet, cursing furiously, his left arm hanging limp; a pair of arrows struck him in the chest, pitching him onto his face. A second man dragged himself free from his dead horse and tried to flee, heading south towards the distant necropolis. A single tribesman rose to his feet, arrow drawn back to his chin. He tracked the fleeing man for a moment, the razor-edged arrowhead drifting fractionally skywards. The bowstring thrummed, and a second later the running man seemed to twist in mid-air, clawing at the shaft which had sprouted between his shoulderblades. He staggered, gave a strangled cry, and then collapsed.

Faisr waited for a dozen heartbeats, scanning the ambush site for movement. Satisfied, he waved his tribesmen forwards. A dozen men put aside their bows and rushed forwards, steel in hand. They began to move among the fallen bodies, despatching wounded men and horses with swift, efficient blows.

Alcadizzar let out a long, silent breath. The ambush had gone much better than expected. Hopefully, his instincts were correct and he hadn't just cut down half a dozen innocent men. "We will have to search them all," he said to Faisr. "Any detail, however small, could be significant."

Faisr folded his arms and scowled. "Significant to whom? Who are these people?"

The moment had come. Alcadizzar could delay no longer. But before he could speak, the stillness of the night was shattered with a savage, inhuman howl.

Out on the killing ground, the desert warriors had made their way into the midst of the stricken riders. Alcadizzar turned just in time to see a gaunt figure rear up from beneath a fallen horse, flinging the dead animal into the air as though it were a child's toy and scattering the three tribesmen who had closed in around it. The bluish glow of the comet shone from the figure's chalky skin, lending its long, clawed hands and hairless skull a strange, ghostly radiance. It snarled like a maddened beast, jaw gaping hungrily, and Alcadizzar felt a chill race down his spine.

The tribesmen reeled in shock at the sight of the creature—all that is, except for Faisr al-Hashim. The sound of his sword rasping from its scabbard shook the tribesmen from their stupor. "Slay it!" the chieftain cried. "In the name of the Hungry God, strike the creature down!"

The *bani-al-Hashim* surged forwards at Faisr's command, shouting war cries and brandishing their swords. They rushed at the monster from all sides. Blades flashed, slashing at its neck and chest, but the creature wove like a viper between the blows, dodging them with hideous ease. Pale hands lashed out with unnatural speed; where they struck, armour ruptured, bone shattered and organs burst. Men crumpled, coughing blood, or their broken bodies were flung backwards like chaff in a rising wind.

Six men died in the blink of an eye. The surviving tribesmen faltered, stunned by the ferocity of the creature. A bowstring sang, then another. The blood-spattered figure spun out of the path of the first arrow, but the second took it high in the right hip. It staggered for a moment, spitting curses, and then two more arrows punched into its shoulder and chest. A fourth shaft transfixed the creature's throat, the broad arrowhead bursting from the back of its pale neck in a spray of thick ichor. The tribesmen let out a yell of triumph—but their hope was short-lived. With a gurgling growl, the monster seized the arrow with one clawed hand and ripped it free.

More arrows hissed through the air. Spitting ichor, the creature dodged first one, then another, but the next one punched through its left thigh. It snapped the shaft in two with a sweep of one hand and then suddenly turned and ran, heading south towards the city necropolis.

"A horse!" Alcadizzar cried. The monster was already well out of bowshot, racing over the broken ground faster than the swiftest mortal could manage. A tribesman dashed from the woods, leading Alcadizzar's horse by the reins; with a loud cry, he leapt into the saddle and dashed off after the monster at a furious gallop.

He couldn't let the thing reach the necropolis. Once it got in among the close-set mausoleums, there would be no way to find it. Alcadizzar spurred his mount onwards, riding hard over the broken ground.

At first, the distance shrank quickly, until the pale-skinned creature was little more than a dozen yards away. But the ridgeline was coming up fast and the horse was struggling to clear the rough terrain. No matter how he tried, Alcadizzar could not close the gap any further.

And then, with a wild laugh, Faisr came racing past him, his lean desert horse gliding like a ghost over the rocks. The chieftain held a short, barbed javelin in his upraised hand; as the creature started to ascend the ridge just ahead, Faisr charged to within a dozen paces of the thing and let fly. The missile sped like a thunderbolt and struck the monster in the back, just below the left shoulderblade. It let out a despairing wail and fell forwards, sliding face-first back down the steep slope.

Faisr was already standing over the creature's body when Alcadizzar reined in at the base of the ridge. He leapt from the saddle, sword ready, but it was clear that the monster was finished; the chieftain's javelin had taken it through the heart. Faisr glanced up and smiled ruefully as Alcadizzar approached.

"I despair of ever making a proper horseman out of you, Ubaid," he said. Gripping the shaft of the javelin, he used it as a lever to roll the creature onto its side. "What in the name of the Hungry God is this thing?"

Alcadizzar approached the monster warily, his mind drifting back to that blood-soaked night in Neferata's bedchamber. "A servant of Neferata," he said. "A man, transformed by black arts into a blood-drinking beast."

The prince raised his sword. The heavy blade flashed down, severing the fiend's head with a single stroke. Surprisingly, the creature's body spasmed beneath the blow, as though some shred of vitality still lurked in its limbs. It trembled spastically for a moment and then finally went still.

Summoning up his courage, Alcadizzar bent and retrieved the monster's severed head. Here was the proof he'd been seeking for almost a century. At long last, the fate of Lahmia's secret rulers was sealed.

Faisr studied Alcadizzar's grisly trophy. "It's done," he said. "The arrows have flown; six of our brothers lie dead upon the sand. Now you owe me an explanation."

The prince stared up at the starry sky. The twin-tailed comet seemed to ripple just overhead, like a battle-pennon. Alcadizzar offered up a silent thanks to Ophiria, then drew a deep breath and met the chieftain's eye.

"The first thing you must know," he said, "is that my name is not Ubaid."

Crook and Sceptre

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Pträ the Glorious
(-1200 Imperial Reckoning)*

Within a week of Alcadizzar's ambush, a band of Faisr's best riders spurred their mounts and headed southwards, bearing grim tidings for the King of Rasetra. The tribesmen bore not just the head of the foul thing they'd slain outside Lahmia, but also several scroll cases that had been found amid the creature's possessions. The letters within revealed a danger altogether more terrible and far-reaching than the cabal of blood-drinkers inside Lahmia. Nagash the Usurper, Tyrant of Khemri, still walked the earth, some five hundred years after his defeat at the Battle of Mahrak. It appeared that Neferata's hidden court had somehow learned of the necromancer's existence and sought an alliance with him against the other great cities. Along with the horrifying evidence, Alcadizzar included a letter of his own, meant to be copied and circulated throughout the land, exhorting the royal houses to marshal their armies and cleanse the land of Lahmia's evil once and for all.

Alcadizzar's younger brother, Asar, now an old and powerful king in his own right, sent emissaries with copies of the letters to every corner of the land. Rasetra called upon a vast and complex framework of secret treaties, some many decades in the making, compelling the Nehekharan kings to march eastwards and assemble upon the Golden Plain without delay. When the news from Lahmia was made known, not a single ruler dared to renege on his or her obligations. To do so would have cast their lot with the Lahmians, which would have invited certain destruction from the other great cities.

Six months after the stolen letters left Alcadizzar's hands, the armies began to move. The terms of Rasetra's treaties indicated not only when each host was to start their march, but also which roads and how many supplies they would be required to carry with them. Each movement was part of a vast and complicated schedule devised by Alcadizzar, Asar, and the veteran warlords of Rasetra, designed so that each element of the coalition would arrive upon the plain at more or less the same time. Facing the possibility of trade penalties if they failed to meet their time of march, the great cities wasted little time in preparing their hosts for war. The Rasetrans, it appeared, had learned a great deal from the financial warfare of the Lahmians, some four centuries earlier.

By the end of the year the armies began to gather upon the great plain. The first was the host of Rasetra, led by Asar's heir, Prince Heru. Ten thousand of the city's

vaunted heavy infantry, plus two thousand swift war-chariots drawn by lean jungle lizards. Next came the scholar-warriors of Lybaras, whose fearsome siege engines would be pitted against Lahmia's walls; their train included a dozen huge catapults, eight ballistae and four armoured fire-throwers, all drawn by teams of surly, groaning oxen. They were met at the centre of the plain by a surprising sight—the assembled warriors of all the desert tribes, some eight thousand of the finest light cavalry in the land, clad in burnished armour and billowing silk robes. The sons of the distant sands welcomed Prince Heru and the Lybaran king, Ahmenefret, with gifts of gold, perfumed oils and wine, and directed the tired warriors to campsites that had been prepared for them along the dusty trade road.

Two days later, just as the sun was setting and the chill of the winter evening was settling on the sprawling camp, came the clarion call of trumpets and the ringing of silver bells. Chanting and singing to Neru, goddess of the moon, there appeared from the gloom some five thousand priestly warriors from the once-great city of Mahrak. The *Hurusanni*, or Devoted, as they were called, patterned their weapons and training on the legendary Ushabti of ancient times. This was the first time the order had marched to war since its founding, some two hundred years past, and they greeted the camp with joyous shouts, eager to come to grips with the evil things that lurked in nearby Lahmia. The shaven-headed youths took their place alongside the road and spent the rest of the evening in meditation and prayer.

Hours later, as Neru shone high above the camp, the warriors of the three armies awoke to the rumble of marching feet bearing down upon them out of the darkness to the west. Men shrugged on their armour and reached for their weapons; desert tribesmen went galloping from the camp into the night, their expressions tense. Veterans and novices alike shared uneasy glances as the tramp of armoured feet grew louder. The warrior-priests of Mahrak began intoning prayers of abjuration, meant to hold the hungry spirits of the wasteland at bay. Then they saw them; white figures, marching in silence down the road, their lacquered armour glimmering in the moonlight. Their helmets were fashioned in the shape of jackals' heads, the sacred visage of Djaf, god of the dead. They were the fabled Tomb Guard of Quatar: five thousand heavy infantry, led by their king, Nebunefre, Lord of the Tombs.

After the arrival of the warriors of Quatar, the armies settled in to watch the trade road and wait for the rest of the western armies to arrive. Over the next few days a pair of small caravans were spotted, laden with goods for markets in Lybaras and Mahrak. The Lahmian merchants and their wares were seized at once and all the useful items were distributed amongst the three armies.

At the end of the week, long ribbons of dust were spotted off to the west. Two days later, columns of proud Numasi cavalry, ten thousand strong, came trotting into the camp, led by their queen Omorose. The desert warriors paced alongside the cavalry on both sides of the road, prancing and pirouetting their smaller, nimbler mounts, and shouting good-natured challenges to the dour horse soldiers. Behind them, marching to the thunder of heavy kettledrums, came the warriors of Ka-Sabar's Iron Legion; fifteen thousand heavily-armoured spearmen and four thousand archers, their sweaty faces caked with ochre dust stirred by the columns of Numasi cavalry. Their king, Aten-sefu, marched in the front rank with the rest of his travel-stained warriors, his armour virtually indistinguishable from that of his men.

The next day—a full week ahead of schedule—came the host of Zandri. Two thousand archers, four thousand spearmen and another five thousand pale-skinned northern mercenaries, all brought by barge up the River Vitae as far as the north-west edge of the Golden Plain, then marched overland through rough country to the armies' marshalling point. Their king, Rakh-an-atum, brought with him rich gifts of gold and silver for the gathered kings and a necklace of fine pearls for Queen Omorose—a not-so-subtle display of the city's burgeoning wealth and potential influence.

Within the space of seven days, a force of more than sixty thousand warriors had been assembled from six widely separated cities—a feat of planning and coordination unparalleled in Nehekharan history. Only Khemri was yet to be accounted for, and several of the kings—Rakh-an-atum in particular—doubted that their contribution would amount to much, if anything. The once-great city was still not much more than a Rasetran colony, administered by generations of viziers over the last four hundred years. The process of reconstruction had been long and difficult and was still far from complete, thanks in no small part to meddling on the part of Zandri and Numas themselves.

Yet at dawn on the day of Khemri's expected arrival, a fanfare of brass horns roused the warriors from their slumber, followed by the surf-like sound of cheers echoing down the western trade road. Dazed soldiers stumbled out into the cold morning air to behold a joyous and colourful procession of two hundred chariots rolling into camp, each one manned by the lord of one of Khemri's noble houses. The noble lords and their retainers were not armed and armoured for war, but instead were clad in their finest feast garments. As they rolled by, they tossed handfuls of coins to the dumbfounded soldiers, laughing and chanting "Alcadizzar! Alcadizzar!" at the top of their lungs.

Behind the chariots came columns of javelin-wielding light infantry, clad in pristine white tunics and polished leather armour, followed by rank upon rank of spearmen. Six thousand infantry all told, plus another two thousand slave auxiliaries armed with slings and short swords. A meagre showing by military standards, but the warriors of Khemri marched with their heads held high, cheering Alcadizzar's name. They were followed by a parade of wagons larger than any trader's caravan, each one painted in bright, celebratory colours and laden with wine and gifts. On this day of days, the people of the Living City were determined not to make a poor showing before the other cities. They had spared no expense, held nothing back, for this was the moment they had been waiting for since the birth of King Aten-heru's eldest son, a hundred and fifty years ago.

Khemri would have a king once more.

Ever since he was a child, Alcadizzar had dreamed of the day he would become king. He had pictured sundrenched streets lined with cheering throngs, scattered with glittering coins and offerings of fragrant oils and a solemn ceremony in the ancient palace built by Settra himself, surrounded by friends and noble allies. There would be feasting and celebrating for a week afterwards; the people of the city would come and pay their respects each day, laying gifts at his feet and praising his name. Princesses

of distant cities would make his acquaintance each evening, plying him with their charms and vying to become his queen.

“Hold still, great one,” the priest said, gripping his chin firmly and shaking Alcadizzar from his reverie. A fingertip, covered in thick, black kohl, was inching towards his left eye. “You may wish to cast your gaze upwards for just a moment.”

Alcadizzar swallowed quickly and looked up just in time. The kohl was warm and gritty and smelled of charcoal. It felt as though the priest was slowly and mercilessly grinding it into his lower eyelid. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to remain still, holding his arms stiffly out to his sides while another pair of priests fussed with the starched, knee-length kilt that had been wrapped tightly about his hips. He hadn’t taken a single step since putting it on and it was already starting to chafe.

The air within the tent was near to stifling and redolent with the scent of horse manure, cooking grease and thousands of unwashed bodies. A small group of slaves bustled about, eyes downcast and scalps glistening with sweat, packing chests, rolling up rugs and taking away empty chairs to be loaded with the rest of the army’s baggage. Faisr and Prince Heru were forced to stand in one corner of the tent, poring over a map rolled out on the last remaining table. Outside, the air shook with shouted orders, the creak of axles and the complaining bellows of oxen as the vast army continued the process of breaking camp. The timetable for the march to Lahmia would not be denied, regardless of the petty needs of aspiring kings.

“So long as the weather holds—and there’s no reason to suspect it won’t—the vanguard of the army should reach the Lahmian watch-forts at the eastern edge of the plain in just over three weeks,” Prince Heru said. “How close can we get before we risk running into mounted patrols covering the trade road?”

Faisr chuckled. “We’ve spent the last year discouraging the Lahmians from leaving the forts at all,” he said. “If you march the last thirty miles by night, they’ll never see you coming.”

Heru glanced up at Faisr. “You’re certain? Because the whole campaign hinges on seizing the eastern pass,” the Rasetran said. “If the Lahmians get warning that we’re on the way, they could rush a few thousand men into the gap and hold it against ten times their number.”

“Trust Faisr,” Alcadizzar interjected. He tried to nod reassuringly at the desert chieftain, but the priest still had his chin in a vice grip. “The tribes know the Golden Plain better than anyone and they’ve made certain that Lahmia has no idea we’re coming. They’ve intercepted every message sent by Neferata’s agents since the armies began to march, and ambushed every patrol the Lahmians have tried to send down the trade road. We owe them a great debt for all they’ve done so far.”

Faisr accepted the praise with a grave nod of the head. The last ten months had been a tumultuous period for the chieftain and for the desert tribes in general. Alcadizzar’s revelations in the wake of the ambush outside Lahmia had thrown the tribes into chaos. Faisr himself had been furious over Alcadizzar’s long years of deception and when the truth became more widely known, several ambitious chieftains tried to paint Faisr as complicit in the prince’s deception. But Ophiria intervened, revealing her oath to Alcadizzar and declaring the prince to be the fulfilment of Settra’s prophecy.

After that, the political manoeuvring began in deadly earnest. The chieftains had heard the news about Neferata and the discovery about Nagash, and knew that the winds of war would soon begin to blow. The tribes had to unite under a single leader, as they hadn't done since the death of Shahid ben Alcazzar, the last Prince of Bhagar. A gathering was called, up in the mountains along the northern edge of the plain, and the chieftains met in Ophiria's tent to press their claim. The competition was fierce, but the outcome was never really in doubt. Seven days later, the Daughter of the Sands appeared and declared to the tribes that Faisr al-Hashim had been acclaimed Prince Faisal, first among the chieftains of the *bani-al-Khsar*. Faisr had accepted the title with uncharacteristic humility and grace, quickly winning over all but the bitterest of his rivals, and had worked tirelessly ever since to prepare his people for what was to come.

Over time, Faisr had forgiven Alcadizzar for his deceptions, but it had created a rift between them that had never truly healed. At Alcadizzar's insistence, the chieftain was among his closest advisors, but otherwise they saw little of one another. Of all the sacrifices he'd been called upon to make in his life, losing Faisr's friendship and respect had pained the prince most of all.

"On the night before the vanguard arrives, my warriors will seize the forts," Faisr continued. "The two forts covering the pass we will hold onto; the rest we'll burn. Then your troops can carry on through the pass and secure the far side."

Heru gave the chieftain an appraising look, then shrugged. "Then, all else being equal, we'll be outside the walls of Lahmia in twenty-three days. What do we know about the state of the Lahmian army at this stage?"

Gold bracelets were being slipped onto Alcadizzar's wrists and a belt of heavy gold links was drawn around his hips. The priest had gotten some of the kohl in his eye, and it was starting to burn.

"We outnumber them, that's for certain," he said through gritted teeth. "And the quality of their troops is poor, to say the least. They might be counted on to hold the city walls for a time, but once the Lybarans have made a breach, they won't be able to hold us." Finally, the priest finished with the kohl, and Alcadizzar turned his head away with a sigh.

"What about the dragon powder?" Heru asked.

"The Lahmians haven't raised any companies of Dragon Men since the last war," Alcadizzar said. "That tells me they don't have any dragon powder left." He gave Faisr a knowing look. "It's Neferata and her ilk we need to be concerned about."

Heru grimaced. He'd seen the severed head of the monster first-hand. "And how many of those creatures are there?"

Alcadizzar belatedly realised that the priests had stepped back and were surveying their handiwork. With a scowl, he lowered his arms.

"Honestly, I don't know," he told Heru. "Not many, else they couldn't have remained secret for so long. If we're lucky, there are no more than a handful of them. Even so, there's no telling how much harm they could do us if we're not careful."

The tent flap drew aside once more. A nervous-looking priest entered. "It is nearly time," he announced.

"Prince Alcadizzar is ready," the senior priest replied.

Alcadizzar glanced down at his bare chest and arms. "I feel naked," he muttered.

Heru laughed. "It's traditional," he replied. "And likely more comfortable in Khemri, which sits at the edge of the Great Desert."

Faisr let out a snort. "No desert dweller with an ounce of sense would be caught in public dressed like that. He looks like an overgrown babe."

They all shared a chuckle at that. The priests shifted about nervously. Heru noted their discomfort and waved Alcadizzar towards the tent flap. "Lead on, uncle," he said. "The sooner the ceremony is done, the sooner you can put your robes back on."

A priest rushed forwards to draw the tent flap aside, admitting a brief gust of dusty air. Alcadizzar stepped out into the confusing swirl of an army preparing to march. Men dashed about purposefully in every direction. Some carried chests, or clay jars, their brows sheened with sweat; others marched in tight groups, turned out smartly in full armour and clutching their weapons tightly. Still others stumbled bewilderedly down the trade road, half-wearing their wargear and clutching the rest against their chests, searching vainly for their parent units. Voices laughed and cursed, bawled orders or cried out in confusion. A pall of dust hung over everything, churned up by thousands of shuffling feet. No one paid the least attention to Alcadizzar and his retinue. He glanced around bemusedly, fighting the sudden urge to sneeze.

"This way, great one." The senior priest hurried up beside Alcadizzar and indicated a narrow lane running south between rows of campaign tents. Feeling a bit like a farmer's prized ox, he allowed himself to be herded along by the holy men. Heru and Faisr fell into step to either side of him.

The young prince cast a sidelong glance at his uncle and smiled ruefully. "Not quite what you expected," he said.

Alcadizzar grimaced. "There are a few things missing, I admit. A city, for example. Cheering throngs. A procession of chariots." He frowned at the priests. "You'd think we could have managed the chariots, at least."

"We needed them more in the vanguard." Heru chuckled. "I suppose we could round up some spear companies and order them to cheer for you, if that would make you feel better."

"How about a company of dancing girls? Do we have any of those in the army?"

Heru arched his eyebrows in mock disdain. "Who do you think we are, a bunch of decadent Lahmians?" The Rasetran shrugged. "Look, it could be worse. I managed to talk the priests into dispensing with the formal ceremony, at least. Otherwise we'd still be at this by sunset."

To Alcadizzar's surprise, Faisr glowered at the priests and grunted in agreement. "Not the best way to begin one's rule, perhaps, but a necessary one," he said. "The army must have a clear leader, and the other kings won't accept the authority of a mere prince, no matter who he may be."

"Look at all the trouble I've had from Zandri and Numas already," Heru added. "They've complained about everything from their place in the order of march, to the number of wagons allocated for their baggage. Imagine what they'll be like when we're camped outside Lahmia."

Alcadizzar raised his hands in surrender. "I know, I know," he replied. He'd expected Rakh-an-atum and Omorose to try and assert their authority at every step. The last thing they wanted was to see Khemri regain its former power, so they would

try to undercut him in any way they could. It wasn't enough to focus on the immediate problems of the campaign; if he wanted to succeed, he had to begin anticipating the challenges that would arise in the months and years to come. Not for the first time, Alcadizzar offered a silent prayer of thanks to the spirit of his long-dead tutor Jabari.

The priests led him to the far end of the lane. Beyond the last cluster of tents stretched a wide field of trampled earth, dimpled by horse hooves and rutted by wagon tracks. The sun was almost directly overhead, causing the shifting curtains of dust to shimmer as they drifted across the open ground. Beyond, wavering like some desert mirage, was the sight of a gleaming white pavilion, surrounded by a silent, watchful crowd of perhaps a hundred people.

The senior priest waved the procession to a halt and gauged the position of the sun with a practiced eye. "A bit slower now, great one," he said, smiling in satisfaction. He clapped his hands, and the rest of the priestly retinue swiftly formed ranks to left and right of Faisr and Heru. When they were in position, the holy man raised his hands to the sun and across the field came a ragged cheer, punctuated by the clash of cymbals and silver bells. The senior priests nodded gravely and set off towards the waiting pavilion at a steady, measured pace.

Alcadizzar's mind was a riot of conflicting thoughts and emotions. He ought to be happy, he thought. The moment he'd been preparing for his entire life was unfolding before his eyes. But all he could think about were the thousand and one tasks that needed tending to between here and Lahmia. As hard as he tried to savour the moment, he found it almost impossible to focus.

They'd crossed nearly half the field in tense silence, squinting through the shifting dust, when Heru abruptly spoke. "So, have you given any thought to a wife?"

Alcadizzar blinked, shaken from his reverie. "First this, and now you're trying to get me married, as well?"

Heru chuckled. "Just trying to make conversation," he said. "Traditionally, you'd be marrying a daughter of Lahmia, you know."

"Really?" Alcadizzar replied archly. "My Lahmian tutors *never once* mentioned that."

Heru let out a snort. "Point being, that's one tradition likely to go by the wayside. Unless you still intend to respect Khemri's ancient ties to Lahmia after you've torn it stone from stone."

"Doesn't seem much point, when you put it that way," Alcadizzar said dryly.

"Exactly," Heru replied. "Father wants you to choose someone from Rasetra, of course. Strengthen the ties between east and west, that sort of thing. Or you could choose someone from Zandri or Numas. *That* would certainly roil the pot."

"I'd rather marry for love than political gain."

"Very funny, uncle."

Alcadizzar sighed. "If you must know," he said, glancing sidelong at Faisr, "I'd planned on marrying a woman of the desert tribes."

Heru's eyes widened. "Ah," he said diplomatically. Instead, it was Faisr who blurted the obvious question.

"Why would you do such a thing?"

There was an edge to Faisr's voice, as though the chieftain half-believed he was being mocked.

Alcadizzar looked his old friend in the eye. "Because they are my people," he said. "Bound by ties of blood and honour. Those are the bonds that matter most to me."

The answer surprised Faisr. "Well," he began, momentarily at a loss for words. "I... suppose such a thing is possible. But she would have to be very desperate indeed to settle for such an abysmal horseman."

"Surely not desperate," Heru protested, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "Maybe just... slow of mind."

Faisr scratched at his bearded chin thoughtfully. "There is a woman of the *bani-al-Shawat* who was kicked in the head by a horse..."

Ahead of the nobles, the senior priest came to a sudden halt. They were only twenty yards or so from the pavilion now, close enough for Alcadizzar to see the expressions of the Khemrians who had gathered to witness his ascension. They ranged from richly clad nobles to common soldiers, standing shoulder-to-shoulder to welcome their new king. Many wept openly, beaming with pride as they chanted ancient songs of blessing to Ptra, father of the gods and patron of their city.

From the midst of the chanting crowd emerged a tall figure clad in robes of white and gleaming cloth of gold. Sunlight blazed from the golden mantle set about his shoulders and the head of the tall staff clutched in his right hand. Atop the staff was a great golden orb, borne on the shoulders of four rearing sphinxes—the seal of Ptra, the Great Father himself. It caught the light of the noonday sun and shone so brightly that it was almost painful to look upon. Shepsu-amun, the Grand Hierophant of Ptra, left the crowd and went to join the waiting procession. He bowed to the senior priest, who returned the gesture and swiftly stepped aside. The hierophant took the priest's place at the head of the procession, smiling briefly at Alcadizzar before turning back to the pavilion.

The cheering crowd suddenly fell silent. Behind Alcadizzar, the noise of the army camp had faded to a dull roar. He was suddenly aware of the heat of the sun on his scalp and the caress of the dusty breeze across his shoulders and face.

At some unseen signal, the crowd around the pavilion parted to the left and right, revealing a stocky, middle-aged man, clad in robes of samite and bearing the gold circlet of the Living City's Grand Vizier. His name was Inofre, the latest in a long line of regents who had rebuilt Khemri from nothing while Alcadizzar had lived as a hostage in Lahmia. Hands clasped at his waist, he cried out in a clear, powerful voice. "Hearken! The people of the city cry out for succour from the blazing sands and the evils of the night! They gather before the throne to receive the wisdom of the gods, but it lies empty! Where is the great king?"

The crowd raised their hands to the sky, taking up their part in the ancient rite. "Great god of the sun, where is our king?"

Shepsu-amun raised the blazing staff of Ptra and answered. "The young king, Thutep, has gone into the dusk and resides with the spirit of his ancestors, until the day when the sons of Man cast off the bonds of death."

"Who, then, will lead us?" Inofre replied. "The enemies of the city gather about us even now. Has the Great Father forsaken us?"

At this, the hierophant threw back his shoulders and laughed. It was a rich, joyous sound, a bright counterpoint to the solemn rite. "Fear not, people of the city, for Ptra hears you! He has sent a man of honour and courage to lead you through the dark times to come."

"Who is this man?" Inofre asked.

"Alcadizzar!" Shepsu-amun declared proudly. "A prince of royal blood, son of Aten-heru, King of Rasetra."

"*Alcadizzar!*" shouted the crowd. "*Alcadizzar!*"

Inofre beckoned. "Then let him come forth, to receive the instruments of rulership and accept the accolades of his people!"

The hierophant nodded and approached the white pavilion at a slow, stately pace. Alcadizzar followed behind, his heart fluttering in his chest. It was as though a great weight was settling about his shoulders—the mantle of history, stretching back to the time of Settra himself. He could feel the stares of the assembled crowd as he passed by. Inofre had cautioned him to keep his gaze fixed straight ahead, but he couldn't help but look from side to side, meeting the eyes of the people around him. *My people*, he thought. The thought was surreal, after so many years living alone among the tribes.

Suddenly, Shepsu-amun stepped to Alcadizzar's left and the prince found himself standing before an ancient throne of dark, polished wood. The throne of Khemri, a relic of ancient times recovered from the Usurper's camp at the Battle of Mahrak by the Rasetrans and returned to the Living City centuries later. Upon its surface rested the ceremonial instruments of ruler-ship—a miniature shepherd's crook, wrought in pure gold, and a gleaming sceptre surmounted by a golden sun-disc.

Alcadizzar took a deep breath and reached for the sceptre. The shaft was warm to the touch and fitted easily into his palm. Next he took up the crook, crossing the two objects over his heart. Then, moving as though in a dream, he took his seat upon Settra's great throne. As he did, the hierophant turned to the crowd.

"The king has come! People of Khemri, look upon Ptra's chosen one and rejoice!"

Raucous cheers rose into the air. Seated upon the throne, Alcadizzar could see past the small crowd and back across the field where the great army was breaking camp. The sight called to him in a way that no throne ever could.

Alcadizzar rose to his feet. The Grand Vizier bowed once again. "What is your will, great one?" he asked.

The king unceremoniously pressed crook and sceptre into Inofre's hands. There were many hours of hard riding ahead before the army would camp for the night, and then many hours more going over details of the attack on the city with Heru and his fellow rulers. If he was lucky, his coronation feast would consist of a bit of unleavened bread and a cup of watered wine. The thought made him smile.

"Bring me my horse... and a proper set of clothes," the king said. "There's work to be done."

—<TWENTY>—

A Storm from the West

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Ptra the Glorious
(-1200 Imperial Reckoning)*

The fires could be seen from the western quarters of the city; a shifting curtain of dull, orange light dancing along the tops of the hills that bordered the eastern edge of the Golden Plain. Families ventured furtively out onto their rooftops, or, daring greatly, gathered in the rubbish-strewn market squares to wonder at the sight. Most believed that the scrubland on the far side of the hills had caught fire; the previous summer had been an unseasonably dry one and the woodland was little more than tinder. Others, however—mostly wide-eyed vagrants, but not a few priests as well—saw an otherworldly significance in the baleful light. They warned the crowds that the wickedness at the heart of the city had grown so great that the gods had chosen to return and mete judgement upon Lahmia. The fire would build like a great wave behind the hills, until it finally overtopped them and came crashing down on the city, scorching it from the face of the earth. Grim-faced men of the City Guard did their best to silence the fearmongers, but the best they could do was slow the spread of hysteria. By midnight there were mobs converging on the temple district and riots were sweeping through the Travellers' Quarter.

This time, the hysteria was justified. The madmen were closer to the truth than anyone—except Ushoran, and a handful of others, mortal and immortal—suspected.

The Lord of Masks wiped the last of his tools clean and slid them clumsily into their loops on the wide leather wallet. Behind him, his evening's entertainment gave one final spasm against his restraints and then expired, his death-rattle echoing in the chilly confines of the cellar. Ushoran bared his teeth at the sound, his anger at the waste of such exceptional flesh momentarily eclipsing the panic that churned in his guts.

Now he knew why he hadn't heard anything from his agents in the west for nearly a year. It was possible that the great cities had finally grown tired of paying their yearly tribute to Lahmia; Ushoran had known all along that, sooner or later, revolt was inevitable. It was the timing that disturbed him. What could have possibly forced the great cities to put aside their differences now, after hundreds of years of rivalry? He could think of only one thing.

Ushoran hadn't heard from Zurhas since the immortal had left the city a year ago. Something had gone very, very wrong.

Footfalls thumped hurriedly across the floors of the house as his thralls gathered his personal effects together. He'd had a plan for escaping the city for the last several years, against the day that Neferata's patience would finally run out. There were forged letters of transit in a bag upstairs that would get him onto a boat in the harbour or pass him through the city gates; he hadn't yet made up his mind which course he would choose. Escaping to the east would put him well beyond Neferata's grasp, but his future in one of the Silk Land's coastal trade cities was uncertain at best. Conversely, he would prosper more easily in one of the other Nehekharan cities, but only if he could slip past the armies that were even now only a few hours from the city walls. He could do it alone, of that he was certain, but that would mean leaving his thralls and nearly all of his other possessions behind.

Ushoran carefully rolled the wallet into a tight cylinder and bound it closed with a braided cord of human hair. The Lord of Masks stroked the stained leather protectively. He could start anew in some other place. He could be anyone he wanted to be. All he needed were his tools. The rest he could do without.

West it was, then. If he moved quickly, he and his thralls could slip through the city's west gate, then turn northwards just as Zurhas had done. From there, they could take refuge in the city's necropolis, scouting a safe path through the enemy patrols that would take them into the wooded hills to the north-west. He knew of narrow game paths that would take him onto the Golden Plain, far north of the trade road. If he encountered any trouble along the way, he could abandon the thralls to their fate and make his escape.

Upstairs, the footfalls had gone silent. All was in readiness. Clutching his tools against his chest, the Lord of Masks raced up the mud-brick stairs to the house's ground floor. The quicker he was beyond the city walls, the better.

When he'd purchased the house, decades ago, the cellar stairs had been accessible through an archway at the rear of the building. Since then, he'd had the entrance hidden behind a cunningly wrought disguised door. Ushoran pressed the door's latch with the tip of a claw and pushed it wide. Beyond was a large storeroom, piled with an assortment of wooden boxes and empty clay jars—placed there to contribute to the illusion that real people actually lived in the building. An archway opposite opened onto a short corridor that led to the house's gathering room. His mind buzzing with the myriad details of his escape plan, Ushoran hurried to join his thralls.

He did not note the stink of spilled blood at first. His nose was deadened to the scent after the evening's entertainments. It was only when he emerged into the gathering room and stepped into a wide, tacky pool of gore that Ushoran realised the house had, in the space of a few heartbeats, been transformed into an abattoir.

The bodies of his thralls were scattered about the room. It looked like a battlefield: heads split, limbs severed, torsos slashed and entrails spilled across the floor. Blood painted the white walls in looping streaks and explosive spatters. Gore was splashed across the ordered rows of leather packs and saddlebags that had been set beside the door.

Ushoran froze, momentarily stunned by the suddenness and ferocity of the assault. A slight movement to his left caught the immortal's eye.

Ankhat sat at the gathering room's crude wooden table, idly tracing shapes with a fingertip through the spots of blood pooled across its rough surface. A red-stained iron sword lay on the table next to him, within easy reach.

The immortal fixed Ushoran with a steady, implacable stare. "You have some explaining to do, my lord."

Ushoran bared his teeth in a silent snarl, like an animal at bay. Mind reeling, he tried to compose himself, only to realise with an icy shock that he wasn't cloaked in his customary disguise. Ankhat could see him for what he really was, and showed not the slightest surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" hissed the Lord of Masks.

Ankhat leaned forwards in his chair. "Now that," he said, "is a *very* interesting question, considering the circumstances."

Ushoran grew very still. His hands slowly closed into fists. How much did Ankhat know? The noble was swift and deadly with a blade, but Ushoran knew he was far stronger. Could he kill Ankhat? Possibly.

"How did you find me?" Ushoran said. He edged towards the table a fraction of a step.

Ankhat did not answer. Instead, Neferata's icy voice spoke from the darkness beyond the door.

"We have known about your secrets for quite some time," she said, gliding like a pallid wraith into the blood-streaked room. Her retinue of maidens followed in her wake, fanged mouths gaping hungrily at the scent of so much carnage.

Neferata stalked towards Ushoran, her tattered robes swaying hypnotically with every languid step. Her eyes were pools of darkness, empty of human feeling.

"While your agents watched the kings of the great cities, Ankhat's agents were watching you," Neferata continued. "In truth, your appetites meant nothing to me, so long as you were useful."

He never saw the blow. One moment, Neferata was several feet away—the next, he was being hurled against the far wall with a thunderous crash. Fragments of whitewashed mud flew across the room.

Neferata's fist tightened like a vice around Ushoran's throat. Her face was expressionless as she pushed him harder against the wall. Fragments of brick ground against his back.

"But now the forts along the plain are burning and an army has seized the eastern pass. A soldier from one of the forts escaped and lived long enough to bring us the news." Her fist tightened further. "I think you have disappointed me for the last time, my lord."

Ushoran gripped Neferata's slender wrist and fought with all his strength for enough air to speak. "I... did... not... know!" he gasped. "My... agents... slain..."

Neferata's eyes narrowed angrily. "Do you expect me to believe that this vast network of agents you've boasted about for so many years was undone so quickly and thoroughly that you received *no* warning whatsoever?" Quick as a viper, she drew back her arm and slammed Ushoran back against the wall, sending more clay fragments spraying around the room. "Now you're insulting my intelligence."

The Lord of Masks pawed desperately at Neferata's wrist. "You're... right," he hissed, his mind racing. "Not... the... agents. The... messages... intercepted." His eyes widened. "Bandits... on the... plain. The... desert... tribes..."

"And why would a gang of flea-bitten thieves suddenly take an interest in your couriers?" Neferata snarled.

There was only one answer Ushoran could think of. "*Alcadizzar*," he croaked.

For a moment, it looked as though Neferata's icy mask would crumble. Her eyes flashed angrily, but she abruptly released the Lord of Masks, allowing his misshapen body to slide heavily to the floor. "Explain," she demanded.

Ushoran drew a deep breath. The more he considered the notion, the more things started to make sense. "The tribes... wouldn't care," he began. "Unless someone gave them a reason to."

Neferata scowled at him. "Alcadizzar? A prince among thieves? Is that your explanation?"

Wood creaked as Ankhat leaned back against the rough-hewn chair. "As much as I hate to admit it, the idea is not as far-fetched as it sounds," he said. "The desert tribes have ancient ties to Khemri, going back as far as Settra himself."

"They must have been sheltering him all along," Ushoran said. "He was under our noses, hiding right outside the city. The tribes have always been secretive and hostile to outsiders. Every attempt to infiltrate them came to nothing. If Alcadizzar could have convinced them of his lineage, though, he might well have won them over."

"And now the little prince has managed to turn the other great cities against us," Ankhat said, casting an accusing look at Neferata.

"How?" Neferata demanded. "We've kept them at one another's throats for centuries."

"Does it matter?" Ushoran interjected. "The enemy is nearly at our gates. The question is, can we defeat them?"

For several, agonising seconds, neither Ankhat nor Neferata spoke and Ushoran began to fear he'd overreached. But then Ankhat sighed heavily, breaking the tension.

"The army is not trustworthy," he said reluctantly. "We can count on the royal guard, of course, and most of the noble companies, but that's all."

"The people of Lahmia will defend their city," Neferata snarled. "Call up the citizen levies. Anyone who does not answer the summons will be slain out of hand."

"The moment we start executing people, we may as well open the gates and invite Alcadizzar in," Ankhat said flatly. "The city will tear itself apart."

Neferata glared angrily at Ankhat, but the immortal didn't waver. Finally she growled. "How many, then?"

"Twenty thousand," Ankhat replied. "Two thousand cavalry, a thousand archers, and the rest infantry." He shrugged. "They're inexperienced, but it doesn't take much skill to stand on a wall and stick men with a spear."

"Will that be enough?"

Ankhat shrugged. "I have no idea. We don't really know what we're dealing with yet."

“We can guess,” Ushoran said. “There have been no reports from the west for many months. If Alcadizzar has roused Zandri, Numas, Quatar and Ka-Sabar, we could be facing as many as fifty thousand men. If he’s won over Rasetra and Lybaras as well—and there’s no reason to think he hasn’t—then the number could be much higher. All they would need to do is create a breach in the walls and it would be all over.”

Neferata shot a look at Ankhat, expecting the immortal to challenge Ushoran’s dire assessment. When he did not, her expression turned grim.

“There must be a way to stop them,” she said. “There *must* be. I’ll die the true death before I give up this city—and I’ll see the rest of you die with me!”

Ankhat stiffened, his eyes narrowing angrily. He started to rise from the chair, his hand drifting to the hilt of his sword.

Ushoran’s eyes widened. If Ankhat turned his blade on Neferata, then all would be lost. With her maidens at her back, she would destroy them both.

“There might be a way!” he shouted. “But there will be a price, great one.”

Ankhat paused. Neferata turned to Ushoran, her eyes glinting like polished onyx.

“Tell me,” she said.

The vanguard of the army moved in good order down through the wooded hills and reached Lahmia’s walls by midnight; the leading companies of the army’s main body, Alcadizzar and Heru among them, joined up with them just before dawn. By the time they arrived, Faisr’s tribesmen had preparations for the army’s sprawling camp well under way, marking positions for tents, enclosures and corrals by torchlight.

Alcadizzar leaned back in the saddle with a grimace, trying to stretch his lower back. They had been riding since just after dawn the day before and he ached from his shoulders to his toes. The chariots and spearmen of Khemri filed past in weary ranks, heading for their assigned spot at the centre of the camp.

Heru drew up alongside the king looking as relaxed and alert as though he were on an afternoon ride. Leather creaked as he leaned forwards in the saddle and surveyed the distant city. “A strange sort of homecoming,” he said to Alcadizzar. “How long has it been?”

Alcadizzar sighed and tried to count the years. Eighty, perhaps? Ninety? He was too tired to be sure. After a moment, he shrugged. “Longer than you would believe.”

“Has it changed much?”

The king straightened, waving his arm at the cramped farmland nestled between Lahmia and the hills at their back. “The last time I was here, this was a shanty town,” he said. “Or what was left of one. Refugees settled here from Mahrak and Lybaras after the war against the Usurper, but they’d been mostly chased off or had found lives inside the city by the time I was born. When the bandits chased all the farmers off the Golden Plain, the lucky ones managed to resettle here.” The farms were dark now, their inhabitants having fled yet again for the dubious safety of Lahmia’s walls.

Heru nodded towards the city. Columns of smoke, dull black against the grey predawn sky, rose from various quarters and wreathed the broad flanks of Lahmia’s central hill. “It looks like someone’s started ahead of us.”

Alcadizzar nodded. "Faisr's people in the city tell me that Lahmia's on the verge of revolt. After everything her citizens have suffered, Neferata will have a difficult time finding troops to man the walls."

"All the better," Heru said. "The Lybarans should be here by midday. If they work through the night tonight, they can have their catapults ready to fire by tomorrow. All we need do is wait for them to make a breach."

Alcadizzar said nothing for a moment, his gaze fixed on the smoke-wreathed hill. He couldn't yet see the walls of the palace that ringed its summit. Was Neferata there, standing atop the Temple of Blood and planning the destruction of his army?

"Faisr should already have pickets out," he said. "Pass the word to him that I want the posts to the north-east doubled. Then tell the captains I want half the companies to get some rest, while the others make camp. We'll switch them at noon and then start digging defensive positions."

Heru frowned. "You think the Lahmians will try an attack?"

The king looked north-east, to the rolling ground beyond the city where Lahmia's vast necropolis lay. "Neferata has little choice," he replied. "If she hasn't realised it yet, she will before long."

The Rasetran let out a snort. "We've got the better part of thirty thousand men here, and more arriving every hour. If Neferata tries a sortie today, we'll cut her to pieces."

Alcadizzar glanced at his nephew, his expression sombre. "It's not a daytime attack that I'm worried about."

It took hours for a group of temple acolytes to prise away the mortar sealing the flagstones in the temple cellar and reveal the cavity beneath. The space was just large enough to hold a large, earthen grain jar, its wide mouth capped and sealed with lead.

Ankhat had followed Neferata's commands to the letter, Ushoran thought, watching the acolytes grip the jar's four thick handles and haul it out of the hole. The cellar was one of the smallest and deepest of the chamber's storehouses and had been filled with everything from barrels of dried fish to bales of mouldy cotton. No one but rats had ventured there for years; even if the cellar had eventually been cleared out and put to another use, no one would have had any reason to suspect that anything had been buried beneath it. The Lord of Masks stole a glance at Ankhat, who stood above the hole and supervised the excavation with a tight, angry scowl on his face. He had been loudly, almost violently opposed to Ushoran's plan, but Neferata had overridden him. The city had to be saved, regardless of the risks.

The acolytes set the jar on the cellar floor with a heavy *thump* and stood back, shoulders heaving. Ankhat dismissed them with a wave of his hand. The mortals bowed swiftly and withdrew, eager to return to the light and warmth of the upper levels.

Ushoran listened to the acolytes' footsteps fade away down the corridor. Within moments, the immortals were alone. The Lord of Masks folded his arms, expecting Ankhat to vent his displeasure further, but the nobleman said not a word. Instead, he walked up to the jar and struck it with his fist.

The jar's thick, curved side shattered beneath the blow, sending palm-sized fragments skipping across the flagstones. Wreathed in a thin veil of clay dust, Ankhat reached into the jar and dragged W'soran's body free.

The necromancer's skeletal body was filthy with dust and mould and had been folded into a foetal position in order to fit into the tight confines of the jar. The jagged end of the wooden shard that Neferata had used to stab him protruded from the back of his grimy robes.

Ankhat's lip curled in disgust. He glared at Ushoran.

"There he is," the immortal snapped. "You're the one who wanted to free him, so you can do the rest."

Ushoran gave Ankhat a disdainful stare, but went and knelt by W'soran's body. Carefully, he gripped the necromancer's fragile-looking arms and straightened them. Fabric crackled; dust puffed from wrists, shoulders and elbows. W'soran's skin was as thin as parchment and his bones little more than twigs. He worked gingerly, fearing that they might snap off if he used too much force.

Once the arms were free, Ushoran straightened out the necromancer's torso, until his body more or less lay flat. W'soran's face was little more than a snarling death's-head, his fangs bared in a tight-clenched grimace. The Lord of Masks stared into the necromancer's desiccated face and paused. He vividly remembered another night, in another cellar, hundreds of years ago, when Lamashizzar had plucked the stone from Arkhan's heart. He remembered the howl of madness as the immortal had clawed his way back to wakefulness, after having been paralysed for only a few months. W'soran had been trapped, fully aware, in the prison of his own mind for some twenty-two *years*. Would he have any sanity left?

The Lord of Masks reached out his hand and grasped the length of wood that jutted from W'soran's ribs. He plucked it free with a quick jerk of the wrist and tossed it across the cellar.

A faint tremor went through W'soran's bony frame. Ushoran settled back on his heels and waited for the howling to begin.

Moments later, the necromancer's eyelids snapped open, and Ushoran found himself staring into W'soran's dark, pitiless eyes. There was no madness there that Ushoran could see; just the cold, calculating intelligence of a serpent. Not a single sound escaped his ragged lips: no cry of terror, or anger, or relief. The lack of reaction chilled him far worse than Arkhan's tortured howls ever did.

For the first time, Ushoran feared he'd made a terrible mistake. Did they dare place Nagash's forbidden tomes into W'soran's hands?

Did they have any other choice, Ushoran thought? They would need an army to defend the city from the invaders. If the living would not answer the call, then the dead would have to march in their place.

Fire in the Night

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Ptra the Glorious
(-1200 Imperial Reckoning)*

Screams and the tramping of running feet rose from the narrow streets that surrounded the royal palace. Lahmia had lapsed into a shocked silence when the rising sun revealed the vast army camped outside its walls; now, with the coming of night, the city was trying to tear itself apart once more. The City Watch was patrolling the streets in gangs, armed not with clubs but with bared blades, under orders to kill any citizen roaming the streets after dark.

Neferata's high priestesses filed silently into her bedchamber as the last rays of the sun sank below the hills to the west. She did little more than sip from the proffered cup; just enough to quicken her limbs and whet her hunger to a razor's edge. Silent and sombre, the masked thralls drew her gently from the bed. This was a duty they had not performed for many years, not since the escape of the Rasetran prince, and they went about their work with slow, almost ritualistic care.

Deft fingers plucked at Neferata's stained clothes, peeling them away. Golden basins were brought in; they bathed her pale skin and then rubbed it with fragrant oils that had once been held sacred by the priestesses of Asaph. Neferata said nothing, her expression distant as she gazed out through the bedchamber's tall windows at the restless sea. The striped sails of trading ships spread in a wide arc from the mouth of the harbour, fleeing eastwards on the receding tide.

The thralls wrapped her in robes of dark blue silk and bound them with a girdle of plain, woven leather. A spearman's supple leather sandals were placed on her feet, secured in place by laced straps that reached as high as her knees.

When she was dressed, the priestesses guided her to a chair and began to work on her hair. Fingers teased and tugged at the mass of knots and tangles. Outside, darkness spread across the surface of the sea. By now, she knew, her warriors would be gathering at the city's southern gate, and W'soran would have begun his preparations for the great ritual. The sands were slipping through the hourglass.

Neferata waved her hand at the thralls. "Time is wasting. If it won't come loose, cut it off. I care not."

The thralls paused. There was a faint murmur of voices and the hands drew away. Neferata steeled herself for the cold touch of the knife—but instead felt another pair of hands take up where the thralls had left off. Deft fingertips unwound one tangle

after another, drawing it down around her shoulders and her back. The sensation brought back memories Neferata had buried long ago.

She turned her head slightly to the side. "Listening to me as I slept, again?"

The fingers paused for a moment. "No," Naaima said quietly. "Not for a very long time."

"What then?" Neferata demanded. "If you've come to gloat, then say your piece and be gone."

"No," Naaima said again. She resumed her work, pulling at a stubborn knot at the base of Neferata's neck. "What's done is done. I take no joy in seeing Lahmia brought to this."

"Why shouldn't you?" Neferata said bitterly. "It's not your home."

To the queen's surprise, Naaima answered with a low chuckle. "Of course it is," she said. "Lahmia has been my home since the day you set me free, all those years ago."

Neferata looked away again, out into the darkness. "If only he had listened," she said hollowly. "How different Nehekhara would be now."

"It was not his fate," Naaima replied. "Such things cannot be changed, no matter how we might wish it."

Neferata fell silent. Frightened screams drifted on the sea breeze.

"Are you still angry with me?"

"No," Naaima said. "Not anymore. Does that comfort you?"

"I no longer know the meaning of the word." The queen sighed. "Why did you never ask to leave? Did you think I would have refused you?"

Naaima teased out the last of the knots and picked up a silver brush from the dressing table nearby. "Is it so hard to understand?" she said sadly. "Because I love you."

"Then you have made a grave mistake."

"As I said, we cannot change our fates," Naaima replied. "Once upon a time, you gave me the world. Ever since, I have waited to give it back." She put down the brush and came around to kneel at the queen's side.

"Come with me to the east," she said, taking Neferata's cold hands in hers. "There is a ship waiting for us in the harbour. We can settle for a time in one of the trade cities, or leave them behind and travel the empire itself. Think of it—"

Neferata frowned. "You think I'd abandon Lahmia?" she said. The queen pulled her hands away. "My family has ruled this city for millennia."

"All things end," Naaima replied. "Come away with me. Please. When the sun rises tomorrow, Lahmia will be no more."

The queen stared down at Naaima, peering into the depths of the immortal's pleading eyes. Slowly, her expression hardened into a cold, defiant mask.

"Not while I still walk the earth," Neferata said.

The queen rose from her chair and turned away from Naaima. The priestesses waited in silence, hands clasped at their waists, their expressions hidden behind their masks of gold.

She went to them, raising her arms as if in welcome. Next to them, laid out upon the silken bed, waited her armour of polished iron.

The view from the western gatehouse showed the invading army arrayed in a wide arc from north to south, their camps set in the fallow grain fields just a few dozen yards out of bowshot from the city walls. The darkness made it difficult to gauge the size of the host, but judging by the number of tents and cook-fires alone, W'soran reckoned that their numbers were vast—probably fifty thousand or more. For once, Neferata had shown a modicum of sense, the necromancer thought. Her pathetic excuse for an army wouldn't have stood a chance against such a force.

W'soran ran his fingertips along the yellowed pages of the great tome cradled in his left hand and smiled possessively. The taste of vindication was sweet. Even trapped in the stifling darkness of his prison, he had known that this day would come. Now the forbidden tomes were his. The final secrets of the necromantic art lay within his grasp.

He turned away from the gatehouse's narrow windows, satisfied that they would provide him with the vantage point he required. The large chamber dominated the upper storey of the gatehouse and normally served as a barracks and common room for the guardsmen who stood watch along the western wall. At Neferata's command the wide, rectangular room had been emptied of cots, tables and chairs, and the guardsmen forbidden to enter on pain of death. A trio of thralls—Neferata's possessions, which galled W'soran no end, but there was no time to create more of his own—waited at the far end of the room, ready to serve his every command. The bloodless corpses of two young men were piled in a heap near one of the chamber's two doors, their faces contorted in masks of terror and pain.

The ritual circle had been inscribed on the floor in blood, copied exactly according to the notes and diagrams in Nagash's tome. W'soran studied the complex incantation with an expectant smile. He had been waiting for this moment for centuries.

"Is all in readiness?"

The necromancer's head jerked up in surprise. He hadn't heard Neferata's approach. The queen had entered through the door to his left, attended by her maidens. The former priestesses were a fearsome sight, clad in dark robes and leather armour reinforced with thin strips of iron. Fresh blood darkened their lips and dripped from their chins. The queen herself was more forbidding still: her torso was cased in a flexible breastplate of polished iron scales, a heavy skirt of leather banded with iron covered her from hips to knees. Hinged iron bracers encased her forearms, heavy enough to block swords and shatter bones. Her face and hands had been cleansed of filth and gleamed like marble in the torchlight. She was radiant, beautiful beyond compare, but her eyes held nothing but death. It was the first time he had seen her since that night in the sanctum, more than twenty years ago. He had looked forwards to the meeting eager to heap upon her all the bitterness and hate that had sustained him in his prison, but the sight of her now gave the necromancer pause.

"The circle is prepared," he said curtly. "But the effects will be limited. The tombs of the nobility are warded with powerful spells of protection, which require more time to circumvent."

A flicker of irritation crossed the queen's face, but she nodded. "Very well," Neferata said. "The enemy's pickets have been slain. Ushoran waits in the necropolis, and Ankhat is leading the army through the south gate even now."

Neferata strode to the gatehouse windows, surveying the battlefield. "And you will guide them from here?"

"It will serve," W'soran replied.

"Then begin."

The necromancer gave the queen a sepulchral smile. "As you command," he said, and sketched a quick, faintly mocking bow. Neferata took no notice, her gaze fixed on the distant enemy.

No doubt searching for her lost prince, W'soran thought, his lip curling into a sneer as he turned his attention to the necromantic circle. With luck, he would find Alcadizzar first. How sweet it would be to present the queen with his still-beating heart.

W'soran took his place before the circle. His gaze fell to the incantation writ upon the page before him. Teeth bared in a death's-head grin, he began the ritual of summoning.

* * *

The cook-fires of the enemy camp twinkled in the darkness, little more than a mile away. From where he stood on the rocky plain just outside Lahmia's southern gate, Ankhat could only see perhaps a third of the enemy force, but even that seemed far larger than the small force under his command.

The last of the spear companies were marching down the coastal road, moving to take their place at the far end of the battle-line. The warriors were well armed, each man carrying an eight-foot spear and short sword, and wearing a shirt of iron scales over a thick leather tunic. In addition, each spearman bore a rectangular wooden shield with a round iron boss in the centre; in battle, each man would stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his companions and form a solid wall of wood and metal to protect the formation from enemy attacks. Helmeted heads glanced his way as the company went by; the faces Ankhat saw were young and frightened. None of them had ever seen battle before. Would they remember their training when they came to grips with the enemy and the blood began to flow? Ankhat had his doubts. Most had answered the call because they had families in the city and knew that their loved ones would be punished if they didn't obey.

The exception was the soldiers of the royal guard. A thousand men strong, they were clad in heavier armour and wielded fearsome, sickle-bladed polearms instead of spears. Most of them were from families whose sons had guarded the royal palace for generations and were given payment and privileges far above what a typical spearman received. Their courage and skill were unquestioned, as well as their devotion to the royal family. Ankhat had placed them in the centre of the battle-line, in hopes that their example would inspire the rest.

He had twenty-five thousand men in all, including lower, placing his palm against the ground, and felt the tremors quicken into a grinding, surf-like rumble.

He recognised it at once. It was the sound of stone scraping against stone, of hands pushing aside hundreds of mortuary slabs or forcing open long-sealed doors. An instant later the noise was echoing among the tombs as the risen dead burst from their resting places and lurched forth into the night.

Skeletal feet scraped and clicked over the rocky ground. Ushoran began to see figures moving stiffly among the tombs; bony shapes clad in rags and patches of grave mould, with pinpoints of greenish light gleaming in the depths of their eye sockets. They were the corpses of the city's poor, laid to rest in crude stone mausoleums and bereft of the grave goods that Lahmia's wealthy citizens were buried with. Though they bore no weapons and carried no armour, there were thousands of them, sweeping past Ushoran in a lurching, staggering tide, heading towards the unsuspecting enemy camp.

The Lord of Masks let out a low, hungry growl and let the tide carry him along. Behind him, the chilling cries of jackals filled the air, drawn by the smell of rotten flesh. They loped along in the wake of the skeletal army, jaws agape, as if sensing the carrion feast to come.

Horns sounded, echoing wildly from the north. Alcadizzar straightened, his dinner forgotten, wine cup halfway to his mouth.

Prince Heru sat bolt upright from the narrow cot where he'd been napping. Oil lamps filled the king's campaign tent with warm, steady light; a trio of braziers had been lit to stave off the night's chill. The Rasetran glanced sharply about, taking his bearings. "Those are our horns," he said with growing alarm.

Alcadizzar nodded. He sat at one of the two large tables set to one side of the tent, where a large map depicting Lahmia and the surrounding area had been laid out and marked with the dispositions of the army. He'd been certain that a night attack was coming. Neferata had nothing to gain by holding the walls and letting her smaller force be decimated by weeks of fighting. A night attack, on the other hand, offered advantages. Aside from the potential of surprise, her troops would not have to worry as much about Alcadizzar's archers and she and her monstrous allies could intervene directly in the fight.

There was also the danger of a simultaneous attack from the city's necropolis. He had to assume that if Neferata could defy death, much like Nagash had done, then she could command the dead as well. Against that possibility, he had given the battle-hardened Rasetrans the job of securing the army's left flank. In the centre, facing the city's western gate—and the likeliest route of attack by the Lahmians—he had placed Ka-Sabar's Iron Legion. On the right, close enough to offer support but otherwise out of the way, Alcadizzar had placed the troublesome Zandri infantry and mercenaries. The Numasi cavalry and the desert horsemen were held in reserve, as well as the Tomb Guard and the much smaller contingents of troops from Khemri and Mahrak.

Heru leapt to his feet, swiftly buckling on his sword. Outside, shouted orders and cries of alarm filled the air. "What in the name of the gods happened to our pickets?"

"Dead, most like," Alcadizzar replied. "The night belongs to Neferata and her ilk. Or so they think." He studied the map one last time, committing the placement of units to memory, then rose and pulled his own sword from its hook on the nearest tent-pole.

“Let’s not waste time on what’s gone wrong,” the king continued. “We suspected something like this was going to happen. Remember the battle plan.” Buckling on his sword, he rushed to the tent flap. “Runner!” he called.

In moments, a young boy from Khemri appeared, his eyes wide with excitement. “Yes, great one?”

“Get to the Lybarans and tell them to get their catapults to work on the left flank. Go!”

The boy bowed quickly and dashed from the tent, narrowly avoiding Faisr, who was rushing to find the king. The great chieftain’s face was grim.

“The left flank is under attack,” he said. “Lahmia’s necropolis has given up its dead, and they are marching on us in vast numbers!”

Alcadizzar had never heard Faisr sound worried in his entire life. The realisation sent a chill down the king’s spine, but he tried to remember old Jabari’s teachings and push the fear aside. “Take your riders and flank the corpses,” he said, in as steady a tone as he could muster. “Find the sorcerer that’s controlling them. Go!”

The great chieftain nodded curtly and hurried back out into the night. Alcadizzar turned to Heru. “Let’s go!”

“Us? Oh, no,” Heru protested, placing a hand on his uncle’s arm. “I’m going to go lead my people. Your place is here.” Without giving Alcadizzar a chance to reply, he brushed past and shoved the tent flap aside. “I’ll send a report on the situation as soon as I’m able. Just get those Lybarans moving, eh?”

“I will,” the king said, but before he could say any more, Heru was gone.

Alcadizzar clenched his fists. Off to the north, he could hear the faint roar of battle. The sound called to him, setting his blood afire. With a frustrated sigh, he went back to the map table and studied the positions of his troops.

Just then came another wave of trumpet calls—this time, however, from the south. Alcadizzar’s eyes widened.

“Runner!” he called again. His carefully prepared plan was threatening to come apart at the seams.

Just ahead of Ushoran, a man was brought down by a trio of skeletons. The warrior fell with a shout, slashing wildly with his sword and shearing off several ribs from the nearest corpse. The skeleton took no notice, its finger-bones clawing deep into the warrior’s throat. Arterial blood jetted into the air. The second corpse pulled the sword from the dying man’s hand and the trio continued on, seeking another victim.

The undead horde flooded into the enemy camp in a silent, shambling tide of bone, tearing apart anyone and anything that got in their way. The enemy fled before them, bellowing and cursing in fear. Those that stood their ground and tried to fight were quickly overwhelmed. Here and there, tents were afire, bathing the battleground in garish crimson light. Off to Ushoran’s right there was a blaze of sparks as a skeleton kicked its way through an abandoned cook-fire and kept going, its rotting clothes burning greasily about its legs and waist.

Ushoran threw back his head and howled like one of the hungry spirits of the waste. He thirsted for the taste of hot, bitter blood.

There was another line of tents up ahead. Several skeletons had already reached them and were clawing at their sides. Beyond them, Ushoran heard a throaty roar of challenge; the Rasetrans had finally chosen to turn and make a stand. Grinning evilly, the immortal picked up speed, loping past the slower skeletons, between the tents, and into the open ground on the other side.

The Lord of Masks let out a grunt of surprise. Some twenty yards past the nearest tents was a long, somewhat irregular line of barricades, formed of tall wicker baskets filled with packed earth and rock.

The Rasetrans had formed up behind the barricades, thousands strong; firelight flickered balefully off a thicket of spear-points that stretched as far as Ushoran's eye could see.

It was a sight that would have given the stoutest heart pause. But not the dead; the skeletons looked upon the enemy line and were unmoved. The horde came on, filling the open ground before the barricades and throwing itself against the enemy line. Spears jabbed and thrust, but could find no purchase. Fearless, mindless, the undead clawed at the earth-filled baskets, climbing onto them and reaching for the warriors on the other side. Men shouted oaths and struck at the corpses with spear butts, or the metal-rimmed edges of their shields. Smashed limbs and broken skulls were hurled back upon the oncoming tide, but the advance never faltered.

For the moment, the enemy line was holding, smashing apart the corpses as they clambered onto the barricade. Snarling hungrily, Ushoran broke into a run. Calling upon the power in his veins, he gathered himself and leapt like a cat, clearing the struggling mass of skeletons and coming down on the far side of the barricade. Two men fell screaming underneath the immortal; a spear punched through his hip and the wooden haft snapped in two. Ushoran felt nothing but a savage, bloodthirsty joy. With a sweep of his hand he tore a man's guts out and hurled his screaming body high into the air. Another blow crumpled a warrior's helmet and pulped the skull beneath.

Shouts, screams and curses thundered in Ushoran's ears. The enemy charged in from all sides, jabbing at him with their spears. Laughing wickedly, the immortal swept the weapons aside like twigs, clawing for the soft flesh behind them. Leather and armour tore like cloth beneath his talons. The scent of blood filled his nostrils.

Roaring like a hungry lion, the immortal plunged deeper into the mass of screaming warriors, sowing terror and death as he went.

The barbarian came at Ankhat with a furious bellow, eyes wild and bearded mouth agape. He was a giant, like all the men of the far north, broad of shoulder and thick of limb, clad in a heavy leather tunic and protected by a wooden shield the size of a chariot wheel. The northman brandished a fearsome, single-bladed battle axe in his knobby fist, drawn back to strike at the immortal's head.

He might have been trudging through wet sand, as far as Ankhat was concerned. The immortal darted forwards just as the axe fell, its blade tracing a broad, languid arc. His sword flashed upwards, chopping through the barbarian's thick wrist, then down again in a backhand stroke that smashed the northman's hip. The warrior crumpled, his bold yell transformed into a scream of mortal agony.

The barbarians threw themselves at the advancing battle-line without thought to order or discipline. They came charging out of the darkness of the camp in ragged mobs, smashing bodily into the shield wall and hewing at the heads and shoulders of their foes. Many times they were struck through by spears at the moment of impact, but the pain of their injuries only made them fight the harder. Men fell screaming, clutching at split skulls or ruined faces, or struggling to stanch the blood pouring from gaping throats. Others pressed forwards, filling the gaps in the line, and the companies continued to advance.

Another brute rushed at Ankhat, bloodshot eyes glaring hatefully over the rim of his shield. The immortal fixed the barbarian with a haughty stare and bared his fangs; the northman pulled up short, shouting in terror.

Ankhat took off the top of his head with a single, swift stroke. More of the mercenaries crashed into the line of guardsmen to the immortal's right; men grunted and cursed, hacking at the giants with their polearms.

"Forwards!" Ankhat cried, adding his own voice to the din. Trumpets were pealing up and down the battle-line, urging the men onwards. The immortal cut the legs out from under a charging barbarian, then stabbed the throat of another who was locked in battle with the guardsman to his left. He had lost track of the number of foes he'd slain since the advance began. Twenty? Thirty? They all blurred together in a magnificent haze of screams and spilled blood. Part of him longed to leave the slow-moving companies behind and truly indulge his hunger. What a slaughter he might have wrought then!

Now, abruptly, the tide had shifted. The barbarians were withdrawing, racing back towards the camp at the bellowing sound of deep-throated horns. The Lahmians, flush with success, flung insults and jeers at the retreating mercenaries. Ankhat, whose eyes were far keener in the dark, saw why; the enemy had finally managed to restore some order in the camp and the rest of the northmen had been formed together in something approaching a proper battle-line, some twenty yards away. As the Lahmians approached, they roared in challenge, striking their weapons against their shields and sending up a thunderous clatter of metal and wood.

Ankhat grinned hungrily, levelling his sword at the enemy. "At them!" he commanded, and the guardsmen shouted in answer. He turned to the trumpeter beside him. "Signal the chariots to advance and wheel right!"

Here was the moment that they would break the northmen. Ankhat sensed it in his bones, like a lion studying his prey. They must have squandered almost half their number already; what remained couldn't hold once the chariots took them in the flank. The barbarians would break and run, leaving the centre of the enemy army dangerously exposed.

Ankhat growled in anticipation of the bloodshed that would follow.

The young messenger was pale and trembling. Ochre dust and streaks of someone else's blood caked his bare forearms and calves. He'd been out on the battlefield less than thirty minutes.

"Rasetra is-is giving ground," the boy said, his voice hitching as he gasped for breath. "The-the barricades on the r-right have been overrun. The-the dead are walking, and-and worse—"

Alcadizzar bit back his impatience. The boy was only twelve or so, he reminded himself. There were horrors walking the field that few grown men could face, let alone a mere boy. He gripped the child's arm reassuringly.

"Put that aside, lad," he said, in as persuasive a tone as he could muster. "You're a soldier in the army now. I need you to do your duty. Do you understand?"

The messenger drew in a deep breath and visibly calmed himself. "Y-yes, great one. I understand."

"Good. Then show me on the map here where Prince Heru's troops are."

The boy nodded. "They're here, more or less," he said, tracing an arc that roughly paralleled the line of barricades, but was anywhere from seventy-five to a hundred yards behind them.

Alcadizzar gritted his teeth. Another hundred yards and the attackers would be at the edge of the inner camp. "Can Prince Heru hold them?"

The messenger paused, consulting his memory. "He said that they are outnumbered and making a fighting withdrawal, and need reinforcements urgently. He also told me to ask you where the damned catapults were. He said to tell you in those words."

"I can well believe that," Alcadizzar said. He'd already sent two more messengers to get the Lybarans' weapons in action. What was the point of dragging them halfway across eastern Nehekhara if they weren't put to use? "Well done," he said absently, his gaze poring over the battle map. "Have the servants give you a cup of wine and catch your breath."

As the messenger withdrew, the king took stock of the situation. Zandri had sent urgent messages saying they were under heavy attack from the south-east, but Alcadizzar didn't know how much stock to put in the reports. Meanwhile, on the left flank, Rasetra was in grave peril. Ka-Sabar, however, reported that the centre, facing the city's closest gate, was silent.

What was Neferata up to? Where was the main threat? Was it the attack on the left, or on the right, or was there something else entirely that he'd overlooked? He longed to grab a horse and go review the battlefield for himself, but he knew that would only complicate things further. It was just like one of Jabari's maddening exercises—only this time, his orders were getting real men killed.

Alcadizzar sighed. He needed to re-orient his troops to deal with the threats to his flanks. Ka-Sabar's heavy infantry could be wheeled around to support Rasetra, but that would leave the centre wide open. Did he dare take the risk?

He didn't see much choice. The threat to the centre was pure speculation, while the ones on the flanks were all too real.

Alcadizzar motioned to three of the messengers who were waiting quietly just inside the tent. He pointed to the first one. "Carry this message to Queen Omorose. Tell her that the Numasi must counter-attack on the right. Swing wide and take the enemy in the flank. Go!"

As the boy rushed out into the night, Alcadizzar turned to the second messenger. "Go to the reserves. The forces of Khemri and Mahrak are to move up and hold the centre. Ride with them; when they are in position, inform King Aten-sefu that the Iron Legion is to pull back and support Prince Heru on the left."

The second boy nodded hastily and raced outside. The king studied the map and nodded to himself. It was a risk, but a calculated one. He still had the Tomb Guard in reserve, just in case.

Alcadizzar reached out and gripped the third messenger's arm. "Go to the Lybarans. Tell them to get their cursed machines working, or I'll head back there myself and start firing *them* at the Lahmians."

Farther west, at the rear of the enemy camp, there was a sudden flare of bluish light. Moments later, a half-dozen globes of fire were hurled skywards, arcing over the invaders' tents before plunging to the ground off to the north-east. The balls of pitch exploded on impact, showering the area with hungry blue flames. Scores of slow-moving, lurching corpses were caught in the blasts, their rotting flesh sizzling and their bones cracking in the intense heat.

W'soran watched the battle unfolding from the safety of the gatehouse and hissed in satisfaction. The ritual had worked to perfection; he could *feel* the vast horde moving along the plain below, as though his mind were bound to each and every one by an invisible gossamer cord. There were thousands of them, far more than the pitiful display the mortal defenders of the city could manage, and they were eating their way deep into the enemy's flank. The bursts of fire only served to better illuminate how desperate the enemy's position was; now he could see that his undead slaves had overrun a long line of barricades and driven the mortals back almost as far as the inner core of the camp. No doubt that little fool, Alcadizzar, was somewhere in there, frantically trying to find a way out of the noose that was tightening around his neck.

Still more globes of pitch fell among the undead host. More skeletons fell, consumed by the flames, but they felt no pain at their demise and neither did W'soran. He could lose many hundreds more and scarcely feel the loss. There would be more than enough to complete the destruction of the invaders.

As the globes of burning pitch passed over the camp, W'soran noted a commotion in the centre of the enemy's positions. Armoured troops were pulling back and heading to the north, undoubtedly in a vain attempt to save the doomed flank. All that remained in the centre were a few companies of lightly armoured troops.

The necromancer smiled mirthlessly, revelling in his new-found power. He turned to Neferata, who stood with her retinue of maidens at a window to his right. "They are growing desperate," he croaked. "Soon their troops will grow tired, while mine will not. They will give in to their fear, while mine feel none. They cannot hope to win."

Neferata studied the panoramic spectacle of the battlefield. If she'd heard W'soran, she gave no sign. Her eyes were distant, her expression grave. "The time has come," she said coldly. The queen glanced over at the necromancer. "You have done well. Press the attack upon the right. I will deal with Alcadizzar."

W'soran gave a deep, slightly mocking bow. "Of course," he said. "I should have expected no less. And what will you do when you find him?"

There was no reply. When he straightened, the queen and her maidens were gone.

* * *

The man's head came away with a crunch of cartilage and a torrent of blood. Ushoran flung the grisly trophy at the enemy battle-line, then bent to drink deeply from the liquid still jetting from the corpse's neck.

Balls of fire hissed overhead, plunging well behind Ushoran and among the rear ranks of the undead. The noise of battle rang in his ears and beat at the bones in his chest; a grinding, surf-like roar of shouts, screams and hoarse battle cries. The enemy line was giving ground slowly but steadily, being forced ever backwards in the direction of the centre of camp. Somehow, their discipline held together despite the relentless pressure of the skeletal horde. Twice now they had launched counter-attacks with chariots in hopes of breaking up the undead advance, but the walking dead simply shrugged off the losses and pressed onwards with single-minded intent.

Ushoran's muscular arms and torso were matted with gore. Blood and bits of flesh drooled from his gaping jaws. Never, in all his long existence, had he imagined anything so glorious as this. He'd killed hundreds of men in the space of the last hour, smashing, clawing, biting and tearing in an orgy of bloodletting and slaughter. All the many nights he'd spent in cellars across Lahmia, drawing out the pleasure of a screaming victim's death agonies... it paled in comparison to this.

The Lord of Masks tossed the headless body aside. His body was near to bursting with vigour. Laughing cruelly, he advanced on the enemy line once again. The enemy warriors in front of him shouted and screamed, recoiling at his approach; many of them had been given ample opportunity to witness what he was capable of. Several flung spears at him, which he batted carelessly aside.

Snarling, Ushoran broke into a run. He wasn't interested in foot soldiers any longer; this time, he meant to find the man commanding this rabble and tear him to pieces.

Just short of the enemy's front rank he gathered his energies and bounded into the air. The battle-line was much thinner than when the battle began; he cleared the remaining ranks with ease and landed on the other side.

There were wounded men everywhere; soldiers who had staggered out of the battle-line and were trying to tend their injuries. Ushoran tore into them with savage glee, savouring their screams as he ripped into them with claw and tooth. As he did so, he searched for men on horseback, who would be riding behind the battle-line and shouting orders or encouragement.

There! Off to his right, some fifty yards away, a large group of horsemen was moving in his direction. Some carried torches, perhaps to draw the eye of the soldiers more easily. Among them he could see a fluttering standard; no doubt the enemy leader on this part of the battlefield. Like a hungry lion he charged at the oncoming riders, letting out a guttural roar as he approached.

The sound had the desired effect. The horsemen scattered before him, spreading out left and right with surprising speed. Directly ahead, Ushoran could see the enemy standard and a group of armoured riders surrounding it. The riders stood their ground, drawing their swords and grimly preparing to receive his charge.

A powerful impact struck him in the side, hard enough to stagger him. Ushoran reached down and felt the thick stub of an arrow jutting from his ribs. Two more

missiles struck him in the left leg, knocking it out from underneath him. He fell, tumbling, and still more arrows hissed past his head.

Ushoran was on his feet in an instant. Horses were dashing past him to the left and right, their riders aiming powerful horn bows at him. He realised with a shock that they weren't proper cavalry, but robed desert riders. They fired at him as they went by and nearly every missile found its mark. In seconds, he was struck no less than eight times, in his chest, abdomen and arms.

The immortal scarcely felt the pain. Snarling, he snatched at the shafts, trying to yank them free, but the heads were barbed and refused to pull away. Worse, each arrow seemed to have a bulb of clay just behind the barbed head; when it struck the target, the bulb shattered, covering the area with a patch of sticky fluid the size of his palm. The sharp reek of the substance filled his nostrils at once. *Pitch.*

Ushoran's joy was transformed to terror in the space of an instant. Two more arrows hit him—one dangerously close to his heart. He whirled about, seeking an avenue of escape.

Two more riders thundered past. Too late, Ushoran saw the torches guttering in their hands. The Lord of Masks had just enough time to scream before his body was enveloped in a sizzling column of flame.

"Forwards! Forwards, damn you!"

A Nehekharan spearman reached over the top of the wicker barricade and stabbed at Ankhat. The immortal knocked the point aside with his sword and crushed the man's skull with a quick, backhand stroke. Around him, the warriors of the royal guard were hacking at the barricade's defenders with their polearms, but making little headway.

Ankhat was furious. Just half an hour before he'd thought victory lay in his grasp. They'd met the barbarian battle-line and held the fools in place while the chariots swung around and struck them in the flank. Panic had taken hold and the mercenaries had turned and run. Exultant, Ankhat had let the Lahmians pursue their broken foes and they had slaughtered the lumbering northmen as they fled.

And then, without warning, the charging Lahmians had come upon the barricade. A fresh line of troops—Nehekharans this time, not wild-eyed barbarians, waited with spears and bows, and unleashed a fierce volley of shafts point-blank into the faces of the oncoming Lahmians. Fortunately for Ankhat's men, the sheer inertia of their charge carried them into the enemy fortifications before they had time to register their shock. Had they time to think, the tired troops might have broken under the storm of arrow fire.

But now the attack had bogged down. Ankhat's men were tired and the enemy fresh, and they defended the barricade with dogged determination. He had tried to signal the chariots to find the end of the fortifications and swing around it, but could not be sure if the message had been received or not.

Furious, the immortal prepared to make another leap onto the barricade. He'd tried three times before but had been thrown back. Enemy spears had struck him twice, but hadn't managed to pierce his vitals.

The royal guardsmen were attacking the enemy with great courage, but even they were beginning to falter. Something had to be done, and quickly, or all would be lost.

Thinking quickly, Ankhat sheathed his sword and took hold of the wicker basket in front of him. It was almost as tall as a man and packed with hundreds of pounds of dirt and stone; he dug his fingers deep into its woven surface and summoned up all of his strength. With a savage cry he heaved the basket into the air and onto the defenders, who fell back with shouts of dismay.

The barricade was two baskets wide. At once, Ankhat pushed forwards and seized the next as well. A spear jabbed at him from the left, scoring his cheek, but the immortal paid it no heed. He grabbed the basket and flung it skywards just like the first, creating a narrow gap in the enemy's defences.

Suddenly, far off to the left, came the sound of trumpets. Ankhat felt a surge of savage joy. The chariots had come through at last! But then he realised that the sounds were coming from the Lahmian side of the barricade, rather than the opposite, and the signals were not ones that he was familiar with.

His bloodlust called to him to press forwards, but his instincts said that something had gone very wrong. The enemy pushed forwards, trying to seal off the breach. Gritting his teeth, Ankhat fell back, drawing his sword once more.

Now more horns were sounding to his left. These signals he knew and the sound caused his heart to sink. The spear companies on his flank were sounding the retreat!

Ankhat turned and shoved his way through the ranks of his own guardsmen. He had to see what was happening. Dragging his trumpeter with him, he made his way to the rear of the formation and peered into the darkness.

What he saw filled him with anger and dismay. The plain to the south was full of warriors, racing back in the direction of the city. Horsemen were charging through their midst, cutting down the fleeing men with spear or sword.

Ankhat understood what had happened in an instant. Enemy cavalry had counter-attacked in great numbers, scattering his chariots and striking his spearmen in the flank, just as they had done to the barbarians. The inexperienced soldiers had panicked and the result was a rout.

The attack had failed. There was no way his surviving companies could press forwards with enemy cavalry sweeping around behind him. Now he had to focus on getting back inside the city before he was completely surrounded.

Ankhat quickly took stock of the situation. There was no chance of reaching the south gate—the terrain favoured the cavalry, allowing them to outmanoeuvre the retreating infantry and cut them off. Their only hope was to pull back and withdraw to the north-east, hoping to reach the city's western gate.

They'd done all they could, Ankhat thought bitterly. It was up to W'soran and his undead warriors now.

Alcadizzar glanced up as the tent flap was pulled aside. Faisr rushed into the tent, beckoning to the servants for a cup of wine. "You sent the Iron Legion just in time," he said, taking the offered cup and draining it to the dregs. "Another few minutes and we would have been lost."

"Prince Heru?" the king inquired.

“Still fighting with his kinsmen. The Rasetrans are a courageous bunch, I’ll say that for them. They’ve paid a steep price in blood tonight, and the fighting’s not done.”

Alcadizzar pointed at the map. “I just got a message from Omorose. The Numasi have broken the attack on the right. How bad are things on the left?”

“Bad.” Faisr shook his head. “The dead just keep coming. You kill one and three more take their place.”

“What about the necromancer? Can’t you find him?”

The chieftain shook his head. “He’s not out there. Some brave souls even circled around the horde and searched the necropolis. We found one of the monsters leading the horde and hurt him badly, maybe even destroyed him. It didn’t make any difference.”

The king turned his attention back to the map, frowning thoughtfully. “He has to be out there somewhere,” he mused. “Everything Rakh-amn-hotep wrote about the undead is that the risen corpses can’t think for themselves. They have to be guided by the necromancer who raised them. So he has to be in a place where he can see enough of the battlefield to give them proper commands.”

At that moment, a wide-eyed messenger stumbled into the tent. Gasping for breath, he bowed to Alcadizzar. It took a moment for the king to understand that the boy was from Khemri and thus one of his subjects.

“Great one! The centre is under attack!”

Alcadizzar straightened. “Attacked? How? By what?”

“Creatures!” the boy said. “Pale creatures in armour, with the faces of women.”

The king gave Faisr a knowing glance. “How many?”

“I-I don’t know! Four or five, perhaps. But they’re killing everyone! Killing them, or driving them mad. The Devoted have lost many men already.”

“Where did they come from?”

“The-the western gatehouse, we think. Some say they jumped right off the city wall, as though it was nothing more than a stepping-stool!”

Alcadizzar began to see what was happening. Neferata had been watching the battle unfold from the gatehouse, gauging his response. The attacks on the left and right had both been feints, meant to weaken the centre. Now she had entered the fray—and he knew where she was heading.

The king rose to his feet. “Gather your people,” he said to Faisr. “We’re going to finish this.” Then he beckoned to two of his messengers. “You, fetch my horse,” he said to one young boy. “And you, I want you to carry a message to the Lybarans as fast as you can.”

Neferata and her maidens walked beneath the moonlight and chaos and death rode in their wake.

They came upon the enemy battle-lines like wives welcoming their husbands home from battle; arms outstretched, faces lit with desire. Men looked upon their faces and lost all control. Some fled screaming, while still others turned their blades on their fellows in a mad fit of jealousy and passion. The few men of iron will who

could not be swayed, who remembered their oaths and tried to put an end to Neferata and her maidens, were torn apart by the immortals' talons.

A company of javelin throwers charged at Neferata and let fly; white-robed priests from Mahrak leapt between her and the oncoming missiles, screaming in horror even as they shielded her with their bodies. A moment later the javelin throwers had drawn their short swords and were locked in combat with a company of spearmen, warriors whom they had perhaps shared a meal with just a few hours before. Their faces were contorted into masks of agony and disbelief. They *knew* that what they were doing was wrong, but were powerless to stop it.

Within minutes, the queen and her maidens became separated by the wild melee. Neferata would catch glimpses of them from time to time, walking calmly among the slaughter like the eye of a raging summer storm. They moved steadily westwards, towards the centre of the camp. The place where, she was sure, Alcadizzar waited. At long last, she would see him again.

A quartet of chariots came rumbling out of the darkness, heading straight for her. The queen met the gaze of the driver in the lead chariot. The man's eyes widened, his expression suddenly transformed from anger to utter, mindless desire. He cast a jealous glance over his shoulder at the other charioteers, and with a snarl, he hauled upon the reins. The chariot veered sharply right, into the path of those behind it, causing a horrendous collision. Horses fell, shrieking in fear and pain, and the air was filled with pieces of broken wood and broken men.

Miraculously, the driver of the lead chariot survived. He staggered to his feet, blood pouring from his face and from a deep cut on his arm. The man rushed to Neferata, hands reaching for her face. Without breaking stride she caught the man's wrists and pulled him close, tearing out his throat with a single, vicious bite.

Slingstones buzzed through the air like angry bees. Several struck sparks off Neferata's iron scales; another buried itself in her forehead with a dull, smacking sound. Grimacing irritably, she plucked the round stone free with thumb and fingertip and tossed it aside.

Off to her left, a woman screamed. Neferata turned to see one of her maidens stagger, clutching at a javelin that had struck her in the heart. Men rushed to her as she fell; several began hacking at her body with their swords, while the others fought to possess her. Even in death—the true death—she continued to spread havoc among the enemy.

Minutes later, another maiden fell, this time crushed to pulp beneath the weight of a tumbling chariot. By now, panic and confusion had taken hold and most of the enemy were fleeing in terror, racing back towards the centre of camp. Five women had broken the hearts and minds of thousands of warriors in a matter of minutes.

Neferata watched the enemy roll away from her in a swift tide, leaving behind a field littered with fallen weapons, helmets and shields. The queen laughed mockingly, delighted at the ruination of her foes. Alcadizzar had underestimated her power and now all of Nehekhara would pay the price.

Last Stand

Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Ptra the Glorious (-1200 Imperial Reckoning)

The battle had shifted. From his vantage point at the gatehouse, W'soran could see that Ankhat's attack on the left had been broken by the sudden appearance of enemy cavalry. Most of the Lahmian troops had turned and fled, only to be mercilessly ridden down long before they reached the safety of the city gates. The rest, now anchored at the far end of the line by the city's royal guard, had pivoted towards the south-east and were now slowly withdrawing northwards, under pressure both from enemy spear companies and increasingly large numbers of cavalry. Fortunately for Ankhat and his men, their path to the western gate was largely clear, thanks to the chaos wrought by Neferata and her maidens. In the centre, the queen and her companions had put the weakened enemy to flight and were driving inexorably into the heart of the invaders' camp.

On the right, the necromancer's forces had been brought to a grinding stalemate by the timely arrival of fresh troops from the enemy's centre. That was still good news for Neferata, for as long as the undead kept the bulk of the enemy's infantry pinned down, then Lahmia still had a chance at victory, but W'soran felt cheated nonetheless. It was his sorceries that had made the attack possible in the first place! The victory should be his as well.

W'soran leafed through the pages of Nagash's tomes, looking for a spell or ritual that might tip the balance of the fight in his favour. If there was some way to increase the speed or strength of his troops, perhaps...

A strange sound from the west caused the necromancer to pause. It was a thin, high-pitched whistling faint but growing louder moment by moment. He frowned, trying to place the noise, when it passed just above the gatehouse and seemed to plunge into the city beyond. A second later came a huge, muffled *thump* and a crash of falling brick that reverberated through the stones beneath his feet.

The necromancer's eyes widened. With a cry, he shut the book and scrambled for the rest of Nagash's tomes, resting on the floor by the ritual circle just a few feet away, just as a chorus of similar whistles rose into the sky from the west.

The next catapult stone fell short, hitting the ground with a dull thud and then crashing into the western gate. W'soran heard the sound of splintering wood below as he gathered the ancient books into his arms. He turned and raced for the nearest door

just as four more catapult stones, each the size of a small chariot, came smashing through the gatehouse wall.

Ankhat turned at the sound of grinding stone and watched in horror as the top of the western gatehouse collapsed in a torrent of dust and broken rock. Another catapult stone whistled through the air, and by sheer bad luck, came in at a shallow angle and struck the face of the western gate. The immortal could hear the sound of splintering wood from where he stood, some two hundred yards away.

The royal guards and the surviving spear companies were paying for every step they took in blood. Arrows fell among their ranks in a steady rain and enemy cavalry kept nipping at their flanks. He had lost track of the number of charges they'd suffered since the withdrawal began, but the field before them was littered with the bodies of horses and men.

There were only two companies of spearmen left on their right. The royal guard had suffered terribly, having lost more than two-thirds of their number, but their resolve never wavered.

The one thing that had held them together thus far was the realisation that Neferata herself had taken the field, and had put the entire enemy centre to flight. From his place at the rear of the retreating guardsmen, Ankhat searched the darkness off to the north-west for any sign of the queen, but it was hard to make out anyone amid the swirling mass of panicked troops. The amount of death and destruction she had left in her wake was both awesome and terrifying at the same time.

Just then, as the last echoes of the gatehouse's collapse faded away, Ankhat saw the swirling mob off to the far right simply melt away, like morning mist. Men scattered in every direction, revealing the pale forms of Neferata and two of her maidens, stalking inexorably westwards through the carnage they'd wrought.

For a moment, Ankhat's spirits lifted—and then he saw the solid wall of enemy horsemen approaching Neferata from the centre of the camp.

* * *

The desert horsemen rode knee to knee, an uncharacteristically tight formation for the swift-moving raiders, but it ensured that nothing would get past them and into the midst of the undefended inner camp. Alcadizzar and Faisr rode side-by-side at the centre of the formation, searching the swirling mass of panicked troops in front of them for any sign of the undead. Warriors from Mahrak and Khemri scattered to the left and right at the riders' approach. The look of confusion and fear on their faces was an unsettling sight, but the horsemen clutched their powerful bows tightly and forged ahead through the press.

Catapult stones whistled overhead, falling on the distant gatehouse. A cheer went up from the riders as the gatehouse was demolished; moments later, another chorus of shouts and cheers off to their left told Alcadizzar that his intuition had been correct. The necromancer's ritual had been disrupted and Lahmia's dead were returning to their original state.

There was little time for relief, however. Ahead of the horsemen, the mob of panicked troops suddenly cleared away, revealing the wide trade road and the rocky

fields that led up to the city gate. Hundreds of bodies lay everywhere, many locked together in mortal combat. The warriors of Mahrak and Khemri had all but destroyed one another, their minds twisted by Neferata's seductive glamour.

Alcadizzar saw her at once. She and two other pale-skinned monsters were walking towards them across the corpse-strewn fields, less than a hundred yards away. Even from so great a distance, he could feel the weight of their predatory stares against his skin. Even the horses felt it. They rolled their eyes and tossed their heads with fright, causing their riders to exchange worried glances and murmurs of concern, for the horses of the desert tribes were famed for their courage and high spirits.

The king raised his hand, and Faisr called for the riders to halt. "Don't let them get close enough to look in their eyes!" he warned.

As he said this, Neferata's maidens let out a piercing wail and broke into a run, racing across the broken ground like desert cats. Their grace and speed was mesmerising. In the blink of an eye, they had covered half the distance between them and the horsemen.

Faisr shook himself from his momentary reverie with a fearsome curse. "Loose!" he roared at his men.

The order galvanised the tribesmen. Four hundred bows drew back as one, and a moment later the air was full of hissing black-fletched arrows. The riders were all expert shots, hand-picked from among the tribes. The shrieking maidens were hit dozens of times; both fell, struck through the heart, their bodies tumbling limply to the ground.

An uneasy silence fell. Neferata came to a stop well beyond bowshot, hands at her sides. Alcadizzar straightened in the saddle. "Wait here," he said gravely.

Faisr gave the king a shocked stare. "Are you mad?" he exclaimed. "She deserves no better than the other two got."

But the king shook his head. "No. This one thing I have to do myself."

Alcadizzar spurred his horse forwards. Off in the distance, he could see more troops converging on the scene: warriors of Ka-Sabar and Rasetra on the left, and a ragged force of Lahmian infantry on the right. Neither side was close enough to interfere.

The king reined in, some thirty yards from the waiting queen, and slid from the saddle. Drawing his sword, Alcadizzar went to face her.

She stood, silent and still, and watched him approach. The closer Alcadizzar came, the more he began to doubt the wisdom of his decision. Could he withstand her power? The gifts of the elixir were long gone, now. He had only his strength of will and his courage to sustain him—just like every one of the hundreds of dead men who littered the field around him.

He came to within ten yards of her and stopped, not daring to get any closer. A faint smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Alcadizzar felt his mouth go dry. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. How was that possible? Even the drops of blood that glistened on her cheek seemed to accentuate her features, like a spray of brilliant rubies.

Neferata's smile widened and set its hooks in his heart. Her voice was dark and rich, like spring honey.

“You never should have left,” she said. “All those wasted years, and see how it all ends?” She spread her arms. “Here we are, back to where we began.”

Alcadizzar felt a brief spark of anger at Neferata’s tone. He clung to it desperately, like a man lost in a cold and empty wasteland. “You think to tempt me now? Here? Amidst all this death and horror? You have much to answer for, Neferata.”

“I answer to no one,” Neferata replied haughtily. “That is the privilege of a queen.” She gestured at the carnage around her. “And this? This means as much or as little as we wish it to.”

Alcadizzar shook his head. “Every ruler in Nehekhara is watching us,” he said, his voice full of scorn. “If I accepted what you offer, they would kill us both.”

“They wouldn’t,” Neferata said. “Kneel to me. Accept my gift and they will clamour for it as well. Become my consort, and see how quickly they sheathe their blades and beg for my forgiveness.” She held out her hand to him. “It’s not too late, Alcadizzar. Take my hand and the world will be ours.”

For a fleeting moment, it all made perfect sense. Alcadizzar looked into Neferata’s dark eyes and saw the desire burning there. She reached out to him. His gaze fell to her bloodstained hand—and the sight of it reminded him of all the men who had cheered his name only a week before, but now lay dead in the field around him. His anger returned, scouring the queen’s glamour from his mind.

Alcadizzar raised his sword. “Take your gifts with you to the grave,” he said. “I want no part of them.”

Neferata grew suddenly, unnaturally still. The smile faded from her face. As Alcadizzar watched, the desire in her eyes transformed into something sharp and cruel.

Suddenly, she was right in front of him, screeching in fury, her talons raking at his face. Fiery pain exploded across his left cheek. The king was hurled backwards, hitting the rocky ground hard enough to knock all the wind out of him.

Alcadizzar’s mind reeled. It had been too long since he’d tasted Neferata’s elixir. He was nowhere near as fast as he’d once been. Neferata, on the other hand, was both swifter and stronger than he’d imagined possible. A moment after he’d hit the ground she was looming over him again. An iron-hard blow from her open hand swatted the sword from his numbed fingers; a second one struck him across the face and stunned him nearly senseless.

On your feet, boy! Get up! The voice of Haptshur, his old battlefield tutor, echoed in his head. Unable to breathe, scarcely able to see, he rolled in the direction of the blows and lashed out with his right leg as hard as he could. The kick connected with Neferata’s leg and knocked the queen off her feet. Still moving, Alcadizzar scrambled onto his hands and knees and crawled after his lost sword.

He nearly made it. The blade was only a few feet away, lying atop a knot of bloodstained corpses. Alcadizzar lunged for it—just as a hand closed painfully about his ankle. Neferata jerked him backwards like a hound on a leash, dragging his chest, arms and face over the rough ground.

Snarling, the king lashed out with his free leg, but missed. His flailing hands closed on the wooden haft of a dropped javelin. Gripping it with bloodied hands, Alcadizzar twisted onto his back and flung it at Neferata with all his strength. She

saw it coming at the last moment and tried to knock it aside with her left hand; instead of striking her in the chest, the bronze point hit her in the shoulder, forcing its way between the iron scales and sinking deep into the flesh beneath.

Neferata hissed in rage, groping for the haft of the javelin with her off-hand to pull it free. Alcadizzar twisted in her grip, wrenching his ankle painfully as he fumbled among the corpses for another weapon. He saw another wooden haft jutting out from beneath a nearby body and seized it. Alcadizzar wrenched it free, and found himself gripping a gore-spattered hand axe. With a yell, he swiped at Neferata's hand, chopping deep into her wrist and nearly cutting off his own foot in the process. The queen let out a shriek of rage, her nerveless fingers losing their grip around Alcadizzar's ankle.

Bounding to his feet with a roar, the king hurled himself at Neferata, hacking savagely at her with the axe. The bronze blade rasped and rang against the queen's iron armour, ripping scales free and scoring the thick leather beneath. More blows fell upon her arms, shoulders and neck, but her armour turned aside the worst of the impacts. Still, Alcadizzar did not relent, driving the queen inexorably backwards as he searched for an opening to deliver a fatal blow. He struck her twice more, tearing into her armour, and Neferata staggered, her foot catching on a body sprawled in her path. Before she could recover, the king lunged forwards and struck her across the side of the head. The axe blade bit deep, cracking bone from temple to jaw and snapping her head around from the force of the blow.

The wound would have been enough to kill a normal man outright. Neferata staggered, her ruined armour flapping loosely about her torso. Alcadizzar rushed forwards, aiming a swift, backhand blow at her neck to end the fight.

But the blow never landed. A hand closed about his wrist—Neferata's *right* hand, the one he'd nearly severed a moment before. The broken bones and severed muscles had already knit together again.

Neferata's head came back around. Dark, thick blood flowed from the ghastly wound Alcadizzar had inflicted. Yet even as he watched, the split bone began to close back together. She gave the king a mocking, lopsided smile, then gripped the haft of the axe with her left hand and plucked the weapon from his grip as though he were a child.

Her fist drove into his side, cracking ribs despite his armour and lifting him from his feet. Another blow crashed into the side of Alcadizzar's head, blinding him with pain. Again and again she struck him, pummelling his shoulders and torso while she held his arm fast with her right hand. All the strength went out of his legs and he collapsed like a rag doll, landing roughly on the ground.

He did not feel Neferata sink down onto him, straddling his waist. Her hands gripped the collar of his bronze scale armour and tore through the thick leather backing as though it were parchment, exposing the king's throat. She bent down, her own iron scale vest hanging loosely from her shoulders, until her charnel breath blew coldly against his face.

"I take it back," she whispered. "All of it. Every gift I ever gave you."

She seized his chin and forced his head to one side, exposing the pulsing artery in his neck. Alcadizzar tried to speak, but only managed a strangled grunt. His hands fumbled weakly at his waist.

“What do you know of the grave?” Neferata murmured. “I have stood upon the threshold of death and glimpsed what lies on the other side. Do you know what waits there? Darkness. Nothing more.” She bent down further, until her lips brushed lightly against his throat. “Think on that, as the light fades from your eyes.”

Alcadizzar scarcely felt the tips of her fangs sink into his skin. His concentration was focussed on one thing only: gripping the hilt of the jewelled dagger thrust into his belt. With the last of his strength he pulled the blade free and drove it into Neferata’s side, piercing her heart.

“No!” Ankhat shouted, watching from a distance as Neferata’s body went rigid, then toppled over onto her side. Moonlight winked balefully from the ruby-studded hilt of the knife that jutted from her ribs.

At the same moment, the enemy let out a roar—part cheer, part horrified shout—and the horsemen spurred their mounts, racing towards the fallen combatants. When they moved, the enemy infantry on their left moved as well, scrambling and stumbling over the bodies of the slain in an effort to reach the spot where Alcadizzar and Neferata lay tangled together.

“The queen!” Ankhat roared. “To the queen!”

The last survivors of the royal guard—fewer than sixty men, every one of them wounded to one degree or another and exhausted to the bone—let out a defiant shout and charged, true to their oaths to the last. The survivors of the remaining spear companies took up the shout as well and within moments they were running across the battlefield as well.

The enemy cavalry reached the pair moments before everyone else. Robed riders leapt from their saddles and went at once to Alcadizzar, seizing him by the arms and dragging him towards safety. A half-dozen more drew sabres and made for Neferata, clearly intending to make sure she never rose again.

Ankhat leapt among the swordsmen, his iron blade flickering. Two men fell at once, their throats slashed open, while the others tried to encircle him and strike from different angles. An arrow thudded into his shoulder; he snarled like a cornered animal and took a swordsman’s arm off at the elbow.

The royal guard caught up to him seconds later, charging at the mounted warriors with polearms levelled. Horses reared and screamed; arrows flew, and men fell dying on both sides. Ankhat despatched another swordsman with a cut to the head and drove the rest back, away from the fallen queen. The Lahmian spearmen rushed in, brandishing their spears and trying to reach Alcadizzar, only to be met by the oncoming enemy infantry. Men stabbed and swore, tearing at one another like starving animals fighting over a bone. All sense of order dissolved into a vicious, four-sided brawl.

Ankhat cut a man’s legs out from under him and pushed his way to Neferata’s side. Two enemy soldiers grabbed her body by the ankles, dragging her roughly towards them; with a shout, the immortal lunged forwards, slicing the hands off one man and driving the other back. More arrows hissed past. Each one found a mark in the swirling mob, but Ankhat couldn’t say whether they hit friend or foe.

The enemy infantry drove back the Lahmians, creating a wall of flesh and metal between them and Alcadizzar. Ankhat didn’t care about the fallen king. All he could

think about was keeping Neferata out of enemy hands. He stood over her, slashing and stabbing at every man who came too close.

More enemy troops were arriving every moment, closing in from both left and right. Before much longer, they would be surrounded and then none of them would escape.

The enemy pressed in around him. His blade never stopped moving, trying to hold back the tide. Horns sounded off behind Ankhat and to his left. More enemy cavalry were closing in. The end was nearly at hand.

Ankhat took his eyes off the enemy for just a moment, glancing down at Neferata's body. They would want her head for a trophy, he knew. Perhaps at least he could deny them that.

He raised his sword to strike—and then, without warning, came an eruption of screams and shouts from behind the enemy infantry to his immediate left.

It was as though a storm was tearing through the tightly packed enemy soldiers. Ankhat saw pieces of men flung through the air: severed limbs, helmeted heads, hands still clutching the hilts of weapons, all trailing streamers of blood. The killing was swift and relentless, carving its way step by step towards where Neferata lay.

Suddenly, the enemy horsemen that accompanied the king hauled on their reins and spurred away, shouting in confusion at the unexpected attack. The enemy infantry saw that and panicked, scattering in every direction to escape the fate of their comrades. The surviving Lahmians—barely a handful of guardsmen and a few score others—drew back in a tight circle around Ankhat, staring fearfully in the direction of the slaughter and wondering if they were next.

The last of the enemy soldiers drew back like a curtain, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man with pale skin and close-cropped black hair. He was armoured in nothing more than a dirty, knee-length leather kilt and a sleeveless jerkin, of the type favoured by those who lived and hunted in the southern jungle. The man wielded a pair of huge, dripping khopeshes in his scarred hands; every inch of him was streaked and stippled in gore. His face was handsome but severe, with a square chin and a thin-lipped mouth set in a permanent scowl. He strode fearlessly towards the Lahmians, heedless of the thousands of enemy warriors surrounding him.

Ankhat stared at the man in wonder. “Abhorash?”

Lamashizzar's former champion and captain of the royal guard strode up to Ankhat and took in the situation at a glance. “Get the queen out of here,” he said simply, as though he'd never been gone from the city a day, let alone the last hundred and seventy years. “I will cover your retreat.”

Abhorash spoke in a voice that brooked no dissent. The four surviving royal guards leapt to obey, lifting Neferata's body and shielding it with their own. If any of them realised that she was not the queen that they knew and served, they gave no sign whatsoever. The spearmen were already falling back towards the ruined western gate in a ragged mob. Back across the field, the horse archers saw their prey escaping and shouted angrily. Bowstrings hummed and arrows plunged towards the guardsmen holding the queen.

Abhorash's twin swords flashed, weaving a web of flickering bronze, and knocked every one of the arrows aside.

The horsemen gaped in shock. No one attempted to stop the Lahmians after that.

Every movement was agony. Groaning between clenched teeth, Ushoran dragged himself another torturous foot, reaching the summit of the wooded hill just to the east of the city necropolis.

The sounds of battle had faded some time ago. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours; Ushoran could no longer say for sure. The pain pushed such trivial details aside. But there was no question of who had won. Of that much he was certain. Which was why he was trying to get as far away from the city as he could.

The fire had eaten into him from his head to his calves, burning away his hair and much of his skin, and cooking the flesh beneath. When the torches had hit him, he could think of nothing but running, as though the fire was something he could actually escape. That had only fanned the flames more. He had pounded at them until his hands were scorched and raw, but nothing would put them out. Finally, after running for what seemed like ages, his legs gave out beneath him. He collapsed on the ground, howling in agony, and waited for the flames to finish him.

Yet he did not die. Eventually, the fire burned itself out, but the final death did not come. Eventually, through the blinding haze of pain, he realised that he could move his legs a bit. His body, despite the damage, was slowly healing itself. Ushoran didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

When he came to his senses, he realised he was no longer alone. A pack of jackals surrounded the dip in the rocky ground, studying him with flat, yellow eyes. Apparently they couldn't decide if he was carrion or not. He wasn't all that certain either. But he knew that, sooner or later, it would be dawn. If the noonday sun didn't finish what the fire began, it would only be a matter of time before some enemy patrol stumbled onto him and chopped off his head. And so he'd crawled, foot by foot, out of the depression and towards the hills to the west, in search of a place to hide.

Now, having reached the top of the hill, the immortal rolled weakly onto his side and looked back the way he'd come. Ushoran could see a vast field of bones stretching from the edge of the necropolis to nearly the centre of the enemy camp. At some point, W'soran's ritual had failed and his army had literally fallen apart where it stood. From the angle where he lay, he could just see the western gate; when he glimpsed the destruction there, he suspected what had occurred. He wondered if the necromancer had managed to escape the massacre.

There was no sign of Neferata or Ankhat, but the ground between the camp and the western gate was piled with corpses. It was clear that both sides had suffered terrible losses, but in the end the invaders had prevailed. Even now, columns of troops were marching down the trade road and through the rubble of the western gate; columns of smoke were rising from Lahmia's western districts as the sack of the city began.

Abruptly, the smothering darkness receded. Neferata opened her eyes with a gasp that very nearly rose to a scream. She fell back against a cold marble floor, her entire body trembling with the shock of what she'd endured.

Ankhat knelt beside her, his face grave. A ruby-hilted dagger hung from one hand. With a scowl, he tossed it aside. "You're safe," he said to her. "For now, at

least. We thought it best to wait until we got here before doing something about the knife.”

Neferata glanced wildly about. She was in a shadowy, vaulted chamber, far from the battlefield. “Where are we?” she managed to say.

“The palace. Abhorash insisted we bring you here.”

Neferata frowned, uncertain if she’d heard Ankhat correctly. “Abhorash?”

“Yes. He’s returned,” Ankhat replied. “Without him, all of us would have been lost.”

Grimacing, the queen forced her body to sit upright. She was resting in the centre of the great hall, with the royal dais at her back. At the far end of the chamber, the great double doors lay open, revealing the dimly lit vestibule beyond. Past the vestibule, the entrance to the palace lay open. The sky outside was tinged red with flames.

Abhorash stood a short distance away, surrounded by four men in the armour of the royal guard. The guardsmen were stripping away Abhorash’s bloodstained tunic and fitting him with the iron breastplate and pauldrons of a captain of the guard. She knew the dour champion at once, despite the passage of years. The queen inclined her head to him. “We owe you a great debt, captain,” she said, with as much dignity as she had left.

Abhorash glared at her. “I didn’t come here for you,” he snapped. “The city was under attack and I swore an oath to defend it. At least here I can meet death with something of my honour intact.”

Neferata scowled at him. “Still as arrogant and sanctimonious as ever,” she growled. The queen turned to Ankhat. “What of Alcadizzar?”

The immortal shrugged. “His people dragged him away. I have no idea if he was alive or not.” He gripped her arm. “Forget about him. The city is lost. The enemy could be here at any moment.”

The queen snatched her arm away. “Then here is where they’ll find me. If Lahmia is to die, then I die with her.”

“Good,” Abhorash declared. “It’s long past time this nightmare came to an end.”

Ankhat took a step back, glaring at the both of them. “Die, then,” he snapped. “Let the damned mortals cut off your heads and parade them through the streets! I don’t intend to give them the satisfaction.”

Ankhat’s vehemence surprised Neferata. “Where is there to go?”

“Anywhere but here!” the immortal cried. “There is more to the world than just Lahmia—or even Nehekhara, come to that. Who knows? I might go north. The barbarians there would worship me like a god.” He sighed, shaking his head. “We should have scattered to the winds long ago. Lahmia might have survived if we had. Now...”

“Now, what?” Neferata demanded. “We’ve lost everything, Ankhat. What’s left?”

“Eternity,” the immortal answered. “We have nothing but time, Neferata. Time enough to do whatever you wish.”

Neferata turned and studied the red-lit sky beyond the vestibule. Her expression hardened. “Time enough for vengeance,” she said.

“If you wish,” Ankhat said. “Do as you will. But I am leaving this cursed place and hope never to return.”

The queen glanced back at the immortal. She was transformed. Her face was a cold, pitiless mask.

“There is a ship waiting in the harbour,” she said. “I will take it and abide for a time in the east. I have a great deal of thinking to do.”

Ankhat nodded. “A new beginning, then.”

“No,” the queen said. “An ending. From this moment forwards, there will be nothing but endings between me and this world.”

Outside, a horn sounded. Abhorash nodded sombrely to the guardsmen, who bowed and offered him his blades. The grim-faced immortal turned to Neferata.

“The enemy is here,” he said. “These good men have sworn to fight by my side until the last. Together, we’ll make our stand here, as befits the royal guard. If the gods are kind, perhaps I will be rid of your damned curse at last.”

Neferata glared at the champion as he turned and made his way from the great hall and out into the vestibule, where his four companions waited. After a moment, she turned to say her farewells to Ankhat, but the immortal was already gone.

The last queen of Lahmia stood alone in the great hall where her dynasty had ruled for millennia. She turned, glancing back at the royal dais, and looked one final time at the empty throne.

“Endings,” she vowed, her voice hollow. “Nothing but endings.” And then the shadows swallowed her and she was gone.

“This is madness,” Prince Heru said. “You should be resting, uncle. The surgeons say you are lucky to be alive.”

“I’ll be fine,” Alcadizzar said tightly, mindful of the pain in his side and the stitches in his cheek. He sat stiffly in the saddle of his horse as he climbed the winding road up to the royal palace. A hundred warriors of the *bani-al-Hashim* rode in his wake, arrows nocked, searching the shadows for danger. “This is something I need to do.”

“Like you needed to fight Neferata single-handed?” Heru said. “We saw how well that went.”

The king grunted. “I won, didn’t I?”

Heru frowned. “I don’t know. It’s looking more and more like a draw.”

The riders rounded the final turn and approached the entrance to the palace compound. It was early morning and the fires had burned their way down the hill and across the city, where smoke now rose from the dockyards. Soldiers roamed the streets, looting what they could and wrecking what they couldn’t. Screams and shouts echoed from nearly every street. When the victorious armies were done, the richest city in Nehekhar would be picked down to its bones and its people, who had suffered so much under Neferata’s reign of terror, would be carted away in chains, to serve their conquerors as slaves. Such was the brutal reality of war.

Alcadizzar guided his horse through the palace gates and reined in. The scene before him was breathtaking in its devastation.

Smoke still rose from the narrow windows of the Temple of Blood. As many as two hundred acolytes and priestesses lay on the ground around the temple's entrance, their bodies riddled with wounds. They had been dragged from the temple during the night and executed, one after another. There was no way to know if the army had done it, or if it had been the work of the Lahmians themselves.

The same could not be said of the royal palace. It was obvious to anyone what had happened there. The steps leading to the great hall were covered in bodies, in some cases piled four or five deep. "The Lahmians didn't surrender the palace easily," he observed.

Heru grunted. "That bastard with the swords," he said. "He and some of the royal guard held the door until dawn. Took enough wounds to kill a hundred men, but never gave an inch."

"What happened to him?"

Heru looked uncomfortable. "We don't know. At dawn, the guardsmen dragged him back inside the vestibule while we regrouped for another charge. By the time we got inside they were gone. We're searching the palace for them now."

"What about Neferata?"

The Rasetran sighed. "We don't know about her, either. The last anyone saw of her, she was being carried into the city by the royal guard. We expected to find her here, but..."

Alcadizzar shook his head. "Is there anything we *do* know?"

"Well, we managed to secure the city treasury," the prince said. "Zandri and Numas are already petitioning for their share, of course."

The king stared at his nephew. "I don't care about the gold," he said. "Did you find any books?"

Heru's expression darkened. "Not yet. If they're anywhere, they're probably inside the temple and the upper levels are still burning. The men found some large chambers on the lower levels that looked like they might have been vaults, but there was nothing left inside."

Alcadizzar nodded thoughtfully. "We'll keep looking, just to be certain. Neferata couldn't have learned necromancy from nothing. Lamashizzar must have somehow brought some of Nagash's tomes back from Khemri after the war. If they're here, I mean to see them destroyed."

"And then?"

The king sighed, thinking of distant Khemri and the work that lay ahead. A tired smile spread across his face. "Then we go home."

The two men fell silent, contemplating the wreckage of the palace. The wind shifted, blowing from the sea and carrying the scent of salt and ashes.

The Usurper

*Lahmia, the City of the Dawn, in the 107th year of Ptrā the Glorious
(-1200 Imperial Reckoning)*

For seven days and seven nights, Alcadizzar's men searched the city for Neferata and her followers, and for the hiding place of the infamous tomes of Nagash. They combed the palace and the smouldering ruins of the temple from top to bottom, and though a great many hidden passageways and chambers were discovered, no sign of the city's secret rulers was found. Even Neferata's puppets, King Sothis and Queen Ammanura, had vanished, though several witnesses claimed that they had fled to the temple garden after the city gates had fallen and taken poison to avoid capture by the invaders.

After a week, Alcadizzar privately conceded defeat. Jars of oil and barrels of pitch were brought up from the docks and the great palace was set alight. The roaring flames burned long into the night, rising like a pyre atop the high hill as the invaders marched out through the broken western gate. They left behind a wasteland of empty streets, pillaged shops and burned-out homes, roamed by vultures and packs of fat-bellied jackals.

Laden with plunder and files of weary, hollow-eyed slaves, the allied armies made slow progress across the Golden Plain. Faisr's people rode ahead, each one bearing a message that the tribes had been waiting to hear for centuries. By the time the soldiers reached the centre of the plain a vast tent city awaited them; wives raced out from the camp on swift horses to welcome back their husbands, filling the air with songs of joy. The long exile in the east was finally at an end.

Upon reaching the tent city, Alcadizzar offered his fellow rulers the hospitality of his tent and bade them stay as his guests for a while, to celebrate their victory and talk of Nehekharā's future. As the matter of Lahmia's vast treasury had yet to be settled, Alcadizzar's allies could not very well refuse.

For a full week, as the last of the desert tribes filtered down from the far reaches of the plain, Alcadizzar entertained his guests with horse races and martial contests by day and lavish feasts by night. During the feasts, young women of marriageable age from the tribes would join the royal guests and provide entertainment, as was their custom, in the form of conversation, dance and song. It was during these feasts that Alcadizzar came to notice one young woman in particular: Khalida, a maiden of thirty years, who was named after the legendary warrior-queen of Lybaras. She was tall, dark-haired and slender, like most women of the tribes, but her eyes were a rare,

vivid green, like polished emeralds. Her voice was deep and earthy, and she laughed often, but what captured Alcadizzar's interest most of all was her keen wit. She was astonishingly well read, conversing with kings and champions on matters ranging from horsemanship to history. One night he had found himself in a lively debate with her about Settra's early campaigns against the tribes that had lasted until nearly midnight, until her brothers had been forced to politely separate them for propriety's sake. He'd looked forwards to seeing her ever since.

Over the course of the week, the political manoeuvring intensified. Numas and Zandri pressed shamelessly for a lion's share of Lahmia's gold and promised close ties of trade and friendship in return. Mahrak and Lybaras appealed to Alcadizzar's scholarly nature, pleading for gold to restore their libraries and temples. Ka-Sabar promised a steady supply of good iron, drawn from the deeps of the Brittle Peaks, in return for trade agreements that would keep their forges working for generations to come.

Prince Heru told Alcadizzar he could keep Rasetra's share of the gold, just so long as he could take Khalida home with him. The king of Khemri refused, much to Heru's amusement.

Alcadizzar played the game of diplomacy with great skill, forging profitable alliances with Ka-Sabar, Quatar and Lybaras, while keeping Mahrak at arm's length and establishing an understanding with Zandri and Numas, his closest and most ambitious neighbours. In the end, Lahmia's plundered gold was split seven ways, with equal shares going to each of the cities. Faisr's tribes received a slightly larger portion of gold than the rest, but forfeited their share of slaves, since their laws forbade it. The following day, Alcadizzar's guests took their leave, marching for home laden with riches and bound by new political ties to Khemri. Whether Alcadizzar's peers had realised it or not, a new era had begun.

The armies began to move at dawn, starting with Zandri and Numas; by sunset, the last of the Lybaran companies had departed, driving their slow-moving wagons westwards. Only the people of Khemri remained, waiting to escort their king to his new home. After days of celebration, a sense of relative calm settled over the tent city, as the tribes prepared their meals and contemplated breaking camp the following day.

Alcadizzar sat inside his tent, wrapped in heavy robes and sipping tea from a fine porcelain cup as he reviewed the particulars of trade agreements he'd signed with Ka-Sabar and Numas the night before. His broken ribs ached and the rest of his body was stiff and sore, from his eyebrows to the tips of his toes. His duties as a host had left him more drained than the battle outside Lahmia, or so it seemed.

There came a scratching at his tent flap. Out of habit, Alcadizzar started to rise from his chair and see to it, but Huni, one of his new royal servants, rose smoothly from his place near the entrance and went to see who was outside. There was a brief murmur of conversation, then the servant returned with a look of consternation on his face.

Huni prostrated himself before the king. "There is someone who wishes to speak with you, great one," he said. "I told her that you have retired for the evening, but she is most insistent."

Alcadizzar glanced up from his documents. "Who is it?" He thought of Khalida, his pulse quickening.

The servant frowned. "I do not know," he replied. "All she will say is that she is the Daughter of the Sands—"

"Gods above," Alcadizzar swore, straightening in his chair. "Send her in at once!"

Huni leapt to his feet and dashed for the tent flap. He pulled it aside with a bow, and Ophiria entered, followed by her hooded servant, the chosen of Khsar. She arched an eyebrow at the king.

"My apologies," Alcadizzar said, sheepishly. "This is... unexpected. Ah... may I offer you tea?"

The seer's lips quirked in a faint grin. "You may."

Huni hurried to the brass kettle, only to be waved away by the king. Alcadizzar poured the cup himself and brought it to her, his mind racing. "I wasn't aware you'd arrived in camp," he said, trying to work out what was going on.

"I've been here since before *you* arrived," Ophiria said, her golden eyes studying him over the rim of the teacup. "You were too busy entertaining to notice." She glanced around the tent. "Shall we sit, or is it your habit now to drink tea standing up?"

"Yes—I mean, no." Alcadizzar sighed irritably. Ophiria flustered him more than all the kings of Nehekhara combined. "Please. Sit."

The seer lowered herself gracefully to the piled rugs, cradling the teacup in her hands. Alcadizzar had seen her many times over the years, at tribal gatherings, but hadn't actually spoken to her since the night of Suleima's funeral rites, some forty years ago. Other than a few streaks of grey in her hair and some wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, she hadn't changed a great deal since then.

Alcadizzar sat across from her. His gaze went from Ophiria to her servant and back again. He wasn't certain how to proceed. The bride of Khsar, as a rule, did not visit other men's tents.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit?" he asked.

Ophiria gave him a sphinx-like stare. "We have matters to discuss," she said.

"I... see," Alcadizzar replied. The seer sipped her tea and said nothing. Finally, the king turned to his servants. "Leave us," he said.

Huni and the rest bowed and slipped silently from the tent. Ophiria waited until the last one was gone before she spoke.

"Congratulations on your victory over the Lahmians," she said.

Alcadizzar shrugged stiffly. "It was a hollow triumph at best," the king said. "Neferata escaped."

"Her fate lies elsewhere," the seer said cryptically. "Her power has been broken for now and my people are free to return home. That is victory enough for me." She sipped her tea, glancing over at the papers piled on the table. "The past few days have been profitable, I trust?"

"It's a good beginning," the king allowed. "There'll be more to do once I get to Khemri, of course."

"And what are your plans, now that Lahmia is no more?"

Alcadizzar took a deep breath. "Well. Finish rebuilding the city, to begin with. Hopefully find a wife, and have children. Try to live like a normal person, for the first time in my life."

Ophiria let out a snort. "There's nothing normal about you, Alcadizzar," she said. The seer finished her tea. "What do you think of Khalida? Does she interest you?"

The king's eyes widened. "You know about her?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was the one who suggested she attend the feasts in the first place," Ophiria said. "As it happens, she's my niece. And she could use a husband who's read as many books as she has." The seer gave him an arch look. "Assuming you were serious when you told Faisr you wanted to marry a woman of the tribes."

Alcadizzar bristled a bit. "After all this time and everything I've done, you *still* doubt my sincerity?"

Ophiria set down her cup and sighed. "No. I don't." Her expression turned sombre. "You've been a man of your word in every respect, Alcadizzar. I wouldn't be offering you my niece if you weren't."

"Well, what's all this about, then?" the king asked.

The seer's golden eyes met his. "It's about Nagash," she said simply.

Alcadizzar stared at her. "What have you seen?"

Ophiria was silent for a moment, her expression thoughtful, as though uncertain how much she ought to say.

"The Usurper is coming," she said at last. "Even now, he prepares his armies for war."

The king's heart sank. "How soon?"

"Years; possibly even decades," Ophiria said. "Nagash does not measure time as we mortals do. He has not forgotten his defeat in the last war and will not act this time until he is certain of victory."

"Then he cannot be defeated?"

Another faint smile crossed the seer's face. "That depends on what you do with the time you're given. From this moment forwards, every day is a gift. Use them wisely."

Alcadizzar sighed wearily. "All right. What am I supposed to do?"

Ophiria shrugged. "I'm no strategist," she said. "How was he beaten the last time?"

"The other priest-kings combined their forces against him."

"Well, then, perhaps you should start there."

The king scowled. "You're a seer. Is that the best you can do?"

"Don't be impertinent. It doesn't work that way," Ophiria snapped. She rose to her feet. "I've told you all I can, Alcadizzar. Rule well with the time you are given. Prepare Nehekhara for Nagash's coming. All the world depends on it."

As she turned to leave, the king called out to her. "Wait!"

The seer stopped at the tent flap and scowled at him.

"There is no more to tell, Alcadizzar. I can't share what I haven't seen."

The king shook his head. "Never mind that. What about Khalida?"

"What about her?"

Alcadizzar frowned. "Now who is being impertinent?"

Ophiria grinned. "She resides in the tent of her father, Tariq al-Nasrim. Call upon her if you like. She loves to read. Promise her all the books her heart desires and you should do well."

By night he crept across the wasteland like a spider, clutching his precious cargo to his chest and stealing the life of any living thing that came too near. North and west he went; at the end of each night, just before the paling of dawn, he would scuttle into a shallow cave or a hillside crevice and open his senses to the aether, like a ship's captain taking a bearing from the stars overhead. The crackle of necromantic energies pulsed invisibly in the distance, always seemingly just beyond the next set of hills.

Three weeks after his narrow escape from the city's gatehouse, W'soran crested a splintered ridgeline and caught his first glimpse of the great fortress. The ancient mountain was as large as Lahmia itself, ringed about with seven high walls of black basalt and hundreds of slender, blade-like towers. It dominated the horizon to the east, crouching like a dragon beneath a vast pall of ashen cloud, along the edge of a dark, fog-shrouded sea. Though he was still a great many leagues away, the sight of his destination filled the necromancer with a terrible, hateful joy.

The path around the shores of the great sea was a long one, fraught with dangers. Twisted, scaly creatures lurked in the marshes that bordered the sea's western shore, but worse were the packs of howling, pale-skinned monsters that infested the hills to the north. Once they'd caught his scent they hounded him without pause, tracking him through the hillside thickets like hungry jackals, until finally he was forced to turn and fight. He slew scores of them with blasts of necromantic energy and still dozens more with his claws and needle-like fangs, until finally the survivors fled in terror. After that, the creatures continued to test him, pacing at his heels and trying to herd him into places of ambush, but they never risked an open battle with him again.

Finally, after many weeks, W'soran crossed through the territory of the flesh-eaters and reached the far shores of the wide sea. He came upon the ancient ruins of a large temple that had once barred the path along the sea's eastern shore. Beyond the ruins, the shoreline along the base of the mountain was covered in treacherous mounds of crushed stone and wreathed in tendrils of poisonous yellow vapours; a lifeless waste made by human hands, living or dead.

A wide road of black stone carved through the wasteland like the path of a knife, leading to the first of the mountain's forbidding walls. This close to the mountain, there was no day or night; just an endless, iron-grey gloom that neither sun nor moon could shine through, allowing the necromancer to travel on without pause. The air throbbed with the sounds of industry: hammers and bellows, the groan of wheels and the rumble of spilled rock. Beyond that, however, there were no shouted commands, no weary curses or barked laughter, as working men might make in the lands to the south. The fortress hissed and rumbled and banged, but for all that, there were no sounds of life within.

As he approached the gate, a horn wailed from a nearby tower and the great black portal grated open. In the darkness beneath the gate's arch waited a dozen skeletal figures, wreathed in icy mist and flickering green grave-light. The wights leered at him balefully, gripping blades marked with runes of death and damnation. Leading

them was a rotting skeleton in ragged robes; the liche's eyes flared hatefully at the sight of W'soran, as though it somehow knew him. A malevolent hiss slipped past its splintered teeth.

Undaunted, the necromancer smiled coldly. "I am W'soran, from the city of Lahmia to the south, and I am known to your master." He lifted the heavy leather bag clutched to his bony chest. "I bear him gifts and news that will be of great interest to him."

The wights said nothing. After a moment, they withdrew. The liche reluctantly lifted a bony hand and beckoned for W'soran to follow.

Traversing the vast fortress took hours, first across narrow lanes under the ashen sky, then down dank, twisting corridors carved into the mountain's flanks. Higher and higher they climbed, and the closer W'soran came to the object of his quest, the more he felt the weight of the Undying King's power pressing against his skin. It permeated the rock and hissed invisibly through the air, filling up his skull until it was almost impossible to think. It gripped him and pulled him onwards, like an irresistible tide.

At last, W'soran found himself in a vaulted antechamber, high upon the slopes of the great mountain. Before him, towering doors of unfinished bronze groaned on their hinges, opening just wide enough to admit him. Green light flickered hungrily within. The wights flanked him to either side, heads bowed towards the open doors. They offered no instruction, for none was required.

Gripping the leather bag tightly, W'soran strode into the presence of the Undying King, followed closely by the silent, black-toothed liche.

The great, columned hall beyond was vast, larger by far than the pitiful chambers of Nehekharan kings. Shadows writhed along the walls, stirred by pulsing veins of glowing green stone that wound across the surface of the rock. More green light pulsed from a sphere of the same glowing rock, resting atop a corroded bronze tripod at the foot of a stone dais. Sorcerous power radiated from the rock like heat from a furnace, but its intensity paled before the conflagration of power that was Nagash himself.

The Undying King sat upon a great throne of carved wood, cased in the intricate black armour that W'soran had glimpsed on Sakhmet's night, so many years ago. Pale green flames wreathed the king's leering skull and arced along the rough surface of his crown.

W'soran made his way towards the king's dais. Hunched, growling figures paced him from the shadows along either side of the hall—flesh-tearing beasts, like the ones who had hounded him along the hills north of the great sea. Of course they served the Undying King, the necromancer reckoned. Every creature within sight of the great mountain, living or dead, likely bent its knee before Nagash's might.

W'soran did so as well, falling onto his knees before the dais. The burning skull did not move an inch in response to the immortal's presence. There was no need; Nagash's awareness filled the echoing space, invisible and all-consuming. A portion of it fell upon him, much as a man might note the passage of an ant beneath his feet.

The immortal raised his hands to the figure upon the throne. "Great Nagash," he cried. "Undying King! I am W'soran, who witnessed your triumph on Sakhmet's night, twenty-two years ago." W'soran fumbled open the leather bag before him.

Reaching in, he drew out the first of the leather-bound volumes inside. “I have come bearing tokens of my devotion—your own necromantic tomes, looted from the Black Pyramid centuries ago and held by lesser hands in Lahmia ever since.”

This time, the burning skull did move fractionally, glancing downwards at the offered tome. The Undying King’s awareness focussed upon W’soran, scorching his mind like a heated iron.

“I bring news also,” W’soran croaked. “The City of the Dawn has fallen; the bloodline of the treacherous Lamashizzar is no more.”

The skull inclined further, until W’soran found himself staring up at the orbs of fire that seethed from its eye sockets. Nagash’s awareness burned like acid along the immortal’s bones, threatening to consume them.

“There is more!” W’soran exclaimed. “A... a usurper has claimed your throne, great one! A man of Rasetran blood sits upon the throne of Khemri! Alcadizzar is his name and he claims descent from Settra himself!”

There was a creaking of metal. Nagash leaned forwards upon the throne, looming over W’soran. The ancient tome flew out of the immortal’s hand as an invisible fist gripped him, smashing him back onto the stone floor. The necromancer’s veins burned and claws of fire sank into his brain. A voice, cold and soulless as stone, reverberated through the hall. W’soran screamed in ecstasy and terror.

“Tell me of this usurper,” the Undying King said.

—<TWENTY-FOUR>—

The Last Light of Day

*Khemri, the Living City, in the 110th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1163 Imperial Reckoning)*

Heads turned as Inofre, King Alcadizzar's Grand Vizier, led the small procession of nobles down the length of Settra's Court. Though it was late afternoon, the resplendent throne room was still crowded with petitioners and embassies from the far corners of Alcadizzar's empire, from the horse lords of Numas to the merchant princes of distant Bel Aliad. They had been waiting for hours to speak with the great king; with the evening drawing on, most would be turned away until the morrow. For the moment, however, all eyes were upon the tall, handsome lord who followed after Inofre and the three strange, iron-bound chests carried by the noblemen who trailed in the lord's wake.

Alcadizzar straightened slightly on Settra's ancient throne as the procession approached the dais, dragging his mind away from worries about the trade negotiations that were planned for later that night. He'd only returned from Numas that morning, reviewing the new irrigation plan that they hoped would restore the city's parched grain fields. He was tired beyond words and his body was a mass of aches—particularly the ribs that Neferata had broken, some thirty-seven years ago. They never had healed quite right, despite the best efforts of the surgeons.

Thirty-seven years, he thought, suppressing a grimace. Where had the time gone?

The king stole a guilty glance to his right. Khalida sat upon her throne, serene as always, her left hand resting upon Alcadizzar's right. They had instituted the tradition upon their marriage, moving her throne from its customary place—set further to the right and two steps lower than the king's—and placed them side by side. Her hand upon his was meant to signify that they ruled Khemri jointly, that her opinion counted for as much as his.

The touch of her fingers was light and cool, as though Khalida was loath to rest the full weight of her hand upon his. Things had been strained between them for a long time now, ever since the last war with Zandri, some five years ago. The expansion northwards into the barbarian lands over the past two decades had provided more lucrative routes for the slave trade that had once made the coastal city so wealthy. When Alcadizzar had finally conquered the bellicose city after a lengthy and difficult campaign, he discovered that their coffers were completely empty and the citizens on the verge of starvation. King Rakh-an-atum had taken ship with many of Zandri's nobles and fled to parts unknown, leaving Alcadizzar in possession of a

city on the verge of anarchy. Since then, he had spent much of his time there, helping to restore order and improve the lives of its citizens, leaving Khalida to return to Khemri and manage the city's affairs alone.

Holding the empire together demanded more from him with every passing year. In the beginning, the horrors of what his fellow rulers had seen at Lahmia and the threat posed by Nagash had been a potent force for unity, allowing him to forge powerful alliances based on mutual defence and free trade. Free at last from Lahmia's crippling economic policies, the great cities flourished. Alcadizzar invested his city's wealth as wisely as he could, returning Khemri to its former glory. Vast amounts of coin were spent on improving roads across the entire country, and connecting east and west via trade along the River Vitae. The great collegia at Lybaras were restored and then similar centres of learning were founded in Khemri as well. Scholar-engineers were put to work creating methods of irrigation that drew water from the Vitae and restored arable land that had been reclaimed by the desert centuries earlier.

As Khemri's fortunes rose, Alcadizzar made certain that the rest of Nehekhara's fortunes rose as well. Peace and prosperity brought stability, and increased his influence over the entire land. What started as an alliance grew into a confederation of cities, then a short-lived commonwealth, and then, after a combination of statecraft and military manoeuvring, into an empire. Through it all, though, Ophiria's warning remained uppermost in his mind. Everything he did, ultimately, was geared towards preparing the land for Nagash's eventual return.

Those preparations grew a little more difficult with every passing year. The memories of Lahmia had faded with time. Now there were powerful men around the empire who had begun to chafe under the elaborate—and expensive—military obligations they were compelled to maintain. There were even whispers that perhaps Nagash's interests had turned elsewhere and no longer posed a threat to Nehekhara. Some even went so far as to allude that Nagash had never been a threat at all, but merely a potent fiction that Alcadizzar had used to gain control of the great cities. He found himself travelling more, visiting cities and speaking directly to the nobles who lived there, reminding them of their shared duty to defend the land. So far, the tactic was working, but at what cost?

Alcadizzar reached over and touched Khalida's hand, brushing the smooth skin with his fingertips. He smiled. His wife glanced over, stirred from some reverie of her own and managed a strained smile before looking away again.

The king frowned, trying to think of something to say, but was interrupted by Inofre's voice.

"Great one," the Grand Vizier intoned, "your loyal subject Rahotep, Lord of the Delta and Seeker of Mysteries, has returned in accordance with your commands and wishes to give an account of his efforts in the lands of the barbarians."

Alcadizzar pushed his fears aside and summoned up a warm smile for the nobleman standing at the foot of the dais. "Of course," he said. "Welcome home, Lord Rahotep. This is a pleasant surprise; unless I am mistaken, your expedition was not expected back for another two weeks."

Rahotep bowed to the king and smiled in return. The two men shared the same interests in learning and exploration, and had been friends for many years. The young

lord was a famous adventurer, renowned throughout Nehekhara for his travels to the far corners of the world. Thanks to his efforts, Nehekhara's northern border now extended for hundreds of leagues past Numas and had opened valuable trade routes with the barbarian tribes beyond the World's Edge Mountains.

"The past winter was a mild one," Rahotep answered, "and the mountain passes opened sooner than expected."

He turned and beckoned his retainers forwards. "It also helped that I was halfway through the mountains when the snows began to thaw."

Alcadizzar leaned forwards, his eyes widening. Rahotep had his undivided interest now. "You met with the *annu-horesh*?"

The fabled explorer swept out his hands and made a dramatic bow. "I enjoyed their hospitality for the entire winter," he said proudly. "They have showed me wonders beyond compare, and offered us assurances of friendship and trade."

Excited murmurs swept through the court. The *annu-horesh*—literally, the mountain-lords—had been discovered by Rahotep more than a decade ago, but the stout, bearded folk had been slow to warm to the Nehekharans. The barbarians who lived at the foot of the mountains regarded them with awe and spoke of their surpassing skill as warriors and craftsmen.

"Their king, Morgrim Blackbeard, sent you these gifts, as a gesture of his respect," Rahotep said. With a flourish, he opened the first chest and drew out the most magnificent sword that Alcadizzar had ever seen. It was a huge, two-handed khopesh, but Rahotep held the blade as though it weighed no more than a river-reed. Its edge looked keen enough to cut stone; the metal had a sheen to it like molten gold. The weapon caught the light of the braziers and shone like the morning sun. Gasps of wonder echoed throughout the hall.

Alcadizzar stared at the sword in wonder. "What is it made of?"

"Iron," Rahotep said, "but made into something far lighter and stronger than anything our smiths can forge." He laid a hand gently against the flat of the blade. "The true magic lies in the way the blade was washed in gold. The bond radiates heat and light, and is anathema to the evils that dwell in the darkness."

The explorer indicated the remaining chests. "There is armour as well, shaped by the same processes. Truly a gift for the greatest of Nehekharan kings."

"Beautiful," the king agreed. "It's a great shame that my sons could not be here to see it. Prince Asar is hunting with his uncle in the desert and Prince Ubaid—"

"Asar and my father are in Ka-Sabar now, as guests of King Aten-sefu," Khalida interjected coolly. "And Ubaid's interests run to horses and hawks these days."

The queen's tone stung Alcadizzar. "Of course. Hawks and horses. How forgetful of me." The king sighed inwardly and beckoned to a group of robed men standing off to the right of the dais. They wore metal skullcaps, like priests, and gripped staffs of cedar or sandalwood.

"Suleiman," the king called. "What do you make of this?"

A tall, dignified, older man stepped forwards, joining Rahotep and peering closely at the blade for several moments. He reached out and lightly touched the sword, just as the explorer had done, and his eyebrows rose. "Truly a marvel," he said to the king. "A form of elemental sorcery unlike anything we have seen before."

There are no runes in its shaping; it is as though the very essence of the sun has been worked into the metal.”

Alcadizzar nodded sagely, even though his knowledge of magic was still very limited. The knowledge had been brought to Nehekhar from the far north, by intrepid sailors and explorers like Lord Rahotep, and given to learned men to emulate and master. In the first decade of his reign, Alcadizzar had founded a collegium of magic in Khemri, knowing full well that the other cities would waste no time creating their own. Without the gifts that had once been granted them by the gods, it was imperative that the Nehekharans find new sources of power to counter Nagash’s foul magic. The forges at Ka-Sabar were making small amounts of enchanted arms and armour each year now, which were purchased and stored in armouries across the land.

Rahotep smiled at the king. “The mountain-lords save their runes for truly powerful weapons,” he said. “Morgrim swore to me that a blade like this requires no great skill to make.”

“Indeed?” the king said. “Then would the mountain-lords be willing to teach us how to make them?”

The explorer spread his hands. “It’s possible. King Morgrim has invited you to be his guest at his hold, to share the tales of our two peoples and discuss how we may work together in the future.”

Alcadizzar brightened. The prospect of meeting the mountain-lords and seeing their creations excited him. “How far a journey is it to the World’s Edge Mountains?”

“Six weeks, if the weather is cooperative,” Rahotep answered. “We could travel there in the early autumn, and winter there until the passes open again.”

Six weeks, Alcadizzar thought. It could be done. If the trade negotiations were concluded quickly enough, it was just possible. He turned to Khalida, smiling hopefully—only to find her already watching him, her expression bleak.

Slowly, deliberately, she withdrew her hand.

“The king may do as he pleases, of course,” she said without being asked and looked away.

Alcadizzar’s heart sank. “We will consider the invitation,” he said, turning back to Rahotep with a half-hearted smile. “You have my thanks for your efforts on behalf of the empire, my lord. I look forwards to hearing a fuller report on the morrow.”

Rahotep bowed gracefully and withdrew. Servants came forwards from the shadows to take charge of the king’s magnificent gifts. Alcadizzar watched the explorer depart through the crowd of restless petitioners and felt the bitter sting of envy.

No sooner had Rahotep gone than Inofre reappeared, hurrying down the processional towards the throne. The Grand Vizier gripped his hands together nervously, and his sweaty face was pale. Alcadizzar frowned, seeing that Inofre was alone.

“Well?” the king asked. “What now?”

Inofre looked from Alcadizzar to the remote face of the queen. “A great host of desert riders have arrived and are making camp south of the city,” he said. “Ophiria is with them. She says you must come to her at once.”

A hot wind, reeking of burnt metal and ash, howled like a tormented spirit around the top of the high tower. The Lahmian stood as still as a statue, his eyes glittering with fear as Nagash stood before him. The Undying King reached out and gripped the side of the necromancer’s face, the tip of his armoured thumb hovering just beneath W’soran’s eye. Slowly, deliberately, Nagash pressed the tip of his thumb against W’soran’s withered flesh and drew it downwards, etching a glowing green line into skin and bone.

“*Go forth,*” intoned the Undying King, “*into the lands of men, where the name of Nagash has been forgotten.*” He etched the first part of the sigil all the way to the bottom of W’soran’s jaw, then lifted his thumb and began the second mark, clawing a curve along the line of the necromancer’s cheekbone.

A faint tremor shook W’soran’s skeletal frame as Nagash etched the sigil of binding into his face. The Undying King could taste the necromancer’s agony, and noted with approval how W’soran fed upon the suffering, as he had been taught. When the Lahmian had first arrived at Nagashizzar, his skill at necromancy had been rudimentary at best. It had taken many years of instruction to mould him into a potent and useful servant. Arkhan, by comparison, had improved much more swiftly, perhaps because his sojourn in the lands of the dead had given him a greater facility with spirits. Because of this, and because Nagash knew of his skills as a warlord, Arkhan would have overall command of the Undying King’s host. W’soran—and the dozen barbarians he had bequeathed his peculiar brand of immortality to—would serve as Arkhan’s lieutenants and champions and take charge of individual legions as the liche saw fit. He would need every necromancer at his disposal to control the vast army that Nagash had created. The effort would tax their abilities to the utmost.

“*Go you to the great cities and cast them down,*” Nagash continued, weaving the incantation that would bind W’soran to his legions. “*Cast down the palaces of the proud kings. Cast down the temples of the fallen gods. Fill every well with dust and every road with ash. Let the winds carry the lamentations of the people to the far corners of the world.*”

Nagash drew his hand away. The sigil of binding pulsed fitfully against W’soran’s grey skin.

“*In the name of Nagash the Undying, go forth, faithful servant, and conquer.*”

The necromancer wove unsteadily on his feet for a moment, but then bowed his head. “It shall be done, great one,” he said in a hollow voice. “I swear it.”

Nagash turned away. The wind hissed across the jagged surface of his armour as he strode to the edge of the tower and looked down upon his assembled host.

They had been marching out from the depths of the fortress for days, and would continue to do so for several days more, taking their places along the shores of the dark sea. The long shoreline had been cleared of debris for leagues to the north and south, where huge ships of bone waited to carry the army to Nehekhara.

The shoreline glittered coldly in the wan moonlight, reflecting off countless spear-points and tarnished helms. Hundreds of companies of spearmen and archers,

hordes of skeletal cavalry and sickle-bladed chariots, and huge, thundering engines of war; it was his hatred for the living given form, as vast and pitiless as the desert sands.

The Undying King raised a smoking fist to the heavens. “*Now let the end of the living world begin.*”

Holding Back the Darkness

*Khemri, the Living City, in the 110th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1163 Imperial Reckoning)*

Nagash is coming.

The warning sped to every corner of Nehekhara, sent from the collegium of sorcery in Khemri to each of the great cities, and thence to the ears of the empire's vassals. Within hours, horns were sounding from the palaces, summoning their fighting men to war.

A strategy had been devised decades before in anticipation of the Usurper's return, its particulars refined every year by a war council convened by Alcadizzar in Khemri. Each city's army had a specific role to play in the grand strategy, plus a strict timetable in which to complete their assigned tasks. It was similar in some ways to the complex movement of armies that occurred during the Lahmian campaign almost forty years prior, but altogether more complex and difficult to achieve.

During the first few months after Ophiria's arrival at Khemri, a steady stream of messages flowed from the palace to the collegium and back again. Alcadizzar worked day and night from the relative seclusion of his personal library, communicating with his vassal kings and directing the mobilisation of the empire. Roughly four weeks after receiving Ophiria's warning, the armies of Rasetra and Kasabar had assembled and were on the march, both rushing northwards to reach their assigned places ahead of the Usurper's forces. Meanwhile, on the river docks outside Khemri, every barge the city's merchants owned had been pressed into service, while the city's army mustered in the fields to the south.

There were hundreds of decisions, small and large, to be made each and every day. Alcadizzar quickly learned that being able to communicate with his allies across such vast distances was a double-edged sword. He was deluged with questions, requests, clarifications and reports at every turn, until it became a challenge just to sift through the flood and determine which messages needed attention and which did not.

Ironically, the more Alcadizzar knew, the more he worried about the things he didn't know. Where were Nagash's forces? How large were they? How fast were they moving? He reviewed his battle plans over and over, looking for hidden flaws that the enemy could exploit.

The king was standing before a large wooden table in the centre of the library, studying a detailed map of the empire, when he heard the door to the library quietly

open. He sighed inwardly, rubbing at his eyes. "Yes?" he asked, expecting yet another handful of messages from the collegium.

"Inofre says you haven't left this room in days. Is something wrong?"

Alcadizzar turned in surprise at the sound of Khalida's voice. His wife stood close to the library's door, surveying the cluttered desks and reading tables with a mix of scholarly interest and mild apprehension. She was dressed simply, as was her habit when not attending court, clad in dark cotton robes and silk slippers. A desert headscarf was wrapped loosely about her braided hair. It accentuated the worry lines that creased her forehead and etched the corners of her eyes.

Too exhausted and too surprised to think properly, Alcadizzar shook his head and said, "No more or less wrong than the day before."

"Then why are you still awake? It's well past midnight."

Alcadizzar frowned. He had no idea it was so late. The library had no windows, being in the centre of the royal apartments, so there was no easy way to mark the passage of time. He ran a hand over his face, trying to rub the tiredness away. "Going over reports," he replied dully. "Making sure there's nothing I've missed."

Khalida joined him beside the map table and peered closely at his face. "You look ten years older," she murmured. Her fingertips lightly brushed his temples. "There's grey in your hair that wasn't there a month ago."

The king managed a half-hearted smile. "That's what you get for marrying such an old man," he joked.

Khalida scowled. "Be serious," she said. "You're exhausted. I can see it in your eyes."

The smile faded from Alcadizzar's face. He looked down at the map, eyes sweeping over symbols and notations that he'd burned into his memory over the past weeks. He shook his head. "It weighs on me," the king said. "Every moment of every day. When I try to sleep, all I can think of is this damned map."

"I know," Khalida replied. "You always fret like this before a campaign."

"Not like this," he said, shaking his head. "This isn't about taxes, or trade, or expanding the borders of the empire. This is about life and death—or something altogether worse than death." Alcadizzar sighed. "The empire is depending on me. If I fail, then every living thing from Lybaras to Zandri will suffer."

Alcadizzar was surprised to feel Khalida's arms slide about his waist and draw him close. It made him think of the first time she'd embraced him, on the road to Khemri with the tribes. He'd thought desert women were quiet and pliable back then, Ophiria notwithstanding. Khalida had shown him how utterly wrong his impressions were.

"You will not fail," she told him, in a voice that brooked no dissent. "This is the moment you've been preparing for. It's the whole reason the empire exists." She rested her head on his shoulder, and her voice softened. "In all my life, I've never known a man more devoted to anything."

The words stung, whether she'd meant them to or not. He put his arms around her. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

“For letting all this come between us,” Alcadizzar replied. “I’ve been a poor husband these past few years.”

“But a great king,” Khalida said. She reached up and wiped at her cheek. She gestured at the map. “Look at all you’ve done.”

“I’d give it all up in an instant if you asked me to.”

“You wouldn’t,” Khalida said, laughing weakly. “Don’t be stupid.”

The king laughed along with her. “I’m not,” he protested. “Once this is over, things will be different. No more travelling. No more campaigns. No more pacing the floor at all hours of the night. We’ll finally do all those things we dreamed about.”

“You’ll take me to the Silk Lands in a barge made of gold?”

Alcadizzar smiled. “If you wish.”

“And you’ll make the Celestial Emperor bow before me?”

“He won’t need much encouragement, once he sets eyes on you.”

Khalida chuckled and hugged him tight. “Promise?”

The king smiled. “With all my heart.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said. “So. When do we march?”

“We?”

Khalida disentangled herself and gave Alcadizzar a stern look. “You expect me to stay here? I’ve ridden with you on every campaign since we were married and I do not plan on stopping now.”

The very idea filled Alcadizzar with dread, but he knew that there was no point in arguing. Even the authority of kings had its limits.

“Zandri’s forces have already left and are travelling upriver now,” he said, tracing his finger along the length of the River Vitae. “The Numasi are on the move as well, they should be here in two weeks. Another two or three days to load their army and ours onto the barges, then we’ll be ready to go.”

Khalida nodded. “And the rest?”

“The Iron Legion left Ka-Sabar two weeks ago and are headed north to Qatar. Rasetra’s forces left at roughly the same time and Heru reports that they’ll be at Lybaras in another week or so.” He folded his arms. “There’s been no word from Mahrak in weeks. I fear the Hieratic Council is reconsidering its role in the plan.”

The queen nodded. Though she hadn’t been directly involved in drafting the battle plan, she’d pieced it together over the years, and knew it as well as any of the other rulers. “It’s not hard to understand. You’ve placed them in a difficult position.”

“It wasn’t by choice, but they don’t seem to believe that,” Alcadizzar said. “They’ve been suspicious of my motives ever since I started the sorcerer’s collegium. But abandoning the city is the only realistic option. If they won’t join Rasetra and Lybaras, at least they could withdraw to the Gates of the Dusk, where they could hold the eastern end of the Valley of Kings for many weeks—certainly long enough for their people to reach the far end of the valley and take refuge in Quatar.”

“It’s not that easy a decision for them. They’re trying to preserve their faith,” Khalida pointed out.

“Not if they manage to get themselves killed in the process,” Alcadizzar retorted. “It will be a bitter irony if the Hieratic Council’s own mistrust and paranoia proves to be their downfall.”

“If that is their fate, then there’s nothing we can do,” Khalida said. “But they may surprise us yet. There is still some time left before Nagash’s army crosses the Golden Plain.”

Alcadizzar nodded, but his expression was doubtful. “We can hope,” he said. “At this point, it’s all we can do.”

Propelled along the dark waters by sweeping oars of bone, the undead fleet took two long weeks to cross the narrow straits and reach the ruined harbour at Lahmia. They arrived in the dead of night, concealed by a spreading stain of ashen cloud that swallowed the light of the moon. In the years since the fall of the city it had become home to squatters and bandit gangs from all over eastern Nehekhara—desperate men and women who laughed at the legends of the Cursed City’s past. W’soran stood upon the deck of his transport ship and listened to their screams as the undead host spread silently through Lahmia’s narrow streets.

Hour upon hour, the heavily laden ships came and went from the great stone quays, pouring a steady flood of spectral troops into the city. It was well past daybreak when W’soran’s turn came to disembark, riding upon a palanquin of bone that moved like a spider on eight long, segmented legs. He rode the undead engine through the preternatural gloom, making his way up the hill to the remains of the royal palace. There he remained over the next several days, while the army slowly gathered on the plains south of the city.

The necromancer amused himself by picking through the ashes of the old temple, both from curiosity and for the simple reason that he knew Arkhan would not come within a mile of his former prison unless he had to. Sharing control of the army—and the glory of victory—with the damned liche galled W’soran no end. For years he had tried to think of a way to engineer Arkhan’s demise—certain that the liche planned the same fate for him. At Nagashizzar, under Nagash’s unblinking gaze, he could not think of a way to destroy the liche without considerable risk to himself, so W’soran had bided his time, waiting for the invasion to begin. Though Arkhan’s necromantic skills might be marginally better than his at present, W’soran now had the advantage of numbers on his side. His seven progeny together accounted for control of nearly half the army. All he had to do was watch and wait for the right opportunity to push the damned liche into the enemy’s hands.

As W’soran expected, Arkhan kept to his own devices, haunting some other part of the city until the army was ready to move. One by one his immortal retainers gathered at the palace as their contingents debarked in the harbour. The old throne of the city was long gone, likely consumed in the temple fire years ago, and the copy that Neferata had made was nowhere to be found, so W’soran had his warriors search the palace for a suitable chair to place upon the royal dais and waited there for Arkhan to attend him and discuss strategy.

A day and a night passed. Then another. W’soran’s ire grew. Finally, on the third day, he despatched one of his immortals to find Arkhan—only to discover that the liche had taken the warriors directly under his control and headed west two days before.

Furious, W’soran roused the rest of the host and chased off after him, determined not to let Arkhan reach Khemri first and deprive the necromancer of the honour of

capturing Alcadizzar. The vast army lumbered and lurched up the narrow pass and onto the Golden Plain, spilling like a dark stain across the barren fields. The necromancer drove his troops forwards ruthlessly, marching both day and night; the dust and ash stirred by their marching feet was drawn upwards by W'soran's magic to perpetuate the vast sea of cloud that shielded them from the burning sun.

It took more than three weeks to finally catch up with Arkhan, clear on the other side of the desolate plain. W'soran's cavalry caught sight of the liche's forces drawn up in fighting order some ten leagues west along the trade road, not far from where it branched southwest towards Lybaras. A league away, with their backs to the Lybaras road, waited a Nehekharan army.

The necromancer's infantry caught up with Arkhan's troops some four hours later. W'soran commanded them to halt a short way behind the liche's forces and then led his palanquin forwards in search of the broken-toothed bastard.

Arkhan sat astride a huge, skeletal horse, surrounded by a group of mounted wights near the centre of his battle-line. Unlike W'soran, who had retained his sigil-marked robes, the liche had traded his filthy rags for bronze and leather armour. A tarnished bronze helmet covered his skull, its skirt of leather and bronze rings surrounding his face and neck like the lower part of a cowl. The liche's snarling face turned to the necromancer, green eyes burning from their bony sockets. With a creak of leather he raised his hand and pointed a bony finger at the distant army.

"Explain this," Arkhan grated.

W'soran brought the palanquin to an abrupt halt. "Isn't it obvious?" he snapped. "Some of that misbegotten rabble in Lahmia must have escaped and carried a warning to Lybaras. You didn't think they would just sit and wait for us to show up outside their walls, did you?"

A guttural hiss slipped past the liche's rotten teeth. *"Lybaras and Rasetra both,"* Arkhan declared. *"It would have taken weeks to muster them, much less march all this way to meet us. How is that possible?"*

"How should I know?" W'soran shot back. "The Lybarans have all manner of strange devices, do they not? Perhaps they spied us coming from a long distance away."

"You're an even bigger fool than I remembered," Arkhan sneered. *"You swore to Nagash that the great cities were divided. That they couldn't muster a proper defence against us."*

The necromancer felt a moment of unease as the implications of what the liche was saying finally sank in. From this moment forwards, if anything went wrong on the campaign, Arkhan would try to blame W'soran for it.

"You call that a proper defence?" the necromancer shot back. "I always suspected you were a coward, Arkhan. That's a *fraction* of the army I nearly defeated at Lahmia, years ago!"

Arkhan leaned back in his saddle and considered W'soran for a long moment, until the necromancer began to wonder if the liche would be foolish enough to reach for his sword.

"Indeed?" he said at length. *"Then your legions should have little trouble defeating this one."* He raised his hand; all at once, his entire force turned to the right

and began to march northwards, out of the path between W'soran's forces and the enemy.

W'soran glared at Arkhan, furious that he had let the liche outmanoeuvre him so easily. "Very well," the necromancer hissed. "Pull your warriors back to the north-east and keep them out of my way. You can manage that much, can't you?"

Arkhan did not deign to give him an answer, merely turning his horse about and heading off to the north. W'soran clenched his fists, sorely tempted to blast the liche from his saddle and settle things once and for all. Reluctantly, he stayed his hand. Now was not the time, not with an enemy army just a few miles distant.

Seething, he turned his palanquin about and returned to his waiting legions. With a few curt orders and a string of mental commands, the army began forming into battle-line. Archer companies clattered forth to take up position in front of the spear companies, while cavalry and chariots took their places at the flanks.

As they were assuming their places, W'soran studied the enemy force. Truthfully, the force seemed at least as large as the one Alcadizzar had led against Lahmia—perhaps eighty to a hundred thousand warriors. He spied heavy infantry in the centre and on the flanks, screened by large units of archers to the front and chariots to the south. Just behind the battle-line were perhaps two-score small, wheeled catapults, arranged in alternating ranks to fire over the heads of the infantry. A formidable force, the necromancer allowed, but woefully outnumbered against the assembled legions of undead. With a mirthless smile, W'soran ordered his archers and spearmen forwards.

The tightly packed spear formations descended the sloping ground towards the enemy troops. Minutes passed as the two forces drew together. W'soran could dimly hear trumpets calling back and forth along the enemy battle-line. When the advancing skeletons were perhaps a thousand yards away, the necromancer saw men begin working the winding arms on the Lybaran catapults. The necromancer issued another command and his archers picked up their pace, trotting ahead of the spear companies to provide covering fire for the last few hundred yards before contact. At two hundred yards, they came to a halt and drew back their bowstrings in a single motion, then unleashed a hissing storm of arrows into the ranks of the enemy infantry. Many fell upon upraised shields or glanced off rounded helms, but others slid through narrow gaps and buried themselves in flesh and bone. Holes opened in the ranks as men fell, wounded or dying.

The skeletal archers prepared for a second volley, but now the enemy bowmen responded, sending up a shower of their own missiles. They plunged down among the lightly armoured archers, punching through dusty ribcages and bleached skulls. Where the arrows struck, there was a tiny white flash and the skeletons collapsed to the ground.

The flashes caught W'soran's attention at once. Whatever it was, it snuffed out the magic animating the corpses like pinching a candle flame. It had to be magic of some kind, the necromancer realised with alarm.

Down on the field, the skeletal archers unleashed another, more ragged volley of arrows. Almost immediately, the Nehekharans fired back, and hundreds more of W'soran's archers were destroyed. With a snarl, he ordered the survivors to retreat. As the archers turned about and trotted through narrow gaps between the spear

companies, W'soran issued curt orders to his retainers. The immortals raised their arms and began to chant, casting the first incantations of the battle.

The spear companies pressed forwards, undaunted by the punishment suffered by the archers. At five hundred yards, a trumpet blew from the enemy battle-line, and all twenty catapults went into action. Clutches of smooth, rounded stones the size of melons fell among the spear companies, crushing shields and shattering bones. Knots of spearmen simply ceased to exist, as though flattened by the stomping feet of an invisible giant.

A hundred yards later, the catapults fired again, then a hundred yards after that. The lead companies of spearmen were all but destroyed, but there were still thousands more ready to take their place. At two hundred yards, another shower of stones fell, plus a flight of enemy arrows that sowed yet more carnage through the ranks. Snarling, W'soran raised his hand to the sky and all eight immortals unleashed their incantations simultaneously. Necromantic power surged through the undead spearmen, filling their spindly limbs with a momentary burst of additional vigour. They surged ahead in a silent mass, weapons levelled, charging across the last two hundred yards faster than either the enemy bowmen or the catapults could react.

The enemy archers saw the danger approaching and retreated at once, snatching unfired arrows out of the ground by their feet and racing back to safety behind the heavy infantry. Moments later the Nehekharan battle-line roared in challenge as the undead spearmen crashed against their upraised shields and the battle was truly joined.

The Rasetran army was clad in heavy armour of leather and bronze plates and they wielded iron-bladed hand axes or heavy maces with deadly skill. Their shields were marked with runes of protection; their weapons with symbols that crumpled skeletons with every blow. W'soran and his retainers responded with another series of incantations that speeded the attacks of their spearmen, until the bronze spearheads jabbed into the enemy like the heads of vipers. The slaughter on both sides was terrible to behold, but the Nehekharans stood their ground against the onslaught.

W'soran lashed at the undead legions with the force of his will, hurling the entire host at the stubborn foe. To the south, skeletal cavalry and chariots charged into the mass of Nehekharan horse, touching off a wild, swirling melee. Companies of archers and spearmen advanced behind the undead cavalry, striking the Rasetrans from the flank and unleashing volleys of arrows at the struggling Nehekharan horsemen. To the north, another force of undead cavalry and infantry were swinging around the enemy's left flank. Trumpets sounded a desperate call for reinforcements, as the enemy left began to bend backwards under the pressure. Before long the undead charioteers would be able to swing past the struggling infantry and strike at the Lybaran catapults at the rear of the army.

Still the Rasetrans fought on, stubbornly refusing to give ground against the onslaught. The Lybaran catapults continued firing over their heads into the rear ranks of the undead, along with the archer companies, but ultimately the effort was a futile one. The skeletons felt no fear or pain. They did not know the meaning of retreat. They fought until they were destroyed, whereupon the next warrior in line took their place and the battle went on. Slowly, inexorably, the undead host began to spill

around the flanks of the struggling army, like a pair of jaws that would soon close and swallow the living warriors whole.

After nearly an hour of fighting, the Nehekharans reached the breaking point. Their flanks had nearly collapsed and their infantry companies had taken a terrible mauling. Suddenly, trumpet calls sounded up and down the battle-line, and the withdrawal began. With a steady, disciplined tread, the companies fell back a step at a time, angling slightly back towards the south-west.

Sensing victory, W'soran urged his troops to redouble their efforts. More incantations were cast—but this time, to the necromancer's surprise, their effects were dispelled by cunningly directed counter-magics. Furious, W'soran searched the aether for signs of the enemy spellcasters—but before he could locate them, there was a sudden surge of magical energy and the ground before the struggling warriors seemed to erupt into a howling wall of blinding dust and sand.

W'soran drove his warriors forwards, into the howling sandstorm, but perversely, the sounds of fighting dwindled rather than intensified. The enemy was in full retreat, shielded by the concealing storm. The necromancer switched tactics, marshalling his retainers to dispel the storm. Within minutes, the spell was unravelled, but swirling clouds of dust still obscured the field of slaughter, making it difficult to gauge the enemy's position.

By the time the dust had cleared enough to see, the necromancer was left cursing in disgust. The Rasetrans had pulled back with surprising speed—even the catapults had managed a rapid withdrawal, towed down the trade road by teams of horses. The enemy cavalry had wheeled about and followed in their wake, screening the weary infantry from pursuit.

W'soran glared sourly at the retreating Nehekharans. He'd won, at best, a minor victory. As long as the enemy army remained intact, it still posed a threat. Now he would be forced to chase them, all the way to Lybaras and beyond if he must. That would cost precious time, while the cities of the west marshalled their forces on the other side of the Bitter Peaks.

The necromancer spat a curse at the mortals. At the bottom of the slope, Arkhan was walking his skeletal horse amongst the piles of enemy dead, no doubt searching for some piece of evidence that could be used to damn him before the Undying King.

Already, the campaign was proving to be a long and a bitter one.

Tides of Bone

*West of the Golden Plain, in the 110th year of Khsar the Faceless
(-1162 Imperial Reckoning)*

The spirit wailed like a damned soul, wracked by the binding sigil and the force of Arkhan's will. It wavered like a luminous thread of smoke above the body it had inhabited in life, that of a young, handsome Rasetran clad in finely wrought iron armour. Dried blood coated the prince's square chin and spread down the front of his breastplate like a coating of rust. An arrow jutted from the side of his throat.

With an angry sweep of his hand, the liche dispelled the summoning ritual, returning the prince's spirit to the realms of the dead. He spat another string of arcane syllables and the bloodstained body jerked, as though startled. A groan escaped from the prince's lungs, forcing a stream of thick congealing blood from the corpse's slack mouth. Grave-light flickered from the depths of the man's filmy eyes. The dead man climbed stiffly to his feet; with a growled command the liche sent the corpse to join the ranks of the Undying King's army.

Hours had passed since the battle with the Nehekharans and the bulk of the undead army remained close to the corpse-strewn battlefield. Arkhan had been forced to wait until nightfall to interrogate the spirits of the enemy dead; after his abrupt departure from Lahmia several weeks ago, W'soran refused to let him out of the necromancer's sight. Even now, he sat upon his ridiculous palanquin just a few yards away, sneering under his breath while Arkhan worked.

Arkhan would have liked nothing better than to twist the necromancer's head off his bony neck and feed his old bones to the jackals, if they would have them. The battle with the Nehekharans had confirmed his suspicions that W'soran didn't know the first thing about war. The necromancer had simply thrown troops at the mortals until the much smaller army had no choice but to retreat—and had taken substantial losses in the process. Unfortunately, if he killed W'soran now, he couldn't be certain how the immortal's progeny would react, and Arkhan could not effectively command the vast army without them. If the battle with Rasetra and Lybaras was any indication, he would need all the warriors at his disposal to conquer the great cities.

The enemy was far better prepared than they had any right to be and now he knew the reason why.

W'soran stirred from his reverie as the dead Rasetran prince shuffled past. "That's the eighth one," he snapped. "How many more do you intend to question?"

We're wasting valuable time." He waved his skeletal hand to the south. "Every hour we spend here allows the Lybarans to get another mile closer to their city."

"That is the least of our concerns," Arkhan snarled. "All of Nehekbara is up in arms. They somehow knew we were coming while our ships were still sailing down the strait!" He pointed to the prince's walking corpse. *"They've been preparing for our coming since Lahmia fell, nearly forty years ago. How is that possible?"*

"It's not," W'soran said flatly. "The very idea is absurd. Alcadizzar is many things, but he's not an oracle." He snorted in derision. "The spirit must have lied to you."

Arkhan's fists clenched angrily. *"The ritual compelled him to speak the truth."*

"Then he was mistaken," W'soran snapped. "What does it matter? Nehekbara must be conquered and Alcadizzar brought back to Nagashizzar in chains. The Undying King has commanded it and we must obey."

It matters a great deal if we're marching into a trap, you fool, Arkhan thought. *"The Nehekbarans know we're coming,"* Arkhan insisted. *"What is more, they're armed with weapons and magic that we had no idea they possessed."* He folded his arms. *"We've lost the element of surprise and today's battle shows that we can't depend on numbers alone to defeat the enemy."*

W'soran studied him warily. "What do you suggest?"

"We still have one advantage the mortals cannot match: our troops are tireless and can march longer and faster than anyone else. The Rasetrans and the Lybarans were put in our path to slow us down, while the cities of the west marshalled their troops. If we move quickly, we can still catch them unawares and defeat them one city at a time."

"How?"

"We divide the army. You take a third of the host and keep Lybaras and Rasetra at bay, while I head west at once and strike for Khemri. If I can take Quatar and the Gates of the Dawn by storm, I can be at the Living City within three weeks. Once Alcadizzar is defeated, the rest of the cities should fall easily."

The necromancer shook his head. "Oh, no. You think I'm going to waste my time on this side of the Brittle Peaks while you march into Khemri and claim all the glory?"

Arkhan glared at the immortal. *"We cannot leave Rasetra and Lybaras free to act while we march into the Valley of Kings,"* he grated. *"If they marched into the valley behind us, we would be caught between two forces, with little room to manoeuvre."*

Even W'soran could see the danger in such a situation. "I'll send four of my retainers to keep Rasetra and Lybaras occupied," he said. "That's almost a third of the army. More than enough to hold the Nehekbarans at bay."

"Very well," Arkhan said grudgingly. He didn't want W'soran anywhere within a hundred leagues of him, but for the moment, he needed the fool's cooperation or else the entire invasion was in peril. *"We leave at once."*

The liche turned on his heel and headed for his horse, thoughts of murder dancing in his head. If W'soran wanted to be in the thick of the fighting, he would be happy to oblige him. The battlefield could be a dangerous place for the unwary.

The people of Khemri turned out in a vast, cheering throng to see their king and queen off to war. Down at the docks, the last few companies of Khemri's army had been loaded onto the barges, along with the horsemen from Numas and the desert tribes. The barges from Zandri had arrived the day before; now the river was crowded with a fleet of brightly painted craft that stretched westwards as far as the eye could see.

Outside the palace, the royal guard was drawn up in their chariots, awaiting the command to depart. The slaves of the royal household waited on the steps of the palace; each one had been given a gold coin to cast upon the ground at the feet of the king, as an offering to Ptra the Great Father, god of the sun.

At the appointed hour, brass horns shook the air and outside the palace compound the people of Khemri roared in response. Moments later, the royal procession emerged into the bright sunlight. First came Inofre, the Grand Vizier, dressed in all his finery, leading the rest of the king's viziers, followed by the king and queen.

Alcadizzar wore the golden armour gifted to him by the mountain-lords, and shone with all the fury of the sun. The crook and the sceptre had been left upon Settra's throne; in their place the king held his golden sword of war. Beside him, Khalida was the dark to the king's light, clad in a gold-chased iron breastplate and a heavy skirt of iron scales over her flowing cotton robes. A desert headscarf hung loosely about her face; a horseman's bow and quiver were slung over her shoulder.

Behind the king and queen walked Prince Ubaid, their youngest son. The prince's head was downcast as he followed them out onto the steps of the palace, his handsome face screwed up into a fierce scowl as his parents turned to face him.

"Why must I stay behind?" he complained, as though the matter hadn't already been explained to him a dozen times.

"Because you're too young," Alcadizzar reminded him. "Your older brother Asar is sixteen and he's not fighting, either." The crown prince had left Ka-Sabar not long after the call to arms had been sounded and returned with his uncle to Bel Aliad, where he would remain until the war was over.

"But Ophiria is going along," Ubaid protested. "And she's *old*."

Alcadizzar sighed. "If I could command Ophiria to stay, I would. But the Daughter of the Sands goes where she wishes."

The prince folded his arms. "I wish I was the *Son* of the Sands, then."

Khalida placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "Someone must stay behind to reassure the people while the army is away," she said solemnly. "You and Inofre will rule the empire until our return. Are you up to such a great task?"

Ubaid's head lifted proudly. "Of course," he said, with all the solemnity a nine year-old could muster. "Does that mean I can stay up all night like father does—and eat my meals in the library?"

Khalida gave Alcadizzar a sidelong look. "That's the privilege of being a ruler, I suppose," she said. The queen bent and kissed him gently on the forehead, causing the young prince to squirm. "We'll be back as soon as we can, dearest," she said.

"I know."

Alcadizzar knelt beside his son and embraced him. "Be brave, and rule wisely," he said. "And don't empty the treasury while I'm gone."

“All right.”

The king smiled and kissed his son farewell, and then took Khalida’s hand. Together they descended the stone steps. Gold flashed and chimed at their feet. The king and queen smiled broadly at the royal household and the waiting guards.

“I heard a messenger came last night,” Khalida said under her breath.

Alcadizzar nodded. “News from Heru. They encountered Nagash’s vanguard four days ago. The first battle happened yesterday.”

“And?”

The king drew a deep breath. “They lasted an hour,” he said through clenched teeth. “Between them and the Lybarans, they had close to a hundred thousand men, and Heru said they were outnumbered at least five to one.”

“Great gods,” Khalida cursed. Her smile never faltered. “Where are they now?”

“Retreating south, towards Lybaras.”

“They were supposed to delay Nagash for *weeks*,” the queen hissed. “What now?”

The couple reached the bottom of the steps and turned to wave one last farewell to Prince Ubaid. The boy broke into a wide grin and waved back.

“We hold to the plan,” Alcadizzar replied. “And pray that Quatar can hold the Gates of the Dawn. Otherwise, there will be nothing to stop Nagash from seizing the west.”

True to Arkhan’s word, the undead host moved like locusts down the western trade road, darkening the skies with their passage. While four of W’soran’s immortals pursued the eastern armies southwards, the liche raced for the Valley of Kings with all the speed his slow-moving force could manage.

First, however, came Mahrak, seat of the Hieratic Council and once known as the City of the Gods, where Nagash had been defeated during the first war.

What little that Arkhan knew of the city’s fate dated from Lamashizzar’s reign, centuries ago. In those days the city had largely fallen into ruin, following the end of the sacred covenant and the decimation of the ruling council. W’soran claimed that Neferata had supported the restoration of the city during her reign, but that Mahrak was still but a shadow of its former glory. At this point, however, Arkhan didn’t trust anything the necromancer told him, so he approached Mahrak expecting to find bristling fortifications and a determined army ready for battle.

The truth, he discovered, was somewhere in-between. Two weeks after the battle with Rasetra and Lybaras, the undead host arrived at Mahrak just after sunset, and found a city much diminished in glory, but with its walls and gates fully intact. Thousands of white-robed warriors stood atop the battlements, ready to defend the city to the death.

Arkhan made every effort to oblige them.

Through the night, his warriors surrounded the city, cutting off every avenue of escape and forcing Mahrak’s defenders to spread themselves all along its perimeter. Catapults were dragged into place and smaller war engines assembled at strategic points around the city. Within hours, the first probing attacks were launched against the city walls, testing the strength of the defenders’ organisation and resolve. Arkhan

kept them up all through the following day, keeping the mortals on edge and giving them no chance for rest.

That evening, just after sunset, the attack began in earnest.

Catapults hurled shrieking missiles high overhead, targeting the tops of the walls and the city's gatehouses. Multi-legged war engines raced for the walls, followed by scores of skeletal companies equipped with crude ladders. Showers of arrows fell amid the ranks of the dead, striking down warriors by the dozens, and sporadic catapult fire from inside the city carved swathes of destruction through the oncoming companies. But the survivors pressed on, heedless of casualties and undaunted by the towering walls rising before them. War engines scuttled up the stone face like spiders, stabbing men with their forelegs and flinging their screaming bodies off the battlements. Bone ladders rattled against the walls under the covering fire of arrows; skeletons climbed for the battlements with daggers or hatchets clutched between their rotting teeth. The city defenders flung rocks down at the attackers, or waited along the walls with clubs or axes to fend them off. The undead snatched at them with their bony hands, seizing men by the arms and necks and pulling the defenders with them as they toppled off the wall.

Once the assault began, it never let up. Arkhan gave the defenders not one moment of respite. Necromantic energies crackled in the night air, lashing the battlements with searing bolts of power, or animating the bodies of the fallen and turning them on their fellows.

Arkhan expected to carry the walls in just a few hours and one of the gates shortly after that, but the defenders of the once-holy city were made of sterner stuff than he imagined. They defended every foot of the walls with their blood; if the undead did not falter, then neither did they. Two hours passed, then four, and then six, and still the gates remained in the defenders' hands.

Slowly but surely, however, the sheer weight of numbers began to tell. By dawn of the following day, most of the city walls had been cleared and fighting was concentrated around both city gates. By noon, the east gate fell, only to be retaken minutes later by a furious counter-attack. Back and forth the fighting went, with both gatehouses changing hands as much as a dozen times throughout the bloody afternoon. By nightfall, however, the eastern gate fell again, and this time there was no mortal left alive to reclaim it.

Arkhan's troops poured into the city and for the next three days and nights they slaughtered every living thing within Mahrak's walls. The temples were put to the torch, and the corpses of the slain were raised up and pressed into the ranks of the conquering army, restoring a portion of the warriors Arkhan had lost.

Five days after the undead host reached Mahrak, the City of the Gods was no more. Nothing was left but heaps of broken bones and scorched rubble; a vast, bleak testament to the vengeance of Nagash.

At the Gates of the Dawn

*The Valley of Kings, in the 110th year of Khsar the Faceless
(-1162 Imperial Reckoning)*

A week after the fall of Mahrak, the undead army reached the eastern edge of the Valley of Kings. At the mouth of the valley stood the Gates of the Dusk: eight towering stone pillars, each a hundred feet tall and older than Nehekhara itself, arrayed to either side of the wide road that wound through the base of the broad valley floor. In Arkhan's time, an unfinished wall had stretched across the valley up to the first pillars of the ancient gate. Since then, it had been replaced with something altogether more formidable—a towering bulwark of closely-fitted stone that rose more than thirty feet high, with hulking bastions rising every quarter mile to the north and south. A brooding gatehouse had been built across the road, just a hundred yards east of the obelisks, and the entrance sealed by twin slabs of solid basalt more than ten feet wide and fifteen feet high.

Prepared for another bitter assault, Arkhan hurled a dozen companies of skeletons and ten war engines at the city walls. Shielded by layers of necromantic incantations, the companies crossed the open ground before the walls without challenge and climbed swiftly onto the battlements. The liche waited upon his horse just out of bowshot, listening for the sound of fighting that never came. There were no guards upon the battlements, or within the fearsome gatehouse. The huge and costly fortifications, no doubt built over many years to secure the eastern end of the valley, were completely deserted. The garrison—if in fact there had ever been one—had likely been withdrawn to Mahrak and died there in the city's defence.

There was no fathoming the ways of priests, Arkhan thought, as he led his wights past the Gates of the Dusk.

At that same moment, more than a hundred leagues to the north, Alcadizzar and the armies of the west were emerging onto dry land once more.

The trip upriver had gone without incident—other than a lengthy and brutal battle with seasickness among the desert tribesmen—and within a few weeks the first of the river barges reached their destination. After the first week of the journey the fleet had headed up the Golden River, a tributary of the Vitae, and into the depths of the Bitter Peaks. There, at the river's end, they came to a small outpost that stood sentinel over a series of stone docks that would have been the envy of any major city. They had

been built during Alcadizzar's reign for a single purpose—to move an army as quickly and efficiently as possible to the eastern side of the mountains.

Few men outside of Khemri knew of the existence of the docks; fewer still knew of the narrow road that had been carved a hundred and twenty leagues through the mountains to the south-east. Caches of food and water had already been put in place along the route, allowing Alcadizzar's forces to travel light and move faster still. So long as the weather held, they would reach the Gates of the Dusk in just under two weeks.

They had learned of the fall of Mahrak while en route up the river; Ophiria had seen it in a vision and spoke of the slaughter that Nagash's troops had wrought. From Mahrak, Alcadizzar was certain that the army would continue into the Valley of Kings in an attempt to break out into western Nehekhar. With the armies of the east now trapped in Lybaras by a sizeable force of Nagash's troops, the way seemed clear to proceed to Quatar, and then beyond to Khemri itself.

What the enemy did not know was that the Gates of the Dawn had changed a great deal since the Usurper's reign, and that the armies of Quatar and Ka-Sabar stood ready to repel them. When Alcadizzar and his armies reached the Gates of the Dusk, the trap would snap shut.

They just had to reach the western end of the valley in time.

The Valley of Kings had once been a vast burial ground, where the early Nehekharans had laid their people to rest prior to the creation of the great cities. Grand tombs had been dug into the valley's steep slopes and the valley floor had been crowded with sandstone shrines and clustered mausoleums.

Now there were only piles of broken stone and blackened rubble stretching for hundreds of miles—the remnants of a months-long running battle fought between the armies of the Usurper and the rebel kings of the east, some six hundred years before. Arkhan remembered the gruelling pursuit across the valley. The retreating easterners had toppled statues and broken apart the mausoleums to create improvised redoubts for their archers and spearmen, while Mahrak's priests bedevilled his cavalry with cunning illusions and deadly magical traps. The rebels had made Nagash's forces pay dearly for every foot of ground, forcing the immortals to break open the tombs along the valley slopes in search of more bodies to fill their thinning ranks. The pursuit had lasted for two gruelling weeks and was some of the hardest fighting of the war.

This time, Nagash's warriors were moving in the opposite direction, towards the Gates of the Dawn and the city of Quatar. During the days of Nagash's reign, the western end of the valley had been sealed off by fortifications even greater than the ones that had been built at the Gates of the Dusk, but the Lybarans had found a way to demolish them in an attempt to slow Nagash's advancing army. Given what he'd seen at the Gates of the Dusk, Arkhan had to assume that something similar had been built at the western end of the valley, and that it would be well defended. Quatar's famous Tomb Guard had been charged with protecting the Gates of the Dawn for millennia; since the Valley of Kings was the only way to move an army across the Brittle Peaks, it was certain that they would be manning the battlements and watching for his approach.

The Gates of the Dawn had to be taken by storm. Now that all Nehekhara was up in arms, Arkhan knew that he had to move quickly before the western kings could unite into a single, massive army. Every day he lost fighting in the valley allowed his enemies to grow stronger, which was something he could not permit.

Arkhan bent all his power to speeding the march of his army. W'soran, not to be outdone, commanded his progeny to do the same. Shrouded in swirling darkness, the undead host raced westwards, past the shattered tombs of the ancients.

Moving day and night, Nagash's army crossed the Valley of Kings in a mere seven days, but the demands of the march and the broken terrain had spread the host over more than ten miles of ground. The cavalry was in the lead, the skeletal horses picking their way easily over the broken ground, followed by scores of clattering war engines and loose companies of loping axe-wielding skeletons. Farther back were the tighter formations of the spear companies and then finally the catapults and the rest of the large siege engines. Arkhan rode with the rest of the horsemen, his glowing eyes burning in the dark as he tried to catch a glimpse of the distant gates. When he reached them, there would be no pause for preparation—he would simply unleash his warriors on the wall in a rising tide of metal and bone, until the Tomb Guard were swept aside. Whatever defences the enemy had in place, Arkhan was certain they could be swiftly overrun.

He was wrong.

The first thing Arkhan saw was sparks of fire blazing against the darkness, scores of watch fires, burning in the night. They were arranged in three lines, and at different heights, with the first row of fires some twenty feet above the valley floor, the next at forty feet, and the smallest at around sixty feet above the ground.

Moments later, the lich vaulted his horse over a heap of broken sandstone and found himself galloping across a wide expanse of cleared ground, more than a hundred yards long. After days and nights of negotiating the rubble-strewn terrain of the rest of the valley, the transition was jarring.

Then, he understood, just as the first blazing missiles flew from the enemy's defences; they'd reached the killing ground at the edge of the fortifications.

Crackling balls of pitch shot skywards on trails of fire, seeming to hang in the air for long moments before plunging like thunderbolts amidst the skeletal horsemen. The missiles exploded on impact, catching desiccated skin and dried bone alight and transforming riders and mounts into firebrands. Snarling, Arkhan redoubled the speed of the cavalry, racing his horse archers as close to the wall as he could manage.

As the fires multiplied along the killing ground, Arkhan saw the wall—the *first* wall, made of slabs of granite that rose twenty feet above the valley floor. Archers along the wall and its squat, brooding gatehouse unleashed a torrent of arrows at the oncoming horsemen, their enchanted arrowheads wreaking havoc among the undead squadrons. A hundred yards behind the first wall, a second wall rose to a height of forty feet, reinforced with stone bastions every two hundred and fifty yards along its length. Then, another hundred yards further on, Arkhan could just make out the black bulk of the third and final wall; sixty feet of sheer basalt, sealing off the Gates of the Dawn.

Another ball of fire crackled just overhead, spilling motes of burning pitch onto Arkhan's shoulders. With a curse, he ordered his horse archers to fire one volley at the men on the first wall and then withdraw out of range. The enemy's defences were far stronger than he'd imagined possible. He would have to waste precious time until the rest of the army arrived before he could contemplate an assault.

His plan in tatters, Arkhan wheeled his horse around and retreated from the killing ground, his mind seething as he contemplated his next move.

The western army stopped only when absolutely necessary to spare the horses and feed the men. Everyone, from the king to the lowliest spearman, was dull-eyed with fatigue, but they had made good time along the mountain road and had crossed the Gates of the Dusk in only ten days. As the warriors sat alongside the trade road that wound along the rubble-strewn valley, they could still see the lingering pall of smoke that hung over the dead city of Mahrak to the north-east. It was a grim sight, reminding them of the threat that loomed over all Nehekhara.

Alcadizzar was resting his head against the side of his chariot when Suleiman, his chief wizard, came riding up the column on a borrowed horse. His arcane robes were stained brown with road-dust; lines of grit stood out sharply along the creases of his neck and the deep wrinkles around his eyes. His polished metal skullcap flashed brightly in the morning sun.

"A message from Quatar," the wizard said without preamble, leaning heavily on his staff. "Nagash's army is at the Gates of the Dawn."

Alcadizzar sat forwards, instantly alert. "How many?"

"A hundred thousand at least," Suleiman replied. "But more are arriving each hour. It could be many times that number."

The king nodded gravely. "Can they hold the gates?"

Suleiman nodded. "For now."

"Any word from Lybaras?"

"Heru says that the city is still besieged. Reinforcements are on the way from Rasetra, but are not expected to arrive for almost a month."

Alcadizzar rubbed his aching eyes. So long as Heru and the Lybarans could hold the city, then they were drawing away thousands of warriors that his own army would not have to face in the valley. That would have to be enough.

The king looked to the west, contemplating how hard he could push his exhausted men. "Tell Quatar to give me ten days. Tell them to do whatever they must, but I need ten days."

The first wall fell after two days of near-constant attacks. Arkhan ordered the skeletal companies forwards under a hail of arrow fire and a relentless barrage from the catapults that had been rushed to the battlefield. The defenders fought back tenaciously, using their own arrows and catapult fire to wreak havoc among the undead horde. Arkhan saw quickly that it wasn't just white-armoured Tomb Guard who were manning the walls, but iron-clad heavy infantry from Ka-Sabar as well. They hurled sandstone blocks down on the skeletons, or doused them with pots of

burning pitch; they smashed skulls and hacked off arms, or split ladders in half with polearms and axes.

One assault after another was repulsed, but Arkhan was relentless. Finally, the catapults succeeded in making a breach around noon of the second day, and the lich ordered his cavalry through the gap. At that point, the defenders knew they had to retreat, or risk being cut off. They pulled back in good order, leaving some four thousand of their dead and wounded behind. Arkhan made certain that they were the front ranks of the next assault.

The second wall held out much longer than the first. It was too high for ladders, and so thick that it shrugged off all but concentrated catapult fire. Arkhan raked the battlements with blasts of sorcery and repeated attacks by swift war engines, but each one was repulsed. Four attempts to batter down the gate were likewise defeated, crushed by heavy stones dropped from the gatehouse, or burned to ash by streams of burning pitch. Finally, after five days of effort, Arkhan persuaded W'soran to send in his immortals. The risk was great, since they were integral to the spells that animated and controlled the army. The death of even one would cost the undead host tens of thousands of troops. But the gamble paid off; the immortals scuttled up the wall like spiders, concealed from view by a wall of sorcerous fog conjured by W'soran. Within an hour, shouts of alarm sounded from along the wall as the second gate groaned open. The wall's defenders launched one ferocious attack after another in a desperate attempt to retake the gatehouse and seal the gates, but to no avail. The survivors fled to the third and final wall with Arkhan's cavalry right on their heels.

After a week of constant attacks, Arkhan pulled back his forces and contemplated the final obstacle in his path. The third wall was too tall to climb and too thick for catapults. That left only the gate, which was made from two slabs of polished basalt some two feet thick.

For two days, the grim defenders atop the third wall peered into the gloom, nervously clutching their weapons as they waited for the final assault to begin. By the third day, some atop the wall began to hope that the enemy had finally given up. King Alcadizzar and his forces had to be very close by now.

And then, just past noon, they felt it, a faint, rhythmic tremor, vibrating through the stone beneath their feet. One slow beat after another, like the tread of giant feet.

The bone giants weren't built for height. They were relatively short—only about twelve feet tall at the shoulder—but very wide, with massive arms and four thick, stubby legs. There were six of them, each one composed of thousands of man-sized bones and plated with every piece of scavenged metal that Arkhan's skeletons could find. Between them they carried a battering ram made from a sandstone column that was fifteen feet long and weighed tens of tons. The ground shook beneath their feet as they made their way through the second gate and towards the remaining wall. Several dozen smaller war engines scuttled along in the giants' wake, their spindly legs crusted with old gore.

Assembling the giants had required the efforts of not just Arkhan, but W'soran and all three of his immortals as well. The cost in time and energy had been great, but Arkhan reckoned it a small price to pay if it got them past the Gates of the Dawn.

The liche sat upon his warhorse and watched the giants lumber off into the distance. Trumpets were already sounding the alarm atop the wall as the juggernauts became visible through the gloom. Most of the army's cavalry and a few large skeletal companies stood ready on the far side of the second wall. The rest—belonging to W'soran and his immortals—waited in the space between the first and second walls, safe from enemy catapult fire. Arkhan turned to W'soran, who sat upon his palanquin at the edge of a ritual circle inscribed upon the ground. Six large clay jars rested in the centre of the circle; the necromancer's three progeny stood at different points around the perimeter, waiting to begin the ritual.

W'soran clutched a large, leather-bound tome in his bony hands. It was one of the ancient books of Nagash, returned to him by the Undying King just before leaving Nagashizzar. The necromancer searched through the pages for the proper ritual, then turned to Arkhan. "When shall we begin?"

The liche gauged the distance between the giants and the wall. They would be in catapult range any moment. "*Now,*" he grated. "*I will go forwards and lead the cavalry through the breach.*"

"Of course," W'soran said, with only a hint of a sneer in his voice.

Arkhan spurred his horse forwards, heading for his wight bodyguard and the waiting cavalry. The necromancer muttered a curse at his retreating back and then turned to his progeny. With nothing more than a curt nod, he raised his arms and began to chant.

The three immortals joined in at once, adding their power to the rite. The energy built from one minute to the next, until the air above the circle crackled with unseen power. The heavy jars, each one as big as a grown man, began to tremble. Their lids rattled—slightly at first, but then louder and more energetically with each passing moment. W'soran's voice increased in pitch, the words spilling from his lips in a buzzing crescendo. And then, with a crack of shattering clay, the lids of the jars burst apart at once, and thousands upon thousands of black tomb beetles erupted from their depths. They rose into the air, joining together in a swirling oily-black cyclone that wavered for a moment above the ritual circle, then sped westwards, climbing swiftly until it broke like a hungry wave over the battlements.

Shouts and agonised screams echoed from the top of the wall as the giants bore down upon the last gate.

The desert tribesman crouched and marked lines in the sand with the point of his knife. "The enemy is through the first and second walls," he said. "The first wall has a breach, here, and the gates are open. Most of the enemy army is between the first and second walls."

Alcadizzar studied the markings in the gloom. He was crouching beside his chariot, surrounded by his closest advisors: Khalida, Ophiria, Suleiman and Faisr's eldest son, MuktaDir. They were a quarter mile from the Gates of the Dawn, close enough to hear the sounds of battle in the distance. "What are they doing now?"

"Hammering at the third gate with something very large. I could not see what. They are also using some kind of magic to blind the men atop the wall. It looks like a shimmering black cloud."

Alcadizzar looked to Suleiman. The wizard shook his head. "It could be anything," he said. "But it means that at least some of their necromancers are busy performing the spell."

"It appears we have arrived just in time," Muktadir observed. He was tall and rakishly handsome, as his father had been. Upon Faisr's death, just five short years after the fall of Lahmia, Muktadir had risen to take his place as the great chieftain of the tribe. "We should strike quickly, while they are focussed on taking the third gate."

"Agreed," Alcadizzar said. He turned back to the tribesman. "Does the enemy have any sentries on the first wall?"

The warrior smiled wolfishly. "None."

Alcadizzar returned the smile. "Good. Suleiman, can you and your wizards conceal our approach as far as the first wall?"

The wizard scratched his chin. "If they are distracted with their own rituals, then yes."

"All right," the king said. "We'll put archers along the first wall. They'll fire as soon as the attack begins. I'll lead the chariots through the first gate. Muktadir, take your tribesmen and heavy cavalry through the breach. The infantry will follow behind us as quick as they are able. Look for their necromancers. If we can destroy them, we'll end this battle quickly." He rose. Behind him, the army spread out across the valley in a vast battle-line, its ends hidden in the gloom. Part of him would have liked to have said something inspiring, right at the brink of battle, but circumstances prevented it. If they survived the next few hours there would be plenty of time for speeches later, he thought. "Suleiman, you ride with me."

Muktadir and his kinsmen mounted their horses and departed quickly, while Suleiman summoned a messenger and composed instructions for his fellow wizards. Alcadizzar took Khalida's hand and turned to Ophiria. "Any last words of advice?" he asked the seer.

The Daughter of the Sands was an old woman now, having served the tribes for more than a hundred years. Her face and hands were deeply wrinkled, but Alcadizzar could still see the coltish lines of the girl she once had been.

She looked up at the king and shrugged. "Don't get killed."

Despite the tension in the air, Khalida snorted in laughter. Alcadizzar gave Ophiria a mock frown. "What would we have ever done without you?"

The seer leaned forwards and rested a hand on the side of each of their faces. Tears shone in her eyes. "Khsar turn his face from you in the battle to come," she said in a wavering voice. "Let him unleash his hunger upon the foe, and gnaw their bones in his teeth."

Alcadizzar smiled. "Keep safe, Daughter of the Sands. Until we meet again."

With that, the king and queen climbed into their chariot. Suleiman climbed clumsily after them, then came the chariot's two young bowmen. When all were aboard, Khalida tugged at the reins and the war machine clattered off into the darkness.

Ophiria watched them go, knowing how the battle would end.

The giants drew back the ram once more and smashed it against the gate. Arkhan could feel the concussion almost seventy-five yards away. The thunderous blow shook the stone slabs on their hinges and brought down another shower of powdered mortar from the arch above the gate. The huge constructs worked entirely unimpeded; every man atop the wall was beset by the buzzing storm of scarabs, or the swiftly-moving war engines. Another few blows, he thought, and the gates would start to crack.

Arkhan turned to his cavalry and, with a thought, ordered a slow advance. Thousands of skeletal horsemen started forwards, walking slowly over the hard ground.

Another blow echoed across the field, followed by a brittle shower of broken rock. Not long now, he thought.

The archers went in first, racing up to the wall and disappearing through the gate. Within minutes they were spreading out across the top of the wall. After the last bowman had vanished, Alcadizzar ordered the cavalry forwards. Beside him, Suleiman clutched his staff and chanted in a low voice, muffling the sound of the wheels and the thudding of the horses' hooves. Other wizards were doing the same with the infantry companies approaching behind them. With luck, the enemy would not know they were in danger until the charge began.

Khalida crouched low behind the armoured rim of the chariot, reins gripped loosely in her hands. She'd strung her bow and had it ready upon her back. Alcadizzar leaned forwards and gripped her shoulder. "We'll charge as soon as we emerge from the gate. No time and no point waiting for us to get into formation."

She nodded, intent on guiding the chariot through the approaching gate. Everything was strangely calm. The king gripped the hilt of his golden blade.

Khalida snapped the reins as they entered the tunnel, bringing the horses to a canter. The sound of the wheels was deafening inside the tunnel; it seemed impossible that no one else could hear it. Within seconds, they had crossed through the first wall and emerged on the other side. At that moment, the queen drew her headscarf across her face and let out a wild, ululating battle cry. The horses broke into a charge.

Alcadizzar drew his sword. The blade of the mountain-lords blazed in the darkness, like a splinter of the sun.

"For Khemri!" he shouted. "For Nehekbara! *Forwards!*"

* * *

The ritual occupied W'soran's total focus, guiding the scarabs and stoking their hunger with the slightest touch of his power. It required a delicate touch: too much, and the scarabs burned out, too little and they became tired and docile.

He did not realise that the army was under attack until arrows started hissing all around them.

Flashes of white peppered the ranks of the undead, toppling a skeletal warrior with each hit. Two shafts thunked into the back of his seat, while another struck one

of his progeny in the shoulder. The immortal howled in pain, snapping the shaft of the arrow in his frantic efforts to remove it. He tore the arrow free with a convulsive wrench, leaving a smoking hole in his breast.

The other immortals ducked for cover and the ritual came undone. Cursing, W'soran whirled about, searching the darkness for the source of the arrow fire.

Trumpets wailed to the east, followed by the swelling thunder of horses' hooves. The killing ground behind the undead host was packed with horsemen and chariots—tens of thousands of them—and they all seemed to be charging his way. At their centre was a man in golden armour, brandishing a fiery sword. W'soran's heart went cold.

“Alcadizzar!” he cried.

The ram struck home again. This time Arkhan could see the cracks radiating through both doors, stretching all the way from the inner edge to the hinges. A shower of rock fragments fell to the ground, leaving a shallow crater in the surface of the right-hand gate. Arkhan hissed in anticipation and drew his sword.

And then, without warning, the angry buzzing that had filled the air for nearly half an hour fell ominously silent. Arkhan looked up to see a shower of tiny, black insects pattering along the battlements and coursing like rain down the sheer wall. The screams from above fell silent.

Arkhan whirled his horse about, as though he could peer down the tunnel of the second gate and see what had interrupted the ritual. And then he heard the wailing of war-horns—not from the wall, but from the *east*, back the way he'd come.

It wasn't possible, the liche thought. The closest mortal armies were trapped at Lybaras, hundreds of miles away.

And then he heard the rending crash of a cavalry charge striking home and knew for certain that, somehow, his forces were under attack.

Alcadizzar's sword sketched an arc of fire through the air and carved through two skeletal warriors as the chariot thundered past. Behind him, his two bowmen were firing as fast as they could draw arrows; the enemy was so tightly packed together that every shot almost guaranteed a hit. Suleiman was roaring incantations over the din of the battlefield, hurling bolts of power into the undead ranks.

Around the king, the chariots of the royal guard had formed a wedge and driven deep into the enemy's reserve formations. Heavy cavalry off to the left and right had smashed into the rear of the spear companies, smashing warriors to the ground with swords, axes and horse hooves. More arrows hissed overhead as the archers on the first wall adjusted their aim to fire over the heads of the Nehekharans.

The initial attack had gone well. Against a mortal army, the result would have been chaos, but the undead simply turned about to face their new foe without a moment's shock or hesitation. It would not be long at all before the cavalry was forced back by the sheer numbers of the enemy.

Alcadizzar turned to Suleiman. “The necromancers!” he cried. “Where are they?”

The wizard scowled at him for a moment, trying to understand the king over the din of battle. Suddenly, his face brightened, and he closed his eyes for a moment in concentration. "There!" he cried, pointing off to the north-west.

A thrown spear clattered loudly off the side of the chariot. Khalida yelled out a curse at someone or something, but Alcadizzar couldn't see what. He searched the battlefield to the north-west—and then he saw it. A strange palanquin made of bone, with legs like a spider, crouching behind a pair of spear companies just thirty yards away. There was a throne atop the palanquin and the king caught sight of a skeletal figure lurking behind it.

Alcadizzar slapped Khalida's shoulder. "That way!" he yelled, pointing with his sword. "That way!"

The chariot lurched to the right, its axle-blades scything through the legs of several slow-moving skeletons. The rest of the king's royal guard responded at once, changing course to follow him. Up ahead, the two spear companies saw what was happening and formed into line, linking their shields together and levelling their spears.

Immediately, they became a target for the archers on the wall. Arrows hissed over the chariots and struck the formation; where the enchanted bronze struck bone, a skeleton collapsed in a flash of white. Then Suleiman raised his staff and bellowed in a furious voice. The end of his staff flared like a torch, and a volley of tiny, glowing darts tore into the undead. Dozens fell, their bones incinerated by blasts of intense heat.

Then the chariots crashed into the battered line, smashing skeletons from their feet or grinding them beneath metal-shod wheels. Alcadizzar chopped at skulls and smashed collarbones; every bite of his enchanted blade toppled another skeleton to the ground. The royal guard added their weight to the charge as well, striking at the enemy with bow and blade. In less than a minute, one of the two spear companies was all but destroyed.

Alcadizzar smashed another skeleton to the ground and saw there was nothing standing between them and the palanquin of bone. "Forwards!" he shouted in Khalida's ear. "Forwards!"

The queen shouted something in reply and lashed at the reins—and then the world dissolved in a blast of heat and greenish light.

Arkhan saw the explosion and let out a sulphurous curse. If W'soran was using sorcery like that, then it meant he was under attack.

The liche led his troops through the second gate and emerged into a scene of pandemonium. Enemy cavalry and chariots had struck his companies from the rear and were being caught by arrow fire from along the first wall as well. The spear companies had no archers to support them, as they were all still on the wrong side of the second wall, and so they were suffering heavily. To make matters worse, large companies of enemy infantry were pouring through the first gate and trying to form a battle-line on the other side.

He caught sight of the pennons flapping above the chariots. *Khemri?* Here? But how? The realisation filled him with a momentary surge of panic. Alcadizzar had

turned the entire valley into a trap and he'd walked right into it. Now he was caught between two powerful forces, with few options left.

Cheers rose from the third wall behind Alcadizzar, followed by the first volleys of arrow and catapult fire as the defenders sprang into action. The attack on the Gates of the Dawn had failed, and possibly the entire invasion along with it. Unless he counter-attacked at once, it was likely that he would never break out of the noose that was tightening around his neck.

Arkhan tried to catch sight of W'soran among the chaos. He caught a glimpse of two of the necromancer's immortals, charging at the wreckage of a destroyed enemy chariot. His first instinct was to try and reach them. If they were lost, then most of the army went with them. But on the other hand, this could be the opportunity he was looking for to be rid of that idiot W'soran and his pets once and for all.

The battle was already lost. The question was whether he would try to save W'soran, or let the bastard hang. When put that way, the answer was an easy one.

With a shout, Arkhan urged his mount forwards. He would lead his troops as far north along the wall as he could, then swing around and try to force his way around the edge of the enemy flank. If he was lucky, he could drive through the gap in the first wall and make good his escape.

Someone was dragging him backward. A voice shouted wildly in his ear. Alcadizzar shook his head and tried to open his eyes.

The chariot lay on its side amid a tangle of dead horses, just a few feet away. Blood was everywhere, but the king couldn't tell whose it was. His sword lay on the ground beside the overturned vehicle, gleaming in the darkness.

And then he saw the slender, bloodied arm poking out from beneath the chariot's battered hull.

"Khalida!" the king screamed. He twisted in the grip of whoever held him, pulling himself away. A boy cried out—one of his archers?—and someone grabbed for him again. He tore himself away and scrambled forwards on all fours, trying to reach his wife's hand.

He had almost reached her when he heard a hiss above him. Behind him, the boy screamed. Battlefield instinct caused him to roll to the side, out of the path of the axe that buried itself in the ground beside his head.

Alcadizzar rolled onto his back. A shrivelled, almost skeletal man stood above him, clad in rough, barbaric robes and bits of bronze armour. Swift as a viper, the creature ripped the axe from the ground and rounded on him. That was when he saw the creature's fangs, and understood what he was facing.

There was a shout and a flare of white light and the creature screamed, clutching at the side of its face. Alcadizzar saw his chance and lunged for his sword. The monster caught the movement and snarled, chasing after him. An arrow punched into its back, the enchanted metal hissing in the dead flesh, but the creature barely broke its stride.

Alcadizzar's hand closed on the hilt of the sword and he continued to roll as the monster charged at him. The king rose in a kneeling position and swung the enchanted sword at the creature's midsection. It ran right into the blow and the magical blade parted armour and cloth as though it were paper. The blade sheared the

thing in two; the power of its magic shrivelled the creature in an instant, like a leaf caught in a flame.

A dark shape leapt like a cat onto the upturned side of the chariot. It was another of the creatures; its attention was directed upon the wizard, Suleiman, and one of the king's two young archers. It spat a string of arcane syllables and flung out its hand, and a bolt of greenish lightning leapt for the wizard. But Suleiman was prepared, and raised his staff, blocking the energy with a counter-spell. The bolt detonated with a thunderclap, leaving Alcadizzar's ears ringing.

Alcadizzar's second archer—the same boy who'd tried to drag him to safety—saw the monster and drew the short sword at his hip. With a cry he charged at the thing, swinging wildly. The creature snarled at the boy and pointed a clawed finger; there was another flash of light and the archer's body burst into flames. As the boy collapsed, thrashing and screaming, Suleiman unleashed a sorcerous bolt of his own. The monster deflected the blast with his own counter-spell, hissing in disdain—then his body went rigid as an arrow from the first archer thudded into his forehead. White steam erupted from the creature's gaping mouth and it fell over onto the ground. Alcadizzar lurched forwards and finished it off with a blow to its neck.

Around them, the tempo of the battle was changing. Cheers were rising from the Nehekharan warriors as the skeletons seemed to be withdrawing—no, not withdrawing, but *collapsing* where they stood. As the blood-drinkers died, Nagash's army died with them.

And then an invisible fist seized the overturned chariot and flung it into the air as though it were a child's toy. It struck Alcadizzar a glancing blow and sent him sprawling.

The king rolled quickly onto his back, and saw two more of the emaciated blood drinkers. They stood at the far end of a magical circle, beside a trio of small, sealed earthenware jars. One of the creatures was clearly a barbarian, but the other wore remnants of Nehekharan robes and clutched a battered leather tome to his chest. The creature seemed to smile at Alcadizzar and lifted his bony hand.

"Beware, great one!" Suleiman cried, rushing forwards to stand between the monster and his king. "See to Khalida! I'll protect you!"

The Nehekharan laughed, and a bolt of energy leapt from his hand. Suleiman brandished his staff—but the fire ate through it like dry wood and clawed deep into the wizard's chest. Suleiman let out an agonised groan and fell to the ground.

"Pathetic," the Nehekharan blood-drinker hissed. He turned to Alcadizzar, and managed a predatory smile. "I have been looking for you, boy," he snarled. "I just might be able to salvage this disaster if I drag you back to Nagashizzar." He gestured to the other blood-drinker and spoke in a strange, guttural tongue.

The monster was on Alcadizzar in an instant, seizing his wrists with uncanny strength. Hissing, the creature clenched his hands, until the king felt the bones in his wrists grate together. He groaned in pain but refused to let go his sword.

There was a loud cry, and the surviving archer came to the king's rescue. He appeared at the monster's side, chopping his short sword into the blood-drinker's left wrist. Bones snapped; the creature snarled in irritation and struck the boy a backhanded blow, crushing his skull. But Alcadizzar was able to free his sword-hand and bury the burning blade in the monster's face.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back, with smoke curling from his breastplate. His ears were ringing and every nerve in his body hummed with pain. The Nehekharan blood-drinker lowered its hand, a look of mild surprise on his face. Evidently the magic forged into his armour by the mountain-lords had saved him from the necromancer's blast.

Alcadizzar tried to rise, but his legs refused to work. The blood-drinker smiled and said something, but the king couldn't make out the words. Then, languid as a snake, the monster started to walk towards him. Desperate, Alcadizzar raised his sword and hurled it at the monster with all his strength, but the blood drinker dodged it with contemptuous ease.

The creature took another step—and then, as clear as day, the king heard the *twang* of a bowstring. Then came a choked scream as the blood-drinker reeled backwards with one of Khalida's arrows in his eye.

The monster screamed in agony. White steam curled from the ruined eye socket. He fell backwards, fetching up against the clay jars as he fumbled for the arrow shaft. He seized it in his right hand and with a shriek of pain he wrenched the arrow free. Thick ichor bubbled down the side of his face.

Shadows danced at the corners of Alcadizzar's vision, Dimly, he sensed men crowding around him and the queen. His gaze was fixed on the monster, who shouted and cursed at him from just a dozen yards away. With a final, angry howl, the creature turned his back on the king and smashed one of the jars at his back. To Alcadizzar's horror, a tide of glossy black beetles poured from the vessel and engulfed the necromancer's body. Moments later, the insects burst into the air in a buzzing cloud and flew off to the north. Of the necromancer, there was no sign.

Alcadizzar fell back onto the ground. Someone was shouting his name. He turned and saw a pair of royal guardsmen helping Khalida to her feet. She was reaching for him, her eyes wide with fear.

The king's gaze drifted past her, to the clouds roiling in the sky. As he watched, they began to fade, dispersing like smoke on the wind.

His vision faded. The last thing Alcadizzar felt was the warm touch of sunlight on his cheek.

—<TWENTY-EIGHT>—

The Edge of Victory

*Lahmia, the Cursed City, in the 110th year of Phatkh the Just
(-1161 Imperial Reckoning)*

Though Nagash's army had been defeated at the Gates of the Dawn, Alcadizzar's injuries threw the western army into disarray. The king's surgeons debated whether to try to treat his injuries on the battlefield, or send him to Quatar, many miles away. The rulers of Numas and Zandri both attempted to take charge of the army in the king's absence, issuing conflicting orders from different parts of the battlefield that took hours for the paralysed forces to sort out. By the time Queen Khalida had recovered enough from her own injuries to take charge, the last remnant of Nagash's army had broken out of the trap and fled eastwards down the Valley of Kings.

By dawn of the next day, it appeared that the king would survive his injuries. Alcadizzar awoke with his wife beside him and dispelled any notion that he would be sent off to the gloomy city of Quatar for his recovery. Instead, he ordered the army to strike camp and pursue their retreating foes.

Nagash's army withdrew from the Valley of Kings and continued eastwards, where two weeks later it was joined by the remnants of the undead forces that had laid siege to Lybaras. Though the undead had succeeded in breaching the city's walls, the timely arrival of reinforcements from Rasetra had broken the siege and slain two of W'soran's four surviving progeny.

Pursued now by the combined armies of east and west, Nagash's warriors fought a bitter, running battle all the way back to the ruined city of Lahmia. Companies of spearmen and cavalry were sacrificed to stage vicious ambushes and night attacks on the Nehekharans, while the rest marched tirelessly onwards towards their goal. Again and again, Alcadizzar tried to pin down the enemy with attacks from his cavalry, but the undead army simply shed another sacrificial rearguard, like a lizard giving up its own tail, while the rest escaped. Fields of shattered bone stretched along the great trade road for miles.

The last battle was fought at the edge of the Golden Plain, just miles from the Cursed City. W'soran's surviving immortals and their skeletal warriors had occupied the decrepit forts guarding the narrow pass that led to the city, and held off the Nehekharan armies for weeks before they were overcome. By the time Alcadizzar reached Lahmia, the city was deserted. Arkhan and the last remnants of Nagash's vast host had boarded their ships and escaped.

Lahmia's docks had not been so alive in decades. Men from Zandri and Khemri—seamen and rivermen, who knew the ways of boats and the sea—were walking the city's old quays and inspecting the scores of silent, fat-bellied troop ships that the enemy had left behind. As Alcadizzar watched, a number of intrepid souls had found a pair of large skiffs that were still mostly seaworthy and were in the process of towing one of the huge troop ships up to the docks.

It was a sunny day in early spring, warm and damp with the promise of rain. The city still smelled of cinders, almost forty years after its fall. The king sat astride a lean desert horse and watched the activity on the docks from an empty square a short way uphill. A small group of royal guardsmen sat their horses a discreet distance away, allowing him to be alone with his thoughts. The surgeons encouraged him to ride when he could, saying that exercise would help speed his recovery.

Alcadizzar had his doubts. He leaned back in the saddle, wincing at the pains in his knees, hips and back. The surgeons had all done their best, he knew. He suspected that the aches he felt had less to do with the blood-drinker's magic and more to do with the fact that he was a hundred and eighty-nine years old. The power of Neferata's elixir was just a memory now, but he still seemed to age far slower than his peers. He looked like a man no more than a hundred—past the prime of his life, but with a good many years left in him, if he was careful. A time when most men put aside their work and tried to enjoy all the good things they'd earned.

Hoofbeats drummed along the cracked cobblestones across the square, shaking the king from his reverie. He glanced over to see Ophiria walking her horse towards him. Her hooded servant, the chosen of Khsar, reined in at the edge of the square, a discreet distance from both the Daughter of the Sands and the royal guardsmen.

The king managed a tired smile as the seer came up alongside him. "This is a surprise," he said. "I hadn't expected to see you inside the city."

Ophiria scowled suspiciously at the empty buildings along the square. Rather than find lodgings inside Lahmia, like the rest of the army, the tribesmen had pitched their tents up on the Golden Plain, near the ruins of the border forts. They shunned the city, convinced it was truly cursed ground.

"You didn't look as though you were coming out any time soon, so I decided to come in after you," she replied.

Alcadizzar chuckled and spread his hands. "If you're expecting tea, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

The Daughter of the Sands smiled sadly. "No," she said. "No time for that now, I'm afraid. I've come to say goodbye."

The king sighed. "I'd hoped that Muktadir and his riders would stay with us a while longer."

Ophiria shook her head. "Muktadir is a good son. He promised his father on his deathbed that when Nagash returned, the tribes would help drive the Usurper from the land. That promise has been kept and now he longs to return home, where his new wife waits for him."

Alcadizzar nodded. "I understand," he said, a little wistfully. "Truly, I do." He glanced over at the seer and gave her a mischievous grin. "The barges are waiting to carry you back to Khemri."

Ophiria grimaced. "Never again, by the gods!" She put her hand to her belly. "I'd rather be dragged to Bhagar from the back of a horse." The seer shook her head. "The next time I want to see a man tortured I'll have him carried to the river and tied to a barge for a week."

The two shared a rueful laugh. Alcadizzar reached over and took her hand. "Safe journeys, Ophiria. You will always be welcome at the court in Khemri."

Ophiria studied the king for a long moment. "You are a good man, Alcadizzar, and my people owe you a great deal. For that you have my thanks." She glanced away from him then, looking down the hill at the docks. "You are contemplating another voyage," she observed.

The smile faded from Alcadizzar's face. "The war's not over yet," he said gravely. "As soon as we can put together a fleet, we're going after Nagash." He pointed down at the abandoned ships. "My men are examining those bone ships to see if we can rig them with oars or sails. We'll head up the strait, find the Usurper's lair, and deal with him once and for all." He sighed again. "Then, perhaps, I can finally rest."

"I hope so," Ophiria replied, her voice sad. For a moment, it looked as though she were about to leave, but then she paused, as though there was something more she wanted to say.

Alcadizzar frowned. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Ophiria did not reply at first. She stared out at the sea for a time, as though wrestling with what she ought to say. Finally, she turned to the king. "Will you do one thing for me, before you go?" she asked.

"Of course. Anything," Alcadizzar said.

"Send Khalida home," she said. "That's all."

"That's all?" Alcadizzar said, his eyes widening. "Can't I do something simple instead, like emptying out the sea, or counting the stars in the sky?" He chuckled. "She'll never go, especially not after what happened at the Gates of the Dawn." The brush with death had wiped away all the years of tension and resentments that had grown up between them. Now they rarely spent more than a few hours apart each day. "If you think she should go back to Khemri, then you should tell her."

"She won't listen to me. I'm just her aunt," Ophiria protested.

"You think she'll listen to me? I'm just her husband," Alcadizzar said. He frowned. "What's all this about?"

"Nothing." Ophiria shifted uncomfortably. "Her children need her, that's all."

The king gave the seer a long look.

"You've seen something, haven't you?"

Ophiria grimaced. "I shouldn't have said anything." She jerked on the reins, trying to turn her horse about.

The king bent down and took hold of the horse's bridle. "Too late for that now," he said gravely. "What is it?"

Ophiria stared at the king. "If you go north to face Nagash, you will triumph," she said slowly. "But you will not return."

Alcadizzar let go the bridle and sat back, stunned. "I don't believe it."

The seer nodded in understanding. "I'm sorry. But that's the way of it."

“No,” the king said. “You’re mistaken. I can’t die now.” He took in the ruined buildings of the square with an angry sweep of his hand. “First Lahmia, then Nagash, and now this? I’ve given *everything* for this land, Ophiria. Everything I’ve done was for Nehekhara’s sake. A hundred and eighty-nine years, and hardly a day of it was ever truly mine.”

“You’re a great king,” she said sadly. “Perhaps the greatest Nehekhara has ever known.”

“But what about *me*?” Alcadizzar said. “Where is the justice in this? There’s so much I’ve waited to do. I’ve hardly even begun.”

“I know,” Ophiria said sombrely. “Believe me, Alcadizzar. I know what it’s like to sacrifice everything for a higher calling.” She shook her head. “But we cannot choose our fate.”

“Then what’s the point?” Alcadizzar cried. “What’s the point of all this horror and suffering, if not to earn the right to live as we wish, for however many years we’re given?”

A tear trickled down the seer’s wrinkled cheek. “I cannot say,” she replied. Ophiria reached forwards and laid a hand on his cheek.

“Goodbye, Alcadizzar, King of Kings. I wish you well, in this life and the next.”

The Daughter of the Sands tugged on the reins, turning her horse about and heading back across the square. The king watched her and her hooded servant head west, deeper into the city, until the two riders were lost from sight.

Evening was drawing on when Alcadizzar arrived at the palace. Thunder rumbled faintly to the east, heralding the coming storm.

The king found Khalida deep amid the ruins of the Temple of Blood, surrounded by her maids and a cadre of keen-eyed guardsmen. The ancient garden at its heart had survived the worst of the fire, and was now a tangled, green wilderness.

Most of the paths through the garden had vanished, swallowed up by ferns and creeping vines. Only the widest, stone-flagged paths survived. One led straight to the centre of the garden, where Khalida rested by the bole of a gnarled old tree and tossed breadcrumbs into the brackish pond nearby.

Alcadizzar strode softly over the thick grass and settled down beside her. The queen turned, smiling, and kissed his cheek. “There you are,” she said. “Have you been down at the docks all this time?”

“Mostly,” the king said, his gaze wandering about the clearing. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard a rumour that there were still fish in the pond,” Khalida said. “Giant carp, the colour of gold coins. I’ve been trying to coax them out with some crumbs.”

Alcadizzar turned back to Khalida. He reached up and gently swept a strand of dark hair away from her face. “How do you feel?”

The queen smiled. “A little better every day.” She had broken two ribs and an ankle when the chariot flipped during the battle and they had been slow to heal.

“Are you up for a long journey?” the king asked.

Khalida’s smile faded. “Why?”

Alcadizzar leaned forwards and kissed her gently on the lips. “Because I think it’s time we returned to Khemri.”

Khalida’s expression turned sombre. “What about Nagash?”

The king was silent for a long moment. “We’ve beaten him. His army has been destroyed. That’s victory enough for me.” He put his arm around Khalida and pulled her close, careful of her ribs. “I’ve fought enough for two lifetimes. Now I just want my wife and children beside me.”

The queen looked up at him. “Do you mean it?”

“With all my heart.”

Khalida smiled. “Then let’s go home.”

Three weeks after escaping the Cursed City, Arkhan the Black beached his ship of bone on the shores of the Sour Sea, beneath Nagashizzar’s shadow. He marched into the fortress with fifty thousand warriors—a formidable army by mortal standards, but little more than a tenth of the vast host he had been given.

When Nagash learned of his army’s defeat, his wrath was terrible to behold. The sound of his fury thundered through the halls of the fortress and sent tremors through the tunnels below. For seven days and seven nights the air above the mountain roiled like an angry sea and spat forks of green lightning that lit the blighted land for miles.

And then, after the seventh night, the thunder subsided, and the mountain grew still. An ominous silence descended over Nagashizzar, more fearsome and portentous than all the days of fury combined.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Eshreegar muttered as the black-toothed liche emerged from the tunnel.

It had been a month since Nagash’s army had returned to the fortress in defeat. Many times, while the fortress halls had been all but empty of the undead, Eekrit and Eshreegar had debated on whether the time had come to unseal Grey Lord Velsquee’s chest and make use of the weapon inside. Each time, Eekrit’s instinct was to wait, fearing that, even without an army, Nagash was still far too powerful to face. The storm of fury that had wracked the fortress—nay, the entire *mountain*—upon the army’s return convinced Eekrit that he’d been absolutely right.

Beneath the mountain, it was still business as usual. Nagash’s hunger for slaves had shown no signs of abating, and the work in the mines continued without pause. Across the cavern, the latest shipment of greenskins snorted and bellowed in their guttural tongue as the undead arrived to make their trade.

Eekrit’s ears twitched. Something was different. There were many more skeletons this time. A *great* many more, in fact, all carrying chests or stacks of flat, square boxes, sealed with lead. As the liche looked on, the skeletons carried half of the chests over to the scales, as usual, then deposited the rest at Eekrit’s feet.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

The liche turned to Eekrit. His skull was blackened in places, his armour scorched and battered. He looked as though a giant had grabbed him by the ankles and used him to beat out a rather stubborn fire.

“My master wishes to make a new arrangement,” the liche grated. One leg dragged slightly as he stepped forwards and indicated the chests and boxes arranged before Eekrit. “In addition to the usual amount for slaves, he will pay double for you to carry these chests to the source of the River Vitae and empty their contents into the water.”

Eekrit eyed the boxes warily. Each one was marked with a complex pattern of runes and arcane symbols. “What’s inside them?”

“Death,” the liche said.

“Ah.” Eekrit replied. He spread his paws. “We, ah, have never heard of this river.”

“It feeds all of Nehekharas,” the liche said. “Its source is a tarn, high in the mountains to the south-west.”

“Where—”

“Find it,” the undead creature rasped. “Unless you do not wish to have the stone?”

“No!” Eekrit said. “I mean—yes, we want the stone.” He glanced at Eshreegar. “No doubt something can be arranged.”

“There will be more,” the liche said. “Deliver them all to the tarn, and you will be well paid.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Eekrit replied, though he felt anything but. “What is all this for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The liche glared at him.

“The Nehekharans will die before they serve my master,” he said. “And so they shall have their wish.”

Red as Blood

*The Tarn of Life, in the 110th year of Tahoth the Wise
(-1155 Imperial Reckoning)*

It took nearly a year to find the place that the liche had spoken of. First they found the wide, swift-flowing river, many hundreds of miles away to the south-west; then they followed its course up into the treacherous, unforgiving mountains. Many were the scouts who were lost along the way, taken by avalanches, or swift, silent wyverns, or stabbed by their fellows when their rations ran low. They negotiated thundering cataracts, scaled sheer cliffs and swung over bottomless crevasses, until finally, after much suffering and hardship, they reached a vast lake, its surface as smooth as glass and coloured a dark, depthless blue. They found the ruins of twelve great temples along its shores, so ancient and so long abandoned that they were little more than crumbling shells of pitted sandstone, the idols within reduced to shapeless knobs of white marble.

This was the tarn they had been paid to find; the birthplace of the great river that fed the lands to the west, all the way to the distant sea. With nervous paws they broke open the seals on the twelve boxes they had carried with them on the journey, and they emptied the burning man's poison into the dark depths. Then they scuttled away into the darkness, heading back to the great mountain where their reward awaited them.

Halfway back to the mountain, the first of the scouts began to sicken. By the time the expedition reached the tunnels that would lead them around the shores of the Sour Sea, only the strongest of the scouts were still alive. Two managed to reach the great cavern beneath the mountain and gasp out their report to Eshreegar before their insides turned to mush.

Eekrit and Eshreegar split the fortune in god-stone between themselves and sent out the second expedition six months later.

Over time, the wily scouts learned to adapt to the dangers of the long trip up to the tarn. Rikkit Sharpclaw had survived the past three expeditions to the lake, which made him the natural leader of the pack. The last thing he did before leaving the mountain was to spend some of his accumulated wealth to hire a score of shifty-eyed clanrats from one of the visiting slaver gangs. He told them he needed the extra muscle to protect the valuable cargo he was carrying up into the mountains. The clanrats took his coin and snickered to one another at the deal they were getting. Five

gold coin apiece to help carry some boxes? Compared to hunting greenskins up north, that sounded like a holiday to them.

After nine expeditions to the tarn over the last five years, the scouts knew the route very well. They knew how to avoid the sudden avalanches, where to be watchful for the fearsome wyverns and how best to negotiate the waterfalls and the yawning chasms. Rikkit was cautious as ever—more so this time, perhaps, because rumour had it that this was to be the last expedition to the lake. He had no intention of getting himself killed with so much unspent wealth hidden back at the mountain.

The expedition reached the tarn right on schedule. The early spring night was cold and clear, and a full moon smiled at its reflection in the still water below. The clanrats gaped at the size of the lake and the ominous, silent ruins, but followed the scouts without question as they worked their way around the shore and up a narrow path that led to a high cliff overlooking the tarn.

Rikkit breathed in the cold, clear air and smiled at the clanrats. “Here is-is where you earn your keep,” he said. The scout pointed a claw at the edge of the cliff. “Set the boxes over there.”

Wary, the clanrats crept to the edge of the cliff and set the boxes at their feet.

Rikkit smiled. He motioned to the one of the other scouts, who produced three pairs of hammer and chisel and tossed them to the hirelings.

“Open them,” Rikkit said.

The clanrats eyed one another uneasily, but were not in any position to argue. Taking the tools, they cut away the lead seals securing each lid and levered the boxes open. Caustic green light spilled from each container, washing over the hirelings.

Rikkit’s smile widened. This was the part he really enjoyed. The scout reached into his robes and pulled out a fat bag of gold coin. At once, he had the clanrats’ undivided attention.

“Now, here’s where you lot can earn yourself some extra coin,” he said, tossing the bag onto the ground. “The clanrat that tosses the most of those things into the lake gets the gold.”

Rikkit didn’t need to tell the clanrats to begin—all at once there was a snarling, scratching, kicking scramble to grab hold of the contents of each box and hurl them into the water below.

Each box contained a flat disc of pure god-stone, each about the size of a small shield. The surface of each disc was carved with hundreds of strange, arcane symbols and the discs themselves seethed with pent-up magical power. The scouts hissed with laughter as the hirelings seized the heavy discs—each one worth a Grey Lord’s ransom—and fought for the privilege to toss them into the depthless tarn below.

Amid savage grunts and yowls of pain, the first discs were hurled into the air. They glowed balefully as they fell, spinning like tossed coins. They hit the water of the tarn with a bubbling hiss, like hot metal plunged into a quenching vat, and sent up a plume of acrid, faintly glowing steam as they sank out of sight.

Once it was down to the last few discs, the knives came out. Clanrats screeched and toppled over the cliff, clutching at the blood pouring from their chests. Two of the hirelings fell together, grappling over a disc up to the moment they hit the surface of the water, forty feet below.

When the last disc was gone, the three survivors turned on one another. After a few minutes, only one clanrat was left. Rikkit laughed loudly, scooping up the bag and tossing it to the victor. The scouts were already taking bets as to how long the fool would last before the sickness took him. Whispering and chuckling amongst themselves, the skaven scuttled back down the narrow path, their thoughts already turning to the long journey home.

By dawn, the surface of the great tarn was as red as fresh-spilled blood.

The great river was the source of life for all Nehekhara, in ways both great and small. Its waters nourished a verdant belt of arable land that stretched through the high desert for more than a thousand miles, providing so much food that cities like Numas, Khemri and Zandri grew rich trading wheat, rice and beans with their neighbours to the east. The river supplied fish for the river cities as well, and water for making wine and beer. Its countless tributaries, many deep underground, spread across the land like threads in a tapestry, feeding distant oases and tiny, hidden springs that sustained merchant caravans and desert nomads alike.

For years, Nagash's poison had spread to every corner of Nehekhara, spreading through the soil into the crops, and from the crops into animals and people alike. Men filled their bellies with the liche-king's curse every time they drank a cup of wine, or sipped greedily from a spring in the great desert. By the time the final set of discs sank into the waters of the tarn, the poison was curled like a sleeping viper in the flesh of every living thing.

The final set of discs completed Nagash's elaborate curse and set the wheels of death in motion. The waters of the tarn turned crimson; the stain flowed down the roaring cataracts and into the River Vitae, where in time it was witnessed by horrified fishermen and river traders all the way to distant Zandri. It was the Undying King's sign that the doom of Nehekhara was at hand.

Within days, the crops in the fields began to wither and die. Not all at once, but by degrees, driving the farmers into fits of desperation as they struggled to save their livelihoods. Livestock who ate the tainted crops soon sickened and died. The disease was horrible to behold; it was a slow, agonising death, as the bodies of the victims rotted from the inside out. Agony led to madness, and madness to death, but the process was neither merciful nor swift.

Not long afterwards, the first Nehekharans began to suffer as well. Hardest hit were the river cities, particularly Khemri. Alcadizzar the Great, ruler of the empire, summoned his chirurgeons and his wizards, and bent every effort to locating the source of the disease and uncovering a cure. The sick were taken from their homes and placed in the temples, in hopes that they would not spread the disease to others. And yet, despite their best efforts, the plague continued to spread.

As the crops failed, food prices soared. Even those who were healthy now faced the prospect of starvation. Cities began hoarding food, leading to riots and more bloodshed. Alcadizzar used all his power to try and maintain order amongst his vassal kings. For a while, he succeeded. Food was rationed, but everyone, from highest to lowest, was fed. As the plague spread to distant cities like Quatar and Ka-Sabar, the infected were removed as humanely as possible and isolated in tent cities outside the walls.

And then Ubaid, the king's youngest son, fell ill.

Alcadizzar summoned a legion of surgeons to attend upon his son. Every wizard and oracle in the land was consulted in search of a cure. The king himself spent night and day at his son's bedside, while he thrashed and bled, and screamed in pain. Once the disease was far advanced, not even the milk of the poppy could dull the young prince's suffering. He begged his father to make the pain go away; later, in the grip of madness, he begged his father to end his life. When he died at last, almost a month later, he did so with a curse upon his lips.

By then, the plague was everywhere. The great cities shut their gates to outsiders, and shut the infected up in their homes to try and hold the sickness at bay. Gripped with fear and half-maddened by grief, Alcadizzar sent Asar, his only surviving son, away from the city and into the Great Desert to live with the tribes, where it was hoped the plague couldn't reach. The king's heir travelled through a land fraught with violence and unrest, as gangs of bandits waylaid travellers in search of food. After many brushes with death, Asar and his retainers reached the safety of the Great Desert and camped for the night at an oasis known only to the tribes.

The very next day, the prince fell ill. His retainers, many sick themselves, struggled to care for him, but his condition worsened. One night, in the grip of madness, the prince slipped from his tent and wandered out into the sands, never to be seen again.

When the news reached Alcadizzar, he was devastated. Over the course of a year, he had watched the plague spread through his empire, and now it was dying before his eyes. Nothing he did slowed the spread of the disease in the slightest. Fresh, untainted water, locked away in cisterns, jars and wells, was now worth its weight in gold. Riots tore through Khemri every day, as the panicked citizens searched for some way to escape the sickness. They clamoured outside the gates of the palace, begging their great king to save them.

As the second year of the plague wore on, the begging of the people turned to angry shouts, and then from shouts to bitter curses as the disease claimed more and more lives. The fact that the king himself seemed impervious to the disease only fuelled the bitterness of his citizens even further.

The months passed and the supplies of food dwindled. Men turned into savages, murdering their neighbours for a crust of bread or a cup of stale wine. Alcadizzar opened the palace's meagre food stores to his people, but his gesture of goodwill spawned a bloody riot that left hundreds of his citizens dead. They rampaged through the palace, stealing whatever they could, while the king and queen and a handful of royal guards barricaded themselves in the king's apartments and waited for the chaos to subside.

One week later, Khalida contracted the plague.

The sickness came upon her much more slowly than the rest. For a time, she tried to hide her suffering from her husband, but within a month her condition had grown too visible to ignore. Alcadizzar summoned his surgeons once more. He sat at her bedside and wiped the blood from her eyes, and listened as she groaned in her sleep. As her condition worsened, he went to the ancient temples and prayed in vain for the gods to save her life.

Khalida lingered in pain for many months, wasting away upon her sickbed. When her suffering had grown so great that she no longer recognised her own husband, the surgeons offered to give her a cup of undiluted poppy to ease her into the next life. Alcadizzar took the cup himself. He lifted it to his wife's lips and sat with her into the night, as her moans faded and her breathing grew ever more shallow. She passed into the realms of the dead shortly thereafter, heedless of the grief-stricken man at her side.

Alcadizzar sent for the mortuary priests and helped them prepare his beloved for the tomb. The last of the horses had died months before, so the king and a pair of acolytes pulled the wagon carrying her body out into the city's necropolis, where a modest crypt awaited. There was no grand pyramid for Nehekhara's greatest king. Alcadizzar had resisted the idea of commissioning one, and Khalida, being born amid the desert tribes, scoffed at the notion of entombment. But in the end, Alcadizzar could not bring himself to lay her upon a wooden bier and set her alight, as was the practice among her people. The tomb at least held out hope that perhaps one day she might rise again.

For a time, Alcadizzar contemplated taking the poisoned cup and joining his family in the afterlife. But then, a few days after Khalida had been laid to rest, an exhausted messenger rode into the city from distant Rasetra. How he had managed the long journey alone was a feat of courage and endurance unto itself, and he was already half-dead from the plague by the time he arrived. The message he bore was from King Heru. An army of the undead had emerged from the Cursed City to the east and was slaying everything in its path. Lybaras had already fallen, its few remaining citizens ruthlessly put to the sword. Rasetra would be next.

The message was more than two months old. Alcadizzar knew that Heru had been dead long before his warning reached Khemri.

From that moment on, the king put thoughts of the poisoned cup aside. Instead he brought forth his armour and his golden sword, and turned his eyes eastwards, searching for the approaching darkness.

—<THIRTY>—

All Is Dust

Khemri, the Living City, in the 110th year of Asaph the Beautiful (-1151 Imperial Reckoning)

When the time had come, the last of the king's household went into the great necropolis and sought out Alcadizzar in the tomb of his beloved wife.

"The darkness is coming," the faithful servant said. His name was Sefm, and in better days, he had been an attendant in the royal stables. His linen robes had been carefully cleaned and his skin anointed with fragrant oil, so that his spirit would present a pleasing appearance when he went to join his ancestors in the lands of the dead. A vizier's circlet of gold sat uneasily upon his narrow brow, and he carried a shield and spear in his trembling hands.

The king was clad in his armour of gold; his gleaming sword rested upon the stones at his feet. He knelt by the marble bier where Khalida's body lay and held her cerement-wrapped hand in his. Hunger and grief had ravaged the king's once powerful frame. Alcadizzar's face was gaunt, eyes sunken and cheeks hollowed as though by a long and merciless fever. He had the look of a man who longed for the peace of the grave.

While the servant waited, the king rose slowly to his feet. Gently, he laid his wife's hand upon the bier, and then bent to press his lips against the wrappings that covered her cheek. Dry lips rasped faintly against the cerements.

"Not much longer now," he whispered to her. "Watch for me in the dusk."

Then the king took up his sword and headed out into the dying light of day.

It was high summer and a chill wind was blowing from the east, carrying the dank scent of the grave. The sky from horizon to horizon roiled with thick, purple-black clouds, spreading implacably westwards towards Khemri. At that moment, the radiance of his golden armour made him seem somehow small in comparison to the vast darkness that was arrayed against him, but he stared up at the gathering clouds with a grim sense of anticipation. He had been waiting for this day ever since his beloved wife had gone.

As the wind began to howl amid the crowded tombs, Alcadizzar made his way south, through the necropolis and across the low hills that separated the city of the dead from the great trade road. It was there that the sons of Khemri had chosen to make their stand against the coming night.

There were perhaps a thousand men, all told, armed with everything from spears to farmers' scythes. A few carried shields, but no more; it was unlikely that their gaunt frames could have borne the weight of armour in any case. Most were sick to one degree or another and the rest were beyond caring. Not a one of them expected to live out the day.

On the far side of the city, men and women with the strength to travel were still leaving the city, hoping to make it on foot all the way to Zandri, some two hundred leagues to the west. There had been rumours for weeks that ships were leaving with refugees, hoping to find safety in the far north. No one knew if the rumours were true, but a faint chance was better than no chance at all.

It was for the same reason that men clutched spear and axe and stood facing the darkness to the east. Every minute they stood and fought was a gift to those who sought succour in the west. It was little enough, they knew, but better than nothing at all.

There were no cheers as the king and his servant arrived; no shaking of spears or clashing of shields. None of that mattered to Alcadizzar. It was enough that they had come to stand beside him, when all the others had fled. He stood before them, with the roiling darkness at his back, and lifted his sword to the sky.

"Woe to us that we have lived to see this day," he said. "Our strength is spent, and our hearts are broken. Nehekhara is no more."

The king's voice carried clearly over the keening wind, and the men stirred from their reverie and listened. Some wept, knowing that the end had come.

"We go now into the dusk, where our ancestors await," Alcadizzar said. "Let it be written in the Book of Ages that when the world ended and darkness swallowed the land, the men of Khemri did not falter. No, they went into the night with spears in their hands, fighting to the last."

The wind rose, as though in reply, howling like the spirits of the damned. Alcadizzar felt the cold breath of the grave upon his neck. He turned, and saw a wall of shadow rushing towards him like a desert storm.

"To the last!" he cried once more and then the light failed, and darkness swallowed the world.

Within the veil of shadow, the howling of the wind was dulled to a muted roar. Alcadizzar could dimly hear the shouts of the men behind him. "Stand fast!" he cried, but he could not be sure if he was heard.

One moment stretched into another, as the wind roared, and the cold sank like knives into his skin. Faint points of light emerged out of the gloom; unblinking eyes of grave-light, glowing from sockets of bone. Ragged figures took shape, clad in scraps of armour and rotting cloth. They marched forwards in their thousands, clutching spears and cruel, tarnished blades.

The air above the undead seemed to shimmer. Moments later he heard the hiss of arrows flickering invisibly overhead. Men screamed in agony as they were struck; others cried out in terror and despair. Alcadizzar gripped his sword in both hands and shouted.

"For Khemri!" he cried, his voice muted by the shadows. "For Nehekhara!" And then he charged, hurling himself into the arms of death.

Alcadizzar's sword made burning arcs in the darkness as he leapt at the army of the undead. He swept aside spear-points and hacked through armour and bone, severing arms and shattering ribcages. The skeletons he struck flared like banked coals for an instant and then collapsed lifelessly to the ground.

Onwards he went, driving deeper into the horde, not knowing or caring if his men followed him or not. He swung his blade wildly, connecting with two or three skeletons with every swing, waiting for the inevitable spear that would find a seam in his armour or pierce his exposed throat. But no such blow ever came. Indeed, not a single blow struck him at all. The skeletons recoiled from him as if afraid to strike him.

The king chased after them, slashing wildly. "Fight me, damn you!" he shouted at them. He hacked through a skeleton's spear haft and severed its hand. "This is what you came for, isn't it?"

He was growing weary now. His strength had fled him long ago, when his first son had died. Still he drove himself forwards, practically throwing himself upon the enemy's spears. "What's the matter?" he cried, his voice breaking. "Here I am! *Kill me!*"

But the enemy drew back from him, retreating away into the darkness as if in a dream. Alcadizzar screamed in despair, running after them, begging the spirits of the damned for release.

Suddenly, a tall, skeletal figure in bronze armour loomed out of the darkness, a black, double-edged sword in his hand. Cold radiated from the liche's body in waves, leeching all the heat from the king's wasted body.

Undaunted, Alcadizzar leapt at the liche, slashing at its torso. The undead monster blocked the stroke with ease, striking sparks from the flat of his iron blade. Shouting defiantly, Alcadizzar pressed his attack, chopping at the liche's head and neck, but each blow was turned aside. With the last of his fading strength, the king lunged, thrusting the chisel point of his sword at the monster's heart, but the liche was too fast for him. The iron blade swept down in a ringing parry that wrenched the glowing weapon from Alcadizzar's hands.

Stunned, the king fell forwards, right into the liche's grasp. A cold, armoured hand closed about his throat. Distantly, he could hear the screams of his men as they were overwhelmed by the undead.

The liche lifted Alcadizzar by the neck, until he could stare into the king's face. A ghastly laugh hissed between the monster's blackened teeth.

Alcadizzar struggled in the liche's grip. "What are you waiting for?" he snarled. "Go on! Kill me, and be damned!"

"In time," Arkhan agreed. *"But not today, Alcadizzar of Khemri. My master wishes you to suffer a short while longer."*

They stripped the king of his gleaming armour and cast his treasured sword into the sands. His hands were bound in chains of bronze and he was given into the keeping of a dozen wights, who locked him inside an enclosed palanquin made of polished bone. The last he saw of Khemri, its streets were teeming with corpses, and the living were being dragged from their homes and slain.

The palanquin was borne on the shoulders of a dozen skeletons, which carried him east through a silent, empty land. Time lost all meaning within the sorcerous gloom; Alcadizzar drifted in and out of consciousness, unable to say for certain whether it had been weeks or months since he'd first been taken. From time to time the palanquin would stop; bony fingers would seize his jaw and pour a trickle of fiery liquid down his throat. He coughed and sputtered, but the skeletons did not relent until they'd gotten some of the potion down his throat. Whatever it was, it nourished him enough to keep his emaciated body alive.

On and on they carried him, past the charnel house that had once been Quatar, and on into the Valley of Kings. Past silent Mahrak they went, and along the trade road to fallen Lahmia. They carried him through the Cursed City's broken gate and down to the docks, where once upon a time an old woman had told him of his fate and he'd chosen to hide from it instead.

The skeletons placed him on a ship of bone and took him north, up the narrow straits and into a dark and restless sea. In time, they beached upon a shore of broken stone and bore him across poisoned fields that reeked of burnt metal and bitter ash.

The further they went, the more that Alcadizzar felt the weight of an invisible presence studying him from the darkness. He could feel a malevolent intelligence scrutinising him, an implacable, hateful will that was both utterly alien and disturbingly human at the same time.

They passed through the gates of a vast fortress and into narrow lanes that led up the slopes of an ancient, desecrated mountain. Alcadizzar soon lost track of all the twists and turns that the skeletons took as they rose ever higher through the levels of the fortress. At one point they entered into an echoing, humid tunnel that led them deep into the heart of the mountain. Nagash's awareness—for the malevolent presence could be nothing else—grew steadily more intense, until Alcadizzar's nerves were raw with apprehension.

At last, when he thought he could stand it no more, he heard the groan of hinges and the grating of a pair of massive doors, and soon the hollow sound of skeletal feet marching down a long and echoing hall. Finally, the rocking movements ceased and he was lowered with a jarring thump that reverberated through the vaulted space beyond.

A key rattled in the palanquin's lock. The sliding panel was drawn aside and bony hands dragged him from his months-long prison. Agony flared from his cramped joints, wrenching a bitter cry from his parched throat. Green light seared his eyes. He blinked, but no tears would come.

Alcadizzar struggled in his captors' grip nonetheless. Without warning, they released him; his legs, weakened by captivity, betrayed him. He fell to the smooth, cold flagstones with a groan, shaking uncontrollably as his cramped muscles twisted into knots.

He lay there for an eternity, lost in suffering and shivering like a babe. And then a voice, jagged and rough like broken stone, sawed through his haze of pain.

"Behold the usurper," said Nagash, the Undying King.

Nagash's prisoner was a pathetic wreck of a man; a pallid, trembling skeleton clad in filthy linen wrappings. Metal grated on metal as the Undying King rose to his feet

and descended the steps of the dais. Nagash reached out with a gauntleted hand and seized the mortal by the throat, lifting him from the floor as though he weighed no more than a bundle of twigs.

"You are the man who seized my throne and united the great cities against me?" Nagash twisted the human this way and that, studying him like a piece of meat. *"I had expected better."*

With a disdainful hiss, he tossed the mortal aside. Alcadizzar collapsed to the floor with a strangled groan, his body curling back again into a foetal ball. The liche-king chuckled, savouring his foe's pain.

"Alcadizzar of Khemri, lord of a dead land," he declared. *"Does the title please you? It was yours, in truth, from the moment you chose to defy me."*

Metal clattered softly as the Undying King clasped his gauntleted hands behind his back. He paced slow circles about Alcadizzar's trembling body, eyes burning with malice.

"Nehekhara's fate was sealed the moment I was betrayed at Mahrak, centuries before you were born," Nagash told him. *"Though they drove me into the wasteland, I prevailed. Alone, I built a new empire, with a single purpose in mind: to take my revenge upon the great cities, and to enslave their people until the end of time."*

With a disgusted hiss, Nagash dug the toe of his metal boot into Alcadizzar's shoulder and forced him onto his back. He leaned forwards, slowly increasing the pressure on the mortal's chest until his breath wheezed past his lips. Alcadizzar's eyes opened as he struggled for breath. Nagash fixed him with a mocking stare.

"Your victory at the Gates of the Dawn meant nothing," he sneered. *"I sent my army to destroy Nehekhara only because I wanted the great cities to know that it was I who had brought them to ruin."*

"That... explains... why we destroyed them... so easily," Alcadizzar gasped. *"The... trade road was... littered with bones."*

Nagash glared down at the fallen king. *"Five hundred warriors, or five hundred thousand; it makes no difference to me."* He leaned down, putting his full weight on the mortal's chest. *"I can make ten times that now. All of Nehekhara is mine to command."*

Alcadizzar let out a strangled groan. After a moment, Nagash rose, and pulled back his foot.

"Tell me," he said. *"Did you wonder, when your people sickened and died, why you alone managed to survive? When your wife and children writhed on their sickbeds, and begged you for release, did you pray to the forsaken gods that you would be next, if only to assuage the guilt that gnawed at your soul?"*

Nagash knelt and gripped Alcadizzar's jaw, squeezing his pallid flesh until the mortal's eyes snapped open again.

"You survived for no other reason than because I wished it," the Undying King said. *"The doom I unleashed upon Nehekhara was aimed with care. Of all the living things that walked the land, I saw to it that you alone would be spared. I wanted you to watch everything you ever loved turn to dust. I wanted you to understand, most of all, how futile your struggles have been. You cannot defeat me, mortal. I am Nagash. I am eternal. And before you die, you will deliver your people into my hands."*

Alcadizzar let out a choked growl, writhing in Nagash's grip. "I'll die before I betray my people again."

Nagash rested the tip of his clawed thumb against Alcadizzar's cheek, just beneath his eye. "*The choice is not yours to make,*" he said.

The last king of Khemri began to scream as Nagash carved the first ritual symbol into his skin.

A tower had been built at the summit of the mountain, taller and wider than any of the hundreds of spires that towered over Nagashizzar. Potent necromantic runes had been carved into its walls, both inside and out, spiralling upwards to join with the complex summoning circle that had been laid out in molten silver across the tower's flat top.

On the night of the new moon, Nagash ascended to the top of the tower with Alcadizzar and three wights in tow. In his hands he clutched the glowing sphere of *abn-i-khat* that had rested at the foot of his throne for hundreds of years. At long last, its purpose would be fulfilled.

A restless wind moaned above the high tower and the clouds above were depthless and dark. The pulsing radiance of the burning stone spilled across the curving lines of silver and lent them an ominous, squirming life.

Nagash stepped to the centre of the circle and knelt, placing the sphere within a bowl-shaped depression in the stone. Two of the wights crossed to the far side of the circle, dragging Alcadizzar's semi-conscious form between them. The mortal's body was a raw wound, carved with hundreds of arcane symbols from his forehead to the tops of his feet.

The wights lowered Alcadizzar to his knees at the edge of the circle, at a spot where the major lines of the sigil met. Nagash rose and crossed the circle to join them.

"*Now comes your true moment of glory,*" Nagash said, glaring mockingly at the king. "*For you will be the key to awaken not just those who died of the plague, or at the hand of my warriors, but Nehekharans who have slept in their tombs for millennia, even unto great Settra himself.*" The Undying King held out his hand, and one of the wights handed him a long silver needle. Nagash studied it for a moment and then drove it deep into the juncture of the mortal's neck and torso. Alcadizzar stiffened in pain, the muscles of his body going rigid as stone.

"*The art of magic—even necromancy—is about symbols,*" Nagash said, as the wight handed him another needle. "*Symbols form connections, tying one concept to another. And the more powerful the symbol, the greater its potential effects.*"

Alcadizzar hissed sharply as the second needle slid into the other side of his neck.

"*I do not want to merely animate the bones of our people, you see. I intend to summon back their spirits and bind them to their remains, as I have done to my servant Arkhan, and bind them to me forever. But such a monumental effort requires a uniquely resonant symbol to focus the ritual's power. A symbol such as the ruler of the Nehekharan empire, to whom all the land—living and dead—must offer their fealty.*"

All was in readiness. Nagash took his place at the opposite side of the circle. The wights withdrew, disappearing into the tower.

The Undying King raised his arms in triumph to the suffocating sky. *"Perhaps you will live long enough to see your wife and children again,"* he said. *"If I find her pleasing enough, perhaps I shall take your woman as my consort."*

Alcadizzar howled in helpless fury as the great ritual began.

"It's been going on like this for days!" Eshreegar shouted over the raging wind. Lightning rent the sky above the mountain, briefly illuminating the master assassin's anxious face. He pointed up to the top of the great tower, just across the narrow courtyard where he and Eekrit crouched. "Nagash went up there with his prisoner on the night of the new-new moon, and he's been there ever since!"

Eekrit gripped his cloak tightly about his chest and scowled up at the top of the tower. It was bathed in a nimbus of green light so intense that it lit the underside of the boiling clouds overhead. Thunder crashed, rolling like an avalanche down the narrow lanes of the fortress. The former warlord cursed, ears folded back against his skull.

Eshreegar seemed unmoved by the tumult. "You see that door at the base of the tower?" he shouted. "It leads to a chamber with a black altar. Greenskins are being dragged up from the mines and sacrificed *every hour*. This is worse than anything we've seen before!"

Eekrit turned his scowl onto Eshreegar. "That much is clear," he snarled. "But what in the Horned God's name do you expect me to do about it?"

"Velsquee's chest! We should open the chest!"

The former warlord growled under his breath and glanced once more up at the tower. His tail lashed apprehensively. "No! Not yet!"

"Can you think of a better time than now?" the Master of Treacheries exclaimed.

Eekrit jabbed a claw at the maelstrom up above. "Preferably when he's not capable of doing things like *that*," he snapped.

Eshreegar frowned worriedly, but he didn't try to argue. "You think we should let him finish whatever he's doing?"

"You honestly think we can stop him?" Eekrit shot back. He shook his head. "No. We wait until he's done. Until he's got nothing left."

"And then?"

Eekrit cast one more glance up at the churning green-lit clouds, before heading for the mouth of the tunnel that would carry them back to the under-fortress.

"Then we open the damned box," he growled.

It was like forging a chain. Day by day, night by night, shaping one unbreakable link at a time.

The incantation was the longest, most complex ritual Nagash had ever performed. Centuries had gone into perfecting the invocations and bindings contained within. The last, most crucial piece of the puzzle had eluded him for ages, until Alcadizzar had provided him with the answer. It was an irony he would savour long after the fallen king was gone.

The ashen wind howled above the tower, forming a whirling, lightning-ravaged funnel over the ritual circle. The storm had grown steadily since the ritual began,

fuelled by the power of the incantation until it spread westwards across the length and breadth of Nehekhara. It was the harbinger of the great ritual, the vehicle by which Nagash's summons would reach across the dead land.

At the centre of the circle, the great sphere of burning stone was all but gone, its composition altered by Nagash's will into a glittering black dust that rose in a long, whirling tendril up into the maw of the storm. Barely a pebble-sized fragment of the *abn-i-khat* remained and it was vanishing steadily before his eyes. For weeks, the storm had carried the black dust across the dead land, where it had sought out the corpses in the streets and in the tombs of the silent necropolis.

Across the circle, Alcadizzar rested on his knees, locked in place by Nagash's paralysing needles and the power of the great ritual. His eyes were open, staring up into the whirling wind tunnel. Green light seethed within their depths. The Undying King wondered what vast and awful vistas the mortal looked upon. Did he stare across the gulf, searching for his wife and children in the twilit realm of the dead?

Nagash could sense the spirits gathering on the other side of the veil. They were drawn by the bond of fealty they owed to Alcadizzar, the first link of the necromantic chain Nagash had forged. When Sakhmet rose in a few hours and usurped Neru's place in the heavens, he would draw that chain taut, and draw the spirits of uncounted ages back into the living world.

Raw power flowed into the Undying King from the sacrificial altar at the base of the ritual tower. The life energy of the greenskins had sustained him during the month-long incantation, adding to the enormous quantities of burning stone he had consumed before the ritual began. The incantation consumed energy at a fearsome rate, far more than his calculations had suggested. At this stage, with the most demanding part of the rite about to begin, his reserves of energy were almost completely gone. Every mote of power he gained from the black altar was consumed almost from the moment he received it.

With a crackling hiss, the last of the burning stone blackened and flew up into the air. Within hours, it would be settling in some distant corner of Nehekhara, just as the sun dipped below the horizon. It was all coming together precisely as he'd ordained.

Soon, Nehekhara would rise again. The kings of ages past would gather at Nagashizzar and bend their knee before the throne of Nagash, and darkness would descend upon the world forevermore.

Night fell across Nehekhara. Neru rose in the east, ever following in the footsteps of her husband, Ptra. Sakhmet, the jealous concubine, followed at her shoulder, burning green with envy.

Upon the ritual tower, the final phase of the incantation began. Buoyed by the stolen life energies of his greenskin slaves, Nagash clenched his fists and spat words of power at the sky. The storm raged above his head, howling like the souls of the damned.

Layer by layer, he could feel the veil between the realms grow thin. The chain was complete, starting with Alcadizzar and linking to the motes of dust spread across Nehekhara, then leading back to the circle of silver and Nagash's crown. As Sakhmet rose in the night sky, the Undying King began to draw that chain tight, pulling at the spirits of the dead.

Hour after hour, as the Green Witch crept closer to Ptra's loyal wife, the tension on the sorcerous chain grew tighter. The power of the ritual spread throughout the dead land, from the narrow streets of cursed Lahmia, to the cold forges of Ka-Sabar and the empty docks of Zandri. It reached into the dark crypts, settling upon the cerement-wrapped corpses of beggars and kings alike. Ancient limbs trembled, stirring the dust of ages.

Nagash's voice rose as the ritual neared its climax, the Undying King staring upward through the whirling funnel of cloud to the clear sky beyond. Neru was directly overhead, and Sakhmet was just behind her, moments from seizing the goddess by the throat. Exultant, he shouted the closing phrases of the incantation to the Green Witch, high above.

"Let the veil of ages fall away!" the Undying King commanded. *"Let the dark lands give up the lost! Let the dust fall from the eyes of the kings and of the heroes, and of the queens sealed within their tombs! Let the people cross the threshold of night and return to the lands of the living! Let them rise from their beds of stone! Rise! I command it! Rise, and serve your master! Nagash, the Undying King, commands it! RISE!"*

Lightning cracked like a slave master's whip, lashing at the silver lines of the magic circle. Thunder pealed, shaking the tower to its foundations. Nagash poured the last of his power into the storm; the wind rose in pitch and the trapped cyclone broke free at last, recoiling violently into the sky. Nagash stood unshaken amid the maelstrom, roaring his triumph at the sky.

Already, he could sense the first, tentative tugs at his awareness as the dead of Nehekhar began to open their eyes.

The first to stir were those whom Arkhan's warriors had slain. From the blood-spattered collegia at Lybaras, to the fields outside Khemri and beyond, the bodies of the last Nehekharans began to move. Heads turned, glowing green eyes looking eastwards as though in response to some distant summons. Groans leaked from rotting throats as the dead lurched clumsily onto their feet in answer to Nagash's call.

These corpses were quickly joined by others, clawing their way out of barricaded homes or from the loose, sandy soil of mass graves that surrounded nearly every one of the great cities. Men, women and children, struck down in their tens of thousands by Nagash's plague, broke free of their makeshift tombs and emerged into the night.

In the great necropoli, dead hands beat at stone lids and mausoleum doors. Dust billowed from the entrances of the mighty pyramids as the great kings and their retinues woke from centuries of slumber. They rode from their crypts on chariots of gold, drawn by teams of skeletal horses, surrounded by entire armies of faithful warriors who had gone into the tomb to serve their masters in the afterlife. Retinues of shrivelled liche priests followed in the wake of each royal chariot, bearing the canopic jars of their monarch and chanting invocations of power to speed his journey to the east.

Beneath Sakhmet's baleful glare, the great cities of Nehekhar gave up their dead. Tormented howls and groans of rage rose into the still air as beggars and kings alike struggled in vain against the sorcerous chains that bound them. Nagash commanded them, and they had no choice but to obey.

Tireless and implacable, the dead of Nehekharu made their way eastwards through the night. The greatest army the world had ever seen began to converge on distant Nagashizzar.

Above the great fortress, the whirling tunnel of cloud collapsed in upon itself, swallowing Sakhmet's light and plunging Nagashizzar into darkness. Off to the northwest, packs of flesh-eaters howled exultantly in the night.

Nagash had fallen silent at last. Faintly glowing smoke leaked from every seam of his enchanted armour. At the very last, the ritual had nearly undone him; it had taken almost every last mote of power he possessed, but in the end, he had triumphed. He could feel the risen spirits of Nehekharu surging like a dark tide across the land, moving in answer to his summons. At long last, his vengeance was complete.

The Undying King lowered his eyes to regard Alcadizzar. The green light had faded from the mortal's eyes, leaving only emptiness in its wake. Nagash approached the fallen king and gripped the first of the silver needles. A faint tremor through the metal spoke of a pulse and told him that, somehow, the last king of Khemri yet lived.

Nagash withdrew first one needle, then the other. Alcadizzar's body collapsed bonelessly onto the stones. The Undying King studied the wretch for a moment, tempted to consume the last of Alcadizzar's life force and leave his body to rot atop the tower. He raised his smoking hand, clawed fingers clenching into a fist, but at the last moment he decided to spare the last living Nehekharan instead. So long as Alcadizzar lived, he might still provide some sport, once Nagash had regained a modicum of his power.

The Undying King turned as the trio of wights emerged from the depths of the tower. With a thought, he ordered Alcadizzar thrown into a dungeon cell, and then departed, making his way back to his throne room. There he would wait, slowly regaining his strength, until the first of his undead subjects arrived.

Eekrit sat at the edge of his throne with a wine bowl in his paw. After so many weeks of raging wind and groaning earth, the silence in the great hall was eerie and oppressive. Before him, upon the dais, sat Velsquee's lead box.

"Well?" Eshreegar said, breaking the silence. "What are you waiting for?"

The former warlord scratched at his chin. The very sight of the box filled him with a sense of foreboding. "We've got no idea what's inside this thing," he said.

"Velsquee said it was a weapon, didn't he?" the Master of Treacheries said. "A weapon made especially to kill Nagash."

Eekrit sipped his wine thoughtfully. "That's what worries me," he replied. "If what's in that box can kill Nagash, what in the Horned God's name will it do to us?"

Eshreegar's one eye widened. "I... hadn't considered that." He covered his snout with one paw. "What are we going to do?" he groaned.

Eekrit glared at the chest. After a moment, he raised the wine bowl and drained it to the dregs, then tossed it over his shoulder.

"We're going to do what any skaven would," he said. "We're going to find someone else to do the dirty work for us."

Alcadizzar lay in darkness, waiting to die.

He did not know where he was, or how he'd come to be there. His awareness had taken shape very slowly, seeping in from the edges of his fractured mind. With it came memories of grief and a sense of loss too great to endure. The pain of it all cut into him like a dull knife, digging into his vitals inch by relentless inch, until he thought his heart would burst.

Slowly, he became aware of a soft, white light filling the narrow cell. A figure knelt beside him, just beyond the edge of his vision. And then from the depths of his pain, Alcadizzar felt a gentle hand touch his cheek.

Tears welled up in his eyes. "Khalida?" he whispered. He struggled to move, his hands slipping on the cell's slimy floor. With an effort, he moved his head and tried to peer up into the face of the person beside him. The nimbus of white light made it difficult to see details, but he could make out the fall of dark hair and the slope of a woman's shoulder.

Alcadizzar lifted a trembling hand, trying to touch her. At once, the apparition withdrew. With a despairing cry, he tried to follow, drawing his knees up beneath him and weakly pushing himself upright.

The apparition had retreated across the cell, until she stood next to the heavy wooden door. Alcadizzar tried to crawl over to her, but before he had the chance, there was the grating of metal as an ancient lock was turned and the cell door groaned open.

Two short, furtive creatures shuffled into the room, dragging a heavy, rectangular chest between them. They took no notice of the apparition whatsoever, focussing their beady eyes solely upon him. Alcadizzar blinked in the uncertain light, trying to make sense of the strange figures. They looked like two enormous rats, clad in filthy robes and walking upright like men. He looked to the apparition for guidance, but the indistinct figure only watched in silence.

The ratmen laid the chest on the floor of the cell and, with great trepidation, they set about breaking the seals that held it shut. They looked at one another uneasily, then without a word they drew back the lid of the box and took several quick steps backwards.

As the lid flew open, a terrible light filled the room—it was a kind of poisonous greenish-black, and gave off heat like the touch of sunlight. The terrible glow radiated from a weapon of sorts: a crude-looking single-edged sword with a curved blade and long hilt that would just barely take a pair of human hands. Strange runes had been etched along its length and it had been crafted out of a mottled, greenish-grey metal unlike anything Alcadizzar had seen before. It was also deadlier than anything he'd ever known. The sword *radiated* death. It was the kind of weapon that could kill a god.

Or an Undying King.

Alcadizzar's eyes rose from the sword and regarded the apparition. He could not say why, but it seemed as though she was waiting for him.

And then he understood. She wanted him to take up the sword. Khalida was giving him a chance to make things right before it was too late.

With a deep breath, Alcadizzar reached into the chest. The hilt of the sword was hot to the touch and caused his hand to tingle painfully as he took hold of it and lifted the blade free. Heat, prickly and unpleasant, flooded his limbs, filling his muscles with strength.

Alcadizzar turned to the apparition. "I'm ready," he said, accepting his fate at last.

The apparition slipped silently through the doorway. He followed after, determined to redeem himself in the eyes of his beloved.

Eekrit and Eshreegar watched the human race from the cell, sword in hand. They turned to one another with identical looks of surprise.

"Who was he talking to?" Eshreegar asked.

"Who knows?" Eekrit replied. "You saw his face. He's mad as a white rat."

"Do you think he knows where he's going?" the Master of Treacheries said.

"We'd best follow along and make sure."

Nagash lay shrouded in deep shadow, resting like a corpse upon his dark throne. The flames that normally wreathed his skull had been extinguished; his burning eyes had shrunk to cold sparks glowing from the depths of his eye sockets. His mind had slipped into a near trancelike state, pulled into millions of tiny fragments by the souls he'd bound to his will.

Already he was looking ahead to what he would do with the undead legions at his command. They would scour the land from north to south, killing every human, greenskin and rat-creature no matter where they tried to hide. Then he would turn his attentions to the east, and amuse himself with the destruction of the Silk Lands. When they were dead, he would continue eastwards, searching out the living and destroying them, until at last he came round again to Nagashizzar, and the entire world had been rendered as lifeless as a tomb. It might take a thousand years, or ten thousand. It mattered not to him.

As he brooded, a dim, white radiance took shape at the far end of the hall. At first, Nagash thought it was one of his wights, but as it came closer, he saw with surprise that it had the figure of a woman. The sight bemused him and he tried to focus his dulled senses upon it.

Slowly but surely, the image grew clearer. Details emerged. Dark hair, and pale skin. Eyes like polished emeralds, and the golden headdress of a queen.

Nagash tried to stir, but his limbs felt like lead. "*Neferem*," he hissed.

The ancient Queen of Khemri drew nearer. She was not the withered husk that she had been when he'd sacrificed her at Mahrak, but the radiant beauty that he'd first seen on the day of his brother's ascension. The sight of her sent a chill along his bones.

"*You are bound to me once more*," the Undying King said. "*Even now, your bones shamble across the desert to bow at my feet.*"

Neferem reached the bottom of the dais and raised her chin defiantly. *I have no bones for you to command, usurper*, she said. *They were burned to ash when you broke the sacred covenant at Mahrak. You have no power over me.*

“Then I will bind your spirit instead,” he snarled. “I am like unto a god now. All of Nehekhara bows its head to me.”

To his surprise, Neferem smiled coldly and shook her head.

All but one.

And then the apparition vanished, scattering like smoke before the onrushing figure of Alcadizzar, last king of Khemri. Bellowing with rage, the mortal charged up the stone steps with a glowing sword in hand and brought it down upon Nagash’s skull.

Fear and rage galvanised the Undying King. At the last moment he brought up his arm to ward off the deadly blow, catching the sword against his armoured wrist. Instead of turning the blade aside however, there was a flash of searing green light, and the sword’s edge bit clean through metal and bone, severing the hand with one blow. It fell to the dais, its clawed fingers twitching spasmodically.

Nagash shrieked in agony. The fell blade’s power clawed at his bones. For the first time in ages, the spectre of death sent a chill down his spine.

Yet even in his weakened state, Nagash was not completely without power. As Alcadizzar drew back his sword for another blow, the Undying King raised his other hand and spat sulphurous words of power. Fearsome energies leapt from his fingertips, bathing the mortal’s body in jagged arcs of fire that would strip the flesh from his bones in an instant.

But the sorcerous bolts washed harmlessly over Alcadizzar, deflected by runes of protection forged into the glowing sword. Undaunted, he lunged forwards, shearing the blade through Nagash’s ribs and severing his spine.

Nagash screamed in pain and terror. The sword’s unnatural energies leached the very power from his bones. Already, he could feel his strength ebbing away. Cursing, he lunged forwards with his one remaining hand and seized Alcadizzar by the throat.

The mortal king struggled in Nagash’s grip. Blood flowed freely down his neck where Nagash’s claws bit deep into his skin. The Undying King put all of his remaining strength into his fingers, trying to crush Alcadizzar’s spine.

Alcadizzar’s knees began to buckle. His eyelids fluttered. But just when it seemed that he was about to fall, he raised his sword with the last of his failing strength and brought it down on Nagash’s arm. The fell blade sliced through the armour, severing the arm at the elbow—then a backhand stroke slashed across Nagash’s neck, severing his head.

A hideous, rending scream echoed through the hall. The last thing Nagash saw, as the fires faded from his eyes, was the ghostly apparition of Neferem standing at the foot of the dais. Her smile was terrible to behold.

Darkness waits, she said.

Nagash’s death reverberated through the aether like the tolling of a broken bell. The power of his ritual shattered, sending shockwaves through the legions of the dead. Thousands of corpses collapsed to the earth, their spirits drawn back once more across the veil of death. These were the souls of those who had died during the days of the plague and the bloodshed afterwards, who had been buried without the customary rituals of the mortuary cult.

The rest ground slowly to a halt, no longer at the mercy of Nagash's implacable summons. They had been restored to the living world, and now were free to act as they pleased.

The great tomb kings reined in their golden chariots and surveyed the empty land around them. Their burning gaze fell upon the legions of the dead. Without hesitation, the corpses bowed before their masters, responding to ancient loyalties that had guided them in life.

Some kings commanded more loyalty than others. The strong eyed the weak and ancient ambitions once more occupied their thoughts.

Skeletal hands gripped tarnished khopeshes and raised them to the baleful moon. Bone horns wailed as the tomb kings went to war.

Metal rang on metal, striking fat, green sparks as Alcadizzar hacked at Nagash's still form. The burning fell blade hacked through the Undying King's armour, tearing the ancient skeleton to pieces and hacking up the wooden throne beneath.

Finally, his body spent, Alcadizzar stumbled back a step and looked upon the carnage he'd wrought. His hands were numb and tingling from the awful energy of the sword, as though its power had seeped into his body like poison. Repelled by its corrupting touch, Alcadizzar let the blade tumble from his hand.

"It's done," he gasped. "Thank the gods, it's done." He looked about, searching for the apparition. "Khalida?" he called. "Beloved? Where are you?"

He had to find her. He had to show her what he'd done. More than anything, he needed her to forgive him. Alcadizzar cast about looking for something he could show her, to convince her that he'd made things right. His gaze fell upon Nagash's grinning skull.

Alcadizzar bent and tore the jagged metal crown from Nagash's skull. Gripping it to his chest, he turned and staggered from the dais. The blade's poison was working its way through his body, killing him from within.

"Khalida!" he called mournfully. "Forgive me. Please." Clutching the crown of the Undying King, Alcadizzar staggered from the great hall.



EPILOGUE

Land of the Dead

*Nagashizzar, in the 110th year of Djaf the Terrible
(-1151 Imperial Reckoning)*

Alcadizzar haunted the halls of Nagashizzar for days, calling plaintively for a woman that only he could see. His mind shattered by guilt and the torments he'd suffered at the hands of Nagash, he eventually found his way through the fortress gates and onto the shores of the Sour Sea. Still clutching Nagash's crown, the last king of Khemri disappeared into the wastelands in search of redemption. There are those who believe he wanders there still.

They searched the fortress for the largest furnace they could find and filled it with charcoal from the enormous bins that stood outside the forges. Eshreegar and Eekrit took turns working the bellows, until the fire breathed like a living thing and the heat scorched their whiskers. Then they went and raided the nearest mine shaft for all the sky-stone they could carry.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" the Master of Treacheries said.

"Without doubt," Eekrit said, tossing a hunk of sky-stone into the furnace.

Eshreegar winced. "Think of the wealth you're throwing away! Enough to buy your way back into good graces with the Under-Empire three times over! Enough to make yourself a Grey Lord if you wish!"

Another chunk of stone flew into the furnace's roaring maw. "The mountain is mine now, Eshreegar," the former warlord growled. "*All mine*. At this point, I'm richer than the Horned God himself."

The Master of Treacheries eyed the flames dubiously. "What if Velsquee goes back on his word and forgets he ever agreed to give you the mountain?"

Eekrit sniffed. "He can either have the mountain or the fell blade. Not both." They had recovered the sword and tossed it back into its lead container with as little physical contact as possible. Now it was hidden deep within the bowels of the mountain, where only the two of them would ever find it. "If he's smart, he'll take the blade back and call it even, and Velsquee is nothing if not very, very smart." He

threw another two pieces of stone into the furnace, then gestured at the bellows. "Stoke the furnace while I get the cart."

Eshreegar sighed and went to the long, wooden lever. With a grunt, he leapt up and grabbed it, then pulled down with all his weight. Air flowed into the furnace, causing it to roar. Within minutes, the sky-stone turned molten and the heat within changed from orange-white to a bright, baleful green.

Eekrit returned a moment later, dragging a small wooden cart. Piled within was every piece of Nagash's armour and bone they could find. The former warlord stared down at the remains and shook his head. "I still don't see how we missed his right hand. It couldn't have just crawled off on its own."

Eshreegar shook his head. "We searched every inch of that dais. If it were there, we would have found it. Nagash's prisoner must have taken it with him, along with the crown. Nothing else makes sense."

Eekrit sighed irritably. "Perhaps." He reached in and rummaged through the pile.

"Do you really think this will destroy him for good?" Eshreegar asked, eyeing the roaring furnace.

"I have no idea," Eekrit replied. "This is for my own personal pleasure."

He grunted in satisfaction, and pulled Nagash's grinning skull from the pile. Eekrit stared at it for a long moment, peering into the depths of its empty eye sockets.

"I've been wanting to do this for a very long time," he said, and tossed the skull into the flames.

High above the ancient mountain, a plume of faintly glowing smoke rose from one of the fortress' many chimneys. Ashes from the seething fire below rose into the air and were scattered on the high winds, spreading across the bleak and blasted land.

Riding high on the swift-moving wind, the ashes travelled for miles before falling back to earth. One mote in particular rode the currents westwards, tumbling through the updraughts over the Brittle Peaks and then gliding lazily downwards again in a long, surprisingly straight path along the bloody line of the dead River Vitae.

Over the silent land of Nehekhara, the tiny mote of ash drifted, until it came to the vast city of the dead that lay beside the river just east of Khemri. There it began to settle, waving this way and that like a leaf on the breeze, until at last it alighted upon the tip of a towering black pyramid, whose matt black sides seemed to swallow the light of the sun.

By some curious trick of the air currents, the mote of ash was drawn inside the pyramid, slipping through narrow airshafts until it reached the very heart of the giant crypt. There, in an octagonal chamber whose walls were carved with hundreds of complex runes, sat an open sarcophagus of black stone.

Silent, unobserved, the mote of ash settled within the sarcophagus of Nagash, the Undying King.

And there it waited.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Lee was the principal creator and developer for White Wolf Game Studio's *Demon: The Fallen*. Over the last eight years he has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements. His credits for the Black Library include the Horus Heresy title *Fallen Angels* and "The Rise of Nagash" trilogy for Time of Legends, as well as writing the Malus Darkblade series with Dan Abnett. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.

Scanning and basic
proofing by Red Dwarf,
formatting and additional
proofing by Undead.

